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“Take Up Your Cross and Follow Me”: The Gospel of Mark and Social Identity Formation

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An abstract of
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of Emory University in partial fulfillment
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Abstract

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This thesis explores the success of the early Jesus movement in spite of its poor reception in the Roman world. In particular, I examine the social identity of purposeful suffering and servanthood that the gospel of Mark fostered in its original first century audience. While many scholars believe that the gospel was either written for the author's community or written with a universal audience in mind, I provide an alternative to this debate, suggesting instead that the gospel was an ideological text that worked to form a community out of those who heard it read. I use social identity theory to examine the nature and goals of this intended community. This thesis concludes that the social identity perpetuated by the gospel was one that held Jesus as its prototype, treating his suffering and service as normative models to be emulated. I argue that Mark provides a socially alternative identity in a fictive kinship structure based on service relations that holds women as models for behavior. This identity of suffering was able to sustain itself because within Mark's narrative, it was equated with social capital in the coming kingdom of God.

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Introduction

The gospel of Mark creates a feeling of dissonance for the modern sociologist: Why, in the first century Roman world, would anyone have *wanted* to be involved in the Jesus movement? Its charismatic leader ended up in the most undignified of places; his death on a Roman cross should have irrevocably nixed him from the list of potential messianic saviors. Nothing good came of being associated with this movement politically— Jews were not first-class citizens in the Roman world to begin with, and this new group was not kindly accepted even by other Jewish groups. The gospel clearly outlines the potential outcome of discipleship— the *hodos* is rough and the devotee must be prepared to follow in Jesus of Nazareth's footsteps. "If any want to become my followers," Jesus tells the crowd in Mark 8:34, "let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." A heavy charge in already difficult times.

Yet the movement grew, as is evidenced by first century texts such as the letters of Paul, the *Didache*, and the various canonical and noncanonical gospels. This paper seeks to examine the earliest canonical gospel, the gospel of Mark, in hopes of discovering how it built a community around its teachings. What were the beliefs and motivations implicit in this document?

In his gospel, Mark grapples with the challenging fact of Jesus' crucifixion, moving suffering from the realm of the incidental into the very core of Jesus' messianic identity. Social identity theory, a tool from the discipline of social-psychology that examines the nature of collective identities in group settings, will provide insight into the gospel's ability to foster this identity of purposeful suffering and servanthood in its audience. Together Mark's audience is

called to emulate Jesus, internalizing his prototypical identity as a means to gain entrance into the kingdom of God.

The first chapter of this paper explores the tenets of social identity theory that will be most pertinent for my study before making the case for this particular sociological theory's salience in a first century Mediterranean context. Social identity theory is concerned with the ways in which groups of people achieve a collective sense of self, modeled after a prototypical figure and internally evaluated as more positive than rival outgroup identities. Philip Esler has applied this theory to the community implicit in Paul's letter to the Galatians, and his work describes why these messianic communities are fitting applications for social identity theory. Namely, the agonistic, collectivist culture in which the early Jesus movement was situated provides a milieu of intergroup comparison that would have led to shared identities within different groups of Jesus' posthumous followers.

But Philip Esler's study of social identity in the letter to the Galatians only informs my own study to a certain extent; his work begins with the assumption that Paul was writing to an established community of believers. Chapter two of this paper outlines why this assumption cannot be taken as a starting point for work on the gospel of Mark. Although the existence of a "Markan community"— a community from which and for which the gospel was written—was taken for granted in gospel scholarship for many years, informing the interpretive work of such academics as Howard Clark Kee and Ched Myers, in recent years Richard Bauckham has led a countermovement against this position. Bauckham's assertion that the gospels were intended for wide circulation in the early Christian world would seem to limit the relevance of social identity theory in examining a community behind the gospel. In this chapter, however, I instead argue for

the gospel as an ideological document intended to affect its listeners and foster in them a particular social identity.

The nature of this identity is the focal point of chapter three. I argue here that Mark establishes Jesus as the prototypical model for the gospel's audience before beginning his description of the crux of the social identity required for this community. This identity is one of suffering—both physical suffering and suffering as an isolation from one's previous self. The group that will embody this identity functions in a fictive kinship structure, inviting potential members into a family of followers. This group is characterized not by traditional masculine values but instead by a focus on servitude as the norm for intragroup relations. Mark lauds women as models of this countercultural kinship identity.

The final chapter of my paper explores the impetus for a member of the gospel audience to choose the challenging identity presented by the evangelist. I begin with a discussion of how Mark portrays Jesus as defeating other group identities in honor/shame competitions, therefore bolstering the esteem of Mark's own group. I then argue that Mark frames Jesus' crucifixion as the ultimate honor/shame competition in which Jesus competes with the Jerusalem hierarchy. The victory attained by Jesus in the empty tomb serves to invite Mark's audience (now Jesus' kin) into a share of the messiah's honor. They must suffer as Jesus did, but this state is reconfigured within the group as positive because it represents social capital in the coming kingdom of God. Mark's audience is invited to evaluate itself by an alternative (heavenly) system of meaning.

I conclude my work with a discussion of the continued relevance of the Markan identity in the contemporary world, drawing out James Carroll's argument that the current age harkens back to the brokenness of post-revolt Jerusalem.

Chapter One

Methods and Methodologies

GROUPS, INDIVIDUALISM, AND THE ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN

The overarching purpose of this paper is to determine how the gospel of Mark allowed a particular Christian group to thrive in a less-than-benevolent social environment. The idea of the group itself provides the first clue into the success of Mark's narrative. The collective identity spawned by the gospel is the key ingredient in a social-scientific analysis of the "Markan community."[1] "Collective" or "social" identity as the primary means of self-identification can be a foreign concept to those accustomed to an American milieu. Individualism is a key cultural value in the United States, and for years Western social psychology held that group behavior was simply the "sum" of the behavior of its constituent actors (Hayes 1993, 39). As a society, Americans were well characterized by the French political scientist Alexis de Tocqueville in the mid nineteenth century: "each one of them, withdrawn into himself, is almost unaware of the fate of the rest" (1863, 691). The socially constructed self is replete with rigid boundaries that serve to demarcate individuals from their surroundings (Sampson 1988). But to apply this conceptualization of the self to early Markan Christians would render us guilty of an anachronistic reading of the gospel. As Philip Esler cautions, "we should not expect to find atypical North American individualism in New Testament texts" (1998, 13).

Instead, given the ancient Mediterranean context of this text, we as interpreters must recognize the group—not the individual—as the most salient unit of social analysis. "Mediterraneans… rarely spoke in the psychological terms characteristic of individualistic

[1] This is a contentious term, and its meaning in this paper will be discussed at length in chapter two. Here, it simply means the community that arose from those among Mark's audience who took the text seriously—the act of listening to the text read aloud stands prior to this created community.

cultures," Bruce Malina asserts in his discussion of the social setting of the Jesus movement (1996, 68). Instead, an individual's identity was a function of group membership. First century Palestinians were defined by—and defined themselves by—their social networks. In an earlier work, Malina even went so far as to completely eschew the application of Western individualism to the ancient Mediterranean: "you might conclude that the first-century Mediterranean person did not share or comprehend our idea of the 'individual' at all," he says (1993, 66). "And I believe you would be right."

The primacy of the group in ancient Mediterranean identity formation is central to understanding the social motivations of the Markan audience and determining the impact of the gospel on their actions. To this end, European social psychology, which "takes the view that real social factors (such as shared beliefs or membership of social groups) will affect the individual" (Hayes 1993, 39), is a useful interpretive lens. Specifically, in this paper Henri Tajfel's social identity theory (1972) will shed new light on the gospel of Mark.[2] The rest of this chapter will provide a basic overview of social identity theory, focusing on the elements of the theory most pertinent to my analysis of the gospel. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the salience of social identity theory in the first century Roman world.

SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

Tajfel's basic definition holds that social identity is "the individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership" (Hogg, Abrams, Otten, and Hinkle 2004, 248). Essentially, social

[2] Philip Esler pioneered the use of social identity theory in biblical interpretation in his 1994 article on the Matthean beatitudes and his 1998 book on Galatians. This paper uses many of his insights.

identity theory holds that group membership has a strong bearing upon an individual's sense of self. "We internalize group membership deeply," Tajfel states (Hayes 1993, 96).[3]

Members come to identify with the group and its norms and values by establishing boundaries between themselves and others—this manifests itself in the creation of an ingroup and outgroup(s) (Cuhadar and Dayton 2011, 274). Once group members have come to view themselves as a distinctive entity, they strive to establish a positive identity for their group. This is important in social identity theory because the individual's identity is part and parcel of the group identity; thus, the social standing of the group intimately affects the individual's sense of self (Cuhadar and Dayton 2011, 274-275).[4] As Hogg et al. put it, "a social group is a collection of…people who have the same social identity—they identify themselves in the same way and have the same definition of who they are, what attributes they have, and how they relate to and differ from specific outgroups. Group membership is a matter of *collective self-construal*" (2004, 250, emphasis mine).

In social identity theory, the formation of the ingroup in relation to outgroups takes place through the inherent human tendency towards categorization (Hogg and Abrams 1988, 19-21; Abrams 1990, 89-90). Group members begin to classify others as outsiders while simultaneously defining themselves and other ingroup members. These categorizations are formed through stereotypes, which entail "the perception or judgment of all members of a social category or group as sharing some characteristic which distinguishes them from some other social group" (Hogg and Abrams 1988, 20). Therefore, the importance of the individual and his or her personal attributes begins to break down when we categorize people into group memberships.

[3] Hayes works with Tajfel 1978 in his discussion of group membership and self-esteem.
[4] Here, Cuhadar and Dayton direct us toward Brewer and Brown 1998 and Hewstone, Rubin, and Willis 2002.

Tajfel's theory argues that in settings where group identity is important, we tend to stereotype outgroups negatively. Conversely, we also stereotype ourselves as ingroup members—only, in this case, the stereotypes that we apply are positive. This comparative process is necessary from a psychological point of view, because belonging to a group that is subjectively rated "better" than others benefits the self-esteem of group members who derive their social identity from membership (Hogg and Abrams 1988, 74; Hayes 1993, 7, 96). "It's comforting to bask in the reflected glory of belonging to a group that is more powerful, important, or successful than other groups" (Sears, Peplau, and Taylor 1991, 306). As Tajfel puts it, as groups stereotype they strive for "distinctiveness." The ingroup wants to be "different and better" than other groups, and intergroup relations are defined by this need (Hogg, Abrams, Otten and Hinkle 2004, 258).

The positive ingroup stereotype is defined by the group's norms and values. Often, the stereotype is projected and crystallized in group imagination as a prototypical individual. This prototype is not a real person; rather, it is an idealized portrait of the quintessential member identity (Hogg, Abrams, Otten and Hinkle 2004, 253-254). Individuals in the group strive to embody the traits of the prototype, and they stereotype themselves and other ingroup members as "like" this ideal figure. "The prototype is the basis of perception, inference, and behavior," explain Hogg et al.; "within groups, people are highly attuned to prototypicality" (2004, 257). This means that individuals judge themselves and other ingroup members based upon their resemblance to the prototype. Outgroup members are also compared to the prototype and are subsequently characterized as "unlike us" (Cuhadar and Dayton 2011, 274)—that is, unlike the prototype (Hogg Abrams, Otten and Hinkle 2004, 254). As group members endeavor to synchronize their behaviors with this defined set of norms, their social identity is formed: "self-

categorization causes self-perception and self-definition to become more in terms of the individual's representation of the defining characteristics of the group" (Hogg and Abrams 1988, 21).

