

Orbis Books (1993), pp. 428-452.

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The Ideology and Social Strategy of Mark's Community

Preceding and continuing parallel to the development of social criticism of the Bible has been an increasingly sophisticated literary criticism, now branching into both "narrative" criticism and "reader-response" criticism. By and large the development of this literary criticism focused on Hebrew Bible narrative and the Christian Gospels has been separate from the use of social sciences and political hermeneutics in biblical studies. The newfound appreciation of narratives such as the Gospel of Mark as a complete story that has been plotted by an author with particular rhetorical techniques and with particular effects on the readers has made unavoidable the dramatic political conflicts portrayed in those biblical narratives. The obvious step is to bring critical social analysis and political hermeneutics together with a heightened appreciation of the features and effects of biblical narratives. Ched Myers has pioneered such a "political reading of Mark's Story of Jesus." Drawing heavily on a combination of Marxist and structuralist literary criticism and exercising a "hermeneutics of suspicion" on modern Western sociology as well as biblical texts, Myers illuminates how, in the course of the narrative, Mark both indicts the established political-economic-religious order and articulates a political-economic praxis constructive of a radical new kind of community.

THE HISTORICAL SITUATION OF THE PRODUCTION OF MARK

The purpose of this chapter is to summarize the socioliterary evidence that has been yielded by my reading of the gospel text, and to organize it into a brief portrait of Mark's community. I begin with a reconsideration of the historical "moment" in which Mark wrote, and then return to the hypothesis articulated at the outset of this commentary. There I postulated that the determine social formation of Roman Palestine in Mark's era allows the possibility of a social group that was alienated from the dominant order, which advocated a radical alternative practice, and remained politically engaged yet nonaligned with the major sociopolitical groups. Before reconsidering this hypothesis, however, a word needs to be said about hermeneutical barriers to achieving an accurate and sympathetic portrait of Mark's community.

It has become a commonplace recently among biblical scholars to understand apocalyptic literature in terms of the conceptual frameworks established by the socioanthropological study of "millennial" communities.¹ There is much to be said for this approach; for example, K. Burridge's *New Heaven, New Earth* concludes that such movements closely resemble what we have seen in Mark:

[They] involve the adoption of new assumptions, a new redemptive process, a new politico-economic framework, a new mode of measuring [humanity], a new integrity, a new community. . . . A prophet is he or she who organizes the new assumptions and articulates them; who is listened to and found acceptable; whose revelation is accorded authority.²

Burridge, however, also warned against the tendency of modern interpreters to caricature these new assumptions, ideals, and redemptive processes as social fantasy: "Whether or not they are bizarre is entirely subjective."³

Yet the prevailing attitude of historical sociology toward the social and ideological strategies of so-called sects, which dates back to Troeltsch's classic sociology of religion, continues to be pejorative. Similarly, in the biblical field, W. Beardslee wrote that scholars have been "able to clarify apocalyptic only by distancing themselves from its inner spirit."⁴ But such objectification, at least according to the model of the hermeneutic circle advocated in this book, is itself the biggest barrier to a true political appreciation of the text.

There is a kind of circular logic to correlating sect-sociology and the study of biblical apocalyptic. For example, I have shown that late Jewish prophecy ("proto-apocalyptic") figures decisively in Mark. But listen to how Hebrew Bible scholar P. Hanson characterizes these traditions:

The sociological setting of Daniel . . . like the communities behind Third Isaiah, the Isaiah Apocalypse, and Second Zechariah [is] a visionary minority living under oppression in a world seemingly fallen into the hands of enemies of Yahweh, convincing them that fulfillment of Yahweh's promises could no longer be anticipated within the existing order.

Reprinted from Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988), 414-44, abridged.

Clinging to their vision, the community of Daniel passively awaits Yahweh's intervention. . . . The dialectic [between vision and reality] has dissolved. . . . Connections with politico-historical realities have been lost: neither the human community, nor any other human agent, takes part in the conflict which would be won "by no human hand" (Dn 8:25); nor does the kingdom given to the saints betray any connections with the mundane; they are saved by being lifted out of this order into the cosmic sphere of the vision.⁵

This illustrates the way in which apocalyptic symbolics are dismissed by a mainline liberal scholar as "pessimistic" and escapist. So caricatured, it is no wonder that apocalyptic seems uninteresting to both Marxist and liberal reformist interpreters.

This bias is inevitably carried over into the study of Mark. So Kee, who rightly defends the Danielic character of Mark, concludes: "In keeping with the passivist tradition of the Hasidim, Mark portrays Jesus as refusing to take any initiative against the political authority."⁶ The same attitude characterizes J. Wilde's more detailed study of Mark as a millennial community. Wilde equates the Gospel's "nonaligned" discourse with a stance entailing socio-political ambivalence. Drawing upon the (notoriously slippery) method of "ideal typologizing," Wilde argues that Mark articulates the "revolutionist" type as defined in B. Wilson's influential sect-sociology:

[It] looks for the destruction and re-creation (transformation) of the basically alien social world by supernatural agency (not human) on a cosmic level (not local or individual) very soon (not yet present); and therefore sees men (by themselves) as basically powerless and weak in the face of the oppression of the present world, but finds access to power and hope solely in the salvation brought by divine agency in the approaching cataclysm.⁷

Admitting that this "pure" type occurs rarely because it is so absolutist, Wilde nevertheless insists that it is the lens through which Markan radicalism should be interpreted.

It is not hard to see in Wilde's sociological caricature the mirror image of Hanson's theological one. Moreover, we can see in it an updated version of Albert Schweitzer's old "thoroughgoing eschatology" thesis, which held that because Jesus expected the literal and immediate end of the world, he abdicated all political and historical responsibilities, offering at best an impractical "interim ethic." In my view, such conceptual straitjackets are no closer to the truth of apocalyptic symbolics than the crude literalizing of a Hal Lindsey or the existentialist psychologizing of a Thomas Altizer.⁸ Sectarian stereotypes fail utterly to explain the militance of Mark's Jesus, his persistent political engagement with—and death at the hands of—the powers. They do not begin to do justice to the activist ideology of discipleship that lies at the heart of the story. Mark looks for the end of the old world and the inauguration of the new, but

it is discipleship—which he equates with a specific social practice and costly political engagement—that will inaugurate this transformation.

Mark could not have been ideologically further from groups such as the Essenes, who, as we know from historical records, pursued a social strategy of withdrawal in order to wait upon Yahweh's intervention. My reading has shown that Mark's Jesus is anything but "passive" toward political authority, his ideology anything but socially introverted. The problem with sect-sociology and the interpretation of apocalyptic literature is therefore hermeneutic: modern rationalists are unable to understand narrative symbolics in sociopolitical terms. Fortunately, there is a growing minority of scholars who has begun to interpret the documents of biblical apocalyptic, such as Daniel and Revelation, as political manifestoes of nonviolent movements of resistance to tyranny.⁹ My commentary demonstrates that the same must be said of Mark.

In order to test my hypothesis about the Gospel as a document of "nonaligned radicalism" we must first return to the question of provenance. In chapter 2, I proposed that Mark was written in Galilee during the last years of the Jewish revolt. Let me address the question of time first. Brandon¹⁰ and Kelber,¹¹ despite their entirely different approach and conclusions regarding Mark, agree on one thing: the literary novelty of Mark could be attributed only to the world-shattering destruction of the temple by the Romans in 70 C.E. Yet Kelber asks himself:

But is the gospel nothing but a retrospective legitimization of a new Christian situation in the wake of the Roman victory? Does Mark merely sanction the facts after the Fall? [But] the gospel is not an exercise in confirming the obvious, but a creative reconsideration on the past so as to be of immediate service to the present of Mark.¹²

Kelber has put his finger on one of the central problems of a post-70 dating. Simply put: If the destruction of the temple state was a *fait accompli*, why did Mark need to launch his polemic against it?

