

David Álvarez Cineira

The centurion's statement (Mark 15:39):
A restitutio memoriae

Most exegetes agree that the account of the passion in Mark has incorporated various folk traditions of Jerusalemite origin. The language, the style and the narrative of the work exhibit many of the features that experts attribute to the oral cultural production. The story is construed as a liturgical performance, and the dynamism of oft repeated oral representations in interaction with the public constitutes a determining factor of its configuration.¹ At the same time, the socio-cultural, political and religious context would have influenced not only its performances, but also its contents as well. Thus the passion story comprises recent items common to the community where it was performed, and to the writer. Their *Sitz im Leben* might explain the inclusion of some texts in the narrative, which otherwise would hardly make sense in the oldest stratum of the story. We shall focus on the centurion's "confession" at the foot of the cross (Mark 15:39).

The purpose of the present study is to show that the meaning of the statement should be understood in the context of its original listeners/readers against the background of their recent political and religious events.² If these historical facts were decisive in the liturgical performances and composition of the text, then we should investigate the life-world of the audience as well as the political and religious circumstances surrounding those communities where it was represented *ad intra* and in which it was written. Consequently, it is necessary to determine its geographical and temporal location. This performed or written piece came from a subordinate social group, on the fringes of the official culture and the ruling class. The hero of the plot, a popular Jewish leader with royal pretensions, was executed in Palestine by

1 K.R. Iverson, "A Centurion's 'Confession': A Performance-Critical Analysis of Mark 15:39", *JBL* 130 (2011) 329-50.

2 G. Theissen, *Lokalkolorit und Zeitgeschichte in den Evangelien* (NTOA 8; Freiburg/Göttingen: Universitätsverlag/Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989), 246-303, has analyzed in detail the social context and the political history in the Markan Passion Story and the Jerusalem Community in the years 40-50 C.E., with the Caligula crisis as background. His suggestions, always intuitive and with scientific rigor, have been a stimulus and encouragement for many readers and students. This short paper is intended as an expression of my great gratitude to him for all he did during my stay in Heidelberg. His suggestions and dialogues always opened new horizons in my research. Thanks a lot. *Hoc die natali septuagesimo omnia fausta tibi eveniant.*

the Roman authorities with an ignominious death after being declared an enemy of the empire. The punishment inflicted was a *damnatio memoriae*. However, his followers produced a literary work from the popular subculture of resistance. It was for their own consumption, and also to rehabilitate his memory. The *restitutio memoriae* by a subordinate social group through the official declaration of a Roman military officer is an affront to and a veiled attack upon the reigning emperor and the political system. An open criticism of the system, however, was not feasible. Oral performances used the language more freely when the actors knew the audience well, but a written text preferred, for safety reasons, a veiled language.

I. The political context of the gospel of Mark

All scholars recognize the difficulty regarding dating and locating the composition of the second gospel. Nevertheless, examination of Mark 13 has allowed a general consensus among scholars that the Gospel was written between 65 and 75 CE. Without attempting to make a detailed argument here, I believe, as many scholars have shown, that the written composition of the text should be placed after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in the early 70s CE. However, exegetes have argued much more about its geographical location.³ The reason for this unending debate is that the text does not provide direct indications on the place of composition, or about its addressees. The text in itself is susceptible to several reconstructions. For this reason, different regions have been proposed as places of its origin. Although there is no real consensus on the identity of the Markan audience, a majority of modern commentaries considers that the gospel could have been written in Syria or Rome. Of these two conjectures, the internal and external evidences provided by various exegetes persuade me to consider the capital of the empire, Rome, as the place of its composition.⁴

The years before the composition of the gospel were times of crisis and civil wars between various pretenders to the throne. In only one year, there were four emperors.⁵ The first of them, Nero (54-68 CE), became a paradigm

3 D.N. Peterson, *The Origins of Mark: the Markan Community in Current Debate* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

4 B.J. Incigneri, *The Gospel to the Romans: The Setting and Rhetoric of Mark's Gospel* (Biblical Interpretation 65; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 59-115; M. Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 1-30; A. Winn, *The Purpose of Mark's Gospel: An Early Christian Response to Roman Imperial Propaganda* (WUNT 2.245; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 43-91.