The potential power of a social or collective identity depends on the salience of the group. Hogg and Abrams make the point that viewing individuals as reflective of group stereotypes "is more pronounced when the categorization is important" (1988, 20). Age, sex, occupation, ethnicity and religion have been identified as "salient" categories in modern society that produce strong group identities (Sears, Peplau, and Taylor 1991, 305). Cuhadar and Dayton add identities that individuals feel "are under threat" (2011, 275)[5] to the list of important self-definitions. Further, Stephan argues that members of minority groups are more likely to sharply delineate between the ingroup and the outgroup than are members of a majority group (1985, 614). The function of this social identity is to "reduce subjective uncertainty about [the] social world" (Hogg, Abrams, Otten and Hinkle 2004, 256). Abrams describes the outcome of a salient social identity as follows: "group members are likely to conform to group norms, to seek uniqueness for the group and to ignore their personal identity" (1990, 93).

A FITTING APPLICATION: SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY AND FIRST CENTURY PALESTINE

As seen above, social identity theory is particularly pertinent to certain kinds of groups. This discussion of salience is especially applicable in contemporary Western societies such as the United States, where there must be a "good" reason for individuals to sacrifice elements of their agency to take on a group identity. If I were applying social identity theory to a group in an individualistic society, I would stress its psychological components: what group membership

[5] Cuhadar and Dayton reference Northrup 1989 in their discussion of the salience of threatened identities.

does, subjectively, for the individual, like how a positive group identity leads to a more positive self-perception. In other words, in an individualistic society, applying social identity theory starts with establishing a sound argument as to why the group matters in the first place.

But individualism was not the dominant conception of the self in the ancient world. What happens when we apply the theory to a place and time when the idea of the group prevailed? It is probably no surprise that in addition to being especially salient to groups with particular characteristics, social identity theory is also most useful in particular social contexts. In his work using social identity to examine the letter to the Galatians, Philip Esler establishes why this theory serves as a strong interpretive lens for movements arising out of the ancient Mediterranean. He cites Hinkle and Brown, who in 1990 refined Tajfel's social identity theory and added this element to the discussion of salience: social identity is most pertinent in societies that stress collectivism and that possess a comparative ideology (Esler 1998, 45). Here the psychological aspects of social identity theory so important to an individualistic society can be subordinated to questions of how group formation and cohesion drive forward a particular identity against other rival identities.

In keeping with Hinkle and Brown's criterion, the world of the Jesus movement was decidedly collectivist. Malina describes the concept of selfhood built into the New Testament texts, citing particularly their lack of focus on the individual. Rather, "we are given stereotypical information about persons in terms of their family of origin, gender and geography" (1996, 68). The individual within this collective society was one with a dyadic personality (Malina 1993, 67-73 and Esler 1994, 29). This personality is driven by the individual's relationship with "the other"; it is set in a process of constant deference to outside forces. "Such persons internalize and

make their own what others say, do, and think about them because they believe it is necessary, for being human, to live out the expectations of others" (Malina 1993, 67). Malina goes on to explain that dyadic personalities must be "embedded" within salient groups in order to function. This dependence on others goes beyond Charles Cooley's "looking glass self" and leads to an identity "whose total self-awareness emphatically depends upon such group embeddedness" (Malina 1993, 68).

This kind of collectivism gives rise to a conceptualization of the world that is inherent to social identity theory:

> The dyadic personality makes sense out of other people by means of 'sociological' thinking, by means of reasons typical of the group to which the individual belongs and whose values the individual embodies… We would call such perceptions 'stereotypes'… fixed or standard general mental pictures which various groups mutually hold in common and which represent their expectations, attitudes, and judgments of other group members. (Malina 1993, 69-70)

Thus, an individual in the ancient Mediterranean would have engaged in the social identity practice of stereotyping and conceived of both himself and others in terms of group identities.

This stress on group identity and the tendency towards stereotyping in the dyadic personality of the ancient Mediterranean also fulfills Hinkle and Brown's other criterion for the existence of social identities: a comparative ideology. "[F]irst-century persons would perceive themselves as unique because they were set within other like beings within unique and distinctive groups" (Malina 1993, 68). Beyond this "unique and distinctive group," the comparative ideology of the first-century Mediterranean world is evident from its "agonistic" nature (Esler 1998, 47). Agonism refers to a state of constant competition; it is derived from the

Greek word *agon*, used "for an athletic context or a contest between equals" (Robbins 1996a, 81). Esler defines the ancient Mediterranean context as agonistic because of the cultural concepts of limited good and of honor, which together "provide a strong stimulus to the development of ideologies and occasions of intergroup comparison" (1998, 48).

The idea of the limited good in the Mediterranean fueled a comparative ideology in a society imbued with a constant state of competition for resources.[6] This theory of supply held that everything—both tangible objects and intangible things, like cultural capital—existed in limited, fixed quantities. A person's share of something (land, for example) was like a piece of a pie. They were endowed with a finite amount, and in order to acquire more of the "pie," they must necessarily take from another's piece; in order to have more pie, someone must get a smaller piece. Likewise, cultural values were also seen as existing as pieces of the limited good pie. Competition for material goods and social prestige was therefore very real because increasing one's wealth or social status put the individual in competition with someone else whose wealth or social status was, inversely, decreasing.

One example of the limited good creating an environment of intergroup comparison and agonism exists in the critical cultural value of honor (Malina 1993, 28-58). Honor, and its opposing state, shame, were limited goods of great worth and in great demand in the ancient Mediterranean. Robbins describes honor, "a claim to worth along with the social acknowledgement of worth," as "the highest goal" in an agonistic honor culture such as this one. Conversely, shame, "the trait that people wish to avoid at all costs, is bestowed on someone when honor is lost in a challenge-response exchange or is passively acquired when a person is born into a low social class, when a person's family is shamed, or when a notable person bestows

[6] Malina describes the concept of the limited good in 1993, 90-113.

it" (1996 online; cf. 1996a, 76). Honor and shame were group entities; you were born into a certain amount of honor depending on your kinship structure. Robbins makes this point in his description of shame as inherent in the lower classes—likewise, he says, a person's ascribed honor is a function of familial standing.

But because honor is an element of cultural capital in a limited good society, it can also be won and lost. Acquired honor is "actively sought and garnered most often at the expense of one's equals in the social contest of challenge and response" (Robbins 1996a, 76). In these verbal competitions, individuals could gain honor to supplement the ascribed honor received from social class and kinship ties. But they could also lose honor. In a group context in the ancient Mediterranean, the all-important positive ingroup identity could be built through processes of acquiring honor.

That the ancient Mediterranean was home to an agonistic honor culture meant that a comparative ideology was inherent in the way individuals viewed the world. As Malina notes, the dyadic self used the lens of the stereotype in evaluating its fellows. This evaluation also turned inward, classifying the self. Individuals were "embedded," as Malina put it (1993, 67), within a group identity by virtue of their dyadic personalities. And "social groups, like the family, village, or region, possess a collective honor in which the members participated" (Malina 1993, 45). Because honor was a limited good, groups strove to attain more of it over and against other groups. This acquiring of honor would aid the ingroup in characterizing itself as having greater worth than outgroups.

It is clear that Hinkle and Brown's criteria hold true for the social context of earliest Christianity: the Jesus movement was born in a society that was both collectivist and dominated by a comparative ideology. The dyadic personality of the individual necessitated strong groups

whose collective identities were salient for its members' own self-concepts. Within the ancient Mediterranean context, the early Christian milieu was particularly ripe for social identity formation because these individuals existed in a volatile world. One function of social identity formation is to "reduce subjective uncertainty about the social world" (Hogg, Abrams, Otten and Hinkle 2004, 256); Christian social identities would have been critical to the survival of the Jesus movement during the early years of its persecution.

CONCLUSION: SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY AND MARK

Esler (1998) sets the stage for his use of social identity theory by briefly explaining the social context of the letter to the Galatians and how elements of Tajfel's theory naturally fit this context (29-57). This is more challenging for the gospel of Mark because information regarding the authorial context is hotly contested in scholarship. The following chapter will outline various positions in the "Markan community" debate. I will define my own position within the context of this debate and demonstrate why social identity theory provides a particularly strong lens for reading this early gospel.

Chapter Two

The Legacy of "the Markan Community" and Social Identity Theory

In his description of the Galatian community, Esler's task was fairly straightforward: he sought to demonstrate that the recipients of Paul's letter were, indeed, a group well-fitted for analysis using social identity theory. While there are disagreements over the exact composition of Paul's Galatian audience, that he was writing to discrete groups of people—"to the churches of Galatia" (1:2)—is obvious. When it comes to the gospel narratives, the fact of a particular recipient, inherent to the genre of the letter, becomes less certain.

The identities of the first readers of each gospel have provoked the scholarly imagination for decades. During the latter half of the twentieth century, many scholars sought to approach the gospels as they did the letters of Paul: as documents written for specific, demarcated communities. This in turn produced studies that sought to read the gospels as veiled descriptions of their authorial communities. For these scholars, out of the stories of Jesus and the disciples, of healings and feedings and teachings, emerged a narrative sketch of the group for whom and about whom the gospel was initially written.

This chapter will outline the search for the Markan community as it was executed by scholars Howard Clark Kee in his 1977 *Community of the New Age: Studies in Mark's Gospel* and Ched Myers in *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, published in 1988. Social identity theory is clearly useful in this vein of Markan scholarship, but the validity of the quest for the authorial community is a contentious topic in modern scholarship. Richard Bauckham's contemporary challenge to reading the gospel in this way, detailed in 1998 in *The Gospel for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, seems to

negate the salience of social identity theory in examining the gospel of Mark. I will conclude this chapter with my own reading of the gospel, mediating the positions of Myers and Kee with Bauckham's criticisms of their perspective. I will argue that social identity theory can be utilized to examine the ideological community that developed out of early encounters with Mark's gospel.

HOWARD CLARK KEE

Kee's scholarship was particularly influential in shaping the direction of Markan scholarship toward study of the "hypothetical Christian community...behind the Gospel" (Bauckham 1998, 18). Kee makes his primary focus in his interpretation of the gospel of Mark clear from the outset. He writes, "only when we have some precise sense of the social and cultural factors within the community that produced Mark and to which it was primarily addressed--including the life-world in which the community discovered its meaning and purpose--can we determine the horizon of the literary, conceptual, and linguistic modes that the document employs" (1983, 3). Essentially, he believes that in order to truly understand the gospel, one must understand the community that produced the gospel. This community, in turn, can be found within the gospel itself. From this perspective, there is a specific, definable group attached to Mark's gospel. Scholarship has termed this group the "Markan community."

Central to Kee's interpretation of Mark is the idea that the gospel author wrote with his audience—his community—in mind and that the needs of this community are therefore reflected in the pages of the gospel. Jesus' words and teachings are directly relevant for Mark's intended audience. Kee cites various "wisdom and eschatological sayings" that fall into this category:

> the passion predictions (8:31-33, 9:30-32, 10:33f), the sayings about forgiveness

> (3:28f), the enigmatic remarks about bread and leaven (8:14-21), the disputes about greatness (9:33-37), about the admission of children (10:13-16), about exercising authority in the name of Jesus (9:41), about temptations and self-discipline (9:42-48), and about discipleship and martyrdom (8:34-9:1). (1983, 42)

Kee argues that regardless of where these traditions originated, their final Markan form is so deeply personalized that it is impossible to read the gospel in any way *but* as a message for the author's community.