The answer usually given, as Kelber notes, is that Mark was providing a theological justification of its demise. It is argued that Mark was using *ex eventu* (after the fact) prophecy in Jesus' prediction of the temple's destruction in 13:2 to "sanction" this world-shaking debacle. Now Mark is quite capable of making use of *ex eventu* prophecy, for it was a common apocalyptic literary device. But if this is the case with 13:2, why does Mark not use a more accurate description of events, as does Luke?¹³ J. Collins's assessment of Daniel's use of *ex eventu* historical review is relevant here. He points out that the events recorded in Daniel 11:1-39 are verifiable based upon a history of the Hellenistic wars—that is, up until 11:40ff., at which point Daniel turns to the career of his own contemporary, Antiochus Epiphanes:

We can tell at what point the book of Daniel was written, since beyond a certain point the "predictions" are no longer fulfilled. . . . Antiochus, like Gog, is a king from the north, who will invade the land of Israel and

fall there. This is not how Antiochus met his death, so we know that this prophecy was composed before he actually died late in 164 B.C.E.¹⁴

In other words, *ex eventu* prophecy freely mixes historical reviews, contemporary commentary, and anticipation of imminent events. If we then apply the same logic to Mark, it follows that Jesus' "prediction" that the temple will be razed "stone by stone" must have been written before the destruction of the temple—by fire.

It is true that Mark wishes to assure Christians that a symbolic life can and must be reconstructed apart from the temple-based order. But it does not necessarily follow that he could only have advocated this after the temple was already destroyed. In fact his narrative indicates the opposite. The disciples' question in 13:1 suggests that the temple was very much a living and imposing edifice. This is further confirmed by Mark's symbolic discourse of "destruction," specifically the correlation between 11:23 and 5:13. The "legion" that "no one had the strength to bind" (5:3f.) is symbolically driven out of Palestine "into the sea" (5:9-13); similarly, after "exorcising" the commercial interests in the temple, Jesus promises that only through the power of faith can the "mountain" be overcome and ordered "into the sea" (11:23). The historical power represented by Roman legions and the temple mount was, in both cases, intact; that is precisely what makes the two "exorcisms" so remarkable as an anticipation of the "impossible," provoking amazement (5:15-20; 11:24).

Mark's criticism of the temple is not based upon "theological" considerations, but rather the exploitive political economy of the temple-based tributary system. This would hardly have been necessary once this system was overturned by the Romans. The same can be said of Mark's vigorous attacks upon the scribal and clerical aristocracy, which rapidly disappeared after 70 C.E.

Many of those who argue that Mark was theologically sanctioning the fall of the temple further assume that this is part of an overall pro-Roman apologia. This is not an implausible hypothesis; we know that some Jews did repudiate the popular revolt, and later justified the Roman victory. Moreover, we have an example of just such an ideological stance in the writings of Josephus. But the contrasts between Mark and Josephus are striking, all the more so given the fact that they had faced the same historical situation. Josephus, as a Jewish aristocrat, was vociferous in his criticism of the rebels, and sympathetic to the clerical elite. Although Mark does not agree with the rebels, he nevertheless refuses to criticize them directly, whereas he is strident in his attack upon the Jewish ruling classes. Similarly, Josephus, though openly pro-Roman, bemoans the temple's destruction; Mark celebrates the apocalyptic demise of both temple and legion.

If Mark wished to portray himself, like Josephus, as pro-Roman, he could scarcely have done a poorer job of it. His use of the anti-Hellenistic motifs of apocalyptic narrative, his veiled repudiation of imperial power (5:1ff.; 12:13ff.) and his parody of the procurator Pilate (15:2ff.) could hardly have carried Roman favor. We must conclude that Mark criticized the temple and the clerical aristocracy precisely because they were still operative. In other words, his

struggle to overturn the dominant social order and its legitimating ideologies was a real battle in the war of myths not a rhetorical "exercise in confirming the obvious."

Another objection to a postwar dating of the Gospel arises from a consideration of Mark's discourse on suffering and martyrdom. At the most obvious level, it would have made no sense for Mark to anchor his discipleship ideology in the call to "take up the cross" if he agreed with Josephus's antirebel, pro-Roman stance. This image makes perfect sense, however, if his community was in fact subject to persecution on grounds of subversion. As B. van Iersel has demonstrated on purely literary grounds, "the significance of the book is most pregnant in an actual situation of persecution, when the reader or listener may be arrested at any moment."¹⁵ Once the war was over, the crisis of temple-destruction may have continued to be a "theological" one, but it would not have been an existentially political one. During the war, on the other hand, a Christian community that refused to defect to the Romans but also refused to fight alongside the rebels would have been liable to persecution from both sides—which is precisely the situation the text reflects.

Virtually from the outset of Mark's portrait of the discipleship community, issues of polarization and solidarity find articulation. At the commissioning of the "confederacy," the shadow of the betrayer is present (3:19). In the catechism, the problem of apostasy is anticipated by the plot-theme of the disciples' "blindness." Indeed, the last days of Jesus are filled with undercover intrigue, and the community is riddled with self-doubt. But nowhere is the pressure of the historical moment more poignantly reflected than in Jesus' second sermon:

Brother will deliver brother to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all for my name's sake [13:12f.].

Not only must disciples stand political trial; they must also face the bitter prospect of betrayal from within the "family"—meaning both kin (for we know the war did divide relatives) and community. The seriousness of this prospect is reflected in the fact that the threat of eschatological judgment appears in Mark only in reference to such betrayal (9:42; 14:21).

That Mark builds his Gospel as a whole around an essentially tragic narrative—the disciples' failure—is explicable in terms of the historical reality of a community under persecution. Yet though "betrayal" is not lightly viewed, there is an equally strong counter-discourse of "pardon." Even as the solidarity of the community unravels in the story, Jesus assures his solidarity (14:22ff.). Mark asserts that even in the "fire" of persecution and apostasy, the "salt" of reconciliation must prevail (9:49f.). And this can happen only when the practice of forgiveness (11:25) is at the center of the community's life. And as the end of the story makes clear, even the most egregious "denial" of Jesus, the most blatant defection from the way, cannot bring the discipleship adventure to an end. Because Jesus "goes before" us (16:7), a new start can always be made on the discipleship adventure.

In sum, then, it was the crisis of the Jewish temple state engendered by the revolt against Rome, and the persecution of Mark's community for its "non-aligned" stance, that was the immediate context of the production of the Gospel.¹⁶ We have both prewar and postwar texts from groups that responded differently to the same historical situation. Josephus, as noted, wrote a historical account that justified his defection and narrated the war from the victors' perspective. Later rabbinic writings obliquely reflect the strategy of many Pharisees, who responded to the defeat by reconceiving Jewish identity and practice in a way that maintained Jewish distinctiveness without a nationalist element. Qumran produced texts of monastic withdrawal, though its members, in the final hour, may have gone to fight in the defense of the temple. The rebels, for their part, left only the "texts" of coins minted during the period of liberated Judea—and the haunting witness of the ruins at Masada. And perhaps just as significant a testimony is the mute voice of those who were simply victims of the war, never its subjects.

Mark, a follower of Jesus, struggling and suffering through the apocalyptic moment of the late war years, responded with a story about a Nazarene and his followers. It legitimated neither defection, nor withdrawal, nor reform-minded moderation, nor Maccabean triumphalism, nor despairing acceptance of a world dominated by the powers. It called for resistance to the rule of the "strong man," and the creation of a new world: a practice of radical discipleship. This story heralded a way through the wilderness—and the war. But this way was the way of the cross: to the Romans a symbol of imperial hegemony, to Mark the sign of the kingdom come.

