

BINDING THE STRONG MAN

A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus

TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

Ched Myers

No one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods
unless they first bind the strong man; then indeed they may
plunder the house.

—Mark 3:27

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*To Phil and Liz
and Ladon*

For every 10,000 words
there's a deed
floating somewhere
head down, unborn

Word can't make it happen
They only wave it away
unwanted
Yet Child, necessary one
Unless you come home to my hands
Why hands at all?
Your season your cries
are their skill
their reason

—Daniel Berrigan

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Foreword

Obery M. Hendricks, Jr.

Everyone can point to an event that has changed their lives forever. Encountering *Binding the Strong Man* was such an event for me. It caused a seismic shift in my thinking and forever changed the direction of my life's vocation.

The year was 1988. I was a second-year, second-career seminarian, doing well in my studies but becoming increasingly disillusioned with them. Most disappointing for me was the sterility of biblical studies. I found aspects of higher criticism fascinating, the various modes of exegesis informative, and the (infrequent) forays into devotional reading comforting. Yet something was missing. Seminary taught me that Jesus was executed for the political charge of sedition against the Roman state. But what fueled that charge? In the Gospels I could see flashes of the kind of political conflict that could have earned Jesus the empire's ire, but they were isolated incidents, as far as I could tell. From what I could see, there was no underlying, coherent political dimension to Jesus' ministry. The Gospels seemed to say that Jesus' execution was the sad result of a tragic misunderstanding, that he was a strictly religious reformer who simply had been misunderstood. But where in that, I wondered, was to be found the earth-shaking power that had changed the world? And if that power was really there, why didn't the Gospel writers say so? It began to occur to me that rather than preparing me to fight the good fight, my seminary studies were really readying me to take my place in a status-quo, counter-revolutionary enterprise that was more concerned with proffering promises of heaven than with building a world of true peace and love and justice for all. If so, I wanted no part of it. I hadn't been an activist for most of my life to end up only offering salve for the wounds of political oppression and exploitation, instead of struggling to dismantle the systemic forces that caused the people's wounds.

Then I read *Binding the Strong Man* and, Thank God! it removed the scales from my eyes. Ched Myers's revolutionary reading of the Gospel of Mark revealed to me a depth and breadth of political radicality in Jesus' message and ministry beyond anything I had imagined. For the first time I truly understood that when Jesus talked about bringing good news, he really meant it! More revealing yet, Myers's reading showed that Mark had a clear political

intentionality; that he purposefully wrote in such a way as to convey the radicality of Jesus' message to those with eyes to see. I am eternally thankful that God used Ched Myers not only to give me eyes to see new meanings in Mark's Gospel, but also to gift me with a whole new way of engaging the Gospels. I'm not just talking about Ched's brilliant use of socio-literary exegesis; that was not a widely used exegetical method, but it was not new. What was new was the marriage of that method with the hard-won insights of committed, organic Christian activists of the sort that Jesus was himself. *Binding the Strong Man* is informed and infused with the shared insights of a community of Christian pastors, scholars, and activists who lived every day empowered in their witness against today's political and corporate principalities by Mark's account of the political subtleties and nuances of Jesus' challenges to the principalities and powers of his own setting in life.

From *Binding the Strong Man* I learned to look for political meaning in every biblical passage, especially in the Gospels. Of course not every passage is intended to have political meaning, but I learned that you will never know if it's there until you have looked. For Ched Myers has shown us that politically radical truths and challenges can appear in some of the most unlikely biblical places, for example, in Mark's narration of Jesus' healing of a leper in 1:40-45. More than a simple healing story, it is an outright condemnation of the priestly aristocracy's callous exclusivism. Likewise, Myers's critical insight that the purpose of the wording and placement of Mark's account of the widow's mite (13:41-44) was not to laud a poor woman's willingness to sacrifice for her faith, but rather to condemn the way the ideological hegemony of the Jerusalem priestly aristocracy exploited the people's faith for their own gain—an especially important insight for the church today. And Myers's insight that the self-destructive figure in Mark 5 is a collective character representing a community rendered self-hating by unclean alien occupation has a special resonance with African Americans. It is becoming a favorite text of Men's Day sermons. (I know; I have preached it!)

I thank Ched Myers for his commitment to the fullness of Jesus' radical good news and for his willingness to let God use him to give so much to so many through his labor of faith, *Binding the Strong Man*. I can only hope that someday I will make as important a contribution to this sacred cause to which we have dedicated our lives.

New York Theological Seminary
June 25, 2008

Preface to the 1988 Edition

This book is situated within a still young North American exegetical tradition, which emerged in the late 1970s under the inspiration and guidance of Hebrew Bible scholar Norman Gottwald. This new approach to Bible study has been referred to variously as “political hermeneutics,” “sociology of the Bible,” “liberation reading of scripture.” Gottwald summarized it as:

A fundamental effort to interconnect aspects of Bible study that have been split apart and treated as unrelated, even antagonistic, in academia and the churches. . . . Many yawning chasms presently separating the several integral aspects of political and social hermeneutics must and can be soundly bridged by critical reflection and practice [1983:2].

Binding the Strong Man endeavors to carry on this tradition by carrying out the “bridging” task in a reading of Mark’s Gospel.

Gottwald identified the major “chasms” as those between (1) thought and practice; (2) biblical academics and popular Bible study; (3) religion and the rest of life; and (4) the past as “dead history” and the present as “real life.” As for the first chasm, this book stands apart from academic commentaries in its fundamental commitment to a contemporary practice of radical discipleship, and the place of Mark’s Gospel vis-à-vis that practice. I accept the axiom of liberation theology that practice must lie on either side of reflection. In adopting the model of the “hermeneutic circle” (below, 1,A), I have made explicit my own partisanship concerning the grave questions of our own time. These issues form the “lens” through which the text of Mark is read; the text, in turn, answers right back with disturbing questions of its own. I wish to take both sets of questions seriously, maintaining simultaneous allegiance to, as Karl Barth put it, Bible and newspaper, Word and world.

Bridging the second chasm I have found to be a most difficult task. This book is pitched half way between the deeply alienated camps of professional biblical scholarship and “lay” Bible study. I have proceeded in the full awareness that many in the latter camp will find this book too difficult, whereas some in the former camp will dismiss it as insufficiently dispassionate, or nuanced, or sophisticated. But the field of biblical interpretation has become so technical that the average reader, unfamiliar with the in-house literature, can quickly become discouraged. The scholarly guild, for its part, has largely abdicated its responsibility to make the Bible more, rather than less, intelligible.

It is true that these ancient texts are cultural artifacts, not easily or accurately interpreted without historical and critical tools. Yet as scripture, they are not *merely* artifacts, for they continue to shape the world as documents of a living ideology and practice. Moreover, the Bible understands itself to belong to the people of God, not to the scholars—Mark himself reserved his sharpest criticism for the scribal classes. This, however, does not give us license to simply settle for novel ways of extracting instant “relevance” from the text. We North Americans are particularly susceptible to our media-saturated culture’s propensity for immediate gratification. Persons should be urged to work harder with the difficult issues of interpreting biblical texts (below, 1,B).

Conversely, more serious exegetical work should be directed to a popular audience rather than to the self-referential world of scholarship. As an activist trained in the biblical academy, I am conscious of the enormous wealth of insight that is locked up there, wealth that activists are too often content to disdain. This only impoverishes our own efforts at critical reflection, to which we are allegedly committed. I think it a lesser evil therefore to risk oversimplifying complex but important concepts than to abandon popular study to platitudes. Whether I have been successful in this attempt to plunder the scholars’ house on behalf of the people is of course up to the judgments of both parties, but especially the latter.

To overcome the third dichotomy I have refused to abide by the typical distinction between “religious” and “political” modes of discourse. The reason for this is twofold. First, the distinction is simply inappropriate to the study of biblical antiquity, indeed to most premodern cultures (below, 2,A,iii). Secondly, in our own time the wedge driven between theology and politics has only resulted in the domestication of the former and the sacralization of the latter. In the North American context this has clearly been articulated in the writings of the late William Stringfellow. My book endeavors to carry on his great work of uncovering both the political character of theological discourse and the theological character of political discourse. To this end I have employed the unified concept of “ideology,” critically examined to yield its liberating or oppressive social functions (below, 1,C).

The fourth chasm is the most treacherous for students of the Bible. A good example of how historical and present meaning are strictly segregated can be seen in most interpretations of biblical apocalyptic literature. Ever since E. Käsemann rediscovered that “apocalypticism is the mother of Christian theology,” there has been something of a renaissance in the historico-critical study of this ancient genre. Few scholars have dared, however, to risk a “translation” of apocalyptic ideology into our own day: “There is no doubt that the old apocalyptic currencies have been negotiated by the various versions of modern theology at a very low rate of exchange” (Braaten, 1971:482). Those endeavoring to read the Bible politically (i.e., liberation theologians and Marxist interpreters) have also tended to avoid apocalyptic discourse. It seems the only ones who *do* attempt to find relevance in apocalyptic symbolics are the popular “profiteers” of doom, huckstering their gratuitous timetables of the future.

I believe the ideology of apocalyptic holds the key to an accurate political reading of Mark—indeed, of most of the New Testament. In order to translate that ideology into meaningful terms for modern readers, I use the Gandhian notions of *ahimsa* (nonviolence), *swaraj* (liberation) and *satyagraha* (truthforce) as a “heuristic” hermeneutical key (explained below, 2,A,iii). This is not an entirely novel approach, having been already tentatively proposed by both biblical scholars (see the works cited by J. and A. Y. Collins) and theologians (see the works cited by J. Douglass), though it goes far beyond previous attempts to portray Jesus as a nonviolent revolutionary (e.g., Yoder, 1972; Trocmé, 1962; below, Appendix, A). A full explication of this thesis concerning apocalyptic ideology and revolutionary nonviolence, however, as well as other hermeneutical connections that I hint at herein, are beyond the scope of this book.

Though my reading of Mark tries to maintain a synoptic view of what the Gospel *meant* in its own socio-historical context and what it means in ours, these two necessary tasks of interpretation are not identical, nor can they always be carried out simultaneously. Thus I wish the reader to know that this commentary is only the first of a two-part project on Mark and radical discipleship. It concentrates on the former task, though never outside the purview of the latter. My reflections concerning the shape of Mark’s call to radical discipleship in our own context must—because of the already daunting length of this book—here be kept general and brief. They will be explored in depth in a forthcoming companion volume, the second part of my political reading of Mark.

A few words about how this commentary proceeds are in order. For better or worse, if we wish not only to avoid but to *overturn* the kind of simplistic Bible readings that are everywhere used to justify aberrant Christian ideologies, from the White House to the Crystal Cathedral, we must deal with the numerous procedural difficulties of methodology. “Simple Bible-believers” who disclaim the need for hermeneutics are the most suspect interpreters of all. On the other hand, socio-political studies of the Bible today are notorious for their tendency to overwhelm the reader with methodological apparatus (e.g., “semiotic theory,” “modes of production,” etc.), so that he or she cannot even get past the preliminaries! Yet to do away with methodology altogether only serves to make the reader dependent on taking the author’s word for their interpretation, which only perpetuates a hermeneutic of “dependency.”