5 K. Wellesley, *The Year of the Four Emperors* (London/New York: Routledge, 3rd2000); G. Morgan, *69 A.D.: The Year of Four Emperors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

of the corrupt and tyrannical emperor. His autocratic power and his overriding interest in artistic pursuits worsened the relations between the emperor and the senatorial aristocracy, culminating in the persecution of prominent citizens. These arbitrary persecutions were due mostly to his temperamental mood or to the advice of some *delatores*. The mechanisms of *dissimulatio* and *adulatio* became prerequisites not only for political success, but also for physical survival.⁶

This poetaster emperor fostered Latin poetry and prose through his patronage, even with some Neronian extravagances, as with his pseudo-triumphal ceremony with big paraphernalia in Rome (67 CE) after his athletic and artistic victories during the tour of Greece.⁷ Nevertheless, three of the prominent literary figures – Seneca, Lucan, and Petronius – perished because of his jealousy of their talent. It was not an easy job to be a dissident poet or an active satirist of the regime and to survive because of the arbitrariness and unpredictability of the censorship.⁸ Some poets preferred to become domesticated poetasters (Calp. Siculus, *Ecl.* 1.59-64; 69-73) and practise the art of the *adulatio* or the *dissimulatio*.⁹

Nero received cultic honours in his life throughout the empire, which underlined his divinity (Tacitus, *Ann.* 13.8.1). Throughout his reign, the senate gave increasing honours, raising him more and more to the divine sphere, and identified him with several gods: Sun, Apollo, Jupiter or Zeus (Cass. Dio, 62.20.5; Calp. Siculus, *Ecl.* 4.142-5; IG 7.2713). In the public sphere, poets and orators praised or exalted the figure of Nero, emphasizing his divine force (Tacitus, *Ann.* 16.2.2). His image as a “golden” god appears

2006).

6 On Nero’s conflict with the aristocracy and their response to the *princeps*, see V.A. Rudich, *Political Dissidence under Nero: The Price of Dissimulation* (London/New York: Routledge, 1993), 125-195; *idem*, *Dissidence and Literature under Nero: The Price of Rhetoricization* (London: Routledge, 1997).

7 M. Beard, *The Roman Triumph* (Cambridge, Mass./London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 268-70.

8 J.P. Sullivan, *Literature and Politics in the Age of Nero* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 74-179.

9 S. Bartsch, *Actors in the Audience: Theatricality and Doublespeak from Nero to Hadrian* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), builds her model upon modern social theory as proposed by J.C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (Hew Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1990). Bartsch explores two models that are adduced to shed light on the demise of sincerity, on the way in which language itself and personal conduct adjusted to the loss of freedom. The first of these models is “theatricality” (pp. 1-35), that is, to act out a script in dealings with each other. Political and literary life became a continuous theatre, where the emperor performed as a stage-actor, and the members of the audience found themselves compelled to “act” out their approval and appreciation of the emperor’s performance. The second model, the “doublespeak” (pp. 98-147), concerns the insincerity of the literary artist, and it is viewed as a natural response of the author to the lack of freedom.

in the theatre to celebrate games in honour of Tiridates (Cass. Dio, 62.6.2), who acclaims to Nero: "I have come to thee, my god, to worship thee as I do Mithras" (Cass. Dio, 62.5.2).¹⁰

Nevertheless, if Nero lived as a "god", his death was that of a villain. In March 68 CE, G.J. Vindex, S.S. Galba and L.C. Macer revolted against the *princeps*, who was unable to control the situation. He committed suicide in June 9, 68 CE, and Galba succeeded him as the new emperor. Nero was cremated, but his ashes were not placed in the Mausoleum of Augustus. Nero's exclusion from this Mausoleum was a posthumous revocation of his membership in the *gens* Julia and a denigration of his reputation. He was the first emperor to be officially declared a Roman *hostis*: "He had been pronounced a public enemy by the senate, and they were seeking him to punish him in the ancient fashion" (Suetonius, *Nero* 49.2) reserved for *hostes*, which mandated that the offender was stripped, held by a forked stick, and then beaten to death with rods. This declaration necessarily included posthumous sanctions against his monuments and inscriptions.¹¹ Pliny the Elder also records that Nero's "crimes" were condemned (*Nat.* 34.18.45). The historical sources and the surviving archaeological evidence confirm that the destruction of Nero's portraits, monuments, inscriptions, and coins was aggressively carried out under Galba and Vespasian.¹² Tacitus quotes Nero's successor Galba as saying that there was no prior precedent for the condemnation of a *princeps* (Tacitus, *Hist.* 1.16). This defamation

10 About Nero's divine cult in life, see M. Clauss, *Kaiser und Gott: Herrscherkult im römischen Reich* (Stuttgart/Leipzig: B.G. Teubner 1999), 98-111.