The place, like the time, of Mark's production, is something a socio-literary analysis can establish only plausibly, not conclusively. Kee's summary of the case against Roman provenance (still the majority thesis) confirms what I have found in reading the text:

The preservation in Mark of cultural and linguistic features of the Eastern Mediterranean rural village culture—features which Luke, in writing for a Gentile audience, eliminates or alters—speaks against Rome. Marxsen, following the lines of reasoning developed by Lohmeyer and Lightfoot, proposes Galilee. The archaeological evidence from excavations there in recent years confirms the wide use of Greek in public inscriptions, including synagogues, so that for Mark to have written a Christian document there in the 60s as Marxsen suggests is not inconceivable. And the accurate reflection of practices having to do with agriculture, housing, employment, and land-ownership and taxation, that are characteristic of the whole of Syria-Palestine in the period do indeed speak for that larger area as the place of origin.¹⁷

The strong "narrative bias" in the Gospel toward Galilee, as Lightfoot and Marxsen argued, further confirms this area as the location for Mark's community. Because of alleged geographical ambiguities in the story, which he attributes to Mark's unfamiliarity, Kee opts for Syria over Galilee proper; I

have argued that these ambiguities can be explained in socio-literary terms. I see no compelling reason not to place the production of the Gospel at the site of its own narrative center: Galilee. This is not historicism, but an argument from the ideology of the text.

If Galilee is the narrative center of gravity for the story as a whole, Capernaum is the narrative center of the Galilee narrative. Many of Mark's most detailed descriptions of social location are in or around Capernaum: the fisherman's workplace (1:16-20), a humble village dwelling (2:1-4), the agrarian parables (4:1ff.), storms on the Sea of Galilee (4:35ff.), and specific conflicts over social practice with the Pharisees (2:16ff.). To extend the logic still further, we have seen that the household is the narrative center in Capernaum (1:29; 2:1, 15; 3:20; 5:38; 9:33) as well as in other areas (7:17, 24; 9:28; 10:10; 14:3). Did Mark emphasize these aspects of life to color his realistic narrative because they were both familiar and important to the real life of his original audience? More specifically, were the households of the Markan community located in the vicinity of Capernaum? These details should not be abstracted from their narrative function in Mark's story, but they can yet serve as indicators of the social setting involved in the production of the Gospel. They do not *prove* that Mark's community was located in Galilee, much less Capernaum itself; but they certainly lend credence to my hypothesis that the Gospel was produced in a generally, if not specifically, Palestinian village setting.

THE GOSPEL AS SOCIOPOLITICAL CRITICISM

When discussing Mark's characterization of social structures, groups, and personalities, we must keep in mind that it was not his purpose to offer a dispassionate historical account of his world. He was involved in a fierce ideological struggle with his opponents in a world he assumed his audience knew; thus he employs shorthand, parody and caricature.

The Jewish ruling classes in the Gospel are represented by three groups: the Herodian nobility, the scribes, and the Jerusalem aristocracy (chief priests, elders, Sadducees). These groups are unequivocally opposed to Jesus throughout the story. The Herodians represent the old nobility of the half-Jewish household of Herod, whose political power, but not wealth or privilege, had largely dissipated under direct Roman administration of the colony. Jeremias notes three outstanding characteristics of the Jerusalem court during the rule of Herod the Great: the significant presence of Greeks and other aristocratic foreigners; its great affluence; and its strong security apparatus. The influential gentile contingent reflected the fact that though Herod's domain was Jewish, he looked to the Hellenistic world for his power, identity, and political style. Herod's state wealth was demonstrated in public building projects; his personal riches were manifested in palace opulence. The rabbinic writings tell of a widow in his court who complained when the scribes limited her daily expense account to 400 gold denarii!¹⁸ Finally, the king maintained a large personal police force, with a known and feared reputation for torture, used not only on dissidents but also on those within the court who fell into disfavor.¹⁹

In Mark's time the royal aristocracy was more concentrated in Galilee, south of Capernaum in the Hellenistic city of Tiberius on the Sea of Galilee. The mere mention of "Herodians" would have conjured up in the minds of Mark's readers all the abuses of this dynasty, singularly responsible for the Hellenization of Palestine and well known for its long record of brutal oppression. But it is the flashback account of the execution of John the Baptist by Herod Antipas that gives specific content to Mark's criticism of the Herodian class. That episode is a bitter parody of the whims of the royal aristocracy, whose marital-dynastic alliances are forged in defiance of Jewish Law, and whose political decisions are made at drunken parties. Yet Mark's vignette of Herod Antipas is far more plausible than Matthew's censorious parody (in Mt 2), which casts Herod (the Great) as the new murderous pharaoh of Exodus 1-2.

Both stories indicate class antagonism toward the house of Herod. But Mark's specifically reflects the popular outrage that lingered in the historical memory of Galileans regarding Antipas's martyrdom of the popular prophet John. His account of the party at the royal court with all the "leading men" of Galilee is highly realistic, including the custom of young Jewish maidens dancing for the nobility.²⁰ The scene reflects the practice of royal concubinage, and the fact that women were one of the prominent signs of wealth in the patriarchal oriental court.²¹ We can infer from Mark's direct warning against the Herodians (8:15), and his portrait of their conspiratorial relationships with the Pharisees (3:6), that the royal house represented a continuing threat to Mark's radical community in Galilee (12:13f.).

The scribes are the archenemies of Jesus in the story and, as government investigators from Jerusalem (3:22; 7:1), they provide the link for the political machinations against Jesus. Mark thus accurately speaks of "scribal Pharisees" (2:16), their connection to the Sanhedrin (14:1; 15:1), and the tremendous social prestige they enjoyed (11:38-40). His criticism is twofold. He correctly perceives the scribes as the architects of the dominant ideology, whose respectability and authority must be refuted (see 9:12; 12:35). Therefore from the outset of the Gospel he pits Jesus' teaching directly against theirs (1:22; 2:6; 12:35). Mark also sharply attacks the way in which their social status becomes the pretext for economic exploitation and aggrandizement (12:38-40).

Finally, Mark repudiates the entire traditional Jerusalem power structure. The wealth and power of the leading patrician families derived primarily from landownership. The Romans acknowledged this power, and appointed them to positions of authority in the colonial structures. As for the Sadducees, Mark mentions them but once, and only in order to show how their conservative ideology legitimizes patriarchal rule (12:18-27). The fact that Mark is more concerned with scribal and Pharisaic social power is an accurate reflection of the situation of his time, in which the influence of the Sadducees was waning, and restricted largely to the Sanhedrin.

In considering the priestly aristocracy, Mark gives no indication of having the slightest interest in the disputes over the legitimacy of a non-Zadokite priesthood, a serious political conflict among the ruling classes, which dated from the period of the Hasmonean dynasty. To Mark priestly power was a

function of economic class, not lineage, resulting from control over the temple cultus. This situation is directly reflected in Mark's report of their outrage over Jesus' attack upon the temple marketplace (11:27).

Mark's trial and execution narrative gives us a clear idea of his political estimation of the members of the Jerusalem hierarchy. On the one hand he portrays it as disdainful, yet fearful, of the discontentment of the masses (11:32; 14:2), whom they manipulate for their own ends (15:11). On the other hand he considers the Sanhedrin fully collaborative with Roman administration of Palestine. In the double trial they ape the imperial mechanisms of "justice," and even attempt to deny Jesus a proper burial after his execution. Their self-interest in maintaining the colonial arrangement predictably results in their rejection of any hint of popular kingship articulated in messianic terms (14:61; 15:32).

Mark summarizes his opposition to the ruling classes in his parable of the vineyard (12:2-9). In the classic prophetic tradition Jesus attacks the leaders of Israel. Although they should be servants (Lv 25:55), they make a pretense of "owning" the "vineyard." This is, in Mark's view, the inevitable result of economic and political power, which makes the ruling class "deaf and blind" to the message of the prophets, whom they murder—hence the "prophetic script." The subversive discourse of Jesus' parable, however, reverses the tables. The rulers are described as mere tenants who will be brutally punished for their insubordination by the true owner—for the landlord class, a taste of its own medicine! Mark roundly condemns this class (12:40), and in his mind there is no question of its compatibility with the new social order: "What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others" (12:9). These are the hardest, and most revolutionary, words in the Gospel.

Mark takes the same hard-line stance toward Roman imperialism. He relies upon two forms of more veiled discourse: the Jewish resistance tradition of apocalyptic and the literary device of parody. Though there are only six instances in which Mark alludes to the reality of foreign imperialism, each articulates his decidedly anti-Roman sociopolitical stance.