Obviously my study is not exempt from this problem. In chapter 11 define, in popular fashion, the salient terms and characteristics of my “socio-literary reading strategy.” A detailed treatise of the methodological issues involved would make rather dense reading, especially for those unfamiliar with the fields of sociology and literary criticism. I believe my generalizations concerning “text as ideological discourse” will suffice for purposes of reading Mark, into which I am anxious to get the reader as soon as possible. I refer to other scholarly works where the issues have been treated at length, leaving readers free to explore further if they so wish. I hope this eliminates a psychological obstacle to this

commentary for those who are less concerned with methodology than its fruits. Readers who yet find part 1 slow going are encouraged to start right in with the commentary, which begins midway through chapter 3, and return to the introductory material if and when questions concerning method arise.

The reading strategy I propose skirts between the twin errors of contemporary biblical criticism. To port lies the Scylla of historical criticism's dismantling of narrative texts; to starboard the Charybdis of the new literary criticism, which divorces narrative signification from the historical world (below, 1,D). I insist upon both the literary *and* the socio-historical integrity of the whole text. I call my approach "socio-literary" in order to distinguish it from three current schools of criticism, each of which I draw from in part but none of which I fully endorse: sociological exegesis, narratology, and materialist criticism (below, 1,E,iii).

The length of this commentary is due to the demands of depth and breadth. A socio-literary method stipulates that the gospel narrative must be interpreted whole, not in isolated parts. As for political hermeneutics, it has tended either to rely upon exegetical generalizations or limit its investigations to select texts. If the long-range task, however, is to reclaim the liberating Bible, we must offer systematic commentary on texts in their entirety, and not just the ones that seem at first glance to lend themselves to a political reading!

This is not so much a verse-by-verse commentary as an "episode-by-episode" exposition, studying the meaning of each literary unit and its relationship to the other units and to the overall ideological strategy of Mark. I have made every effort to avoid getting bogged down in details of exegesis or narrative structure, as is so easy, and apologize in advance for those places the reader may find inappropriately sclerotic. I have also tried to preserve a narrative style in my own writing, as opposed to the usual detached prose of commentaries. Still, this is a book for Bible study, meant as a tool and reference work. Needless to say, it must be read with the text of Mark at hand, for I have not reproduced it herein. In my biblical citations I stay close to the text of the *Revised Standard Version* (RSV) except where otherwise indicated; the RSV remains the best study text in English. I have included the transliterated Greek where necessary for clarity.

Because so much work on Mark is available, I have steered away from well-established insights, and concentrated instead upon texts, themes, or socio-literary characteristics that I believe to be underappreciated. My thesis about the whole of the Gospel is as important as my treatment of any specific part, and the reader is invited to take issue on both levels. Because my method is eclectic and cross-disciplinary, it has all the attendant assets and liabilities. Although many of my conclusions are original, I have borrowed freely from a wide range of the traditional exegetical literature, as well as from the newer sociological and literary fields. Indeed, one of my intentions has been to expose the reader to some of the exciting exegesis being offered in contemporary Markan studies. To avoid cluttering the pages with secondary references, however, I decided against all but a very few footnotes. Instead I have preferred to guide readers to

sources that I have found particularly helpful, in the event they wish to pursue something through further investigation.

It is my hope that this commentary might stimulate further work along similar lines, in Mark or other biblical texts. But above all it is offered, as the Gospel itself is, to discipleship communities, however discouraged and weary, as part of our ongoing search for renewed direction and hope in our struggle to follow the way of Jesus in difficult times. A true reading of Mark compels us to come to terms afresh with our faith and most certainly our lack of faith (Mk 9:24). I pray that this study might help Mark to speak, and the reader to have “ears to hear,” the good news that promises yet to overthrow the structures of domination in our world.

Preface to the Twentieth Anniversary Edition

On April 4, 1968—exactly forty years ago as I write this—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was shot down in Memphis, Tennessee. King had come to town to support the city sanitation workers' strike, a profound gesture of solidarity that ultimately brought victory to this low-income community but tragedy in the wider scope of history. In the wake of King's death, the city, the civil rights movement, and much of the nation went into shock. We have never really recovered, unable and unwilling to understand how and why our own government would have conspired to assassinate our greatest public prophet. As Dr. Virgil Wood, a colleague of King, said recently, Americans have truly been "40 years in the wilderness" since that traumatic event, wandering far from the dream of a Beloved Community.

King was, as Vincent Harding (2008) put it, an "inconvenient hero" for both the nation and our churches. The national holiday finally established in his honor in 1983—after a long political struggle—has unfortunately, if predictably, domesticated more than illuminated King's legacy. We must not allow popular hagiographies and politicians' prayer breakfasts to obscure King's radical vision. This is best encountered in his 1967 speech entitled "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break the Silence," delivered at the Riverside Church in New York exactly one year before he was murdered.

The Noble Peace Prize winner had just begun to speak out publicly against the Vietnam War, against the wishes of his colleagues in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and despite being exhausted by more than a decade of civil rights campaigning. King's address that day was truly prophetic, in both senses: it spoke truth to power *and* anticipated the historical consequences of our collective choices. He called that war "one of the most unjust wars ever fought in the history of the world," and peered into the future of imperial adventurism:

The war in Vietnam is but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit, and if we ignore this sobering reality we will find ourselves organizing clergy- and laymen-concerned committees for the next generation. They will be concerned about Guatemala and Peru. They will be concerned about Thailand and Cambodia. They will be concerned

about Mozambique and South Africa. We will be marching for these and a dozen other names and attending rallies without end unless there is a significant and profound change in American life and policy.

Adding Colombia and Venezuela to his litany, King presciently named countries that have indeed endured covert and/or overt military intervention by the United States or its allies since 1967.

But “A Time to Break the Silence” was more than a bold critique of U.S. policy in Indochina. It was a deep archaeology of our culture and identity—the culmination of King’s lifetime struggle “for the soul of America.” He connected the dots between what he called the “giant triplets” of racism, militarism, and materialism and then challenged us to take back the world from those “who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight.” The address represented the pinnacle of King’s dialectical grasp of realism and hope, even as it sealed his fate at the hands of the Powers. It was, in my opinion, the most courageous and significant public speech in U.S. history.

And its power extends to our own day. In March 2003, the United States invaded Iraq for the second time under a Bush presidency. My wife, Elaine, and I were visiting faculty at Memphis Theological Seminary. Still steeped in the culture of the Old South, Memphis struggles with the legacy of King’s death, as well as with the older story of racial and economic apartheid, which was overturned only in part by the civil rights movement. This context thus offered us a sobering catechism in how deeply intertwined King’s “giant triplets” continue to be in our time. As we spoke out against the war in the seminary, the sanctuaries, and the streets, we discovered that King’s Riverside speech was our most compelling tool. It resonated profoundly, though its message was received very differently in Memphis’s white and black churches.

We have used this text continuously in our work ever since, right up through last month’s fifth anniversary of an Iraq war that is beginning to rival the earlier “quagmire” in Indochina. Our experience with it serves as a powerful reminder of how an old, prophetic text can, when recontextualized, animate renewed discipleship—as well as exhume latent resistances—across time and space.

This is germane to this anniversary edition of *Binding the Strong Man*, because our “rereading” of King’s Riverside speech arises from the same belief that energized this commentary twenty years ago. “I feel almost unbearable anguish when faced by the fact that only the word recovered from history should be left to us as the power for stemming disaster,” wrote Ivan Illich (1973). I share Illich’s distress, but also his conviction that “only the word in its weakness can associate the majority of people in the revolutionary inversion of inevitable violence into convivial reconstruction.”

The evangelist Mark and the preacher/activist King had much in common. They were both disciples of Jesus, writing on behalf of stressed but faith-grounded movements of social and spiritual renewal. Each was trying to speak

both pastorally and prophetically into a conflictive national and international moment of war, political terror, and profound social injustice. Their respective witnesses arose from historically oppressed communities of conscience who knew plenty about resisting Pharaoh while struggling to remain human. I would even go so far as to say that King's proclamations were, like Mark's, divinely inspired by the One who stands outside the reigning imperial cosmos, calling us to discipleship.

Mindful of this, I offer two reflections on *Binding the Strong Man* as one attempt to recover the Word from history in order to stem disaster. One summarizes where my own discipleship has taken me in the two decades since its publication. The other assesses the degree to which this book has helped "associate people into convivial reconstruction."

I

Mark's Gospel was written both to and on behalf of a circle of discipleship communities. The same is true of this book. It is a reflection upon actual (not imagined) praxis, growing out of . . . living, organizing and acting with sisters and brothers around the country and around the world, struggling to envision and embody a different way of being human and Christian.

—*From original Acknowledgments*

This book was transparent about my social location and political practice as an interpreter of Mark, because this was and is required by hermeneutic honesty. It also is necessary if one wishes to be accountable to the demands of one's historical moment. In that same conviction, I share some of my journey since 1988.

I have been asked repeatedly why, after this book was published, I did not go on to do doctoral work and teach in academia. I was thirty-three years old, and indeed at a crossroads. The intentional community mentioned in the original edition's preface had spun apart, and my first marriage with it. There were, therefore, strong factors of personal turmoil and transition that impacted my choices at that juncture. Ultimately, however, my decision was a matter of fidelity to the hermeneutic circle. Having written a commentary to and for communities of faith and justice, I felt that my primary responsibility was not to procure more professional credentialing or write "the next book," but to keep living into the narrative of biblical radicalism through my own discipleship.

The political climate also weighed heavily in how I understood my vocation. We were at the tail end of two hard terms of the Reagan presidency, in which neoconservative structural adjustment and resurgent American imperialism were rapidly remapping the political and economic landscape. Abroad we'd endured a decade of covert war in Central America, the overt invasions of Grenada and Panama, and the Iran-Contra arms-trading scandal. At home we

were seeing deepening socioeconomic disparity and a new round of backlash against immigrants, affirmative action, and environmental responsibility.

I did not feel called to the pastorate, and I saw few signs that our theological seminaries would emerge as vanguards of social concern. So I chose to reimmerge myself in political organizing and began a decade of work with the American Friends Service Committee in Los Angeles.

When *Binding the Strong Man* began to receive scholarly reviews, I attended the annual meetings of the Society for Biblical Literature, hoping for critical conversation. There I had the strange and powerfully alienating experience of sitting anonymously in seminars where my commentary was being discussed, invisible because I was not a professional academic. More importantly, most of the scholarly debates seemed too disengaged from the issues I was immersed in at AFSC, such as immigrant rights, fair housing, rural poverty, and indigenous sovereignty.