11 E.R. Varner, *Mutilation and Transformation: Damnatio Memoriae and Roman Imperial Portraiture* (Leiden/Boston: Brill 2004), 46-84. Even his Colossus and the *domus aurea* suffered a transformation. The ruling elite (the senate or the emperor) in Rome sought to eradicate or obliterate the memory of the State's enemies or even of their deceased opponents through a process known as *damnatio memoriae*. Its original purpose was to preserve the honour of the city; in a society that stressed the social appearance, respectability and the pride of being a true Roman, the *damnatio memoriae* was perhaps one of the worst punishments inflicted on Roman citizens. These formal and traditional practices included removing the person's name and image from public monuments and inscriptions, making it illegal to speak of him, and forbidding funeral observances and mourning. Sometimes, the condemnation did not take the form of an official, legal pronouncement, but was rather enacted in practice, with erasure of the name, with mutilation or transformation of portraits, etc. Paradoxically, a later change of historical events could rehabilitate his memory. Cf. F. Vittinghoff, *Der Staatsfeind in der römischen Kaiserzeit: Untersuchungen zur „damnatio memoriae“* (NDF 84; Berlin: Junker & Dünhaupt, 1936); H.I. Flower, *The Art of Forgetting: Disgrace and Oblivion in Roman Political Culture* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 197-232; S. Benoist (ed.), *Mémoire et histoire: Les procédures de condamnation dans l'antiquité romaine* (Metz: Centre Régional Universitaire Lorrain d'Histoire, 2007).

12 Suetonius, *Galb.* 15.1; Tacitus, *Hist.* 1.20; 1.78; Plutarch, *Galb.* 16.1-2, *Otho* 3.1; E.S. Ramage, "Denigration of Predecessor under Claudius, Galba, and Vespasian", *Historia* 32 (1983) 210.

was his *abolitio/damnatio memoriae*, and the “god” Nero became again a human being, a parricide.

A few months later, Otho attempted to rehabilitate Nero’s memory to please the *plebs*.¹³ Vitellius continued Otho’s policy of honouring Nero.¹⁴ Their purpose with this action was to extol and consolidate their power. However, Nero’s rehabilitation was for a short time, because Vespasian once again actively enforced his *damnatio*. Despite this *damnatio*, Nero’s posthumous popularity continued; he was esteemed by the plebs and impostors of him rose up, especially in the eastern part of the empire.¹⁵ As E.R. Varner says,

Nero was not only the first *princeps* to be officially condemned, but also the first whose memory and images were subsequently rehabilitated, first under Otho and Vitellius, and much later in the mid third and the end of the fourth century. Nero’s rehabilitations, as well as the phenomenon of the “false Neros” ... underscore his continued posthumous popularity and highlight the complexities of the condemnation process.¹⁶

Galba ruled the destinies of Rome for a few months. Otho successfully plotted Galba’s overthrow and the emperor was murdered in the *Forum Romanum* by members of the praetorians in January 15. His corpse was denigrated, his head cut off, and his body may have been further abused by being thrown into the *Sessorium*, a place of execution for condemned criminals.¹⁷ Otho was subsequently proclaimed emperor by the praetorians and ratified by the senate. Statues of Galba were re-erected (Tacitus, *Hist.* 3.7), and the senate also voted to restore his honours¹⁸ and even desired to erect a memorial to him where he was murdered in the Forum “as soon as it was lawful,” underscoring that official sanctions against Galba’s memory and portraits had been enacted after his assassination (Suetonius, *Galb.* 23). However, Vespasian may not have supported the rehabilitation of Galba’s memory, as “he annulled this decree, believing that Galba had sent assassins from Spain to Judea, to take his life” (*Galb.* 23).

13 Tacitus, *Hist.* 1.78; Suetonius, *Otho* 7.1; 10.2; Plutarch, *Oth.* 3.

14 Cass. Dio, 64.7.3; Suetonius, *Vit.* 11.2.

15 Suetonius, *Nero* 57.2; Tacitus, *Hist.* 2.8-9; Cass. Dio, 66.19.3.

16 Varner, *Mutilation*, 85.

17 Tacitus, *Hist.* 1.41; Plutarch, *Galb.* 28.2-3. Suetonius, *Galb.* 20.2, mentions that the head was cut off by a common soldier, placed on a spear and mocked, “crying out from time to time, ‘Galba, thou Cupid, exult in thy vigour!’”, but eventually buried together with the body.