The first instance is his subversive appropriation of "gospel" as title for his story. This term suggests that this story will extol yet another Roman military victory in the provinces, and at the surface of the narrative this indeed appears to be the case. The Romans, through the agency of the collaborative native aristocracy, successfully capture and execute a subversive prophet and aspirant to popular kingship. Yet Jesus throughout the trial remains uncowed by the imperial power of Rome, causing the procurator to "wonder" (*thamazein*; 15:5, 44). And in the discourse of Mark, the very moment of Roman triumph—the cross—is revealed by apocalyptic symbolics to be in fact the moment of Rome's defeat.

The true battle being narrated by the "gospel" is between Jesus the Human One and the domain of Satan, administered by "strong men" such as Caesar. Just as Jesus first clashes with the Jewish ruling class through the symbolic action of the synagogue exorcism (1:21-27), so too he serves notice to the

Roman imperialists in the story of the Gerasene demoniac (5:1-20). Mark is nowhere politically bolder than in 5:9f., the only place where Jesus wrestles from a demon his "identity".

Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" He replied, "My name is 'Legion,' for we are many." And he begged him earnestly not to expel them from the country [5:9f.].

Mark appears to acknowledge the reality that "no one had the strength to subdue" the demon of Roman military occupation (5:4). Yet he makes his revolutionary stance clear by symbolically reenacting the exodus story through a "herd" of pigs. With the divine command, the imperial forces are drowned in the sea. It is no accident that in the aftermath of this action the crowd, like Pilate, responds with "wonder" (*thaumazein*; 5:20).

To invoke the great exodus liberation story was, as it has been subsequently throughout Western history, to fan the flames of revolutionary hope.²² Yet Mark realized that the problem was much deeper than throwing off the yoke of yet another colonizer. After all, biblical history itself attested to the fact that Israel had always been squeezed, courted, or threatened by the great empires that surrounded it. And the Maccabean revolt against the Seleucids had only resulted in recycling oppressive power into the hands of a native dynasty, one that in turn became an early victim of a newly ascendent imperial power, Rome. Thus the meaning of Jesus' struggle against the strong man is not reducible solely to his desire for the liberation of Palestine from colonial rule, though it certainly includes that. It is a struggle against the root "spirit" and politics of domination—which, Mark acknowledges matter of factly, is most clearly represented by the "great men" of the Hellenistic imperial sphere (10:42).

Mark believes that both parties of the colonial condominium are "possessed" by this spirit, and so assesses each in exactly the same terms. The discourse of "equation" is reflected at the outset in the parallelism between the two inaugural exorcisms, and again at the story's end in the double trial of Jesus. There Pilate is indicted along with the high priest for engineering the railroading of Jesus. The ruthless procurator, infamous for his defiance of Jewish political opinion, is parodied as "consulting" the Jewish crowd, yet nevertheless shrewd enough to release a convicted Sicarius terrorist instead of Jesus.

We can see the same discourse in Jesus' second campaign. On either side of the central political parable of 12:1-12 are conflict stories in which Jesus' opponents challenge him to reveal his ideological commitments, only to have their own duplicity revealed. They are unwilling to state their loyalty to the biblical vision of justice (represented by the prophet John, 11:27ff.) while implicitly advocating loyalty to Rome (represented by the coin, 12:13ff.). A political "trap" is set for Jesus in the tax question. It provided him with a good opportunity to unambiguously instruct his readers to collaborate with Rome, if he was so inclined. But in 12:17, as in 11:33, Jesus refuses to be caught. He appeals, as he does throughout the Gospel, to the sovereignty of Yahweh, who is true "lord of the house" (13:35) despite the counterclaims of Caesar.

But is Yahweh truly sovereign? This claim must stand the test of Caesar's ultimate claim over life, articulated not by the coin but the cross: Caesar's power of capital punishment, the threat that renders his subjects docile. And so, in his second call to discipleship, Jesus faces Caesar's "lordship" head on. Mark could not have chosen an image that indicated more unequivocally his opposition to the empire than the Roman executioner's stake. And Jesus means what he says about taking up this cross: Mark fully expects members of his community to "follow" Jesus in political trials not only before Jewish courts but Roman ones as well. "You will stand before governors (*hégemonōn*) and kings" (13:9a), referring to procurator and Caesar.

By redefining the cross as the way to liberation rather than symbol of defeat and shame, Mark radically subverts the authority of the empire. The accepted meanings of "saving life" and "losing life," of being "convicted" and "acquitted," of what "belongs to Caesar" and what "belongs to God," are all turned upside down when the power of death, by which the powers rule, is broken. But to understand this takes "eyes to see" that the cross is the power of God, which alone can reanimate the exodus liberation story. It alone can drive the oppressive temple state and the repressive legions "into the sea."

Reform efforts among literate Jewish groups took two trajectories in Mark's era. The first strategy advocated withdrawal from the social mainstream in order to more rigorously attend to the demands of the symbolic order of debt and purity; it is represented by the Essene movement. The fact that Mark never addresses this movement directly may indicate he felt it less of an ideological competitor. His portrayal of John in the wilderness, and later his equation of the practice of John's followers with that of the Pharisees (2:18), may suggest that some of the Baptist's followers were drawn toward Qumran. It is noteworthy that Mark cites Isaiah 40:3, for this text appears to have been used by the Essene community to justify its monastic life in the desert. But the narrative movement of the Gospel, although it begins in the wilderness, does not remain there, proceeding inexorably from the periphery toward the center—that is, toward engagement.

Mark would not only have disagreed with the Essenes over their social strategy of elitism based upon intensification of the demands of the symbolic order, but their political eschatology as well, reflected in the so-called War Scroll, which narrates the final battle between the "Sons of Light and Sons of Darkness." Archeological evidence indicates that the community site at Qumran was abandoned late in the war years, and Qumranite writings have been found at Masada.²³ It appears therefore that once the siege of Jerusalem began, the Essenes joined the rebels in their defense of Jerusalem. This would strengthen my hypothesis that rebel recruiters operated abroad in Palestine in 69 C.E., and did in fact successfully draft many.

The other trajectory of reform and renewal pursued a strategy of extending the symbolic order to a greater number of persons. This was represented by the Pharisaic movement, a far more formidable competitor in Galilee. Mark's portrait strongly suggests protracted Pharisaic antagonism toward his community; Pharisees are always pictured on the offensive against Jesus. Conflicts

erupt over issues of practice that were hallmarks of Pharisaic piety: strictly segregated table fellowship (2:16ff.), asceticism (2:18ff.), Sabbath observance (2:23ff.), and ritual purity with respect to meals (7:1ff.). In each case, Jesus eclipses the Pharisaic objection by raising a deeper issue concerning the place of the poor in the symbolic order. It is as if Mark is trying to convince those impressed by the Pharisaic social strategy practice that it is not the populist alternative it seems, but merely a cosmetic alternative to the oppressive clerical hierarchy.

At every point Mark's criticism of the Pharisees concerns social relationships. Mark does not stop with simply repudiating Pharisaic practices of ritual purity. By sandwiching the debate over *korban* into his consideration of kosher, Mark attacks the very heart of Pharisaic ideology: the halakah (7:6ff.). The halakah allegedly make the demands of the symbolic order more accessible for the common people. But Mark contends that this legislation is in fact quite elitist. It is this very commitment to the symbolic order (i.e., the temple treasury) that allows the "commands of God" regarding the weak *within* the community (in this case the elderly) to be ignored or overridden (7:9-13). The same issue is at stake in Mark's other reference to the halakah, the question of divorce legislation (10:2ff.). Again, the Pharisees are revealed to be wholly unconcerned with the weaker member (here the woman), not to mention the original scriptural vision of equality in marriage. Thus, Pharisaic *halakah* functions to guard the status quo, whether the political economy of the temple or patriarchy.