I settled into organizing work and slowly grew in political maturity, thanks to the mentoring of many committed colleagues, particularly those who did not share my race, class, and gender privileges. Three developments during 1991-92 confirmed for me that I had made the right vocational choice: the first Gulf War, the Columbus Quincentenary, and the Los Angeles uprising. These tumultuous events became my hermeneutic lens for the promised “second part” of my Mark project, which I wrote at nights and on weekends amidst my activist work.

Who Will Roll Away the Stone? Discipleship Queries for First World Christians was published by Orbis in 1994. The response to its attempt to outline a liberation theology for our North American context was, however, disappointing. There proved to be far more interest in my exegesis of Mark’s Gospel against the backdrop of the Pax Romana than in my reflections on following Jesus in the Pax Americana—which confirmed why I spent so much time in the sequel addressing our various dominant cultural mechanisms of denial. Still, the experience of writing the *Stone* book was deeply clarifying, and it remains my most personal statement of theology, identity, and faith.

Requests began coming with increasing frequency to work with activist and church groups around North America (and occasionally abroad) on Bible study and social analysis. The challenges of translating my academic work for non-seminary-educated folk drew me steadily into the discipline and art of popular education in the Freire tradition (see *Stone*, pp. 64ff.). This resulted in two collaborative publications with a wonderful circle of co-authors. One was a Quincentenary study guide entitled *The American Journey, 1492-1992: A Call to Conversion* (1992). The other was *Say to This Mountain: Mark’s Story of Discipleship*, published by Orbis in 1996. With the latter I felt my project of reading Mark—and allowing Mark to read us—was completed.

In 1997, I was approached by organizers of the nascent Jubilee 2000 movement seeking to mobilize communities of faith to address the global debt crisis. They were looking to anchor their work in deeper biblical analysis and asked if I could do some resourcing. This corresponded with my growing

interest in economic anthropology in a quest to understand the root causes of oppression, alienation, and violence. Over the next few years, I published a series of articles that eventually became a popular booklet entitled *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics* (2001b). This continues to be used widely as a study tool (for more information see www.sabbatheconomics.org).

The travel associated with my popular education work became increasingly difficult to squeeze in around my organizing. Yet activist friends in local, regional, and national movements insisted that this sort of reflection was needed. Consequently I left AFSC to engage full-time as a “theological animator” (on this see <http://bcm-net.org/wordpress/theological-animation/>). I embraced an itinerant life, working across the ecumenical spectrum with groups large and small, grassroots and institutional, activist and ecclesial. This work has afforded me a fascinating vista of faith-rooted organizing for justice and peace around the English-speaking world, with all its rich and inspiring diversity, as well as its fracture and frailty. Before long, however, the wear and tear of the road began to break my body down. A number of serious physical ailments made medical coverage a necessity, so in 1997 colleagues and I established a non-profit cooperative. Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries (www.bcm-net.org) remains the platform for my educational and organizing efforts.

The goal of my work is to help rehabilitate the church as a movement of personal and social transformation. The strategy is to return theological reflection to an organic (instead of professionalized) context, through a pedagogy of community formation, sociopolitical conscientization and capacity building. In practice this approach consists of equal parts evangelism, teaching, facilitation, networking, and pastoral accompaniment. Despite our era’s sophisticated communications technology, there is no substitute for personal interaction, and there is a continuing need for critical reflection that goes beyond political or theological sound bites. “Keeping one another’s courage up,” friends at Jonah House taught me, is the “most apostolic duty of all.”

This vision was most fully realized through Word and World: A People’s School, an ecumenical and multiracial collaborative I helped found in 2001 (www.wordandworld.org). Five historic streams of theological education-for-liberation informed our pedagogy:

1. The “Freedom School” tradition of the black church, especially as it developed during the civil rights movement
2. The “Underground Seminary” and “School of the Prophets” experiments of First World peace and radical discipleship movements, which drew consciously upon the Confessing Church tradition of Dietrich Bonhoeffer
3. Feminist pedagogies of the women’s movement, as well as struggles for ecclesial inclusion by sexual minorities
4. The base community movements inspired by liberation theology in the two-thirds world, especially Latin America and the Philippines
5. Labor Schools and the work of the Highlander Center.

Word and World held eight schools in as many cities around the country, each up to a week long and organized by local-national collectives. The curriculum was broadly structured around studying scripture and the history of social change. Our educational practices endeavored to be contextual, inclusive, applied, and holistic (see Myers, 2001a).

To our great disappointment, this experiment in alternative theological education proved to be difficult to sustain, failing to garner sufficient material support from either denominational institutions or activist organizations. Fortunately, our last two schools (Memphis in 2006 and North Carolina in 2007), which focused on the legacy of Martin Luther King's solidarity with low-income workers, helped launch an important ongoing initiative: the Southern Faith, Labor and Community Alliance (www.wordandworld.org/FaithLaborCommunityAlliance.shtml). Anchored by dear colleagues at the Beloved Community Center in Greensboro, North Carolina (www.belovedcommunitycenter.org), this effort is rebuilding the strategic relationship between back churches and the trade union movement.

More recently our cooperative has inaugurated the "Bartimaeus Institute," five-day intensive studies of the Gospels and social justice, which continue the approach of Word and World. Today my study and writing range widely, anchored in an effort to connect the struggle for God's justice in scriptural texts with various contemporary contexts. After years of writing "on the run," I am now committed to staying home at least half of each year to write.

In the two decades since *Binding the Strong Man* was published I have lost many dear mentors and friends, some of whom I have named in this edition's acknowledgments. These losses have made me more conscious that this season of my life invites me to settle into new places. For one, I am clear that I have a role as a "keeper of the tradition" for our scattered circles of radical discipleship, which remains my true church. For another, I have joined the Mennonite Church, both because of my long-standing resonance with the Anabaptist vision, and out of respect for Elaine's beautiful and strong ethnic Mennonite clan in Saskatchewan.

Third, I am at last realizing a long-standing commitment to engage my native bioregion more deeply (see *Stone*, chapter 11). After three decades in the inner city, in 2005 we co-founded a small intentional community in a blue-collar town on the edge of the Los Padres wilderness in southern California. We are trying to learn as much about the ecstasy of God's *creation* as we have about the trauma of human *civilization*. We believe that justice for the poor and the defense of nature should not be divergent tasks, as they so often seem to be. "It's hard to know when to respond to the seductiveness of the world and when to respond to its challenges," wrote E. B. White. "I arise in the morning torn between the twin desires to change the world and to enjoy the world. That makes it hard to plan the day."

In all of this I still aspire only to follow Jesus on the Way in the manner of Bartimaeus (Mk 10:46-52). Mark's archetypal disciple remains my North Star.

II

Binding the Strong Man had seventeen printings before this new edition. Below is my assessment of how it has fared in the different (and all too disconnected) contexts of seminary, sanctuary, and streets.

Seminary. One goal of this book was to forge a new methodological approach to the Gospels, taking the traditional path of using Mark as the “proving grounds.” The commentary was, for the most part, respectively received among New Testament academics. The main complaint at the time, unsurprisingly, was that the book was too overtly “political.” But most aspects of my somewhat eclectic approach have been vindicated in the ensuing two decades, as the following examples suggest:

1. Owning my social location and political commitments initially brought dismissive accusations of “reading my biases into the text” from biblical scholars who still imagined they could and should remain neutral interpreters. But the (so-called) postmodern turn was already beginning to impact the guild, and today it has become acceptable (and in some circles expected) to foreground one’s readerly context. One of my greatest affirmations came from Silvia Regina de Lima, an Afro-Brazilian New Testament scholar now in Costa Rica, who wrote:

Binding the Strong Man has been a valuable tool for those of us who are disturbed and wounded by those who still talk about the possibility of doing “objective studies.” . . . Your indignation found resonance in mine; your dreams of rupture, liberation and radical discipleship added to my own. Each day the challenge is more urgent: to enter the house of the strong man, bind him and recover what has been taken from us: the life and dignity of our peoples, of Afro-Latin Americans, of women, children, and impoverished men. Thank you for your expression of the community of those who are “tireless dreamers.”

2. Formalist literary-critical methods were just starting to impact the reigning historical-critical paradigm in Synoptic studies when I wrote in the mid 1980s. (There was not a single course on literary theory when I was in seminary!) Today narrative reading strategies have become ascendant, though in a variety of modes (see, e.g., Powell, 1990; Anderson and Moore, 2008). I see this as a healthy restoration of common sense, since storytelling is our human *lingua franca*. A narrative approach can go a long way toward bridging the vast chasm between scholarly and everyday readings of scripture.

Unfortunately, the gulf between literary and sociohistorical methods that I attempted to bridge in this book remains wide. The feud between historicism and post-structuralism persists, and few in New Testament studies have embraced my sociology-of-literature method. Still, there have been some notable works

that combined some form of narrative and sociohistorical analysis. The field of “ideological criticism” also emerged in the 1990s, exhibiting many similarities to my approach.

3. Political hermeneutics, while always on the margins of the academy, has changed significantly over the last two decades. There is considerably less use of Marxist analysis—presumably a casualty of the “end of the cold war.” Instead there has been an explosion of “postcolonial” readings—a methodology predicated upon Marx’s critique of imperialism. Whether postcolonialism represents a more versatile and less doctrinaire approach that yet is able to animate strong political practice remains to be seen.

The same could be said about the way in which “empire” has recently been used by many scholars as a hermeneutic key for reading the Jesus story. This is a welcome trend, since *Binding the Strong Man* was deemed overly politicized twenty years ago for taking precisely this approach. While for some academics the analysis of imperialism stops at antiquity (e.g., Malina, 2001), for others it informs both past and present (Horsley, 2003; Hendricks, 2006; Crossan, 2007). The latter are (rightly) responding to the rehabilitation of U.S. imperial rhetoric and policies under the second Bush regime. Still, unless analysis is connected to concrete engagement, a hermeneutic of empire will amount to little more than another fad in biblical studies.

4. Perhaps the most dramatic scholarly development over the last two decades has been ever more sophisticated work in social history and socio-anthropological modeling of Mediterranean antiquity. Much more archaeological information is now available for reconstructing material history, as are comparative studies of a wider array of ancient textual traditions. Such work has strengthened the approach and conclusions of *Binding the Strong Man* and is an asset to any political reading of scripture, providing broader and deeper underpinnings to sociology of literature approaches.

One trajectory of research deserves special mention: studies of the social context of ancient oral transmission among marginalized communities. Richard Horsley has shown how the popular oral storytelling of the Jesus movement, which drew on “anti-hegemonic” cultural memory, was often in conflict with the elite’s authority over *texts* (in Horsley et al., 2006:172ff.). This is why Mark’s references to scripture are always polemical. Antoinette Wire (2000) believes that women may have carried primary responsibility for stewarding oral Jesus traditions, and that the writer of Mark could well have been female. I delight in that possibility.

Other aspects of my commentary that were considered unorthodox have been reinforced by subsequent theological and exegetical work. For example, my contention (following Douglass, 1968) that Jesus’ cross was the ultimate expression of nonviolent resistance has been further articulated in several recent books exploring a “nonviolent atonement” theology (e.g., Weaver, 2001). In addition, my reading of Mark’s trial narrative as parody has been echoed in other investigations of biblical satire (e.g., Weisman, 1998).