Kee continues his reconstruction of the Markan community by analyzing the character of the disciples in that gospel (1983, 42-43), even entitling one section of his work "The Disciples in Mark as Model of the Markan Community" (87ff). Kee holds the disciples both as a model *of* the Markan community and as a model *for* the Markan community. He makes a point for the disciples as a model of the community when he argues that Mark tries to paint the disciples as an "esoteric group" that looked quite like a "secret society." Here he uses as examples the circumstances surrounding Jesus' ride into Jerusalem (11:1f) and the "clandestine nature" of the Passover meeting (14:13f). This, he contends, is probably Mark "reading the tactics of his own community back into the time of Jesus" because there are no other explanations for the need for secrecy (1983, 170).

Likewise, Kee asserts that "Jesus is the paradigm for the disciples, according to Mark, just as they are the model for the uprooted, persecuted members of the Markan community" (1983, 110). Being a disciple meant giving up everything and following Jesus, and the price of membership in the Markan community was similarly steep. Kee elaborates on the most important sacrifice the disciples made, by ancient Mediterranean standards: for these followers of Jesus, "to embark on this sort of career require[d] a break with the one group in which the individual

[found] his most important attachments and his true identity: the family" (1983, 89). In the same vein, members of the Markan community also made this sacrifice in choosing to join this particular early Christian movement (1983, 153). Under these circumstances, Kee argues that the community itself was transformed into a tightly knit family group (1983, 89-90).

In addition to his attention to the minutiae, identifying individual characteristics of the Markan community through his interpretation, Kee also seeks to paint a broader picture of the authorial community. Kee believes that the gospel was probably written before the destruction of the temple, in the late 60s CE (1983, 101), citing the urgency of Mark 13 as evidence. Mark's author wrote in Greek but probably had a background in Aramaic, according to Kee, and the location of authorship was most likely a village in Syria. Kee places authorship close to but not in Galilee because of inconsistencies and incorrect references to Galilean geography; he asserts that the narrative emerged from a village because of the negative portrayal of cities in the gospel (1983, 101-103).

Kee describes the community that produced this gospel as "at once esoteric and evangelistic, as both inclusive and voluntaristic, as affirming both divine determination and hard decisions to be made by its members" (1983, 163). The community was open to those who would accept its message (including traditional outsiders such as Gentiles and women). Kee further describes the community's mission, saying, "it is with the authority of an eschatological message, supported by the prophetic speech of charismatics and by the healings and exorcisms that they performed on the authority of Jesus, that the evangelistic activity of the Markan community is carried out" (1983, 164-165). For Kee, the most important component of the community was its "eschatological message"; the apocalyptic nature of the gospel both defines and aids in the description of the community behind it.

Kee holds that the Markan narrative reconfigures the Jewish prophetic-apocalyptic genre for its own purposes (1983, 49). The end is imminent, with the Markan community poised for entrance into the kingdom of God within the current generation. The gospel serves as a road map for the audience: “when the final violent acts of the evil powers (13:14) take place just prior to the end (13:13), it is only the divinely enlightened ‘reader’ who will be able to ‘understand’ (13:14)” (1983, 67). This reader, of course, resides within Mark’s community.

Kee draws parallels between Mark’s community and the Essene community at Qumran, (71-72), the Hasidim of previous centuries (93-94), and Cynic-Stoic itinerant philosophers (104). As noted, Mark’s community kept busy healing the sick, preaching the gospel’s message (including to the Gentiles), and performing exorcisms while they awaited the end (1983, 96). Wrede’s messianic secret is, for Kee, a function of the community’s apocalyptic outlook:

> the secret is not an apologetic or a literary device invented by Mark and employed by him somewhat clumsily to explain why a non-messianic Jesus came to be acclaimed as Messiah after his death, but it is a central, pervasive element in the community’s understanding of itself and of Jesus as those to whom it has been revealed that the kingdom of God is given--not to those who seize power--but to those who in faithful, suffering obedience, receive it as a gift. (1983, 9)

This sets Mark’s community apart in the era of the Jewish revolt (1983, 99-100). Like the rebels, these early Christians sought a new world order. Unlike the rebels, they were waiting for God to bring this order.

CHED MYERS

While Kee utilizes sociological theory in his reading of the gospel, Ched Myers, writing

a decade later, adds an even more pronounced social-scientific component to his interpretation of Mark and his search for the authorial community. Myers professes to aim for a "political" reading of the gospel (1988, 13). He paints the Markan author as an intentional, calculated individual: the gospel is really the "manifesto of an early Christian discipleship community in its war of myths with the dominant social order and its political adversaries"; it is "the product of a concrete social strategy and practice within a determinate historical setting" (31). For Myers, the temporal— the "concrete social strategy" of the community and its place in the first century world— is of the utmost importance. Instead of painting the gospel as primarily eschatological, pointing towards a divinely ordained age-to-come, as Kee does, Myers's focuses on the life of the community as actively building the new age.

For Myers, the "advent of the Human One" (Son of Man) is not a future event but was achieved in Jesus' death on the cross (1988, 398ff). The "new creation" promised in the gospel was, in reality, pointing towards the Markan community in Galilee (1988, 407). As Myers argues, "the full revelation of the Human One has resulted...in nothing more and nothing less than the regeneration of the messianic mission" (398). Throughout his exegesis, Myers lays out this messianic mission and the role of the Markan community in the tumultuous first century milieu.

Myers argues that in Mark Jesus "creates a countercommunity from among the common folk (1:16ff), one with an alternative practice that will directly compete for the leadership of Israel (3:13ff)" (1988, 183). This idea of a community drawn from the lower classes and posited in a place of power in the new order ushered in by Jesus' mission dominates Myers's work from the start (39-40). This community is called to "radical discipleship" (11); that is, to stand in direct opposition to the social inequities of the first century Palestinian world— the "temple state

and its political economy," in Myers's words (80)— and work for a different kind of society. The Markan community was therefore characterized by an economy that focused on communal resources (229-230). In addition to alleviating economic disparities, Myers contends that Mark's community also worked to end social disparities, a process of "social reconciliation" between classes, genders, and Jews and gentiles (230). Myers carries the idea of an "ecumenical community" (230) further than Kee, going so far as to claim that Mark does not consider men fit to act as "servant leaders" in the same way that women can in a community whose primary focus is reversing the old social order (281).

Myers's interpretation also sets the historical stage for what he deems Mark's radical community. Myers, like Kee, believes that the gospel was written in the late 60s CE, before the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. Unlike Kee, who holds Syria as the place of authorship for Mark, Myers attributes the gospel to village Galilee— perhaps even Capernaum, given its centrality in the narrative (1988, 421-422). Myers places the Markan community in direct opposition to both the temple state and the colonizing Romans. The impetus for writing the gospel itself was the progression of the revolt and the presence of rebel recruiters from Jerusalem in Galilee, trying to pull members of Mark's own group into the fray (87).

Against this background, and with the heavy charge of building Jesus' apocalyptic community through correct discipleship, Mark's community fills the pages of his gospel. Myers asserts that this narrative, "though ostensibly set in the 'time' of Jesus...clearly addresses issues more specifically germane to Mark's own time" (107). He cites, for example, the dominant presence of the Pharisees in the gospel, a group that would have been of greater import in the late 60s CE than they were during the first half of the century. Like Kee, he also attributes the paranesis that Jesus imparts to his disciples and the crowds as "primarily concerned with

defending or promoting the practice of Mark's community against its critics" (1988, 107). As Myers puts it, "in this sense the story is as much 'about' Mark's community as it is 'about' Jesus" (1988, 107).

SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY AND "THE MARKAN COMMUNITY"

This interpretive lens— reading the gospel as a narrative both about, and responding to the needs of, the authorial community— fully colors both Kee and Myers's readings of the gospel. Both scholars approach the gospel as a work directed toward an existing group, acting to describe, uphold, and strengthen the identity of the Markan community. Tajfel's social identity theory thickens their reading of the gospel, giving voice to concepts such as the ingroup-outgroup dichotomy and the importance of Jesus as a prototypical figure and the disciples as embodying community norms. For both Kee and Myers, the Markan community must diligently hold its own in a time and place where the Jewish world was on the brink of disaster. Kee saw the identity of the community as one focused on weathering persecution in expectation of eschatological reward, while Myers painted a more active identity wrapped up in building the new world order with its radical social and economic implications.

Just as Esler uses social identity theory to analyze the Galatian community that received Paul's letter, using Myers and Kee's interpretations social identity theory could be applied to the community that lies hidden in the gospel itself. Social identity theory could tell us how the community defined itself. It could also tell us how the gospel narrative acted upon the community in the formation of identity. This takes as a given, however, that the gospel of Mark was written for the author's own discrete geographic community, be it of Galilean or Syrian origin.

The problem with applying social identity theory to an established community out of which the gospel emerged is that there is not a unanimous consensus as to the existence of this authorial community. In contemporary scholarship, dating primarily from the past fifteen years, there are an increasing number of scholars cautioning that these imaginative portraits of the "Markan community" are a product of too much guesswork. This particular quest, they argue, will never reach a conclusion. Perhaps it should not be undertaken at all.

RICHARD BAUCKHAM

Richard Bauckham put those scholars who endeavor to use social-scientific models to recreate the earliest gospel audiences on the defensive with his *The Gospel for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (1998). From the very first page of the book's introduction, Bauckham makes his agenda clear: "The aim of this book is to challenge and to refute the current consensus in Gospels scholarship which assumes that each of the Gospels was written for a specific church or group of churches: the so-called Matthean community, Markan community, Lukan community, and Johannine community" (1998, 1). He asserts that the idea that the gospels were written for the author's own community— the "current consensus"— has no real basis for its argument and that it is a residual from now-outdated 19th century British scholarship (13-16).

Bauckham instead suggests that the gospels were written with an authorial intention of wide circulation— that the evangelists wrote with every early Christian in mind as part of their target audience (1). Bauckham's perspective challenges scholars such as Kee and Myers who want to discover in the gospels portraits of early Christian communities.

Bauckham writes that "the Gospels were written with the intention that they should circulate around all the churches (and thence even outside the churches)" (1998, 1). He contends

that the “implied readership” of each gospel was “indefinite”; that authors fully expected their works to spread from community to Christian community throughout the ancient world (45). In support of this claim, Bauckham cites the fact that given the assumption of Markan priority, the gospel of Mark was clearly a source used by the authors of Matthew and Luke. The earliest canonical gospel must therefore have “circulated quite widely” in the years following its completion in order to end up as the base for these gospels; therefore, in Bauckham’s estimation, the authors of Matthew and Luke “must have expected their Gospels to circulate at least as widely as Mark’s had already done” (12-13).

Bauckham also discusses writing in the ancient world as part of his argument. “Why *write* the gospels?”, he asks. The answer is not because the evangelists wanted *their own* communities to read them—there would have been no point in the authors writing down what they had to say were this the case. Instead, they could have simply *told* their stories. Rather, he contends, the gospel authors wrote because they wanted those outside of their communities to hear what they had to say about Jesus. “The obvious function of writing was its capacity to communicate widely with readers unable to be present at its author’s oral teaching” (29). Bauckham argues that ancient writers expected others to copy their work and for it to thus disseminate widely (29).