Mark's inclusive community, like Paul's, came under severe Pharisaic criticism, but his counterattack was just as vigorous. For Mark, Pharisaic concern for purity, allegedly in order to protect the social boundaries of Judaism, cannot possibly reflect a populist commitment if their own legislation is unconcerned with social equality *within* those boundaries. Segregation from gentiles, the poor, and the unclean did nothing to ensure that the "commands of God," which concern true justice for all, would be promoted. Mark concludes that the symbolic order and any group that supported it would never be able to fulfill Yahweh's vision of a humanity free of class and racial alienation. So does he reject the reform groups, withdrawn or engaged.

Jesus is portrayed as entering Jerusalem as a specifically nonmilitary, popular king (11:2-7); yet he is contrasted with [the rebel] Barabbas (15:7). We must also acknowledge, however, the distinct tone of solidarity that Mark weaves into his passion narrative. Jesus is first arrested (14:48) and then crucified (15:27) "as a social bandit." Mark appreciated the fact that the very conditions he protests against, the systematic oppression of the peasantry by both the Romans and the Jerusalem hierarchy, had led many of his Galilean compatriots to engage in social banditry. Some factions of the rebellion of 66-70 took the opportunity to settle class scores. Upon entering and gaining control of the city, certain rebels launched a series of attacks upon the houses of the royalists and high priests. The burning of the public archives building housing records of debt was certainly an action on behalf of those who had lost their land and become impoverished due to an inability to meet tax and tithing obligations. Noteworthy too were efforts to democratize the high priesthood and overturn

the aristocracy's control of the temple during the civil war in 67-68. These actions against the institutions of autocracy suggest that there were many points of ideological affinity between Mark and the social bandits turned rebels.

Yet for all of this, and despite his unequivocal opposition to Roman colonialism, Mark did not advocate revolt. Why? According to the latter half of Jesus' second sermon, it had to do with his insistence that the real revolution must take place at a deeper level of both ends and means. Any attempt to restore a Davidic state meant a return to the politics of domination, and was thus counterrevolutionary (10:42f.). Mark therefore considered the prospect of the temple state's collapse a "sign" of liberation (13:28-31), whereas the rebels saw it as indicative of cataclysm and defeat, "the end" (13:7).

Mark then expropriates the great symbol of resistance to Rome, the cross. Jesus' call to a discipleship of the cross was directed not only to his disciples but to the "crowd" as well (8:34). Says Mark, our movement stands in resistance to Rome; after all, our leader was crucified (15:27). Our nonviolent resistance demands no less of us than does guerilla war—to reckon with death. But we ask something more: a heroism of the cross, not the sword. We cannot beat the strong man at his own game. We must attack his very foundations: we must render his presumed lordship over our lives impotent. You consider the cross a sign of defeat. We take it up "as a witness against them," a witness to the revolutionary power of nonviolent resistance (13:9b). Join us therefore in our struggle to put an end to the spiral of violence and oppression, that Yahweh's reign may truly dawn (9:1).

THE GOSPEL AS SOCIOECONOMIC CRITICISM

In the first part of the Gospel, Mark addresses the dominant ideological order as it manifested itself in the provinces. The three great dictums of the first campaign narrative—the two Human One sayings (2:10, 28) and the Deuteronomistic ultimatum (3:4)—all make the same point: cultural systems must enhance and liberate human life, not marginalize it—or to put it in modern parlance, they must function "for people, not for profit." In the tradition of classical prophecy, Mark contends that the original intention of the symbolic order had been betrayed, and thus calls for justice and compassion over cultic obligation.

Mark's concern has to do, on the one hand, with the way in which the institutions of purity and debt have created socioeconomic stratification within the Jewish community and, on the other, the way in which they reinforce social segregation between Jew and gentile. Defying them, Jesus freely interacts with the sick/unclean and the foreigner, and instructs his disciples to do likewise. Included in Mark's criticisms are the dominant cultural codes of honor and status, which also function to promote social divisions. In the first construction section, Mark subverts cultural assumptions about propriety and what constitutes "first" and "least" in the hierarchy of status. For example, Jesus attends to the needs of an impure and destitute woman before the requests of a synagogue head, and concedes a debate to a gentile woman (5:21-43; 7:24-37). In

the second construction cycle, Mark continues turning the social order upside down, this time through Jesus' teaching. Jesus gives priority to children and women over the rich and the "great"; a blind beggar is portrayed as a model of discipleship.

In the second campaign narrative, Jesus confronts the symbolic order at its heart, the temple. There he delivers yet another prophetic dictum concerning the purpose of the house of God (11:17). The decisive break with the debt code comes with his advocacy of a practice of communal forgiveness (11:25). When Jesus dies on the cross, not only are the powers pulled from their thrones (the sun darkens), but the symbolic order itself is overthrown (temple curtain is rent). The curtailed Holy of Holies symbolizes the ideological justification for priestly elitism: in this order, Yahweh is exclusive (reclusive?), dwelling "apart from and above" the people, mediated by the priests. That which divides the people from Yahweh also divides them from each other: the priest also lives "apart and above." Thus the destruction of this curtain symbolizes the end of such an order. It is true that the symbolic order appears to prevail in the story, as Jesus' corpse (of the first order of impurity) is removed from the cross by a Sanhedrin representative so it will not profane the Sabbath. But the "absence" of that body from the tomb is the last word; the corpse does not need to be properly buried according to the demands of honor and purity, because the new order has now dawned. Moreover, that "body" becomes the center of the new order in the eucharistic feast — those who partake of it are "contaminated" with the subversive memory of Jesus.

The politics of the narrative reinforces Mark's contention that the messianic community must now live outside the bounds of the dominant order. From its genesis in the wilderness peripheries, the kingdom movement is put in spatial tension with the "center," whether that is conceived of as Judea/Jerusalem or the Hellenistic *polis*. Mark's Jesus travels throughout northern Palestine, which may well be an indication of the missionary scope of Mark's own community. Then the narrative slowly moves south toward the negative pole of Jerusalem for the final confrontation. But as soon as this mission is completed, Mark points immediately back to Galilee (16:7). This is the culmination to an ideology totally opposed to the dominant Jewish symbolic order, its institutions and its sites.

I stated above that Mark criticized the temple cult not as a theological rationalization of its demise but because it anchored an essentially oppressive political economy. To begin with, Mark portrays a world in which hunger and disenfranchisement among the masses is widespread—a situation that corresponds to the reality he knew in wartime Palestine. Mark is particularly preoccupied with eating and not-eating motifs. We might further consider the various expressions of economic deprivation, or "not enough," that we encounter throughout the story:

1. John's wilderness diet, 1:6
2. should we fast? 2:18ff
3. disciples commandeer grain, 2:26
4. Jesus unable to eat due to press of crowd, 3:20, 6:31
5. Jesus' command to feed Jairus's daughter, 5:43

6. Jesus' command to go on mission without bread or money, 6:8
7. Syrophenician woman's plea for crumbs, 7:24
8. Jesus hungers, 11:12
9. widow's impoverishment, 12:40, 44
10. famines, 13:8.

For Mark, the experience of economic marginality, land alienation, and social disruption was proof positive enough of the injustice of the temple-based tributary economy. He envisions the restoration of a system that will be committed to communal sufficiency.

Mark does more than criticize the economic disparity of class divisions within the Jewish community; he also recognizes the mechanisms by which those divisions are maintained. The Herodian class, for example, is portrayed as deeply complicit in the colonial system by which its wealth and power are maintained. It is the Herodians who, again in cooperation with the Pharisees, try to extract from Jesus a position on the imperial tribute (12:13-17). The Pharisees in turn are attacked where they are most vulnerable, from the peasant's perspective: their attempts to control the production and distribution of agricultural produce. Mark alludes, directly and indirectly, to each aspect of this control: their administration of purity regulations (2:16f; 7:1ff), which determined acceptable tithes, their jurisdiction over debt obligations (i.e., *korban*, 7:6ff), and their enforcement of Sabbath law, which affected the peasant's ability to produce enough to survive (2:23ff).