I can of course, in retrospect, see small errors and tactical weaknesses in

Wire 2000 not
in bibliography

Binding the Strong Man. I am grateful to Bas Wielenga of Tamilnadu Theological Seminary for taking me on a stroll around the massive Hindu Temple in Madurai, India, in 1996. He gently pointed out to me that my severe critique of the political economy of the Second Temple in Jerusalem was overly one-dimensional, neglecting to affirm the many ways such an institution can function positively and integrally in the daily lives of regular people. My reading has also been taken in some activist Christian circles to suggest that Jesus rejected most aspects of his own Jewish culture, which could not be further from the truth. The awful legacy of Christian supersessionism dies hard; if I were to revise this book I would take more care to stress all the ways in which Mark's Jesus draws upon his heritage, particularly that of the eighth-century prophets.

While corrections and updates would improve this book, I am not aware of any developments in Markan studies that overturn my basic premises. There are, to be sure, ongoing debates concerning the provenance and literary structure of Mark and the meaning of particular texts. This is the nature of biblical studies! But *Binding the Strong Man* has stood up well in the biblical academy over two decades, so I can in conscience assent to its republication without revision.

Sanctuary. I am invited to lecture or teach at seminaries often enough to have the strong impression that the academy is more insulated from movements for social change than it was in 1988. I turn therefore to the more primary audiences for which this book was written: church members and Christian social activists.

A second goal of this book was to challenge traditional spiritualized or dogmatic readings of the Gospel in our First World churches, in order to promote *discipleship* as the core of Christian faith rather than either *decisionism* (the tendency of evangelicalism) or *denominationalism* (the tendency of liberalism). Though the conservative turn of culture and politics through the Bush eras saw liberation theology increasingly relegated to the margins of North American seminaries, many divinity students are still exposed to this commentary during their course of study. I frequently meet ministers who say they encountered it in their studies and found it to be important to their faith and vocation. Many preachers have told me that they lean on it throughout the Year B lectionary cycle, often confessing to have "plagiarized shamelessly." I remind them that the Gospel is public domain!

A serialized popular summary of my reading of Mark appeared in *Sojourners* magazine in 1987, which helped spread word of this project. This became the basis for the *Mountain* book, which has been employed by many study groups in parishes and adult education. Still, I have been gratified by the number of laypeople who have labored appreciatively through this big commentary—and more so by how many have told me how Mark's story of discipleship has challenged and changed their lives.

I was initially surprised by how many Catholics were drawn to this book or my popular presenting of its themes. The greatest legacy of Vatican II is how it enfranchised the laity to study scripture, and a renaissance of Catholic

scholarship has ensued. May it continue in this more regressive environment! There has also been a robust response from mainstream Protestants, which suggests that there is far more hunger for discipleship renewal than most denominational managers presume. This is particularly true as mainline church members face post-Constantinian realities. Of particular encouragement have been leaders in both the Uniting Church of Australia and the United Church of Canada, who have urged their membership to explore what it means to live their faith in resistance to empire.

On the other hand, evangelicals by and large remain suspicious of political hermeneutics in general, and of this book in particular, even though I once hailed from their ranks. Perhaps for similar reasons Anabaptists, with whom I now identify, have not widely used *Binding the Strong Man*. Nevertheless, I am happy that some young leaders of the current “emergent” generation of evangelical social justice activists have begun discovering this book.

Over the last fifteen years I have traveled more than a million miles to work with groups across the spectrum: high-, low- and no-church. From denominational leaders to folks in the pews I have heard repeatedly that the kind of Bible study and social analysis represented by *Binding the Strong Man* is crucial for personal, ecclesial, and political renewal. My conviction that our scriptures must be recovered as both powerful and populist (see Myers, 2000) is affirmed by countless persons I meet along the way. The poignant testimony of one elderly nun haunts and motivates me still. She sat quietly in the back row at a week-long seminar on Mark in 1994, saying nothing, breathing laboriously with the help of an oxygen tank. After we finished, she motioned me over, and I half expected to be scolded. Instead she looked at me with quiet tears. “I thank God,” she said, grasping my hand, “that after all these years in church, I finally heard the *whole* gospel. Now I can pass in peace.”

Streets. I took to heart Marx’s famous dictum that the point of critical analysis “is not merely to understand the world, but to change it.” And I have been pleased with how many faith-rooted activists have worked with this commentary. Such folk are notoriously reluctant to take time away from incessantly demanding work to read and talk about why and how they are engaged. But without such reflection, too many who came to the works of mercy, advocacy, and organizing because of Gospel inspiration end up losing their spiritual moorings, often burning out. Others become disillusioned with churches that do not stand with them or behind them. My greatest joy is when weary or cynical activists are, with the help of this book, able to reconstruct a reintegrated faith and practice.

Equally gratifying is how *Binding the Strong Man* and other books like it have inspired activist Christians to embrace disciplines of Bible study. A notable example is the Los Angeles Catholic Worker community, hard-working friends who serve the poor on Skid Row, welcome them into hospice, advocate for the dignity of the homeless on the mean streets of the city, and resist the culture of war. For twenty years they have maintained weekly, serious study of a biblical text, which I have periodically been privileged to lead. They have developed

the most rigorous study rhythm I have encountered in the Catholic Worker movement, and an impressive biblical literacy. A few are even laboring to teach themselves Greek or Hebrew! Their embrace of this form of “clarification of thought” makes my work worthwhile.

I have also had the opportunity to encourage and help other “movement scholars” get their theological reflections published. I take this task seriously, ever mindful of how Dr. Norman Gottwald made time to do the same for me in 1986. More manuscripts now come my way than I can handle, confirming that those engaged in struggles for peace and justice have crucially important (if underrepresented) perspectives on biblical texts and theological and ethical issues.

On the whole, however, it remains difficult for those of us who are nonprofessional theologians to sustain the type of “organic intellectual” engagement demanded by our activist work. Finding the space and time to read, reflect, and gather with others for critical conversation amidst the press of pastoral and prophetic ministry is challenging. Another problem is that our work is often deemed too political for religious institutions (and the granting agencies that prop them up), and too religious for secular institutions! Serious writing produced outside the privileged confines of the academy is, consequently, too rare. But more distressing is the fact that when our work *is* published, it is seldom taken seriously in the universities and seminaries. The balkanization between the worlds of theory and practice must be overcome, because each desperately needs the other for its own wholeness.

On the eve of his assassination, Martin Luther King spoke at Mason Temple in Memphis, prophesying the following:

It is no longer a choice between violence and nonviolence in this world; it is nonviolence or nonexistence. . . . And in the human rights revolution, if something isn’t done, and done in a hurry, to bring the colored peoples of the world out of their long years of poverty, their long years of hurt and neglect, the whole world is doomed.

Forty years later, that analysis is regrettably more relevant than ever. And the giant triplets of racism, militarism, and poverty he named a year earlier at Riverside Church continue to hold our history hostage.

Sadly, twenty years on, the critique advanced in *Binding the Strong Man* holds as well: we Christians who dwell comfortably in the bosom of empire have missed the point of Mark’s Gospel. Thus I believe our task remains the same: to reread Mark (and the rest of the Bible); to reread Martin (and other modern prophets); and to read the signs of our times—all in order to animate renewed discipleship.

The Lorraine Motel, where King was gunned down, is now the National Civil Rights Museum, thanks to a protracted community struggle to commemorate that painful event. Directly under the balcony where Martin took his last breath is a

See p. xxvi line 10, where the giant triplets are “racism, militarism, and materialism.”

memorial stone, into which is etched this quotation from the old story of Joseph: “They said to one another, ‘Behold, here comes the dreamer. . . . Let us slay him . . . and we shall see what will become of his dreams’” (Gen 37:19f.). It represents a challenge that lingers over our nation and our church like an unresolved chord.

May this new edition of *Binding the Strong Man* help a new generation of disciples in the seminaries, sanctuaries, and streets to follow the One whom Martin followed, in our common mission to realize the Dream of God.

—Ched Myers
April 4, 2008

NOTES

1. The poignant story of King’s last days working with the sanitation workers has been narrated well in the award-winning documentary “At the River I Stand” (available at www.newsreel.org, and in Honey, 2007).

2. It took a Memphis jury that presided over a civil suit brought by the King family in 1999 only one and a half hours to find that a conspiracy to kill Dr. King did in fact exist, and that it involved city, state, and federal government agents. The story of this stunning verdict is told in Pepper, 2003; trial transcripts can be found at <http://theking-center.com/news/trial.html>.

3. See Washington, 1986:231ff. The text and audio of the speech can also be found at www.drmartinlutherkingjr.com/beyondvietnam.htm and many other Web sites.

4. Indigenous struggles for sovereignty and demilitarization were a key organizing commitment of mine through the 1980s. This is also reflected in a book I co-authored with Robert Aldridge, *Resisting the Serpent: Palau’s Struggle for Self-Determination* (1990).

5. Recent examples are readings of Isaiah’s concern for the cedars of Lebanon in light of current struggles to preserve old-growth forests (2007); Luke’s Emmaus Road story in light of M. L. King’s assassination (2006a); and Isaiah 56 in light of advocacy for immigrant’s rights in the United States (2006b). I have also been collaborating with Elaine in doing theological and practical reflection on the growing restorative justice movement, in which she is deeply involved as a mediator. For a bibliography of my published work since *Binding the Strong Man* see <http://bcm-net.org/wordpress/theological-animation/bibliography/>.

6. “Biblical interpretation has begun to see shifts in paradigms,” writes Kah-Jin Kuan (2003), “since the introduction of liberation theology. As a biblical scholar, I no longer subscribe to the idea that biblical interpretation was or can ever be objective and universal. On the contrary, every reading and every interpretation is by nature subjective and particular. As readers and interpreters of texts, biblical and otherwise, we engage in the construction of meaning whenever we read. The meaning is never imbedded in the text; rather it is the result of the interaction between the reader and the text.” On this see Segovia and Tolbert, 1998; and Callahan, 2006; in Markan studies see Blount, 2004, 1998.

7. Private correspondence. Thanks to Ross and Gloria Kinsler for translating this letter. Silvia teaches New Testament at the Universidad Biblica Latinoamericana in Costa Rica.

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Kuan 2003

8. See, e.g., Howard-Brook on John (1994); Howard-Brook and Gwyther on Revelation (1999); Carter on Matthew (2000); Horsley (1997) and Elliott (1994) on Paul; Walsh and Keesmaat on Colossians (2004); and Elsa Tamez on 1 Timothy (2007). Specific to Mark, see Tolbert, 1989; Beck, 1996; and Horsley, 2001.