18 Immediately after Otho’s death, the people of Rome carried round the temples images of Galba, ornamented with laurel leaves and flowers, and piled chaplets in the form of a sepulchral mound near the lake of Curtius, on the very spot which had been stained with the blood of the dying man (Tacitus, *Hist.* 2.55.1), which was a signal to the senate to enact the deification. According to Tacitus, *Hist.* 4.40, the restoration of Galba’s honours was proposed by Domitian and passed by the senate.

Otho lost the empire at Vitellius' hands after a battle, causing Otho to take his own life in April 16, 69 CE. His memory was condemned under his successor and his name eradicated from inscriptions. Even his birthday was a *dies nefastus* (Suetonius, *Dom.* 10.3). This emperor also suffered a kind of literary *damnatio* in Juvenal's *Satires*, where his memory and reputation are denigrated.¹⁹ Some of his portraits were destroyed, others were thrown in the sewer in a vehement gesture of punishment *post mortem* and denigration of memory.

Vitellius' entry into the city of Rome in 69 made use of the traditions of the Roman triumph to establish his claim to imperial power. However, troops stationed in the East refused to recognize Vitellius as the legitimate *princeps* and instead declared themselves in favour of Vespasian. While Vespasian was at Caesarea, he was proclaimed emperor (July 1, 69), first by the army in Egypt and then by his troops in Judea. His army defeated Vitellius's forces at Cremona (Tacitus, *Hist.* 3.13). In December 20, 69, Vitellius was dragged to the Forum and forced to suffer the indignities of a common criminal: he was insulted by the populace, forced to watch his statues overturned, pelted with dung, and finally tortured to death at the Gemonian steps. "One speech was heard from him shewing a spirit not utterly degraded, when to the insults of a tribune he answered, 'Yet I was your Emperor.' Then he fell under a shower of blows, and the mob reviled the dead man with the same heartlessness with which they had flattered him when he was alive" (Tacitus, *Hist.* 3.85). His corpse was mutilated and then dragged by a hook and thrown into the Tiber, a fate reserved for the bodies of traitors, capital offenders and victims of the arena (Suetonius, *Vit.* 17.2). Vitellius is the first Roman emperor whose corpse was publicly desecrated in this way and it must have been a fairly shocking act of denigration intended to assert loyalty to his victorious rival, Vespasian.

Accounts of emperor worship during the year 69 for the four emperors are scarce. But even Galba followed the established ritual. A golden statue was in the podium of the Praetorian camp, so we can assume that there was also a divine image of the reigning emperor erected shortly after his accession to the throne.²⁰

Vespasian got the news of his rival's defeat at Alexandria, and was declared emperor by the senate while he was in Egypt in December 69. Not far from there, in Judea, his son, Titus, captured Jerusalem and destroyed the Jewish temple in 70. Vespasian returned to Rome as emperor in 70 (Cass. Dio, 66.10.2; Suetonius, *Vesp.* 8.5.). As he drew near the city, the people of Rome came out to line the streets to greet him, and as he passed they hailed

19 Ramage, "Denigration", 679-80.

20 Clauss, *Kaiser*, 112.

him “benefactor”, “saviour”. Josephus described the city filled with garlands and incense, like a temple (*BJ* 7.70-3). The new emperor received divine honours from the local communities (Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 5.35). A similar welcome was dedicated to Titus probably in June 71 CE, when he returned from Palestine and Egypt. The triumph of Vespasian and Titus over the Jewish rebellion was celebrated in the *urbe* with a big triumphal procession (*BJ* 7.121-62). During this ritual and military parade the Jewish temple treasures were displayed (*BJ* 7.148-52), and the captured Jewish leaders of the revolt condemned to die. The display of the temple treasures transmitted a clear message of the defeat of the Jews in all aspects – military, political, cultural, and religious.²¹

This visual imagery articulated the imperial ideology/theology of peace and security that the gods had established in and through Rome (*pax deorum*), the divine justice, which the emperor personified. The parade was a real “public transcript” or official discourse. This propaganda was intended to shape the consciousness of the subjects, who were invited to respond with gratitude, fear and loyalty to the emperor.