The next component of Bauckham’s argument for universally read gospels begins with a question: “Why would Mark, if Mark was the first evangelist, have written merely for a few hundred people, at most, who composed the Christian community in his city, when the very act of writing a book would naturally suggest the possibility of communicating with Greek-speaking Christians everywhere?” (1998, 30). Here he discusses the close connections between early Christian communities; according to Bauckham, these individual communities were in

communication. Letters traveled between the churches, so it would have been natural for other types of writing to do the same (38). Bauckham cites the rapid circulation of the letters of Ignatius in his argument that the gospels would have also traveled quickly through the early Christian communities. The ease of travel in the ancient Roman world adds to this conclusion; not only letters but also early church leaders were highly mobile (32-36). Bauckham argues that the evangelists were probably itinerant teachers who had developed a reputation in more than one early church. "Such a person would not naturally confine his attention, when composing a Gospel, to the local needs and problems of a single, homogeneous community but could well have in view the variety of different contexts he had experienced in several churches he knew well" (37-38).

In addition to building his own case, Bauckham discusses the weaknesses of the work of those scholars who argue that the gospels were written for specific communities. After arguing that the idea is an outdated relic of 19^{h} century scholarship now treated as a "self-evident fact" (1998, 17), Bauckham states that with this idea in mind, gospel scholarship has lost sight of the actual topic of the narratives: the life of Jesus (19-20). Instead, scholars spend their time searching for the community in the gospel, treating the narrative as an allegory (19-20). Bauckham contends that in reality, scholars have yet to prove that the gospels were written for or about specific churches at all; events such as John's expulsion from the synagogue could apply to a much wider locale than scholars take into account (22-24). Additionally, he argues, gospel scholars could be assigning incorrect characteristics to the proposed authorial communities: just because Mark's Jesus is a proponent of the poor, for example, does not necessarily mean that the "Markan community" was impoverished (25). Because even if the gospels *were* written specifically for the evangelists' communities, "it seems very doubtful whether we can know

anything worth knowing about them" (1998, 44). Bauckham therefore calls on the scholarly community to stop using monikers like "the Markan community" (45).

A CRITIQUE OF BAUCKHAM

While Kee and Myers assert that the author of Mark wrote for and about his own community, Bauckham universalizes the author's conceived audience. Bauckham would instead have scholars work under the assumption that Mark wrote with the early Christian church, in its totality, in mind. While I accept Bauckham's critique of the traditional reconstruction of the "Markan community," he swung the pendulum too far in the other direction. By asserting that the evangelist wrote for an indefinite, ideologically diverse audience— and expected this audience to read and accept not only his but many other gospel accounts— Bauckham assigns to Mark's author a naiveté. He also effectively discounts the ideological texture of the gospel (Robbins 1996a).

Bauckham has greatly oversimplified his portrait of early Christianity and its place in the first century Roman world. Bauckham tries to argue that the "evidence for conflict and diversity" among the early Christian churches actually works in favor of his universal gospels thesis because it shows that the churches were, in fact, in communication with one another (43). This fails to take into account the fact that the early churches were in many cases quite contentious. Ernest van Eck makes a strong point when he hypothetically asks, "Would...an audience that was negative with regard to a Gnostic interpretation of the message of Jesus, receive a gospel like John or Thomas at all?" (997). Along this vein, it can be argued that even those early Christians who faithfully read John or Thomas may not have positively received the other: Elaine Pagels contends that John was written as a challenge to Thomasine Christianity (cf. *Beyond Belief,*

Pagels 2003). As van Eck argues, “New Testament scholarship... has indicated that the early Christian movement was all but one close-knit family. There were many different responses to the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth” (2000, 989). The gospel authors, particularly if they were well-traveled individuals as Bauckham contends, would have known this. Writing a gospel that could circulate widely and be accepted by all would have meant writing a gospel that was so general it would have lacked a decisive function within the deeply agonistic culture of the first century Roman world.

The gospels reflect the diversity of the early Christian movement; their ideological content would not have served the needs of all first century communities. Rather than name as Mark’s audience the universal church, I believe that the diversity reflected in the gospels also reflects a diversity in intended audiences.

Bauckham contends that the gospels must be taken as they are presented at face value; that is, as narratives of the life of Jesus (1998, 19-20). But in reality, the gospels (Mark, in this case) are not neutral biographies. They are documents *about* Jesus *for* a Christian audience. Mark’s gospel, in particular, was written as a response to the great crisis of its time and contains in its pages clear value judgments regarding the situation. As Myers and Kee both argue, Mark advocates for noninvolvement in the rebel’s fight against the Romans. Instead, as the passion predictions in chapters 8, 9, and 10 illustrate, the gospel calls for an active acceptance of suffering in hopes of achieving a particular apocalyptic end (Kee and Myers disagree on its nature). Just as Paul wielded a prescriptive authority in his letters, I believe that Mark did not write his gospel for an audience that could encounter it and remain neutral. Instead, like Myers, I believe that the gospel was intended to be an ideological call to action.

CONCLUSION

Mark is more than simply a narrative life of Jesus. It is a life of Jesus for a specific Christian community. In identifying this community, I edge away from Kee and Myers towards Bauckham. Because even if authorial communities existed and were the intended audience of gospels such as Mark, scholarship has focused for decades on this approach without moving any closer to *proving* anything. But Bauckham fails to account for the very real divisions within the early Christian movement. I adopt a place on the continuum between the gospel's audience being a particular community of people and the gospel being for no one in particular. I believe that Mark arose from a Galilean context on the eve of the destruction of the temple. The events surrounding the Markan author certainly colored his narrative and provided him with an impetus for writing. In my estimation, his intended audience was anyone who would "hear and understand," as Mark's Jesus put it.[7] This "understanding" would have involved committing oneself to the Markan narrative and the way of life it perpetuated.

While Kee and Myers start with a hypothetical community and attempt to use the gospel to define it, I propose starting with the gospel and the idea that its message was strong enough to build a community spanning more than one small Palestinian village. Unlike Bauckham, who discounts the Markan author's ideological intentions and therefore the gospel's role in identity formation, I believe the gospel message fostered a social identity in its initial receptive audience and that this identity solidified a community of faithful listeners. Esler uses social identity theory to gain insight into an existing community; I will examine how social identity theory, when applied to Mark, can provide insight into the construction of a community. Out of his early

[7] Kee makes a similar point playing on the idea of "hearing and understanding" in discussing those who would understand what is taking place at the end time. He is talking specifically about the "Markan community" as he defines it.

Christian audience, Mark's gospel *built* a community of believers.

Social identity theory can be applied to Mark because the gospel's message built a group with a unique worldview. The gospel is persuasive, just as Paul's letters were in previous decades. The question naturally arises: why did Mark's author choose to write an ideological biography instead of a more straightforward letter? Exploring why this form was elected to foster a social identity in some early Christians will in turn shed light on other issues surrounding the community that formed around the gospel. Most importantly, it may answer the question of what drew readers in, prompting them to shed the old world and take on this new social identity.

Chapter Three

The Social Identity Perpetuated by Mark's Gospel

In the decades prior to the publication of the gospel of Mark, the primary mode of communication in the early Christian world was the letter. Paul composed missiles both to entire communities—such as the communities in Thessalonika, Philippi, Corinth, Galatia, and Rome—and to individuals like Philemon. In the years following his death, other early Christians authored additional letters in Paul's name, taking the pastoral theology of the apostle and developing it further to address new needs within the Roman world.

The letters found in the New Testament bear witness to the ideological formations occurring in the years following the death of Jesus. Mundane matters are addressed, such as rules for community living—Which Jewish laws should be followed? Which are anachronistic for the new lifestyle of these messianic followers? Alternate ideologies are condemned, like the faction that calls for gentile circumcision. Paul spends much of his time reassuring his fledgling communities that they are, in fact, living correctly. And Paul, like many after him, grapples with the task of reconciling Jesus' execution theologically. The contested and deuteropauline letters continue in ideological formation. Colossians, for example, expands a household code suggested in Ephesians into a model for power structures within the early Christian church.

Readers of Mark will recognize many of these same rhetorical agendas in the gospel. Like the early Christian letters, Mark presents both temporal and Christological truths to its readers. And like the Pauline letters, the gospel expects action. This chapter will explore how the gospel, as a didactic biography, presents Jesus as a prototypical model for emulation. While the narrative establishes Jesus as a normative figure in his role as a teacher and a healer, the true

crux of his identity—what must truly be emulated—is Jesus' suffering. In accepting this radical model of messiahship and agreeing to participate in the Markan identity, potential followers face both physical suffering and isolation from their previous identities. These lost identities are replaced by a fictive kinship that emphasizes servant leadership, with a feminine identity reconfiguring the traditionally masculine idea of power and status within the group. Just as Jesus is presented as the prototype for Mark's audience, the author portrays women in the narrative as normative models for kinship relations.

FORM AND FUNCTION: THE GOSPEL GENRE

The gospel genre was developed because Mark's message necessitated that he not simply *tell* his listeners and readers what they should do—for who would have listened to a culturally dissonant message about a messiah whose identity was derived from his suffering? Rather, Mark penned a story, a biography of Jesus of Nazareth, to *show* members of the Jesus movement how they should behave. The gospel narratives are most closely related to ancient biography. Justin Marc Smith argues that in this genre, there was often a personal relationship between the author and the subject (in this case, Jesus) (2010, 65). While the relationship of Mark's author to Jesus is debated, given the years that passed between the latter's death and the writing of the narrative, selecting a biographical format may suggest the emotional investment that the author has in Jesus. Writing a biography rather than a letter would foster the author's personal investment in the gospel audience as well, aiding the narrative in forming identity.

The gospels most closely resemble a particular form within the genre, that of the ancient peripatetic biography.[8] Charles H. Talbert defines this type of biography as "focused on the

[8] Not all scholars would agree with this assessment. The debate has stretched for many years, including such key scholars as Bultmann. In a more recent publication, Alan Millard argues: "In their nature the Gospels are unique,

revelation of a man's character through his actions so as to make a moral point and inspire imitation" (1977, 92-93). This fits under the larger umbrella of the more general didactic biography, or a biography intended to teach, "with didactic lives being interested in the propagandistic enterprise of compelling an audience toward or away from the emulation of a certain person of note" (Smith 2010, 53). The gospel of Mark clearly propels its audience toward emulation of Jesus; it is not simply a "life" of the man in a descriptive sense. Instead, it advocates imitation of a very specific version of Jesus of Nazareth—of Jesus the suffering messiah (Harris 2009, 148).

As a didactic biography, the gospel of Mark was not simply a document intended for wide circulation, destined to share the story of the life of Jesus of Nazareth with everyone who encountered it, as Richard Bauckham argues. Rather, as John Paul Heil argues in his *The Gospel of Mark as a Model for Action,* the gospel called its audience to react (1992, 1). As the earliest extant document of its kind, Mark is indicative of the potency of the gospel genre in shaping the Jesus movements circulating in the ancient world. In presenting Jesus as a model for emulation, Mark was able to completely reconfigure the identities of those who "had ears to hear" and chose to listen.

SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY AND THE FORMATION OF A COMMUNITY

Choosing a didactic biography as his medium enabled the Markan author to convincingly model the ideal community of believers. The intended community's norms center on the prototypical figure of Jesus, and Mark's Christology is a central feature in the mythmaking that produces a coherent social identity. Using Jesus as a model, Mark's audience members are able

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they cannot be fitted neatly into any category of literature current in the first century; they contain biography and instruction together, yet tell very little about their hero, his appearance, his youth, his habits" (2000, 11).

to shape their own behavior and successfully integrate into the community that Mark hopes to create.

Establishing the prototype: Jesus the healer and teacher

In social identity theory, the ingroup prototype is the quintessential group member; this figure is not a real person but a compilation of the positive stereotypes associated with the group.[9] In the gospel of Mark, the prototypical figure for the community was Jesus of Nazareth. Mark appropriates the Jesus narrative circulating in the latter half of the first century to paint his own ideological portrait of the man. Therefore, while the historical Jesus was certainly a real person, he still functions in this ideal way in Mark's gospel: whatever else may be known about Jesus, he is first and foremost modeled as a suffering messiah.

While Jesus' primary role as sufferer is not fully evident until the gospel's eighth chapter, the Markan author endeavors from the start to establish that Jesus is a prototype. He initially does this through his detailed description of Jesus as both a healer and a teacher, outlining Jesus' actions before explicitly telling his audience that Jesus is, indeed, a figure to be emulated. This sets the stage for the audience—just when the audience fully grasps Jesus' healing and teaching as prototypical, the narrative shifts to the beheading of another normative figure, foreshadowing Jesus' own ultimate suffering.

The teacher and miracle worker debuts in Jesus' first public act. In each gospel, this act is paradigmatic of Jesus' ministry; in Mark, Jesus teaches in the Capernaum synagogue (1:21ff). He teaches "as one having authority" (1:22) and casts out an unclean spirit (1:25). Those who

[9] See "Methods and Methodologies" chapter, page 11.

witness the event are "amazed" and sum up what Jesus has done: "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him" (1:27).

Jesus' parables and his verbal contests with the scribes and Pharisees in the first half of the gospel show that he was a compelling teacher. His success is envied by those who are in opposition to him, as is evident in the number of honor/shame competitions in which he engages throughout the narrative. Jerome Neyrey explains this verbal competition in his work on honor and shame in Matthew, pointing out that "in a world driven by love of honor and understood in terms of limited good, the success of others tends to be interpreted as loss by the perceiver" (1998, 19). Contests between those claiming authority on a particular topic would therefore be fierce. In Mark's narrative, Jesus is displayed as emerging victorious from every honor/shame competition he enters save his encounter with the Syrophoenician woman (the only person to win an argument with Jesus in all of the gospels; cf. 7:24-30). At the end of chapter 2, for example, the Pharisees confront Jesus because his disciples are picking grain on the Sabbath (2:23-28). In the ensuing question and answer contest, Jesus gets the last word.[10] His status as a teacher increases, reaching an apex in Mark 12 when Jesus engages with various Jewish establishment representatives in Jerusalem.

As the gospel progresses, in addition to addressing crowds and teaching the disciples, Jesus performs many positive miracles, and the narrative focuses particularly on his propensity to heal and drive out demons. In the first ten chapters of Mark, Jesus heals or exorcises Simon's mother-in-law (1:30-31); the leper who spoke "freely" of his healing (1:40-45); the paralytic

[10] Neyrey presents the structure of a typical honor/shame competition as follows: "(1) claim of worth and value, (2) challenge to that claim or refusal to acknowledge the claim, (3) riposte or defense of the claim, and (4) public verdict of success awarded to either claimant or challenger" (1998, 20). In Mark 2:23-28, the "claim of worth and value" is replaced by the actions of Jesus and the disciples (2:23)—picking grain on the Sabbath runs counter to Jewish law and is thus a symbolic action that makes a statement on its own. The Pharisees approach and set their challenge to Jesus (2:24), which is followed by his response (2:25-28). While there is no "public verdict" present, the strength of Jesus' logic and the failure of the Pharisees to further respond (at least in this narrative account of the event) marks Jesus as the winner of the contest.

(2:3-5); the man with the withered hand in the synagogue (3:1-16); the man with the "legion" of unclean spirits (5:2-13); Jairus's daughter and the hemorrhaging woman (5:22-42); the Syrophoenician woman's daughter (7:24-30); the deaf man on the way to Decapolis (7:31-35); the blind man who is granted a double healing (8:22-26); and Bartimaeus (10:46-52). Editorial comments assert that these miracles (the ones that are named or described) represent only a fraction of Jesus' work in the time prior to his arrival in Jerusalem. Jesus is something of a celebrity in the north; everyone brings out their sick so that "wherever he went" he healed those in need (6:54-56).

But Jesus' status as teacher and miracle worker is not to be taken for granted. If Mark's audience has been lulled into a sense of complacency by the repetition of Jesus' success as the narrative progresses, chapter 6 forces them to once again take note of Jesus' actions. The repetitive pattern established in the narrative—arrival in a new place followed by teaching and/or healing the sick in that place—becomes notable when it is broken in Jesus' hometown of Nazareth (6:1-6). Upon hearing Jesus teach in the synagogue, those who know him "take offense at him" (6:3). Lack of belief leaves Jesus able to heal only a very few; "he could do no deeds of power there" (6:5). The fissure created by the disbelief in Nazareth marks the narrative.

As the episode in Jesus' hometown breaks his pattern of teaching, healing, and exorcisms, it is also notable that the gospel slows down to frame this rhetorical moment. The gospel progresses quickly through the first half of its narrative, ultimately slowing down to discuss in depth Jesus' last days and his crucifixion in Jerusalem. The speed of the narrative is marked by the author's repetition of the word *euthus.* This word translates from the Greek as "immediately" and lends a sense of urgency to the gospel.[11] It occurs eleven times in the first

[11] *Euthus* occurs at Mark 1:10, 12, 18, 20, 21, 23, 28, 29, 30, 42, 43; 2:8, 12; 3:6; 4:5, 15, 16, 17, 29; 5:2, 29, 30, 42 (2); 6:25, 27, 45, 50, 54; 7:25, 35; 8:10; 9:15, 20, 24; 10:52; 11:2, 3; 14:43, 45, 72; and 15:1. The Greek repetition is

chapter of Mark alone, and consistently until Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem in Mark 11. The break in the narrative created by the dissonance of Jesus' denial in his hometown and his failure to perform "deeds of power" (6:5) there is emphasized by the fact that *euthus* is absent from this episode as well as the following passage. It is notable that *euthus* occurs immediately preceding Mark 6, twice in 5:42 (the second to last verse of the chapter). It also occurs several times in Mark 6 following the episodes of Mark 6:1-13 (6:25, 27, 45, 50, 54). But in describing Jesus' failed attempt to bring his mission to his hometown, the narrative has truly slowed down. This rhetorical change would have further drawn the audience's attention to this passage.

Now that the audience is "awake," so to speak, following 6:1-6, they are called to action. The literary structure of 6:1-13 establishes Jesus as the gospel's prototype, juxtaposing a disruption in the pattern of Jesus' actions with clear instructions to his apostles: "He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over unclean spirits" (6:7)… "So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them" (6:12-13). The fact that the author slowed down to present not only a negative episode in Jesus' ministry,[12] but also to present this episode immediately prior to Jesus' instructions regarding how the apostles should execute their own mission, illustrates the import Mark placed on his audience grasping the idea that Jesus' behavior is prototypical. Jesus is the normative model for his disciples *and* for those whose identity Mark is shaping; their job is to follow his example. The audience can then view the healing and teaching episodes in the gospel following Mark 6 in light of this charge.

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tempered in the NRSV as the editors vary the language of the text by using several synonymous transitions—transitions that, while semantically similar, lose the sense of urgency present in the early chapters of Mark.

[12] Some commentators would argue that instead of making a literary point, incorporating the negative story in 6:1-6 speaks to its historical veracity. I do not disagree with this but think that its placement in the narrative adds additional texture to its meaning (to borrow from Robbins, 1996a).

Beyond the healer: Jesus the sufferer

Jesus' role as healer and teacher, while central to the first half of the narrative, does not fully define his messianic mission. The true crux of the social identity into which Mark is inviting his audience is far more challenging. Immediately following Mark's solidification of Jesus as a normative figure in 6:1-13, the narrative shifts to a more ominous hint of things to come: 6:14-29 briefly leaves Jesus and focuses on John the Baptist's fate at the hands of Herod. In the first chapter of his narrative, Mark presents John the Baptist as a forerunner to Jesus. John gained acclaim as a preacher and baptizer, "and people from the Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him" (1:4) in the wilderness before his arrest in 1:14. Following the success of John's mission, Jesus embarks on his own successful mission (1:14), "proclaiming" the good news just as John proclaimed baptism and repentance. Now in 6:16, Herod likens Jesus to a resurrected John, and this is significant because Herod himself had the Baptist beheaded at Herodias's request. Therefore, returning to John's character at this point in the narrative, using the teaching and healing of Jesus and the Twelve— which mirrors John's successful ministry— as the impetus for sharing the story of his fate, foreshadows what is to come in Jesus' own mission. In *Jesus the Teacher*, Vernon Robbins presents Mark's rhetorical strategy, outlining the syllogistic reasoning inherent in this episode: "(a) God sent the Baptist to prepare the way for Jesus (1:2); (b) the Baptist was arrested, killed and buried (1:14, 6:17, 27, 29); (c) therefore, Jesus will be arrested, killed, and buried" (2009b, 181).

That John the Baptist is brought back here ties the notion of Jesus as the prototype—and the Markan author's charge that he must be emulated—into a much more challenging normative model. This model entails following not only Jesus' example of healing and teaching, but also "carrying the cross" of Jesus in suffering.

John the Baptist's death (Mk 6:14-29) precedes a more prominent shift in Mark 8, 9, and 10. Chapters 8, 9, and 10 are the site for the Markan Jesus' three passion predictions. The foreshadowing of Jesus' death in 6:17-29 was introduced by a discussion of Jesus' identity: "King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, 'John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.' But others said, 'It is Elijah.' And others said, 'It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old' " (6:14-15). This discussion is mirrored in Jesus' dialogue with his disciples in 8:27-30: "[he] went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' " (8:27-28). This clearly links the passage back to 6:14-16, with the disciples giving the same answers as those listed in chapter six. But Jesus takes the discussion one step further. Whereas in 6:16, Herod answers his own question by deciding that Jesus is really a resurrected John the Baptist, Jesus instead turns to the disciples and asks, "But who do you say that I am?" (8:29). It is Peter who answers: "You are the Messiah" (8:29).

This is not the whole answer, however. "Then [Jesus] began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (8:31). That these are things the Son of Man *must* do is indicative of the importance of suffering in Jesus' messianic mission. Also significant is that the narrative explicitly questions and then establishes Jesus' identity. In a text that functions to formulate an identity for its faithful audience, the identity of the leader—the prototype or normative model for their own self-definition—is critical.

Jesus provides similar predictions of his passion in 9:31 and 10:32-34,[13] solidifying the

[13] Mark 9:31: "for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, 'The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.' " and Mark 10:32-34: "…He took

Son of Man's identity as one who is destined to suffer and die at the hands of his enemies. By 10:32-34, the audience has a much clearer idea of what he, as the Messiah, Son of Man, must suffer. Specifically, before his death he will be mocked, spat upon, and flogged (10:34).