9. See, e.g., Jobling, Day, and Sheppard, 1991; and the Bible and Culture Collective, 1997.

10. For representative surveys, see Sugirtharajah, 2001, 2003; and Dube, 2000. Exemplary projects of reading the Bible with marginalized groups include Ekblad, 2005; and West, 1990, 1998. For all its promise, I have two concerns about postcolonial hermeneutics. There is no doubt that biblical texts have been employed relentlessly in the service of conquest and colonization through the history of Christendom since Constantine, and thus the history of interpretation must be aggressively engaged. But this should not obscure the “contrapuntal” fact that these ancient texts were produced by and for peoples on the margins of empire. Indeed, the New Testament writers were far more countercultural than most modern postcolonial scholars, who seem far more adept at identifying “accommodation” in the text than in their own social practices. The hermeneutic of suspicion should go both ways! Moreover, too much postcolonial discourse is obtusely pedantic, and thus difficult to access by those in our churches and movements currently struggling against neocolonialism in all its guises. From a liberation perspective, the litmus test of this method is the degree to which it is accountable to and involved with social movements of transformation on the ground (see Gottwald and Horsley, 1993; Rowland and Corner, 1989).

11. See, e.g., Stegemann, Malina, and Theissen, 2002; and Hanson and Oakman, 1998. Specific readings of texts include J. Elliott on 1 Peter (1990); Malina and Rohrbaugh on the Synoptics (1992); Herzog on Jesus’ parables (1994); and Pilch on healing in the New Testament (2000).

12. See, e.g., “As it is written . . .” (Mk 1:2; 7:6; 9:12f.; 10:4f.; 11:17; 12:19; 14:21, 27) or “Have you not read . . . ?” (2:25; 12:10, 26; 13:14). Moreover, Mark portrays actions in a way that calls to mind popular, oral tales about cultural heroes of peasant Israel such as Moses (e.g., Mk 9:2ff.), Elijah (e.g., 1:6), or Elisha (e.g., 6:35), while the scribal class comes in for Jesus’ severest criticism.

13. Meanwhile, liberation theologies continue to fertilize engaged biblical study throughout the Third World, despite the fact that less of this exciting material is “trickling up” to First World publishers. See, e.g., Kinsler and Kinsler, 2005; and De La Torre, 2002.

14. The best account of my pedagogic style, based on an analysis not only of my writing but of popular educational work I did in churches in the United Kingdom, is found in Barrow, 2002. I am grateful to him for this work.

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Introduction to the Anniversary Edition

Sam Wells

If anyone asks me what an “organic intellectual” is I immediately think of Ched Myers.

—*Christopher Rowland*¹

I believe that scholarship that does not start and end in praxis is not worth engaging in.

—*Osvaldo Vena*²

“WE HAVE NEVER SEEN ANYTHING LIKE THIS” (MARK 2:12)

In the days before I inhabited a posh office I used to display a number of cartoons within regular provoking distance. One of them was of a convention of psychiatrists gathered on the beach of a seaside resort. Out in the bay were the flailing arms (and doubtless agonized noises) of a distressed swimmer, clearly beginning to disappear under the surface of the ocean. The caption below the cartoon noted the conclusion of the psychiatrists’ deliberations: “So we’re agreed then; it’s definitely a cry for help.”

What the cartoon achieved through irony Ched Myers achieves through exegesis. Conventional biblical scholarship, concerned to assume the mantle of disinterest so coveted by scientific research, relentlessly comes to a tantalizing conclusion: the Gospel writers portray Jesus as a man beyond any mundane description, who makes breathtaking promises, performs acts that equal or exceed his promises, and calls on those inspired by him to respond in ways that transform every aspect of personal, social, and cosmic existence. So we’re agreed then. It’s definitely a cry for utter personal and social transformation—body, mind, and spirit.

And that’s where the conversation remains. Of course there is plenty of room for defining and exploring exactly what “transform” means, what “personal,” “social,” or “cosmic” might mean, then or now. And there will always be variant

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readings and new translations and baffling phrases. But while endlessly clarifying precisely what the meaning and message and difference and demand of Jesus really were and are, it has not been very common for the Gospel commentator to assume that readers are *already* embarked on making these transformations the center of their earthly existence. That would disqualify them from being disinterested readers. That would allow these texts to do what on the face of it they seem to want to do: change everything.

Jim Rice³ sees this clearly when he writes, “*Binding the Strong Man* helped us understand that when Jesus healed a leper, he was also challenging social, cultural, and even political mores. He helped us see clearly that Jesus’ call to transformation goes far deeper than individual salvation to a whole new order, in his time and in our own.” *Binding the Strong Man* doesn’t just say “It seems to be a cry for utter personal and social transformation,” and lay the pen to rest there. It rigorously and relentlessly charts the nature of sin and oppression in first-century Palestine, the personal and political identities and interests of those who kept a stranglehold on the people of God, the ways Jesus went about exposing and addressing the sources and roots of the problem, the logic and coherence of Jesus’ apparently disparate actions and words, and the decisive significance of his crucifixion and resurrection. It simply takes for granted that this must evoke the transformation in the reader that it demanded of the first followers. As Peter Price⁴ notes, “The quality of discipleship called forth from this reading of the gospel is both politically demanding and spiritually empowering.” It likewise assumes that the insights derived from years of seeking to embody this transformation will enliven the reading community to aspects of the text that might be invisible to the studiously disinterested reader. Ched Myers’s work simply eliminates the hermeneutical gap between discovering the meaning of a text in its time and allowing its meaning to be inscribed on one’s own body and society today.

Wes Howard-Brook⁵ expresses this transformative method in more precise terms. “Three aspects of Ched Myers’ *Binding the Strong Man* have been groundbreaking for me from the perspective of twenty years. First, Ched openly claimed his social location as an activist-disciple, rather than pretending neutrality as an ‘objective’ scholar.⁶ Second, he named the contextual confluence of text and reader as the locus imperium. Finally, he showed the power of reading through what he then called, following his teacher Norman Gottwald, the ‘socioliterary method.’⁷ Each one of these aspects has been foundational for my own reading and writing on the Bible. Without *Binding the Strong Man*, who knows if these now basic ‘givens’ would have emerged with such power and clarity, releasing the biblical Word for its proper purpose of inspiring and empowering a living commitment to the Way of Jesus, the crucified and risen One.” Likewise, Ulrich Duchrow,⁸ John Hirt,⁹ and Brian Blount¹⁰ speak about the inspiration of Ched Myers’s book for vibrant and radical discipleship. For Ulrich Duchrow, “*Binding the Strong Man* continues to be an inspiration for many of us trying to follow Jesus in radical discipleship.” John Hirt writes,

“Both in his writing and teaching Ched continues to remind the church that theological reflection and movements for social change will be bereft of biblical integrity unless they are performed by conscientious Christians whose personal lives are grounded in a profound commitment to Christ their lord. Because he writes and teaches from the deep place of his devotion to Jesus, Ched continues to be among those who radically affect authentic Christian existence today.” And in Brian Blount’s words, “Twenty years later *Binding the Strong Man* still has the ability to push its readers into a fresh new perspective on what it means to be in discipleship with the Human One who seeks to realize the Reign of God in our social, historical, spiritual, and political landscape.”

Christopher Rowland captures the tone of Ched Myers’s work in similar terms. “What I think is so striking about Ched Myers’ *Binding the Strong Man* is that it’s apparent on every page that it is written by a person whose understanding comes from within the struggles of life, and who knows, *mutatis mutandis*, what it is to follow Jesus ‘in the way’ and to understand the Bible out of that context. Ched understands something about the text, because he knows that what it means to be a follower of Jesus puts one in a position of being a nonconformist and an activist. If you’re not, then one will miss things about the text and not grasp the wisdom and insight which is hidden in this strange story of a marginal Jew which we know as the Gospel of Mark.”

The unique quality of Ched Myers’s work is summed up by the following two perspectives. First, Norman Gottwald,¹¹ mentor to Myers in the 1980s: “First of all, it is a sophisticated reading of the Gospel that brings together literary and social critical methods in a manner that is accessible and intellectually exciting. Of equal significance is Ched’s overt appropriation of the Gospel for contemporary social and religious praxis.¹² The power of the work is its compelling union of rigorous academic analysis with a social passion that opens up the biblical text to social change movements both within and beyond the church. Just as my *Tribes of Yahweh* served to explode the fetish of scholarly objectivity in OT studies, Ched’s *Binding the Strong Man* has done much the same in NT studies. His book has won a large and deserved readership, including the grudging respect of scholars who still cling to the fiction of scholarly neutrality.” Then John Dear,¹³ radical priest: “I don’t know any other scripture scholar or theologian who has been arrested for nonviolent civil disobedience in opposition to war, injustice and empire. Because of those dramatic experiences, my friend Ched understands the Gospels, the story of Jesus, like few other scholars.”

“WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO FOR YOU?” (MARK 10:36, 51)

Toward the end of the lengthy and invaluable introduction to his commentary, Myers identifies what he describes as three distinct narrative strands or subplots. First of all, there is Jesus’ creation of a new community, based around the

messianic hopes of his preaching. He calls around him twelve disciples and commissions them to spread the fire of his kingdom. The disciples falter and stumble, out of fear of the cross, lack of imagination, and cold betrayal. But in Mark's account of the resurrection there is promise of a restored community in Galilee.

The second story is Jesus' mission to the crowd, the teeming mass of poor and oppressed whom Mark mentions thirty-eight times in his Gospel. Shane Claiborne¹⁴ was especially drawn to the way Myers focuses on this narrative strand: "*Binding the Strong Man* was one of the first books that allowed me to hear the invitation to join God's revolution with the ears of first century peasants. I will forever be ruined by—and indebted to—the work of Ched Myers." Jesus' ministry with the crowd is that of healing, exorcism, and liberation, through story, announcement, and gesture. At the triumphal entry into Jerusalem the crowd seems to have taken up the cause of liberation, but by Good Friday it has chosen the terrorist Barabbas instead.

The third interwoven story is Jesus' confrontation with the powers that held Israel in their grip. One by one Jesus takes on the Pharisees, the scribes, the Herodians, and the Sadducees. He dismantles their authority and challenges their control, but eventually the veil of pretense is pulled aside and behind emerges the real power in Israel, the power that toys with all other powers—the iron fist of Rome. It is the nails and wood of Roman execution that finally destroy Jesus—only for him to dismantle even Rome's control over life and death.

These three stories, of disciples, crowd, and authorities, are interwoven in Mark's Gospel like three strands in a rope. Each finds its climax in the account of Jesus' passion. The three stories in the end constitute one story. And that story is the sending of Jesus by the Father, crystallized in the Father's words at Jesus' baptism, "You are my beloved son," epitomized in the Father's words at the Transfiguration, "This is my beloved son," and climaxing in the centurion's words at the cross, "Truly this man was God's son!" Jesus' intimacy with the disciples, his mission to the crowd, and his confrontation with the authorities are all dimensions of his being at the heart of God.