If the gospel of Mark was performed and composed in the capital of the Roman empire, all of these persuasive situations would undoubtedly impact the collective memory of the Christian community, and especially when they read the story of Jesus’ passion, for several details of the narrative could have evoked the fate of the previous emperors. Several scholars have already noticed this possibility. B.J. Incigneri has shown in his detailed monograph numerous “allusions” in Mark’s gospel to issues specific to Rome between 69 and 71.²² While admitting that some may seem coincidental, he argues that the number of connections make the setting of the gospel in Rome more likely. The “devastating sacrilege” (Mark 13:14) is Titus’s presence in the temple; Mark’s gospel was written late in 71, after the triumph of Vespasian and Titus in Rome made the news of the destruction graphically known there. In a similar way, A. Winn concludes that the Roman propaganda announcing the emperor Vespasian as the fulfilment of Jewish messianic prophecy drives Mark’s shaping of his account. Writing to the church in Rome, Mark counters this propaganda by stressing Jesus’ identity and superiority as Messiah, Son of God, and true sovereign. Two secondary objectives that Mark pursues are to encourage the Roman church to remain faithful in the face of persecution and to ease their eschatological anxiety.

21 I. Östenberg, *Staging the World: Spoils, Captives, and Representations in the Roman Triumphal Procession* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009), 111-16; Beard, *The Roman Triumph*, 93-106. The arch of Titus in Rome depicts this triumph.

22 Incigneri, *The Gospel*, 156-207. In a similar way, Winn, *The Purpose*, 153-77, reaches the conclusion that Roman propaganda announcing the emperor Vespasian as the fulfilment of Jewish messianic prophecy drives Mark’s shaping of his account.

I do believe that the reading of the passion in the Roman Christian community would have evoked the recent political events. These Christians have witnessed in a few years the coming and disappearance of several pretenders to the throne, different emperors, some of whom had divine pretensions, and their fate was the *damnatio memoriae*. Obviously, some kind of parallelism would resonate in the ears of the Roman Christian gentiles with the story of Jesus, who pretended to be king of the Jews, and ended up with an ignominious death on the cross. The statement of the centurion at the foot of the cross should be read with this background in mind, and it must have served the Markan community in a definitive way.

II. The centurion at the foot of the cross

The Roman authorities knew well how to eradicate the memory of the enemies of the Empire, especially of those who attempted to revolt against the omnipotent domination of Rome. To reach this goal, they had one of the cruellest and most heinous of practices, the crucifixion. This was a public affair. Naked and affixed to a cross, the victim was subjected to savage ridicule by passers-by; it was humiliation for him and his family. Generally, crucifixion was a penalty reserved for those of lower status (*servile supplicium*), dangerous criminals, slaves and the populace of foreign provinces.²³ In Judea, it served as a means of asserting Roman authority, maintaining law and as a deterrent against Jewish nationalism, that is, as military and political punishment. Even for the Jewish people, it had a religious meaning, as a divine stigma: "Anyone who is hung on a tree is under the curse of God" (Deut 21:23).

Around forty years before those events narrated in the previous section, the Roman authorities carried out the crucifixion of Jesus by the sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate. According to the inscription on the cross, Jesus had pretended to be a political king of the Jews: this notice would have marked Jesus as a messianic pretender to the throne, like others before him. Pilate's soldiers mocked Jesus as soldiers were prone to do with imperial pretenders.²⁴ On the other side, the Jewish leaders mocked Jesus on the cross as an act of derision because his shameful death was a clear sign that God was not with him. Jesus' execution on the cross should have been the eradication of his public memory for the Jewish aristocracy, as well as for

²³ M. Hengel, *Crucifixion: In the ancient world and the folly of the message of the cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, ²1978). For the several meanings of the crucifixion, see his summary, pp. 86-90.

²⁴ See how the troops loyal to Vespasian mocked Vitellius (Cass. Dio, 64.20-1).

Romans. Even some of his friends saw the events as the “end” of the story and returned home (Luke 24:21). His followers needed to interpret this scandal and legitimize their faith. In that way, the crucifixion accounts are interpreted events. Some information was included to explain this kind of death and surpass the scandal of the cross, as in the case of Mark 15:39.