The model of Jesus as a suffering messiah is at the heart of the social and cultural texture of the gospel of Mark.[14] This texture "concerns the capacities of the text to support social reform, withdrawal, or opposition and to evoke cultural perceptions of dominance, subordinance, difference, or exclusion" (Robbins 1996a, 3). In Mark's case, the text functions in this manner because it presents a *new* model for an existing cultural expectation.

The capacity of Mark to "support social reform," or at least ideological reform of a particular Jewish concept, is evident given the context of this gospel. Within the relative peace and prosperity of the Roman world, Jesus' own social and cultural milieu was one of less certainty (Myers 1988). Discontent was brewing, and in just four short decades—at the time of Mark's composition—that tension would boil over in the Jewish Revolt. When Jesus was teaching in Galilee, many Jews were anticipating that a messianic leader would emerge who could help them restore a kingdom free from Roman rule. While there were variant descriptions for this promised deliverer, none of them included a messiah that ended up defeated, hanging on a Roman cross. In other words, that the messiah had come to deliver news of the kingdom of God was expected in first century Palestine, but Jesus' consideration for the role should have

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the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was going to happen to him, saying, 'See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; and they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.' "

[14] For a full discussion of social and cultural texture, cf. Robbins 1996a, 71-94. Robbins describes his idea of textural "textures" as such: "socio-rhetorical criticism approaches the text as though it were a thickly textured tapestry. Like an intricately woven tapestry, a text contains complex patterns and images" (2). These "complex patterns and images" become clear when multiple angles are used to examine a text; each "texture" requires the reader to consider different levels of meaning, analyzing the text with an eye for its literary elements while considering too its historical context. Social and cultural texture is one element of the "tapestry" that is the gospel of Mark.

been precluded by the fact that he did not deliver Israel to political freedom and, *especially*, by the fact that he was killed by the oppressive establishment. In an honor and shame society, Jesus' crucifixion would have been the ultimate shaming event: a painful and public death during which the gospels themselves claim that Jesus suffered greatly and was derided by onlookers.

Beginning most famously with William Wrede,[15] scholars have tried to determine how members of the Jesus movement reconfigured the messianic framework so that it made sense that their messiah was executed instead of vindicated on Calvary. Years before Mark composed his gospel, Paul began to grapple with the theological implications of Jesus' crucifixion, but his focus was primarily on the parousia and Jesus as the first one resurrected from the dead. Paul does not linger on Jesus' suffering and what it meant for his messianic identity. Mark, on the other hand, confronts the shameful death of Jesus head on.

Mark asserts that it is *because* Jesus suffered and died at the hands of the Roman Empire that he truly fulfills messianic expectations. This is the radical message of Mark's narrative. For example, it is not until Jesus has died on the cross—when his shameful ordeal has ended—that the first human being vocalizes Jesus' identity: "Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!' " (15:39).

The social and cultural texture of the gospel of Mark therefore defines Jesus' messianic mission, placing suffering at the center of his identity.

"Pick up your cross": Suffering as identity in Mark's community

Because Jesus is the prototype for the community, as the gospel's author has established

[15] William Wrede posits in his 1901 *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien* that the gospel of Mark has Jesus attempt to keep his messianic nature a secret throughout the narrative. According to Wrede, it was not until after the resurrection that Jesus was dubbed the messiah, and the gospel of Mark attempted to deal with this lack of Jesus' recognition during his lifetime by constructing the "messianic secret" whereby Jesus purposefully hid his true identity.

in Mark 6, the repetitive texture that links the three chapters in the middle of the narrative (8, 9, and 10; cf. Robbins 2009b, 23) serves to establish the identity that the audience should seek to emulate. To further aid in identity development, the author has juxtaposed teachings regarding discipleship with each passion prediction (Robbins 2009b, 24-25). In Mark 8 and Mark 10, these lessons bring the idea of suffering to the fore.

Following his first passion prediction, Jesus defines discipleship *as* following him in his suffering. "He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me' " (8:34). To fully achieve the identity of discipleship, therefore, Mark's audience must not only mimic Jesus' role as itinerant teacher and healer, "taking nothing for the journey" (cf. Mark 6), but must also be prepared for physical suffering—up to and including following Jesus' example literally to death (further established in 8:35).

In Mark 8 the author has Jesus demand that his followers put on his prototypical identity as sufferer. Rather than depicting Jesus as reissuing this command in Mark 10, the narrative shows two apostles attempting to understand what is expected of them. Following Jesus' third passion prediction, James and John request to sit at Jesus' left and right hands "in his glory" (10:37). This request would not have been out of place in the milieu of the early Jesus movement. The reconstructed text of Q, which Arland Jacobson characterizes as "a kind of missing link between the Jewish world of Jesus and the early Christian church" (1994, 250), presents a similar model for difficult discipleship but ends with a promise to the twelve: "You are the ones who have stuck by me in my ordeals. And I confer on you the right to rule, just as surely as my Father conferred that right on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my domain, *and be seated on thrones and sit in judgment over the twelve tribes of Israel*" (Q 22:28-

30, emphasis mine).[16]

But the promise of thrones and places of glory present in Q does not materialize in Mark 10. James and John's query is followed not by a promise from Jesus that what they request will come true, but with an exchange that again alludes to suffering. Jesus references "the cup that [he] will drink" (39). This foreshadows Mark 14:32-36, when Jesus prays in the garden of Gethsemane (with Peter, James, and John charged with keeping watch) the night before his death and asks God to "remove this cup from [him]" if he is willing (14:36). In the latter reference, Jesus is metaphorically speaking of his impending crucifixion. In the earlier reference, that this exchange comes immediately following his third passion prediction establishes a conceptual link between the two.

Likewise, "carrying one's cross" and "sharing in the cup" are identities for Mark's own audience.[17] In both of these references, the connotation of the suffering identity is that it is one that includes physical hardship and, ultimately, death. This is strengthened in Mark 13:9: "As for yourselves, beware," Jesus cautions during his apocalyptic speech, "for they will hand you over to councils and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them." But, as Morna Hooker notes, even though Jesus is warning his disciples here, "it is a warning to expect these things, not to try to escape them" (1995, 309). The physical suffering that accompanies the Markan identity is a continuation of Jesus' identity, as Jesus asserts that just as he must die because of who he is, his followers must be prepared to "stand before governors and kings" *because of him*. This section serves to "remind" the audience "once more that their discipleship means suffering" (Hooker 1995, 309).

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[16] This translation of Q can be found in Robert J. Miller's *The Complete Gospels*, 1994.

[17] James Kelhoffer explores the idea of suffering in the Markan narrative in his 2010 book, *Persecution, Persuasion and Power*. In his chapter on Mark, he describes ten passages in the gospel where suffering plays a role: 4:17; 8:34-9:1; 9:38-41; 10:28-31, 35-40; 13:9-13; 14:3-9, 26-50; 15:20b-24, and 15:39 (183).

Early on in the gospel, Mark acknowledges the difficulty of this identity. The first place where suffering is mentioned in conjunction with the proper identity for followers of this messianic movement is in Jesus' explanation of the parable of the sower (4:17) (Kelhoffer 2010, 183). Here the emphasis is on those who are not able to live up to the requirements of their social location within the Roman world. Mark describes those "sown on rocky ground," saying that at first they "receive [the word] with joy" (4:16). "But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away" (4:17). Hooker's exegesis of this verse includes the insight that in the volatile first century context, "ephemeral discipleship [was] of no value" (1995, 131). Those who shirk away from suffering will therefore fail in their discipleship; they cannot be members of Mark's ingroup because they do not embody the necessary social identity.

Suffering as isolation from one's previous identity

But physical trial is not the only consequence of involvement with the Jesus movement. Mark 13:12-13 nuances the kind of suffering that should be expected by those who choose to put on the identity implicit in the gospel. Jesus warns Peter, James, John, and Andrew: "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name." This warning is not without precedent in the gospel. As Katrina Poetker argues, "the story reveals tension between natural kin and religious loyalty from the start" (2001, 3). In Mark 3, Jesus himself experiences a break with his kinship network. The crowds gather to see Jesus in his hometown, and "when his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, 'He has gone out of his mind' " (3:21). When his mother and brothers call for him a short time later, Jesus responds,

"Who are my mother and my brothers?" (3:33), claiming kinship instead among those who "do the will of God" (3:35). Likewise, in Mark 10:29, Jesus stresses that "leaving everything" is not complete without giving up "house or mother or father or children or fields" (10:29).

In ancient Mediterranean society, where "kinship [was] the most central social institution" (Poetker 2001, 78), the gospel's assertion that its audience must be willing to give up—and face persecution at the hands of—this familial network represents a less physically extreme but nonetheless poignant form of suffering. Kinship in the ancient Greco-Roman context "define[d] identity and provide[d] the boundaries for insiders and outsiders" (Poetker 2001, 78). The family was the site of socialization and religious formation; it was, in Poetker's words, the "primary…regulative agent of social life" (81). Forsaking one's familial ties was therefore akin to eschewing one's first and most formative identity.

In the first century, primarily for males, honor was also derived from the kinship structure.[18] This ascribed honor would have been implicit in the individual's identity, inherited from his family and a part of his sense of self. To cut ties with one's household was therefore a forfeiting of the attendant honor. In a culture where honor was, as Robbins asserts, "the highest [social] goal"—not to mention in a collectivist society where family was the most important component of the individual's identity—repudiating kinship ties would have been a source of hardship for Mark's audience. In illustrating this hardship, Joanna Dewey argues that in Mark 8:34, when Jesus demands that his followers "deny themselves," which is presented in conjunction with the obvious physical suffering of taking up one's cross, he is requiring that they give up "the self" as defined by their old relationships with kin (2001, 33-35; cf. also Kee 1983, 89). And as Mark 13:12-13 shows, this break with familial ties and sacrifice of the public self

[18] Cf. my discussion of honor and shame on pages 11-12.

was not clean; instead, it was characterized by hatred and betrayal.

This rift between those whose new identities were shaped by Mark's gospel and the families they left behind in the Greco-Roman and Jewish world represents a microcosm of larger social and political consequences for the faithful. The identity of suffering fostered by the gospel was necessarily contingent on its cultural context.[19] Mark 13, also called "the Little Apocalypse," is an exposition of suffering particularly salient for Mark's audience given their socio-historical milieu.

It is probable that this gospel was written immediately preceding the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, in the midst of the Jewish revolt.[20] Myers contends that the gospel originated in Galilee (1988, 421-422). He details the revolt's effect in this region:

> All of Palestine, whether actively in solidarity with the revolt or not, was profoundly impacted by the war. The poor, as usual, suffered greatly, especially the peasantry of Galilee. Distant from the drama of power-broking and ideological struggle in Jerusalem, they were left defenseless before the avenging wrath of the Roman counterinsurgency program, betrayed on the one hand by their regional rebel commander Josephus who defected to the Romans, and on the other by brigand leaders such as John who abandoned Galilee to join the struggle in Jerusalem. (1988, 69)

The communities in the region would have been in a particularly tight spot as they attempted to carve out a new identity—Mark could have been written to bolster allegiance to the Jesus

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[19] This is particularly the case because the author of Mark, in forming an identity in his audience, was under the impression that the world would be ending soon (I will discuss this further in chapter 4). Therefore, the socio-political situation of Mark's author was of primary importance for this community because in his eyes, the late first century would be the only milieu of this group.