What *Binding the Strong Man* enables the reader to see is that a life shaped by Jesus must similarly be lived in these three normative contexts. First we reflect Mark's Gospel by being part of a group of disciples. When we become Christians, we are called into intimate relationship. We may already have close family ties, and our call to follow the man from Nazareth may intensify and strengthen these existing relationships, or it may test and challenge them. But either way, we are called to make new, close, and accountable relationships with members of Christ's church. These may earn the name friendships; on the other hand, they may never become friendships, just stubborn, intractable, and sometimes downright irritating relationships with people who remind us of stubborn, intractable, and sometimes downright irritating things like showing up at worship on Sunday and tithing our income, and praying for our

enemies. When we take stock of our Christian life, we must ask, “Am I part of an accountable group or network of relationships? Am I part of a ‘group of disciples’ in any meaningful sense?”

Then, second, we reflect Mark’s Gospel by attending to the crowd, by being in relationship with the poor and oppressed. There are all sorts of ways to do this. Myers simply assumes that his reader is seeking to alter legislation affecting the status of migrant farmworkers in rural North Carolina. He takes for granted that his reader is volunteering in a soup kitchen or campaigning for a living wage or protesting against gun laws or the death penalty. At the very least Myers is pushing his reader to a new kind of friendship with the poor, because to be a friend is to say “I am allowing myself to be changed by knowing you.” When we take stock of our relationship with the poor and oppressed, we ask ourselves in the light of Mark’s Gospel, “Do I have friendships with people very different from myself, people to whom I say ‘I am allowing myself to be changed by knowing you’?”

Third, we reflect Mark’s Gospel by attending to Jesus’ confrontation with the Jerusalem authorities of his day. We seem to have picked up an idea that holiness is a trance-like sense of peace and well-being in relation to those all around, an experience of floating on a magic carpet of tranquility. Wherever that picture of holiness came from, it certainly wasn’t Mark’s Gospel. Jesus is constantly having heated debates with everyone who held Israel in check. The one thing everyone seems to agree on today is that there’s plenty wrong with the world. There are only two responses to this—either go and put it right yourself, or, if you can’t, make life pretty uncomfortable for those who can until they do. When we take stock of our relationship with the powerful, we ask ourselves “Does the shape of my life reflect my longing to see God set people free, and do I challenge those who keep others in slavery?” Jeff Dietrich¹⁵ captures this longing when he says, “Meeting Ched and reading *Binding the Strong Man* opened my eyes to the way in which Gospels have been so completely domesticated for almost 2000 years by the culture of domination. Rather, they embody the radical word of God’s liberation that comforts the poor, emboldens the prophets and causes ‘the tyrants to tremble sick with fear.’” Similarly, Mark McVann:¹⁶ “Twenty years after its first appearance, *Binding the Strong Man* continues to be eloquent, relevant, and fierce testimony against Empire, especially timely when we remember Afghanistan and Iraq.”

Just as for Mark’s Gospel, these three strands, the strands of accountable community, friendship with the poor, and challenge to the powerful, all unite in the fundamental story, which is our commissioning by God in our baptism, our sharing the mystery of God in the transfiguration of our lives of service, and our entering the glory of God in our death and resurrection. But Mark’s Gospel teaches us that this fundamental story cannot be lived except through the three strands of the story, except through accountable community, except through friendship with the poor, except through challenge to the powerful. This is the kind of radical discipleship to which *Binding the Strong Man* invites us.

“A NEW TEACHING—WITH AUTHORITY!” (MARK 1.27)

While Myers’s command of the literary, rhetorical, and political structure of the text is commanding and comprehensive, his reading comes alive in his treatment of particular narratives and segments of teaching.¹⁷ Here I want briefly to highlight passages that in Myers’s hands have had a significant effect on specific readers.¹⁸

1. The calling of the first disciples (Mark 1:16-20). Here Myers writes of the “fishers of people” episode: “The point here is that following Jesus requires not just assent of the heart, but a fundamental reordering of socio-economic relationships. . . . This is not a call ‘out’ of the world, but into an alternative social practice” (132-33). Osvaldo Vena comments as follows on this passage. “Of the many insights I have gained by reading Myers’s work, there is one that has truly influenced the way in which I understand discipleship. And that is his description of Jesus’ call of the first disciples in Mark 1:17. Since in the Old Testament the idea of catching fish with hooks is used metaphorically to represent the divine judgment upon the rich and the powerful, the call to be ‘fishers of people’ is not a call to save people from their sins but rather an invitation to join Jesus ‘in his struggle to overturn the existing order of power and privilege’ (132). The traditional way of understanding discipleship as one of taking people out of the world because it is a hostile place, promising them a better place in God’s heavenly kingdom, has been radically transformed by this insight. Jesus calls us rather to change the world in such a way that it will cease to be the hostile place it is, as we construct the way for God’s reign on earth.”

2. The Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5:1-20). This we may call a classic example of Ched Myers’s exegetical skill. In Myers’s words, “In 5:9 Jesus wrests from this powerful demonic horde its name: Legion. A Latinism, this term had only one meaning in Mark’s social world: a division of Roman soldiers. Alerted by this clue, we discover that the rest of the story is filled with *military* imagery. . . . the demon now represents Roman military power. In the symbolic act of exorcism, the legion ‘begged him (*parekalei auton*) earnestly not to send them out of the country’ (5.10)!” (191-92). Vern Ratzlaff¹⁹ highlights the significance of Myers’s approach to this passage as follows: “For many years I have been struck by the political overtones in NT vocabulary, and done selective exegesis in sermons and lectures with this perspective, and the sociological and political dimensions (with Bruce Malina, Gerd Theissen, and J. D. Crossan) deepened this awareness. But it was Ched Myers’s extensive treatment of this dimension in *Binding* that prodded me to shift to a more systematic political hermeneutic. For example his treatment of the Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5:1-21), where he identifies the military terms used, focuses on Jesus’ confrontation with the demonic ‘legions,’ a confrontation that sees a tragic end with Pilate’s legions later; in the exorcism narrated here, Myers notes the political repudiation of the empire, a seditious and treasonous act.”

3. Jesus and the Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:24-30). Myers highlights

the effrontery of the Gentile woman's interrupting Jesus' privacy at home. He goes on to point out that Jesus "grants her request not because of her faith but because of her argument; a remarkable turn of events, given Jesus' powerful verbal mastery over his opponents in the gospel! . . . Jesus allows himself to be 'shamed' (becoming 'least') in order to include this pagan woman in the new community of the kingdom; so too Judaism will have to suffer the indignity of redefining its group boundaries (collective honor) in order to realize that gentiles are now welcomed as equals" (204). Ted Lyddon Hatten²⁰ appreciates the subtlety of this passage. "The encounter between Jesus and the Syrophenician woman is one of my favorites. Jesus puts down the arguments from the best minds of his day with this one exception. She is several times removed from power and privilege (which Ched thoroughly unpacks). From the margins she speaks truth to power. But the power 'blessed' by her truth is also the protagonist of the story. Jesus is busted. The obvious question is why would Mark include such a surprising turn? I think Mark does it because it illustrates the reversal that is a hallmark of the Kingdom that is at hand. Mark is up to something and Ched is on to him." Ched's reading of this text was also influential for Silvia Regina de Lima,²¹ who came to this text starting with questions that emerged from her reality as an Afro-Latin American woman in Brazil and Costa Rica. She writes that she discovered "the freedom to think beyond the limits of conventional academicism, a way of thinking constructed in the midst of conflict, capable of overcoming so-called impartiality, a proposed reading that would speak from another territory, crossing frontiers, changing the order and opening the way to new reflections, new discoveries of the significance of Jesus."

4. The feeding of the five thousand (Mark 6:30-44). Here we encounter Myers's unequivocal rigor with regard to the explicit information communicated by the text:²² "Twice the disciples suggest to Jesus that the solution to the hunger of the crowds is to 'buy' food. . . . But Jesus' solution has nothing to do with participation in the dominant economic order. Instead he determines the available resources, organizes the consumers into groups, pronounces the blessing, and distributes what is at hand. . . . The only 'miracle' here is the triumph of the economics of sharing within a community of consumption over against the economics of autonomous consumption in the anonymous marketplace" (206). Marie Dennis²³ comments as follows. "I have used Ched's elucidation of wilderness and of Jesus' repudiation of the debt system and purity code often in doing contemporary political and economic analysis. The vision of an alternative global economy of 'enough' made evident, for example, in Ched's exegesis of the first feeding story (6:30ff.) also provides a rich resource for my work for global economic justice, especially as part of the Jubilee campaign for debt cancellation." Will O'Brien²⁴ picks up on similar themes. "One of Ched's gifts is his ability to so fully root the gospels in the broader narrative and tradition of the Hebrew Bible and the story of the Israelite people. For instance, his elucidation of how the Sabbath economics and Jubilee traditions so fully inform Jesus' proclamation of the reign of God has been enormously influential to me."

5. Jesus and the children. Here Myers makes extensive use of contemporary psychoanalysis to draw out the alienations of antiquity through gauging the alienations of modernity. “Where do we meet children in the Gospel? In every case, it is in situations of sickness or oppression” (268). Myers cites the Swiss philosopher and psychoanalyst Alice Miller. He reads the saying “Unless you receive the kingdom as a child, you cannot enter it” through her eyes. “Nonviolence, as part of a radical practice that seeks to address structural injustice at its roots, must begin with the family system. . . . A new social order cannot be constructed unless and until we have dealt with the very foundations of oppression” (270). And yet people invariably repeat the undesired conditions of their own childhoods when they come to shape a world for themselves. Christopher Rowland identifies the poignancy of this analysis. “I’ve many favourite passages in *Binding the Strong Man* but the one which stays with me, because it spoke to me existentially and intellectually is his treatment of Jesus and the children in Mark 10. Disciples of Jesus have to learn that the child in each adult has to be given priority so that their own repressed past may be transformed. It takes the text, and as Barth suggests in the preface to his Romans commentary, wrestles with it until the essential wisdom is understood and explicated.”

6. The widow’s mite (Mark 12:38-44). Myers narrates the climax of Jesus’ interactions with a series of interlocutors in the temple in these terms: “In the end he has silenced his social and political opponents, and done it on their own home ground: the temple. In other words, Jesus appears to have ‘bound the strong men,’ and ransacked their house” (318). Then come these contrasting words as Jesus sits opposite the temple treasury: “Many rich persons put in from their abundance; one poor widow put in two little coins” (Mark 12:41b-42). Myers summarizes the significance of this episode thus: “The temple has robbed this woman of her very means of livelihood. Like the scribal class, it no longer protects widows, but exploits them” (322). This exegesis particularly struck Ken Sehested.²⁵ “The ‘widow’s mite’ story (Mark 12:41-44)—one that has currency even in our larger culture—is commonly taken as a billboard for complete devotion and self-sacrifice. Ched shows how such an interpretation is faulty, how it actually reifies the woman’s marginalization, and how such interpretation ignores the more devastating critique of the unholy alliance between mainstream piety and everyday robbery.”