Mark 15:16-24 mentions the presence of Roman soldiers in the execution of Jesus, but it is not until 15:39 that one appears, where the narrative records the presence of an officer with the rank of centurion, who thereupon will be Pilate’s informant for the confirmation of Jesus’ death (Mark 15:44-45). Surprisingly, this Roman military officer made a very high Christological assessment of Jesus. Scholars have analyzed every single word and its possible content. Special attention was given to the predicate of the sentence, “son of God” without the article and to the possible match to the “*the* son of God”, with article.²⁵ Various explanations have been proposed at the grammatical level, trying to emphasize that the use of the predicate without the definite article is interchangeable with the predicate with the article.²⁶

Apart from this grammatical discussion, the interpretation of the content continues to be debated.²⁷ On one side, some interpretations support the traditional point of view: the words of the centurion constitute a true confessional statement; it could even be the kernel of Markan Christology as an interpretation for the messianic secret. The Roman centurion has seen this man and has identified him as the son of God. Mark presents this military officer as a faithful model of gentile Christianity, which saw the significance of Jesus as son of God revealed *par excellence* in the drama of the cross.²⁸ What had the centurion seen as unusual in the death of this prisoner to make such a Christian statement? R. Brown believes that the statement is linked to the vision of the rending of the veil of the temple (Mark 15:38), interpreted as a divine response: the torn veil was a demonstration that God had not abandoned Jesus. This signal was given to explain that Jesus was not only

25 E.S. Johnson, “Is Mark 15.39 the Key to Mark’s Christology?”, *JSNT* 31 (1987) 3-22.

26 About the question of the *anarthrous* υἱὸς θεοῦ and the difficulty of the meaning, see T.H. Kim, “The Anarthrous υἱὸς θεοῦ in Mark 15,39 and the Roman Imperial Cult”, *Biblica* 79 (1998) 221-5.

27 According to W.T. Shiner, “The ambiguous Pronouncement of the Centurion and the Shrouding of Meaning in Mark”, *JSNT* 78 (2000) 3-22, the pronouncement is intentionally ambiguous and is used by Mark to allow his audience to hear a deeper meaning while leaving the veil of secrecy intact.

28 C.U. Manus, “The Centurion’s Confession of Faith (Mk 15,39)”, *BThA* 7 (1985) 261-78, on p. 264. Against this kind of interpretation, however, there are no clues which indicate that the centurion has been converted, because the mere recognition of Jesus’ divine sonship does not necessarily entail conversion. Demons and unclean spirits have done the same.

innocent, but also that he was closely associated with the divinity.²⁹ This interpretation assumes that the outer veil of the temple could be seen from Golgotha. However, this possibility has been questioned, arguing geographical improbabilities: the outer veil could be seen from the Mount of Olives, but not from the northern part of the city, nor from the Golgotha.

On the other side, other research utilizing grammatical, textual and historical evidences contends that the words before the cross cannot be taken as a *crux interpretum* for Markan theology. The examination of the Roman background of the centurion's exclamation continues to demonstrate that his statement cannot be understood as a full confession of Jesus as the son of God in Mark's gospel. E.S. Johnson, one of the most important authors who has challenged the traditional interpretation, has raised questions regarding the historicity of the confession on the lips of the nameless Roman soldier with the rank of a centurion. It is important to understand what experiences Mark's readers might have had with Roman soldiers of a centurion's rank, what their general expectations of a centurion might have been, and the way they might have expected a centurion to act at an execution. A pagan Roman soldier would not have had this kind of religious knowledge to confess that Jesus is the only begotten of the true God. He could have considered Jesus as a divine hero, worthy of worship, but not beyond. Johnson argues that it is unlikely that Mark's readers would find it believable that a professional soldier would risk his career in order to worship a crucified man, because it would be inconsistent with the image of a Roman centurion that the Markan readers probably had:

Soldiers ... took religious oaths to the Emperor, praising him as a god or a Son of God... A Roman soldier's allegiance to the Emperor was expected to be absolute and it is unlikely that Mark's readers would find it believable that a professional soldier would risk his career in order to worship a crucified man, especially if by such a confession he might be risking his own death for treason. A Roman soldier of a centurion's rank and experience would be too sophisticated and would have been exposed to too many gods to make that kind of quick judgment at an execution, and Mark's readers would have known it.³⁰

According to Johnson, the authenticity of the confession does not conform to the historical data. It is highly unlikely that a Roman centurion would make such a bold and public profession while serving in Caesar's army; and, given the soldier's frame of reference, it is doubtful that such a confession was even possible. While it is difficult to determine with precision how Mark intends the centurion's statement to be understood since it could have had such a wide range of meanings to Mark's readers, it is likely that in the

29 R.E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave* (New York: Doubleday, 1994) 1150-2; D.M. Gurtner, "The Rending of the Veil and Markan Christology: 'Unveiling' the 'ΥΙΟΣ ΘΕΟΥ (Mark 15:38-39)", *BibInt* 5 (2007) 292-306.