Patterns of landownership are reflected in Mark's frequent allusions to tenant farmers and absentee landlords. But it is the temple, as the central mechanism of this political economy, that is the focus of Mark's criticism. Jesus' attack upon the temple market, and the scriptural justifications that accompany this direct action, articulate a clear repudiation of this system. The poor are directly oppressed by cultic obligations they cannot meet, as illustrated in Jesus' lament over the impoverished widow in 12:41ff. Capital accumulates in the temple building and treasury, and landownership concentrates in the hands of those already privileged by the system—all of which is "robbery" of the poor. To claim that the temple is the domain of "thieves" (11:17) is the same as asserting that the rich are rich by "defrauding" the poor (10:18-21).

Throughout the Gospel there is a consistent narrative opposition between those representing the symbolic order on the one hand and the poor and marginal on the other:

1. priests (purity) vs. the leprous (1:41ff.)
2. scribes (debt) vs. the physically disabled (2:1ff.)
3. Pharisees (debt) vs. the dependent elderly (7:6ff.)
4. scribes (debt) vs. disenfranchised widows (12:40).

Although all the major social groups are indicted, it is the scribes, as ideological apologists for and economic beneficiaries of this exploitive political economy, who are singled out as the worst offenders. Mark's Jesus is unimpressed by their rhetorical affirmations of the prophetic insistence that "love of neighbor is more than burnt offerings and sacrifices" (12:34). The fact is that the system itself, which the scribes uphold, enforces the class stratification of Israel.

Mark, in other words, understands the nature of *structural* injustice, and for this reason refuses to consider strategies of reform. The disciples do not see this clearly, at least twice entertaining the idea that Jesus' concern for the poor might be satisfied by their making better use of their purchasing power in the market (see 6:37; 14:5). Their blindness is a result of a failure to see that the system cannot be redirected toward the purposes of justice. Instead, Jesus calls for its complete collapse (13:2), and in its place he advocates a genuine practice of equitable redistribution.

A NEW POLITICAL PRACTICE

Mark believed that the kingdom would not dawn by divine cataclysm, but rather would grow slowly, a small seed in hostile soil. Advocating a "revolution from below," the discourse of the Gospel includes both subversive and constructive elements. Mark does not simply criticize the present order; he offers instructions for the building of a new order, which will center around the community of discipleship. The Gospel functions to legitimate this community as a political "confederacy" (3:13-19), which represents a concrete alternative to the politics of domination.

How was this community organized? How was power exercised? The narrative undermines any absolute ideology of leadership: the leaders of the community are portrayed as failures. I would not characterize Mark's treatment of the male disciples as a "political polemic" against a Jerusalem-based Christian leadership, as does W. Kelber.²⁴ However, its sarcastic tone does suggest that pretensions to authoritarianism were not unknown in the experience of Mark's people. Jesus' taunt—"Oh, but this is not so among you!"—referring to the practices of domination so bitterly familiar from Roman colonialism, functions as a sharp warning against aspirations to power. And "discipleship" as a permanent state of following Jesus the true leader, in contrast to rabbinic schools in which the student became himself a master, further guarded against the reproduction of hierarchy in the community.

Still, Mark's alternative is not leaderlessness, but leadership accountable to the "yeast" in the community. What concretely did the "politics of servanthood" mean? Our reading has identified a radical break with the traditional Palestinian patriarchal structures of clan, kinship, and marriage. The new "family" is egalitarian, both in its marital and community forms, and the traditionally weakest members of the system, women and children, are given central place. Mark does not have a lot to say about marriage except where he considers the problem of divorce. The profile of women characters in the Gospel indicates that women were considered full persons outside their traditional roles as helpmeets. I have also argued that there is evidence that Mark's critique of patriarchy strongly implies that women are considered more suited to the vocation of servant-leadership than are men.

The unprecedented nature of such an ideology and practice in the context of Mediterranean antiquity cannot be overestimated:

At this period Jewish, Hellenistic, and Roman perceptions of family life are quite conservative. Strong family bonds were supported not only by social pressure but by a host of laws governing marriage, inheritance, and the relation of different members of the natural and extended family. The power of the head of the family (*patria potestas*) was a virtual law unto itself. A Christian community which evokes a saying of Jesus to claim that doing the will of God is more important than loyalty to the natural family and which actually counsels leaving the family to form a new family without the governing power of the father and which rejects those structures of interrelationship which govern normal family life would naturally evoke suspicion and persecution.²⁵

Donahue goes on to note that many of the earliest attacks upon the Christians by Roman writers centered upon their socially aberrant community lifestyle.

Against Theissen's theory of "wandering charismatics," I believe Mark reflects a settled community in which the extended household model is maintained. The household, however, is now understood as the primary site not of reproducing dominant socio-cultural patterns, but resisting them; perhaps it is also the haven for underground activity. Under persecution, the community appears to be struggling with the question of internal discipline, but the Gospel clearly comes down on the side of leniency and understanding for those who have fallen to apostasy. The practice of reconciliation and forgiveness is crucial to the community's life. Importantly, Mark advocates an "open" community—that is, one whose boundaries are not rigidly defined. Not only must the door always be open to the poor and outcast, but non-Christians who do the works of justice and compassion must also be accepted.

On the whole, the Gospel concentrates more upon subversive than constructive politics, probably because the pressure from both Jewish and Roman authorities demanded clarity on these matters. Jesus is presented from the outset as a rival authority, challenging the hegemony of the powers who hold sway over the dominant political order. After being declared an "outlaw" (1:10f.) toward this order, Jesus proceeds to appropriate priestly authority over the purity apparatus (1:43), scribal authority over the debt system (2:10), and Pharisaic authority over Sabbath legislation (2:28). Later the conflict escalates as Jesus assaults the highest authority structure of his time: the temple. In each case he asserts that the original purpose of these institutions has been betrayed. Mark subsequently identifies Jesus as "Lord" not only of the "Sabbath," but of the "house" as well (13:35). As Malachi had warned (Mal 3:1ff.; cf. Mk 1:2), he has indeed come to judge the temple community according to the proper exercise of justice. All of this functions to justify the community's practice of resistance.

The ideology of resistance is clearly articulated in Jesus' "strong man" speech: the goal is to bring down the old order and liberate those captive to it. The practice of resistance consists of three elements, as we have seen: kingdom proclamation, healing and exorcism, and nonviolent confrontation. Jesus commissions and instructs his community in each aspect of this messianic vocation (3:13; 6:7).

The political strategy of the community, like so many modern revolutionary movements, begins with attempts to persuade the "base," or popular sectors, of the double imperative: the old order must be overturned and the new order welcomed. The community's proselytizing appears to consist of founding other cells of resistance, which become "safehouses" (6:7ff.). The mission is wholly contingent upon popular reception; thus the emphasis upon going without sustenance and the role of hospitality. It is anticipated that this preaching mission alone is enough to bring the disciples into conflict with the authorities, which is why it is juxtaposed to the story of John and Herod. Despite the danger, the "good news" of liberation must be spread abroad, not only to oppressed Jews but to "all peoples" (13:9f.).

The proclamation must be accompanied by concrete expressions of the new order. These are not thaumaturgical "signs and wonders" (8:11f.), but the works of justice and mercy: feeding the hungry (6:37), healing the sick (6:13), promoting fellowship with the socially outcast (2:16) and the gentile (7:1ff.), and above all, exorcism. Jesus' ministry of exorcism, portrayed as the most threatening aspect of his practice to the political authorities (3:22ff.), is a discourse by which Mark articulates his ideology of opposition to both Jewish and Roman politico-military hegemony. The new order means the end of scribal domination and liberation from the colonial boot of the imperial legions. But exorcism is not merely the symbolic declaration of intent: it takes on a decidedly concrete character when Jesus "casts out" the temple entrepreneurs. This episode links exorcism to the politics of symbolic direct action.