[20] This is Ched Myers's assumption as well; cf. *Binding the Strong Man* 41, 417-418 for his argument as to why the gospel was most likely penned before rather than after the war.

movement during a time when "rebel recruiters" from Jerusalem were active in Galilee, calling the Jews of the area to solidarity with Jerusalem's cause.[21] In remaining out of the fray (which Myers believes Mark's author intended for his community), those who built their identity around this gospel were in a precarious position vis-à-vis not only the Romans, who would have been wary of Jews during the revolt, but also the Jewish community engaged in the fight for freedom. As Kee puts it, "in a time when… Jews… were suspect, the Markan community…[which] refused to identify itself with any of the wholly Jewish groups of that epoch would find itself a radically alienated social group that could expect little but suspicion and hostility from Jew and Gentile alike" (1983, 100).

This hostility and suspicion, felt first in the home and now emanating from both the religious community and the larger Roman world, would have been a source of emotional suffering and isolation should Mark's audience choose to accept the identity offered to them. While this isolation from the intended audience's previous familial and cultural identity could have led to physical suffering (particularly at the hands of the Roman authorities who feared revolutionary activity), the less overt hardships that Mark anticipated and demanded are key to the identity he hoped to foster. Being a member of Mark's community entailed a willingness to suffer at all times—not just during times of overt political persecution.

MARK'S INGROUP

An identity of suffering and willingness to endure persecution at the hands of both friends and strangers would have drawn together a group whose resulting lifestyle diverged from cultural precedent. To replace broken familial ties and replace lost kinship identity, Mark's group

[21] Myers (1988, 87) claims that the gospel was written as a direct response to these rebel recruiters—that the intention of the author was to bolster his own authorial community and remind them where their loyalties needed to lie when they were pressured by the revolutionaries.

(as well as other messianic groups in the ancient world) adopted a model of "fictive kinship." This family was formed in such a way that the social identities of its members (from those considered "greatest" in the culture, like free males, to those considered "least," like children) were consistent—that is, the identity perpetuated by Mark countered the hegemonic social hierarchy. Cultural norms were subverted. To illustrate the necessity of a society where followers act as servants for one another, Mark presents females as models of discipleship, expropriating from the narrative's males their traditional masculine leadership role.

"Here are my mother and my brothers [and sisters]!": Fictive kinship as a new social identity

Mark's audience risked losing their families by accepting the suffering implicit in the gospel's identity. While the disciples were meant to bear this suffering, cultural context dictated that those relationships be replaced. In the ancient world, where identity was collective and kinship relations the most important component of the self, the individuals who heard and accepted the gospel of Mark would need a new group in which to "embed"[22] themselves and whose identity could subsequently become their own. Leaving one's kinship network and former social group necessarily entailed a place to go— a new social identity to adopt.

In discussing the process of group formation, Hogg and Abrams (1988) argue that "self-categorization is the process which transforms individuals into groups" (21). Hogg and Abrams continue by describing self-categorization as serving a dual purpose in terms of group formation: "it causes one to perceive oneself as 'identical' to, to have the same social identity as, other members of the category—to place oneself in the relevant social category, or places the group in

[22] Cf. my discussion of the first century dyadic personality, pg. 9.

one's head; and it generates category-congruent behaviour on dimensions which are stereotypic of the category" (1988, 21). The gospel of Mark as formative of social identity provides the framework for this self-categorization.

The biological family—the primary source of identity—is gone, but it has been replaced by fictive kinship. After the incident during which Jesus' family attempts to restrain him in Mark 3:21, he again sees his biological family in 3:31. They ask for him (3:32), and Jesus responds by establishing a new criterion for kinship recognition: " 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' And looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother' " (3:33-35). He sets the bounds for his family and the means for self-categorization as a member of a new group. Doing the will of God, as outlined by Jesus' teachings in the gospel, entitles the audience to membership in this group. And membership in the group involves embodying a new social identity; it involves modeling oneself after the prototype (Jesus), adopting the norms of the group, and, as Hogg and Abrams put it, "plac[ing] the group in one's head."

Formulating a new social identity necessarily begins with establishing an ingroup. Mark models this group as a family to replace the families given up upon answering the call to discipleship. The gospel favors its own kinship structure. Poetker points out that it is "striking…how scant the data referring to [traditional] families are" in the narrative (2001, 156). That is, "most of the story is narrated outside of the context of households and kin relations" (156). Both John the Baptist and Jesus, for example, are introduced absent their familial ties (158). They are both figures in the wilderness, quite the opposite of the private, comfortable setting of the home (158). It seems that the home and the traditional self as identified by one's

kin are not enough for Jesus or for Mark; Jesus is pictured as breaking up the traditional family, including his own. Mark, in turn, seeks to form an alternate group that reconfigures this cultural institution.

Poetker theorizes about the fictive kinship of the gospel: "Jesus' disruption of families in Mark does not function as an end in itself. It is inextricably linked with building an alternate family centered around his person" (2001, 173). This kinship structure is, in part, modeled after the first century Mediterranean family. Just as the traditional family was patriarchal, Mark's proposed family had God at its head (181). In the ancient world, "the father had ultimate authority and was the source of identity for the whole family" (181-182), and this was true for Mark's family as well. Poetker argues that God is primarily identified as Jesus' father in the narrative (177). And the gospel establishes from the very start that Jesus is, first and foremost, identified as the Son of God (1:1) (Poetker 2001, 174). In his role as son, Jesus is required to submit to the authority of God: "only God has the authority to grant who will sit at Jesus' right hand or at his left (10:40). Only the father knows when the Son of Man will return in 13:32. Jesus submits to his father's will in 14:32-42" (Poetker 182). Mark tells us that the father sent Jesus, his "beloved son" (1:11) (177).[23] And after God sends Jesus, Jesus derives his authority from his relationship with the head of the household (178). As Poetker shows, this is evident in Jesus' exchange with the chief priests, scribes, and elders in 11:27-33, which implies that both John and Jesus derive their authority from heaven (178).

God is also father to the disciples (Poetker 2001, 181), whom Jesus designates as his brothers and sisters (3:35). But, Poetker points out, the disciples are not equals with Jesus in this new fictive kinship. Rather, God, as the father, is in charge of the household. But because he is

[23] Poetker (2001, 177) cites Mark 9:37 here. Jesus, speaking to his disciples, says the following: "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

physically absent on earth, his son Jesus acts as householder in his stead (200). The household is arranged in "a series of concentric circles based on a center-periphery schema" (184), with select apostles closest to Jesus (Peter, James, and John), the Twelve forming the next band, followed by the disciples, and finally by the faithful crowd. Those who oppose Jesus are outside the family. Membership is theoretically open to all (cf. 3:35) (Poetker 2001, 187).

The family formed by the gospel possesses the characteristics that Robert Winthrop defines as anthropologically important in an ancient household (Poetker 2001, 191). "Jesus and his followers appear to eat, share residence, travel, and perform the acts of cooperation that provide the day-to-day necessities of living" (191). Jesus calls his disciples to leave their economic livelihoods when they leave their natal families for his own, and they are in turn expected to work as healers and teachers, after Jesus' prototypical example (191-192).

The family that Mark calls his audience into is one of openness (Myers 1988, 435). Jesus has reconfigured purity laws (7:14-23) and acted on behalf of gentiles (the Syrophoenician woman in 7:24-30) (Poetker 2001, 198). Jesus states in Mark 9:40, "Whoever is not against us is for us." In terms of social identity theory, this means that those who do not oppose the Jesus movement are evaluated positively. This keeps the outer boundaries of the family fluid, allowing for peripheral movement.

The call for a servant identity in a community of equals

While the gospel details the familial structure established while Jesus was still alive as one that owed loyalty and obedience first to God and then to the words of Jesus, once the messiah is crucified and no longer temporally present "the disciple family's internal power relations are to be transformed" (Poetker 2001, 200). The family that Mark is creating is still

formed around doing the will of God, as Jesus instructed. And the will of God is embodied in Jesus' prototypical actions, which are recorded in the gospel narrative.

Myers characterizes the family perpetuated by Mark as a site of "social reconciliation": between classes, genders, and Jews and gentiles (1988, 230). The community that Mark's author builds through his gospel is inclusive (Myers 1988, 429), comprised of those who accept its mission regardless of previous social location. Both Myers and Poetker speak of an economic system based on reciprocity and shared communal resources (Poetker 2001, 201; Myers 1988, 229-230). This is evident in the feeding stories in 6:37-44 and 8:2-9, when food is gathered and distributed to all (Myers 1988, 230). In a limited good society, Mark's intended group would have fallen under Myers's categories of "subversive" and "constructive" (1988, 130). When Jesus' disciples are "perplexed" and "greatly astounded" by his teachings on the wealthy and the kingdom of God (10:23-26), they are responding from a cultural mindset that equates temporal wealth with God's blessing. Mark's gospel instead calls its audience to share what they have, living as a true community.

Cultural notions of power are also subverted in the Markan identity. The proper identity for a member of the community is that of servanthood (Poetker 2001, 195). This is the focus of the paranesis following Jesus' second and third passion predictions. In 9:34, Jesus finds out that his disciples have been arguing about which of them is "the greatest." He therefore instructs the apostles in 9:35, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." After James and John request places at Jesus' right and left and anger the other apostles (who probably also want these places), Jesus again imparts advice for the proper nature of discipleship: "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great

among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all" (10:42-44). Jesus then establishes himself as the prototypical example for this behavior, telling the twelve that "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (10:45).

The communal nature of Mark's fictive kin works because of these servant relationships. And these reciprocal relationships of servitude are possible because Jesus eschews the prevalent cultural model of the family that calls for a distinct male head whose word is law (Poetker 2001, 200). God is in charge, yes, but when Mark is writing, it is with the understanding that the kingdom of God has not yet come and his audience is still on its own for a little while longer.

During this interim, the gospel could have called for a distinct household structure with hierarchical relationships to govern the actions of the intended community.[24] But the narrative establishes that this hierarchy will not persist in the new group that Mark is forming. When Peter tells Jesus that the disciples have "left everything and followed [him]," Jesus quickly reassures him: "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions" (10:28-30). Poetker points out that this parallel structure of giving up and receiving anew includes a significant change: while those who follow Jesus will gain brothers, sisters, and mothers, they will *not* gain a new father in this age (2001, 180-181). For Poetker, having no father in the fictive kinship structure is "striking in light of the role of father in the ancient world" (181). But it also allows for a reconfiguration of the "internal power relations" inherent to traditional families (200). Because God is father of all, and God is not yet present in this age,

[24] This is what deuteropauline letters such as Colossians and Ephesians seek to do in their household codes.

there is no one called to the traditional masculine seat of power.

This does not mean that the identity Mark is fostering is a passive one, however (Poeker 2001, 200). It reconfigures leadership and the honor that accompanies this traditionally male position. In the section below I will argue that Mark's narrative provides an example of this identity in his portrayal of female characters throughout the gospel.

Women as kinship models for Mark's audience

Mark's author eschews traditionally masculine leadership when Jesus tells his disciples that being "great" in his fictive family requires acting as a servant (10:43). This counters cultural ideas of honor and shame, and Mark shows his audience the requisite identity of servitude by presenting women as kinship models. In their natural societal roles, these characters already embody Jesus' prototypical behavior. Because identity formation involves striving for prototypicality, in the gospel context those who serve as models for the group replace traditional leaders. Models "lead" others into adherence to the community's norms.