“THEN THEY BEGAN TO BEG JESUS TO LEAVE THEIR NEIGHBORHOOD” (MARK 5:17)

Ched Myers pushes his readers to consider not only the context of Jesus’ story, but their own context in which they are reading Jesus’ story. Perhaps those most profoundly honored, affirmed, resourced, and yet also challenged by Myers’s readings of Mark’s text have been those who have seen themselves

as part of a popular movement, characterized by but not limited to the radical fringes of the church. The following reflections indicate the kinds of contexts in which Myers's exegesis has proved most inspiring and most fruitful.

Elizabeth McAlister²⁶ speaks of the significance of reading *Binding the Strong Man* while in prison. "Ched did a three month internship with Jonah House Community in 1976. At that time (or shortly thereafter), Ched began his work on *Binding the Strong Man*. He sent drafts of chapters to our community. We began a study of Mark's gospel, using Ched's material, that continued for no less than three years. We studied it every week during those years and it opened our eyes to Christ's resistance²⁷ to all institutions that oppress people (and that, we came to understand anew or more deeply, is all institutions including the family). I was in prison for two of those years in Alderson WV. I was there in consequence of an act of disarming a B-52 bomber at Griffiss Air Force Base in Rome, NY. The Jonah House Community sent me copies of the drafts which I read and studied with some of the women there—especially the women with whom I acted at Griffiss and other resisters to the American Empire. The geography in which we take up the Gospels does make a difference. Ched helped us understand that our time in prison was sacred, was part of the consequence of the gospel. I can think of no better gift."

This theme of geography is underlined by Kazi Joshua.²⁸ "I first encountered Ched Myers's work as represented in *Binding The Strong Man* in the early 1990s. Ched's attention to the geography of the narratives in Mark has been very influential to me in my work as educator, minister and organizer. Ched showed that the movement from periphery to center was important, and therefore that when we read the text in circles committed to faithful discipleship and social justice, we have to pay attention to the particular location (geographically and socially) that we are reading in." James Perkinson²⁹ describes Ched's characterization of Mark 1:2-3 as "a kind of 'shock therapy' in the key of geography—the one to come will appear not at the Temple-State center, but the wilderness margins, of colonized Palestine."

One person for whom Myers's work was deeply troubling was Steve Taylor.³⁰ "Back in the early 90s, someone gave me a copy of *Binding the Strong Man*. At that time I was beginning to struggle with the tension between my role as a member of the U.S. Air Force where I was serving in a Special Operations unit and this call of Christ to 'love my enemy.' Well, I did a dangerous thing. I took the book, began to read, and began to ponder in ways I never had before. Ched's work was foundational in leading me to new space and new possibilities. Literally, through Ched's historical contextualization and then his reading of scripture into our contemporary world, and the continuing work of God's Spirit, I truly was given new eyes and entered into the deeper waters of faith. It was not long after that I found myself under bridges with the homeless, in refugee camps with those whose lives had been destroyed by war, and in the classrooms of Sunday school, trying to impart the truths that had become so evident to me. Additionally, though it was the hardest thing I have ever done, I found this new perspective could never be held in congruence with the life as a

maker of war. So I separated from the military, the place that had most defined my adult life to that point.

“As Ched unlocked the words of Mark, he also unlocked the life of Jesus. The stories took on a new vibrancy and immediacy. As I used the work in my own teaching, as the political, economic, and relational tensions of the first century church began to inform our own world and our own church, I began to hear statements like, ‘This changes everything, why haven’t I heard of such teaching before?!’ There were times where senior citizens who had been in the church the whole of their lives came up in tears after a presentation or teaching session. I remember one woman who wept openly, saying, ‘I knew I wasn’t crazy when I thought there was something more.’ More than pabulum, more than the iconic Jesus who never breathed or struggled or wept or found himself at odds with empire, courageously loving with a radical costly love that challenges injustice and embraces those most often forgotten . . . back then and here now.³¹ Binding the Strong Man changed my life, and it continues to do so for others—binding the voices of our own cultural mythology and disbelief, so that finally we might be liberated.”

Matthew Colwell³² tells a similar story of discovering his social location and the need to change it, in picking up this unsettling book. “Ched’s ‘socio-political reading’ allowed Mark’s gospel to come alive and sing, grabbing me and pulling me into the discipleship narrative until I was faced with that key question: would I dare follow? Would I enter the story myself or leave it on the page? I saw the journey to ‘the other side’ as a socially charged reference to move from Jewish to Gentile territory, and a simultaneous charge for me to head out towards the margins of my Los Angeles context, and in a journey of solidarity, find Christ among and within the poor and oppressed. Christ’s call to the rich young man became Christ’s call to me, the challenge to embrace ‘one loaf’ emerged as a vision for me of an inclusive and multicultural church, and the healing of the blind man became the story of my eyes increasingly opened to the injustice, violence, and poverty in the world, and of our call as disciples to engage in the struggle for a more just and peaceful world.”

Another context within which Ched Myers’s work proved both challenging and affirming was the American South. Ed Loring³³ writes as follows. “For many of us at the Open Door Community Binding the Strong Man is an essential text. By 1990 our lives in residential discipleship community had been shaped decisively by Liberation Theology from South Africa and Latin America. Yet, we in this interracial community whose historical location is the demonic legacy of White Male Supremacy were starving for a North American Liberation Theology which could focus with grace and political liberation on us—the oppressor and the oppressed together. Ched Myers’s Binding the Strong Man was just what the Holy One ordered. Here a hermeneutic, pedagogy, radical scholarship for radical discipleship life and performance. Here a helping hand that brought renewal and deeper theological insight and Bible believing for our work in the Old South where repression has not yet ‘Gone with the Wind.’ Martin Luther King, Jr., is also one who speaks to us at the Open Door Community in faith

and political action. Myers corrects King around women's issues and leadership models which do not include life together in community where God speaks truth to power through the homeless poor, death row prisoners, women, homosexuals and used car salesfolk. *Binding the Strong Man* has led us toward the Crucified Risen Jesus, the Human One, on the streets, in the prisons, under bridges. This book is a primary source used by the Holy Spirit among us for the building of the Beloved Community of God on earth as it is in heaven."

For Ray Gaston,³⁴ the decisive context has been nonviolent direct action. "Binding the Strong Man has proved particularly important in rooting me in a gospel understanding of non-violence and resistance to empire since 9/11 and responding to the 'war on terror.' It influenced my contribution to my Christian community at the time (All Hallows, Leeds) developing a militant nonviolent witness to the so called 'war on terror' from 2001 onwards. The idea of Mark's community being one that saw Jesus' call as one to nonviolent direct action but also one that refused to demonize the opposition and also cautioned against the search for direct historical efficacy to one's resistance was significant on two counts—firstly speaking to our experience of marginalization in our public resistance as a church community to the war on Afghanistan and the division that created within our own community and secondly in the light of the failure of resistance to the war on Iraq 'succeeding.' My call for our community to organize an anti-war event after the invasion of Iraq was deeply influenced by this understanding of the call of Jesus Christ to a certain kind of resistance rooted in what Ched called 'revolutionary patience.'" Bill Wylie-Kellerman³⁵ speaks out of a similar context. "In broad stroke, the incessant concern of the 'gospel' for issues of empire, couldn't be more pertinent in this period as the US imperial state and global economy lurch and sway. The flip side of that is the rigor with he uncovered the non-violent action of Jesus in everything from healings and exorcisms to the direct action at the currency exchange in the temple. That effort has pressed and stretched my own work of non-violent action and resistance."

For Marty Coleman,³⁶ the journey was from Pasadena to Central America. "Ched gave me a copy of *Binding the Strong Man* in January 1989 as I was beginning my new assignment at All Saints Church, Pasadena, as Associate for Peace and Justice Ministries. A formidable task for an extraordinary congregation. I did not have to go further than the first chapter: 'A Reading Site and Strategy for Mark' before I knew my eyes were opening in a new way to the contradictions of traditional biblical analysis and realidad that had so confused me. Ched made it all come together for me and subsequently, for the hundreds of gatherings of eager members of our 'peace and justice ministries' when he talked about locus imperium: 'White North American Christians, especially those of us from the privileged strata of society, must come to terms with the fact that our reading site for the Gospel of Mark is empire, locus imperium. . . . The irreducible meaning' of empire is the geopolitical control of the peripheries by the center. . . . the fact remains that those on the peripheries will have 'eyes to see' many things that those of us at the center do not. This, however, does not

relieve us of the responsibility to read the Gospel and respond to it . . . [and] to listen to the perspective of the periphery . . . ’ (5-7). And so began my determination to lead our folks out of their comfort zones to listen to the voices of the periphery. Lives were turned upside down and inside out, new ministries were launched as we traveled and met with campesinos in El Salvador, Ecuador, Guatemala, AguaVerde (Mexico), east Los Angeles and northwest Pasadena. Listening to the peripheries and recognizing the seductions of empire transformed my ministry at All Saints and profoundly impacted a strong core of new disciples of the way.”

For Carter Echols,³⁷ the context is determinatively one of the complacent mainline congregation. “I’m convinced that the greatest challenge currently facing mainline Protestants is a lack of clarity about why we are in business. Binding the Strong Man brings us back to our core purpose and is a great tool for cutting through layers of institutional church distraction and retrieving our real identity. Binding the Strong Man brings vibrant life to the following of Jesus for ‘seekers’ and helps tradition-bound Christians realize that their true religious heritage is their connection with a new social order.”

“YOU LACK ONE THING” (MARK 10:21)

My own first encounter with Binding the Strong Man had little drama about it. I was visiting the Roman Catholic National Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham in Norfolk, United Kingdom, popularly known as “England’s Nazareth.” I found a copy of Binding the Strong Man while browsing in the bookshop. Pretty much straightaway it became my most frequently consulted commentary, and the book I gave everyone for ordination presents. Ched Myers did for my exegesis what John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas did for my theology. That’s to say Hauerwas and Yoder convinced me that doctrine and justice were not alternatives in theology, that the most liberating element in the universe was Jesus Christ, that the only way to avoid a selective Gnosticism that ignores the humanity of Christ is to believe in and love and long for the renewal of the church, and that the only way to study the gospel is not to dissect its entrails but live along its trajectory. Meanwhile Myers showed me how to read the Gospels, where to look for their hidden wonders, how to synthesize historical and literary scholarship, and how to make academic study a form of discipleship and even prayer. Just as I went on to write books Hauerwas and Yoder had inspired me to write, so in *Power and Passion* I wrote a book Ched Myers had inspired me to write.

I vividly remember standing up at a public meeting of 250 people in a troubled and antagonized neighborhood seeking social regeneration and making a short speech about poverty inspired by the language Myers offers for speaking of the kingdom beyond the conventional manners of the church. A firebrand local resident said to me afterwards, “If you spoke like that on Sundays, I’d come to your church.” I suppressed the urge to say, “I do and you don’t.” Instead

I longed to show her what Ched Myers had showed me. With her, I never succeeded. But I still believe Jesus was and is surrounded by people like her. (He was and is a lot more patient than me.) And Myers shows us the Jesus for whom she was worth everything.