In both his first and second campaigns, Jesus employs the tactics of what we would today call "civil disobedience." The very first public action of his disciples is to break the law (2:23ff.);¹ Jesus then debates the true intention of the law in the ensuing "trial" (3:4). The same pattern of legal violation and defense occurs again in 7:1ff. The climax to Jesus' practice of symbolic direct action, however, is the parade from the Mount of Olives and the ensuing temple action. The procession, curse, and "cleansing" are, to be sure, painstakingly choreographed exercises in political theater; but we must not lose sight of the fact that they are also portrayed as specifically *disruptive*. Thus Mark legitimizes not only "classic" civil disobedience—in which the law is broken because it is unjust, as in the case of the Sabbath—but militant direct action as well.

The powerful practice of exorcism/direct action must not be exploited by the disciples in order to build their own power base (9:38ff.). Indeed, the power is linked to "faith," which means the ability not only to "name" the demons within and without, but to envision a new personhood and a new world free of the structures and patterns of domination (9:14ff.). Only by such faith can the "mountains" of the present order be overturned (11:23f.). The disciples' struggle for faith-as-political-imagination is one of the central themes of the Gospel, narrated in counterpoint to Jesus' powerful practice. This indicates that Mark's community wrestled with self-doubt about the viability of its messianic vocation, and given the historical situation, it is not difficult to sympathize with its members. After all, their visible impact was small, and they were probably hard pressed by the rival claims of the Pharisees on the one hand and the rebels on

the other. Yet Mark stuck by his belief that true subversive politics was to be found in neither reform nor rebellion.

In speaking of the political process, Mark offers his readers two key images: the "miracle" of a mustard seed and the "paradox" of the cross. The seed reminds us that a revolution from the bottom up is a slow process whereby the root cause of domination are exposed and transformed. It demands both patience and faith, for historical change will not be as evident as if the new order were imposed from the top. To believe in the "true" court of justice of the Human One is to believe that the smallest of seeds can grow into the tree in which all "the birds of the air" can nest. The cross reminds us that the powers cannot be overturned by military means. But how was it that Mark (and all the early Christians) understood the cross to represent *victory* over, not defeat by, the powers?

I have shown how Mark weaves a sophisticated fabric of apocalyptic symbols throughout the story. The combat myth in the wilderness is rearticulated in the parable of "binding the strong man and ransacking his house" (3:27). It is enacted in Jesus' direct action in the Jerusalem temple, and reaches its climax in Jesus' final confrontation with the authorities in his trial (14:62) and death. At this moment the apocalyptic signs of the "end of the world" occur (15:33-39): the Human One pulls the heavenly potentates down from their thrones (13:26f.). The "strong man," it turns out, is not identifiable *simply* with the scribal class or its political coalitions, or the temple, or even the "desolating sacrilege" of imperial Rome. Mark's apocalyptic discourse reveals the heart of the matter: Jesus is taking on the politics of domination itself.

W. Wink, in his study of "powers" discourse in the New Testament, has in my opinion correctly captured the meaning of this apocalyptic euphemism. His argument that we should interpret "the spiritual powers not as separate heavenly or ethereal entities but as the *inner aspect of material or tangible manifestations of power*" is worth citing at length:

We encounter them primarily in reference to the material or "earthly" reality of *which they are the innermost essence*. . . . The expression "the Powers" should no longer be reserved for the special category of spiritual forces, but should rather be used generically for all manifestations of power, seen under the dual aspect of their physical or institutional creation on the one hand, and their inner essence or spirituality on the other. Popular speech, often more accurate in unconscious matters than it is given credit for being, has quite properly referred to the whole range of phenomena as "The Powers That Be." . . . In all these cases, the simultaneity of heavenly and earthly events witnesses to the perception, mythically couched, that there is more to events than what appears. The physical actors and institutions are only the outer manifestation of a whole field of powers contending for influence.²⁶

For Mark, then, the practice of domination is so deeply embedded in human history that no mere rebellion will do.

Genuine revolution demands a radical break with all the accepted canons of power politics, with every expression of violence, exploitation, and dehumanization:

“For we are contending . . .” against the spirituality of institutions, against the ideologies and metaphors and legitimations that prop them up, against the greed and covetousness that give them life, against the individual egocentricities that the Powers so easily hook, against the idolatry that pits short-term gain against the long-term good of the whole.²⁷

The means of the old order cannot bring about the ends of the new. Anything less than a politics of militant, nonviolent resistance is counterrevolutionary, a recycling of the old world. Mark’s Jesus calls for a more radical (driving-to-the-roots) social transformation, a unity between means and ends. I have suggested at several points throughout this commentary that the cross is not only a reminder of the political “cost of discipleship,” but can also be seen as a symbol of what Gandhi called *satyagraha*.

Mark’s Gospel legitimates the transgression of established social and economic boundaries for the sake of the re-creation of human unity. The subjects of this practice of inclusivity are first the poor and outcast. This is articulated both generally, in terms of Jesus’ ministry to the “crowd,” and specifically, in terms of episodes involving the disabled (2:1ff; 10:45ff.), the ritually unclean (1:45ff; 5:25ff.), the socially marginalized (2:15ff; 7:24ff.); and women and children (10:1ff.). This solidarity is perhaps best represented in the first episode of the passion narrative, in which Jesus is pictured residing in the house of a leper, and there teaches that one woman’s act of compassion outweighs all the pretensions to faithfulness of his own disciples (14:3-9).

Because it is often raised in political readings of the Gospel, the question must be addressed: Does Mark’s story portray Jesus as the author of a “mass movement”? This might be suggested not only by his clear “preferential option” for the poor of Palestine, but the evident class bias in the narrative. There are those who would see some of Jesus’ “popular” actions, such as the wilderness feedings or the procession on Jerusalem, as indicative of mass organizing. But we must keep in mind that Mark’s discipleship narrative articulates a definite strategy of minority *political vocation*. That is, Jesus creates a community that is expected to embrace the messianic way regardless of how the masses respond to the “objective conditions for revolution.”

In what sense, then, do we understand Jesus’ solidarity with the poor? Liberation theologians working in South Korea have illuminated the question with a term drawn from their cultural and historical experience: *minjung*. Kim Yong-bok defines *minjung*:

Kingdoms, dynasties, and states rise and fall; but the *minjung* remain as a concrete reality in history, experiencing the comings and goings of political powers. . . . Power has its basis in the *minjung*. But power as it expresses itself in political powers does not belong to the *minjung*. These powers seek to maintain themselves; and they rule the *minjung*.²⁸

Kim calls them “protagonists in the historical drama,” but distinguishes the politico-cultural definition of *minjung* from Marx’s strictly socio-economic understanding of the proletariat:

The former is a dynamic, changing concept. Woman belongs to *minjung* when she is politically dominated by man. An ethnic group is a *minjung* group when it is politically dominated by another group. A race is *minjung* when it is dominated by another powerful ruling race. When intellectuals are suppressed by the military power elite, they belong to *minjung*. Of course, the same applies to the workers and farmers.²⁹

Ahn Byung-mu, sees *minjung* as analogous to Mark’s “crowd.” In Mark, argues Ahn, the *minjung* are outside the sphere of the dominant Jewish groups; they include the poor, the tax collector, the impure.³⁰ Mark clearly portrays Jesus as an advocate for the poor and outcast in his healing and symbolic direct action. Ahn refers to “passive” solidarity in the sense that Jesus does not objectify the Palestinian *minjung* in terms of its role in a revolutionary process “so that its name may be used to justify any kind of political dictatorship.”³¹

Instead, Mark advances an ideology of “receptivity”: the leper, the sinner, the woman, the child are all to be received unconditionally as subjects of the kingdom. Jesus teaches his disciples to live among them and look at life from their perspective. This receptivity is not based upon any inherent goodness on the part of the poor, but as a sign of Yahweh’s unconditional acceptance of them as *minjung*. For Mark, the ideology of receptivity would appear to be rooted in the old Hebrew notion of reciprocity. The land belongs to Yahweh, and *all* who dwell upon it do so by grace, with equal status: “To me the people of Israel are servants, they are my servants whom I brought from the land of Egypt” (Lv 25:55).