30 Johnson, "Is Mark 15.39", 12-13.

context of the passion narrative it stands along with other ironic statements at the foot of the cross about who Jesus is.

Although the information regarding the Roman soldiers is useful and provides an enriching backdrop, Johnson's exegesis of Mark 15:39 is influenced, if not determined, by this historical information. That is why other exegetes have taken into consideration other backgrounds, for example, the intersection between Jesus' crucifixion and the martyrological literature. John Pobee, for instance, has demonstrated that Mark 15 is imbued with martyrological proof-texts from the biblical tradition, including the Psalms and Isaiah.³¹ An important motif in several of these texts, besides the stock elements of persecution, ridicule, and the miraculous, which all resonate with Mark's crucifixion scene, is the vindication of the martyr by those responsible for the martyrdom. Typical of these accounts is the conversion of the executioner or authority figure(s), or the absolution of the persecuted by those directly responsible for the hostile acts.

Other lines of research have inserted the history of the passion of Mark within the political context. This would constitute a critique of the ideological politics of the empire, and even a parody of the triumphal parades of Nero or Vespasian.³² For T.E. Schmidt, the sacrifice at the cross represents the culmination of Mark's parable of triumph:

Mark is presenting an anti-triumph in reaction to the contemporary offensive self-divinization efforts of Gaius and especially Nero. In other words, he intends to portray Jesus parabolically to a Roman gentile audience as the true epiphanic triumphantor.³³

Mark would select and arrange some details of the emperor's cult to hint at a correspondence between the seeming mockery of Jesus and the futile adoration of the emperor. "The common element is the soldiery, who start out intending to mock but are in the end, in the person of the centurion, compelled to recognize the true Son of God."³⁴ The subtlety and opacity of this critique is due to the contemporary political climate.

In this line of interpretation and based on the work of Incigneri, A. Winn proposes the following interpretation of the statement of the centurion in the

31 J. Pobee, "The Cry of the Centurion – A Cry of Defeat", in E. Bammel (ed.), *The Trial of Jesus: Cambridge Studies in Honour of C.F.D. Moule* (SBT 2/13; London: SCM, 1970) 91-102.

32 On the Markan passion narrative as a parody of the Roman imperial policy see Incigneri, *The Gospel*.

33 T.E. Schmidt, "Mark 15.16-22: The Crucifixion Narrative and the Roman Triumphal Procession", *NTS* 41 (1995) 1-18, on p. 8. For the Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and its parallelism to the triumphal entries in the ancient world and the significance of the sacrifice offered by the conqueror in the temple of the local god cf. P.B. Duff, "The March of the Divine Warrior and the Advent of the Greco-Roman King: Mark's Account of Jesus' Entry into Jerusalem", *JBL* 111 (1992) 55-71, on pp. 58-62.

34 Schmidt, "Mark 15.16-22", 18.

Roman community, after the triumphal procession of the emperor Vespasian and Titus. The title "son of god" was commonly adopted especially by Roman emperors of the Julio-Claudian dynasty.³⁵ Given the situation of Mark's community in Rome and the close association between Roman emperors and the title son of God, Mark's readers see the parallel that the evangelist has created between Jesus and the emperor. With this title, Jesus is placed in the same category as the Roman rulers. This identity of Jesus "directly opposes both Vespasian's propagandistic claims and his imperial identity. Mark presents Jesus as Messiah, rejecting the Flavian propaganda that Vespasian was the fulfilment of Jewish messianic prophecy."³⁶ Jesus also usurps Vespasian's claim that he is the ruler of the world. However, some members of the Roman Christian community would have doubted these Christological claims. For this reason, Mark had to offer two stories in which a divine voice confirms Jesus' identity (Mark 1:11; 9:7). The divine appointment of Vespasian to the Principate (through the oracle on Mt. Carmel and the vision in the temple of Serapis) was relevant to Flavian propaganda. Against this political message, Jesus had direct divine confirmation of his identity. To sway his readers and re-establish Jesus' legitimacy, Mark demonstrates that Jesus' power surpasses Vespasian's, and presents Jesus as a powerful exorcist, healer, prophet, benefactor, with power over nature. Mark's readers have to make a choice. They could follow the current emperor or they could follow the true ruler, who is now in heaven and would soon return.

I find Winn's proposal suggestive. However, before taking into consideration the figure of Jesus as a counter-propaganda against Vespasian, the evangelist needed to rehabilitate Jesus' memory. That was the first purpose of the centurion's statement.