The last word may go to Ted Lyddon Hatten. “I think it was William Stringfellow who said that the church clings to a misconception that the gospel of Jesus Christ will be warmly received by the world today. After reading *Binding the Strong Man* in seminary I understood what Stringfellow meant. I had only heard a domesticated gospel before reading Ched’s work. The tame, somnolent version I grew up hearing was never threatening and almost always warmly received. *Binding the Strong Man* opened me up to see that the gospel of Jesus Christ was and is a story much more powerful and more threatening than I knew. It is threatening to empire and to oppression and to a good night’s sleep. *Binding the Strong Man* did for me what naturalists are doing when they reverse the effects of domestication by reintroducing plants back to their native ecosystems. They call it ecological restoration, aka, rewild. *Binding the Strong Man* reversed the effects of domestication on Mark’s story. It is no longer a lullaby, no longer tame. Rewild. I appreciate and admire that Ched was able to be both subversive and constructive in *Binding the Strong Man*. It is rare and holy to dismantle and build at the same time. I suspect that he was able to do that because Mark was able. The two of them, I believe, found their way to this sacred ground by following the Crucified One.”

Ched Myers embarked on ambitious program in *Binding the Strong Man*: nothing less than to rewild the church. When he wrote the book, theology and biblical studies were still in an era where the definitive way to be a public theologian was (as Jim Rice points out) to be like Reinhold Niebuhr, ironically and wistfully demonstrating how theology underwrites the existing balance of political power. Today public theology is most dynamically centered on the critique of empire and the demonstration of how Jesus brings the exiles home; and its social location has shifted from the right hand of power to the wilderness and waste places of Jerusalem (Isa 52:9). For that transformation, no author and no book should take more credit than Ched Myers and *Binding the Strong Man*.

NOTES

In writing this introduction I have sought to give voice to those countless academics, activists, pastors, and regular disciples whose lives have been touched, troubled and transformed by Ched Myers and *Binding the Strong Man*. I wrote to around sixty and a great many responded. I include the comments of many respondents here. This correspondence and this introduction owe a great deal to the thoughtful attention, perception, and wisdom of Rebekah Eklund.

1. Dr. Christopher Rowland is the Dean Ireland Professor of the Exegesis of Holy Scripture at the Queen’s College, University of Oxford.

2. Dr. Osvaldo Vena is Associate Professor of New Testament at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Chicago.

3. Jim Rice is editor of *Sojourners* magazine.
4. The Rt. Rev. Peter B. Price is Bishop of Bath and Wells, Church of England.
5. Wes Howard-Brook is an educator, writer, and staff member at the Intercommunity Peace and Justice Center in Seattle, Washington.
6. Dr. Neil Elliott, author and Episcopal priest, sees this same quality in Ched Myers's work as a scholar and an activist: "In 1991, *Sojourners* convened a national conference to mark the twentieth anniversary of the *Sojourners* magazine [which included] a workshop led by Ched Myers . . . here was someone equally at home in biblical scholarship and activism, who resolutely refused to separate these parts of his life—these spiritual disciplines."
7. Dr. David Rhoads, Professor of New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, also highlights this aspect of *Binding the Strong Man*: "Clearly the book was a pioneering work that applied social science commentary, made use of post-colonial analysis, and had an exploration of the relationship between Mark and the Roman-Judean War—all fresh approaches at the time in Markan studies."
8. Dr. Ulrich Duchrow is Professor of Theology at the University of Heidelberg, Germany.
9. The Rev. Dr. John Hirt is minister of the Ultimo Uniting Church and the Uniting Church Chaplain at the University of Sydney in Australia.
10. A preacher, teacher, and writer, Dr. Brian K. Blount is President of Union Theological Seminary.
11. Old Testament scholar Dr. Norman Gottwald is Professor Emeritus of Biblical Studies at New York Theological Seminary.
12. Sr. Maria A. Homberg, director of the Maryknoll Mission Institute, points to this application of the Gospel to contemporary themes through comments commonly given by participants in workshops led by Ched Myers on Mark's Gospel: "he related Gospel stories to things going on in society"; "he brings life and relevancy to today's life situations."
13. Father John Dear, S.J., is a writer, lecturer, and peace activist.
14. Activist Shane Claiborne is a founding member of the Simple Way community in Philadelphia.
15. Activist Jeff Dietrich is a longtime member of the Los Angeles Catholic Worker community.
16. Brother Mark McVann, F.S.C., is Professor of Religious Studies at Saint Mary's College of California.
17. For example, Dr. James W. Perkinson, Associate Professor of Ethics and Systematic Theology, uses Myers's exegesis of a particular text to challenge his students at Ecumenical Theological Seminary in Detroit: "Ched's unpacking of the anomalous inclusion of 'defrauding' in the list of commandments offered the rich young ruler in Mark 10 has continuously served as a 'remarkable riddle' around which to galvanize multiple layers of questions for my students."
18. Father Brendon Byrne, S.J., is Professor of New Testament at Jesuit Theological College in Australia and is one of many who call on Myers's exegetical skills to affect the way his students read the Gospel. "About halfway through courses on Mark's Gospel, I introduce students to *Binding the Strong Man*, to shock them into thinking radically about the hermeneutical implications of what they have learned. It is by far the best resource to fire their imagination and stir them up."
19. The Rev. Dr. Vern Ratzlaff is a Mennonite pastor in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada.

20. An artist and a pastor, Rev. Ted Lyddon Hatten is Director of the Wesley Foundation at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa.

21. Silvia Regina de Lima is a professor of New Testament and theologian in Costa Rica.

22. Ted Lyddon Hatten points out this facet of Myers's work when he says, "Ched taught me to honor the story by listening hard to the details and then asking the obvious questions."

23. Marie Dennis is the director of the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns.

24. A former editor of *The Other Side* magazine, Will O'Brien coordinates the Alternative Seminary in Philadelphia.

25. Rev. Ken Sehested formerly directed the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, and now serves as co-pastor of the Circle of Mercy church in Asheville, North Carolina.

26. Peace activist Elizabeth McAlister is co-founder of the Jonah House community in Baltimore, Maryland.

27. The theme of resistance in Myers's work has resonated with many. Dr. Walter Wink, Professor Emeritus of Biblical Interpretation at Auburn Theological Seminary in New York, explains, "I see Myers's work as a sort of continental divide marking the coming of age of the resistance church in North America, and the harbinger of a theological renaissance."

28. Rev. Kazi Joshua is an ordained minister, community organizer, and educator in Chicago.

29. Dr. James W. Perkinson is Associate Professor of Social Ethics at Ecumenical Theological Seminary in Detroit.

30. Steve Taylor is Director of Missions Development for the North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church.

31. Myers's portrait of Jesus was also significant for Father Gerald Curry, S.F.M., former director of Scarboro Missions in Canada: "Ched Myers's commentary *Binding the Strong Man* helped me to understand in a new way the Gospel of Mark and the Jesus present in Mark's Gospel. I understood for the first time a very human Jesus who struggled with life and with his own destiny . . . a compassionate and vulnerable Jesus who challenged the culture and religion of his time and place."

32. Rev. Matthew Colwell is a Presbyterian pastor in Pasadena, California.

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34. Rev. Ray Gaston is an Anglican priest and social activist in Leeds, United Kingdom.

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36. Marty Coleman is a longtime activist in peace and justice issues at an Episcopal church in Pasadena, California.

37. Canon R. Carter Echols is Canon to the Ordinary and Congregational Development Director of the Episcopal Diocese of Newark.

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Mark's Gospel was written both to and on behalf of a circle of discipleship communities. The same is true of this book. It is a reflection upon actual (not imagined) praxis, growing out of a decade of living, organizing, and acting with sisters and brothers around the country and around the world, struggling to envision and embody a different way of being human and Christian. The primary soil of germination was eight years in a community in Berkeley, California, which took its name from Mark's blind beggar-disciple, Bartimaeus. The material that eventually became *Binding the Strong Man* was first tested there through teaching and preaching, and subsequently in other communities. Such sites remain the most important crucible.

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Though your lips can't recall now
all the joy and all the pain . . .
dream on, sweet dreamers. . . . (Peter Campbell)

Words are not the way to liberation. Insofar as this study offers any clarification or inspiration, it is done on behalf of all those nonviolent resisters presently in jail because of their witness against the imperial Goliath. "May we become the wind that diverts the oncoming storm!" (Bernard Narakobi).

Binding the Strong Man is dedicated to three persons who stood with me one cold morning at the Pentagon, Thanksgiving 1976, a time that I look back upon as my own second call to discipleship. They have helped me, and help me still, with that long, ongoing catechism in reality, in which the truth of imperial America, with its vast disparity between rich and poor, its permanent war economy, and its institutionalized racism, is laid bare. To Phil Berrigan and Liz McAllister, who have with their lives exegeted the meaning of apocalyptic radicalism in our day. And to Ladon Sheats who gently called me (and so many others) to follow Jesus, and who has been there every time I have, like Peter, broken down and wept in the face of my own betrayal and that of my companions. Mahalo, friends; by your discipleship I continue to measure my own.

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Two of the three persons to whom the original edition of this book was dedicated have passed on into the cloud of witnesses. My wife, Elaine, and I spent a third of 2002 as part of a hospice community at the Guadalupe Catholic Worker, accompanying my dearest mentor Ladon Sheats as he crossed over. Shortly after that, Phil Berrigan died in hospice at Jonah House. Phil's wife, Elizabeth McAllister, remains our most beloved elder, a constant source of friendship and inspiration.

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Meanwhile, several children who were born into our movement in the years just before this book's publication have become exemplary young adults. These include Amber and Tessa Baker, and Sierra, Sydney, and Jonathan Hirt of our Berkeley community; Lydia and Lucy Wylie Kellermann of the Detroit Peace community; and Frida, Jerry, and Kate McAlister Berrigan of Jonah House. May you carry on.

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As I wrote in the original edition:

Words are not the way to liberation. Insofar as this study offers any clarification or inspiration, it is done on behalf of all those . . . who witness against the imperial Goliath. "May we become the wind that diverts the oncoming storm!" (Bernard Narakobi)

Abbreviations

<i>A.M.</i>	<i>Assumption of Moses</i>
<i>Ant.</i>	<i>Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews</i>
<i>BibTheoBul</i>	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
<i>BJRL</i>	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands Library</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>JAAR</i>	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
<i>JSSR</i>	<i>Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion</i>
<i>LXX</i>	<i>Septuagint (Greek translation of Hebrew Bible)</i>
<i>NedTheoTijd</i>	<i>Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift</i>
<i>NovTest</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i>SBL</i>	<i>Society of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> (10 vols. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, eds.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans)
<i>TheoZeit</i>	<i>Theologische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>War</i>	<i>Josephus, War of the Jews</i>
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
<i>ZDPV</i>	<i>Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins</i>
<i>ZeitNTWiss</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

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