In counterpoint to the portrait of economic deprivation that Mark paints of Palestine, he asserts the vision of abundance. The images of “enough” are:

1. eschatological harvest, 4:8
2. crowds satisfied in wilderness, 6:44
3. all food declared clean, 7:19
4. crowds satisfied in wilderness, 8:8
5. abundant leftovers, 8:19f
6. communal abundance, 10:30.

These images imply a new practice over against the temple-based system of economic redistribution, which has failed. This is the practice of cooperative sharing, a return to the original Israelite vision of a community of production and consumption.

The old system will persist, of course, and the disciples on mission will be vulnerable to it (6:8); they are justified in commandeering food for sustenance (2:23ff.). Mark appears to reject asceticism (i.e., fasting) as a privilege of the affluent, offensive to those who genuinely hunger. But the central focus of Mark’s ideology can be seen in Jesus’ interaction with his disciples in the first feeding story. Note the dialectical play of Mark’s discourse (6:36-38):

Disciples: "Send the crowds away into the villages so they can buy themselves something to eat."
 Jesus: "You feed them."
 Disciples: "Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?"
 Jesus: "How many loaves do you have? Go and see."

The disciples can imagine only market scarcity in the dominant economy. Against this, Jesus keeps referring them to their own resources, challenging them to forge an alternative economics. The "abundance" envisioned in Mark's vision of the kingdom can be realized when the disciples learn to organize and share available resources. This is the "miracle" narrated in the wilderness feedings; by it no one need "faint on the way" (8:3).

The community model of economic sharing is articulated in 10:29-31, there standing in tension with the dominant order represented by the rich landowner whose wealth "defrauds" the poor (10:19-22). The community re-creates the redistributive system: private ownership of land and houses is abandoned in favor of cooperative economics. This model is not intended to engender corporate affluence, but to provide surplus on behalf of the poor. The narrative strongly suggests that Mark's community is in fact practicing some kind of communal model (10:28), and experiencing social opposition because of it. It was one thing for Qumran monks to practice a style of communal economics in isolation in the wilderness; it was quite another to attempt it while residing in the midst of a hostile economic system.

There may be, however, a more specific dimension to the "persecutions" alluded to in 10:30. Did Jewish members of Mark's community refuse to cooperate with their tithing or other obligations to the temple-state? There is no direct evidence of this, but certainly such a position could be extrapolated on the basis of several episodes: the civil disobedience in the grain field (2:23ff.), Jesus' attack on the temple (11:15ff.), his criticism of contributions to the treasury (12:41ff.), and his prediction of the temple's destruction (13:2). Moreover, the tribute question suggests that some form of economic resistance was a live issue for the community (12:13ff.). Mark's narrative bias against the city further suggests that the community stood in solidarity with the plight of rural producers in the dominant system, and may have been promoting alternative models of distribution that were considered subversive by authorities such as the Pharisees.

At the heart of Mark's political, social, and economic alternatives to the dominant order lies a radical new symbolic system based upon the primacy of human need (3:4). In place of the purity code Jesus exhorts moral imperatives concerning exploitation (7:21f.). In place of the debt code he enjoins a community practice of forgiveness (11:25). Jesus' teaching functions to both ethicize and democratize the traditional symbolic order, undermining the legitimacy of those who mediate it—that is, priests, scribes, and Pharisees. Mark presses the bold claim that the temple is not necessary in order for Yahweh to dwell among the people. There is no sacred institutional site from which Yahweh must be

addressed in prayer: that site is faith (11:24). This point is made dramatically in the rending of the temple curtain at the moment of Jesus' death. The messianic "sacrifice" of Jesus has reconciled the people to Yahweh and each other, thus rendering void the priestly apparatus. Yahweh is no longer a recluse in the Holy of Holies, but present among the community.

Given the importance of table fellowship to Mark's social and economic experiment, it is not surprising that Jesus chooses this site as the new symbolic center of the community. In place of the temple is a simple meal, which represents participation in Jesus' "body" (14:22-25). Yet it is the meal, not the body, that is "holy," for the latter is absent at the end of the story. We are left, then, not with a ritual but the social event of table fellowship. This meal, which itself was an expropriation of the great liberation symbols of Passover, is meant to bring to mind the entire messianic program of justice and the cost of fidelity to it. But it is a meal for a community in flight, or more accurately, a community that follows its true center, Jesus, who cannot be institutionalized because he is always ahead of us on the road (16:7).

There is one more aspect to Mark's reconstruction of a symbolic life within the community: that is the primacy of the word. Jesus' teachings remain not only after he is gone, but stand at the center of history: "heaven and earth may pass away but my words shall not pass away" (13:31). And how is this word mediated? Through Mark's story, of course! The Gospel is an integral part of the symbolic center of the community, inseparable from Jesus himself. For the sake of Jesus and the Gospel, disciples give up the old order for the new (10:29) and pay the attendant price (8:35). And because the new story is linked to the old story, the community continues to read the Hebrew scriptures with "eyes to see" and "ears to hear."

To conclude, the literary *novum* called the Gospel of Mark was produced in response to a historical and ideological crisis engendered by the Jewish war. In this apocalyptic moment, a community struggled to maintain its nonviolent resistance to the Roman armies, the Jewish ruling class, and rebel recruiters, while sowing the seeds of a new revolutionary order through practice and proselytism. Mark's community does not fit in the strictures designed by sect-sociology, nor does it fit the caricatures of millennial groups. It must be taken seriously on its own terms, as a distinct socio-political strategy in a determinate formation, and indeed as an ideology of practice that begs to be heard in our own time.

NOTES

1. See the work of Howard C. Kee, *Community of the New Age: Studies in Mark's Gospel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), and John G. Gager, "Shall We Marry Our Enemies? Sociology and the N.T.," *Interpretation*, 36 (1982): 256-65.

2. Kenneth Burridge, *New Heaven and New Earth: A Study of Millenarian Activity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 13f.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

4. W. Beardslee, "N.T. Apocalyptic in Recent Interpretation," *Interpretation*, 25 (1971): 421.

5. Paul Hanson, "Old Testament Apocalyptic Reexamined," *Interpretation*, 25 (1971): 473, 476.
6. Kee, p. 146.
7. James A. Wilde, "A Social Description of the Community Reflected in the Gospel of Mark," Ph.D. dissertation, Drew University, 1974, pp. 61f.
8. Thomas Altizer, "The Dialectic of Ancient and Modern Apocalypticism," *JARR* 39: (1971): 312ff.
9. John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Vision of the Book of Daniel* (Missoula: Scholar's Press, 1977); Adela Yarbro Collins, "The Political Perspective of the Revelation to John," *JBL* 26 (1977): 16-31.
10. S. G. F. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots* (New York: Scribner's, 1967).
11. Werner Kelber, *The Kingdom of Mark: A New Place and a New Time* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973).
12. *Ibid.*, p. 131.
13. See B. Reicke, "Synoptic Prophecies on the Destruction of Jerusalem," in D. Aune, ed., *Studies in the NT and Early Christian Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), pp. 121ff.
14. John J. Collins, *Daniel, 1-2 Maccabees* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1981), pp. 105, 107.
15. B. van Iersel, "The Gospel According to Mark: Written for a Persecuted Community?" *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 34 (1980): 15.
16. This is also the conclusion of Kee, *Community of the New Age*, pp. 100f.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 102.
18. Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus: An Investigation into Economic and Social Conditions during the New Testament Period* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), p. 95.
19. See Josephus, *War*, I, xxiv, 708.
20. Jeremias, p. 362.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
22. Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).
23. Samuel Sandmel, *Judaism and Christian Beginnings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 163ff.
24. Werner Kelber, *Mark's Story of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), pp. 88ff.
25. John R. Donahue, "The Theology and Setting of Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark," The 1983 Pete Marquette Theology Lecture (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1983), p. 45f.
26. Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), pp. 104, 105, 107.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 140.
28. Kim Yong-bock, "Messiah and Minjung: Discerning Messianic Politics over against Political Messianism," in *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1981), p. 183.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 185.
30. Ahn Byung-mu, "Jesus and the Minjung in the Gospel of Mark," in *Minjung Theology*, pp. 150f.
31. Kim Yong-bock, p. 185.