III. The *restitutio memoriae*

At the historical level, as Johnson has underlined, it is not possible to consider that a pagan centurion could have made such a statement only as a result of the previously recounted events, such as the darkness, the cry of the defendant, his breathing out or because the centurion could have witnessed the tearing of the Temple's veil, which geographically would be highly

35 Kim, "The Anarthrous", 125, argues that the title "son of god" was unique to Augustus: "The name 'son of god' was reserved only for Augustus because it was a personal name, not a mere title".

36 Winn, *The Purpose*, 181; see further pp. 180-94. On the parody and mockery of the cross, cf. J. Marcus, "Crucifixion as Parodic Exaltation", *JBL* 125 (2006) 73-87.

unlikely. Nor could such a theological statement be inferred from his report submitted to Pilate about the death of the condemned (vv. 44-45). I, therefore, consider that the verse is a redactional work of the evangelist. As R. Bultmann had verified, the account of Jesus's death is heavily distorted by the legend: the powerful signs at the death of Jesus and their profound impact on the pagan viewer are legendary developments.³⁷

The objective of introducing this verse, apart from creating a theological statement, where Jesus is recognized as son of God at the beginning (1:1; 1:11) and at the conclusion (15:39), could be sought in the political context of the readers and the author. By Mark's day, the Roman emperor had gained a supreme position in the empire during his life and after death. The accession of a new emperor was not only a decisive political event in Rome, but also the cardinal moment around which clustered the elements of the imperial propaganda and ritual. Ruler worship became part of the social, political and religious life of the Romans, which evoked a picture of the relationship between the emperor and the gods. This happens officially after his death through the *apotheosis*. But the citizens, wanting to express their loyalty to the *princeps*, applied divine attributes to the still living emperor. That was what the Roman citizens did in the years before Mark's composition. Nevertheless, they have seen that none of the last four rulers had become *divi filii*. They committed suicide or were killed by their own people (soldiers) and they were denigrated in different ways. Four emperors suffered in a year the *damnatio memoriae*. The emperors try to eradicate the public memory of their predecessors and they were not rehabilitated with public honours.³⁸ The proclamation of a new age of ideal government under the ideal ruler was far away in the horizon.

In this context, the Roman Christian readers could interpret the death of Jesus on the cross as the eradication of his memory. It would be difficult to explain to a Jewish or gentile Christian that God's son could have ended his life in this way. For a gentile Christian, the manner of Jesus' death would probably debar him from receiving the *apotheosis*. Those who died violently, such as those crucified, were not even guaranteed a restful death or a burial. Thus, a later tradition, or Mark, added to the story of the passion the statement of a Roman officer as rehabilitation of his memory, a fact that did not happen to the emperors in the years 68-70. For the readers of Mark, God has already re-vindicated and re-confirmed Jesus as son of God. Now, the same military authority who had executed him recognizes his divinity. Despite the kind of

37 R. Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition* (FRLANT 29; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979), 296.

38 Cf. the Roman legal process for the *abolitio memoriae* and its *restitutio*, F. Amarelli, *Itinera ad Principatum: Vicende del potere degli imperatori romani* (Napoli: Lezioni Jovene Editore, 2010), 127-74.

death that Jesus bore, this representative of Rome declared of him: "Truly, THIS man was son of God", and not the other men who were emperors but never the "sons of god"; instead, everyone became *hostis publicus* and usurper of the empire. The Roman centurion confesses of Jesus what he should confess of the Roman emperor. The facts however showed that they were not worthy of being sons of god. The emperors are not the sons of god; Jesus, the crucified messiah, is. The officer ascribes to Jesus what he should ascribe to the emperors: truly, those men were not *divi filii*. Instead, Jesus is really son of God. That is what Mark's early readers would have associated with the statement of the soldier. Mark's use of the title υἱὸς θεοῦ must have had a great impact upon the readers, because not only did the name echo the language of the Roman emperor worship but also directly challenged the most revered figure of the cult in contrast to the dismal reality of the time.

It is ironic that one of the officers of the same troops who acclaimed Vespasian a few months before in Palestine as emperor after the bitter civil wars, now, in the Markan account, declared in Judea that the true son of God is on a cross. This is the ironic discourse of dominated groups, who, unable to express openly their resistance, develop strategies of ironic and "hidden transcripts" to criticize the dominant authority outside the public arena and that go unnoticed by those in power. However, the main purpose of the text was not criticism for criticism's sake, but to confirm the belief of the group: "Truly this man was son of God."

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