Possessing honor was necessary for traditional leadership in the ancient world, and honor was a male characteristic (Poetker 2001, 77). The family, serving as microcosm for the empire, was "patrilineal, patrilocal, [and] patriarchal" (Poetker 2001, 77). Moving beyond the family and into the realm of public life, Penner and Vander Stichele describe a "clear connection" that exists in the ancient world "between one's ability to rule and his masculine performance" (2005, 227).

Females entered into the honor/shame arena only as male property—they could either bring honor to or bring shame to their male relatives (primarily via their sexuality) (Poetker 2001, 77). Strong and powerful women were allowed to exist not in their own terms but in order to demonstrate that the men who controlled them were even *more* powerful (Penner and Vander

Stichele 2005, 231-232).[25] It was not only females as a group who existed outside of positions of honor— traits associated with femininity, when present in males, were also deemed as less than honorable. Penner and Vander Stichele cite as an example of this value system Philostratus's *Lives of the Sophists* (2005, 224-225). In this ancient tale, an orator named Philiscus is critiqued because of his "perceived feminine mannerisms" (Penner and Vander Stichele 2005, 225). Robbins describes the trait of honor itself as being comprised of a male and a female component. "From a male perspective, the male aspect is called honor, while the female aspect is called shame" (1996a, 76).

In light of this cultural context, males competing for honor do not naturally embody the identity of servitude presented in Mark's narrative. Serving others is a feminine task, and traits associated with female identity are shameful. Myers therefore asserts that from this perspective, when Mark speaks about making the "last" "first" (cf. 10:42-44), he is establishing that "in a thoroughly patriarchal socio-cultural order, women alone are fit to act as servant leaders" (Myers 1988, 264-268; 281). I argue that Mark is not removing men from leadership positions and replacing them with women; instead, Mark is demonstrating that the preferred model for his community is not that of the typical honored male. The Son of Man came to serve (10:45), and his fictive kin must also engage in service. Because men are not normative models in this context, they do not provide an example that leads others in embodying the social identity of the group.

Women in Mark's narrative are models because they perform the kinds of activities that emerge from an identity of servitude. They are presented as working with their hands for the benefit of others. "*Diakonia,*" the Greek verb for service used in 10:45 "that summarizes the

[25] Penner and Vander Stichele here cite Susan Fischler's 1998 work, "Imperial Cult: Engendering the Cosmos."

whole ministry of Jesus" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983, 320), is also used to describe the role of women in 1:31 and 15:41 (Krause 2001, 43). This verb first appears in Mark 1:13 when the angels "wait on" Jesus during his time in the wilderness. It is next used later in the same chapter, when Jesus heals Simon Peter's mother-in-law "and she began to serve them" (1:31). Krause details feminist scholarship's equation of this domestic service with the actions of the angels (2001, 43).[26]

Mark again configures female service as honorable when the woman anoints Jesus at the home of Simon the leper (14:3-9). This foreshadows Jesus' death, since the only times women anointed men in the ancient world were in preparation for burial or sex. After Jesus has been crucified, women again seek to perform this "proper rite of burial" (NRSV 2007, NT 90) in 16:1 but cannot because he is no longer in the tomb. The woman at the home of Simon the leper is therefore serving Jesus by fulfilling a feminine role—performing proper burial rites. Jesus characterizes this service as "good" (14:6) and promises that it will be remembered: "Truly I tell you," he says, "wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her" (14:9). By including this pericope in his gospel, Mark has perpetuated that remembrance. Jesus and Mark deem a basic act of female service as important enough to occupy a key place in the collective memory of the group.

The narrative's justification of femininity has been recognized to varying degrees by different scholars. Kee acknowledges the place of women in the gospel narrative as a cultural subversion, pointing to the status of women and children in the text as indicative of at least a partial breakdown of the traditional patriarchal structure (1983, 91-92). But he is cautious, contending that "it cannot be inferred…that women occupied the leading offices in the

[26] Krause believes that feminist scholars such as Schussler Fiorenza, Schottroff, and Tolbert take their exegesis too far in glorifying this domestic service (2001, 41).

community of Mark, but rather that the menial tasks they performed were regarded as praiseworthy and as fully compatible with God's purpose for his people" (1983, 91).[27] Myers condemns Kee for not moving far enough into Mark's radical reconfiguration of gender roles, arguing that "the first concrete step in the 'last as first' revolution is to bring women into leadership"—not to validate their current secondary roles (281). He therefore takes Kee's argument further, asserting that the Markan narrative appears to value women and children in a way not commonly seen in the ancient world (230).

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's *In Memory of Her* discusses the unique nature of Mark's emphasis on positive female identity: "the Gospel of Mark was written at approximately the same time as Colossians, which marks the beginning of the patriarchal household-code trajectory" (1983, 316). So while some early Christian communities were purposefully trying to mirror the larger cultural system, recreating its hierarchies as an apologetic tactic to avoid making waves (317-319), Mark instead advocated for women.

I agree with Myers's assessment that Kee has not allowed the gospel narrative to speak fully in simply praising the menial tasks of women. But I do not necessarily think that by establishing an honorable identity of servitude, Mark is precluding males from esteemed positions within the community he hopes to form. Rather, I think that just as Jesus is the prototype for the community, serving as a normative model for behavior, so too are women normative models for the Markan audience. Rather than reconfiguring traditional male hierarchies, as other strands of the Jesus movement were doing, Mark stands by vulnerability and servitude as prized for his new group. He presents a female identity—an identity of serving others and potential suffering at the hands of the powerful—as a model of true discipleship. By

[27] Kee cites 1:31, 9:35, 10:30, 10:45, and 15:41.

internalizing as positive the traditional role of women in ancient society, any member of Mark's community can move into this valued identity.

Mark also makes clear the role of women as normative models for discipleship by contrasting their ability to "follow" Jesus all the way to the cross with the male disciples' failure to do so. In 15:40-41, it is the women who have served Jesus throughout his ministry. The women, who are Mark's models for his community, are witnesses to Jesus' movement into his identity as the suffering messiah. The disciples as a collective, with male members as their active and named representatives,[28] are characterized as constantly failing to understand both Jesus' mission and their own role within this mission. They attempt to move into proper roles of service, but Mark describes them as falling short. For example, when the apostles suggest that Jesus send the crowd away so that they can buy food for themselves (6:36), Jesus replies by asking them to move into a servant role: "You give them something to eat" (6:37). The apostles pass out food to the crowd of five thousand men (6:35-44), performing the female task of feeding other males. But they do not comprehend the miracle of the loaves; they do not understand when Jesus walks on water during the failed journey to Bethsaida (6:47-52). They again feed the crowd of four thousand, passing out the seven loaves and "small fish" (8:1-10). But once again, they do not understand this service as indicative of true discipleship (8:21).

It is the Twelve, the special disciples whom Jesus has chosen to be particularly close to him, who lead this misunderstanding. Vernon Robbins characterizes these men as fulfilling prophetic rhetoric from Isaiah; they hear but do not understand, look but do not perceive. Their hearts are dull (2009a, 275-276). The severity of the disciples' denseness increases when Peter

[28] Jesus names the Twelve in Mark 3, and these apostles are all male: Simon Peter, James and John the sons of Zebedee, Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus, Thaddeus, Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot.

rebukes Jesus and denies the integral part of the messiah's identity: his impending death (8:32-33). The narrative continues with the preeminent, privileged apostles—Peter, James, and John, the same group that witnessed Jairus's daughter being raised from the dead (5:35-42)—questioning what Jesus' rising from the dead could mean following the transfiguration (9:2-10). They again fall short when Jesus makes his second passion prediction (9:30-32). One of the Twelve, Judas Iscariot, becomes Jesus' betrayer, thus setting in motion the events that Jesus has predicted (14:10-11). When faced with the onset of the crisis, Peter, James, and John again fall short of their privileged standing by falling asleep (three times) as Jesus prays in Gethsemane (14:32-42). When the crowd arrives to arrest Jesus, the apostles break their promises of loyalty (particularly Peter, who insisted in 14:29-31 that he would not desert Jesus) and run away. In continuing this trend of male failure, Peter denies Jesus three times in the high priest's courtyard (14:66-72).

Following Peter's denial of Jesus, the disciples, the ones who had followed Jesus from town to town during his ministry, stop following and instead "desert" Jesus and "flee" from him, thereby disappearing from the story (14:50). When the time of suffering has arrived—the time that Jesus has attempted to prepare his followers for; the time that will reveal him as the true messiah of Israel, the one who will usher in the kingdom of God—the disciples are nowhere in sight. Their abandonment of Jesus and their failure to uphold the identity of a true Markan disciple precludes these men from acting as kinship models for Mark's audience.

But Jesus is not totally alone as he faces his death. Juxtaposed with the absence of the male disciples at this point in the narrative is the presence of women. In the climax of the narrative, women "exemplif[y] true discipleship" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983, 319). When Jesus breathes his last on the cross, "there were also women looking on from a distance; among them

were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. These used to follow him and provided for [served] him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him from Jerusalem" (Mk 15: 40-41). After Jesus is taken down from the cross and Joseph of Arimathea takes care of the body, "Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where the body was laid" (15:47). Mark has established through his discussion of John's death in 6:29 that it should have been the disciples who took care of this final act of service for Jesus. But while John's disciples laid his body in the tomb, here this task falls to Joseph, who is not a follower of Jesus but a "member of the council." As the narrative continues, it is women who are brave enough to venture to the tomb on the morning after the sabbath, and it is therefore three women (as opposed to Peter, James, and John) who are given the news that Jesus has been raised and is in Galilee (16:1-8). And finally, it is women who are trusted to relay the message—the message that ultimately led to Mark's gospel (NRSV 2007, NT 91).

In a context where the male disciples have fled, denying Jesus and refusing to adopt the necessary identity of potential suffering as he makes his way to the cross, the women are faithful. As Schüssler Fiorenza puts it, by owning the potential suffering that accompanied following Jesus to his death, the women who went to the cross were granted the identity of Jesus' "true 'relatives' " (1983, 320). This is the very identity Mark's story motivates his audience to achieve. The narrative implies that the audience must therefore adopt a feminine identity—not only because women are presented as the normative models for behavior at critical moments in the narrative, but also because they provide a cultural example of service.

CONCLUSION

Mark's author introduced the gospel genre to the Jewish messianic world to present a challenging message to his audience. This ideological message called on its listeners to follow Jesus' example, not only as a healer and a teacher, but primarily as one whose identity was defined by suffering. This suffering entailed not only physical persecution but also isolation from one's previous familial and cultural identity. The gospel offers a new identity to its audience in the form of a fictive kinship network. The Markan narrative calls Jesus' followers to live in reciprocal, service-oriented relationships with one another, directed by doing the will of their father in heaven. Jesus' instructions in 9:35 necessitate a reconfiguration of the ancient world's traditional gender hierarchy: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Because the ancient world recognized leadership not in servitude but in men who possessed great honor, the author of Mark provides a model for the prized identity in his new community: the women of the narrative.

An identity whose primary components were suffering, service, and femininity would not have been culturally desirable in the Roman world. This identity's adoption by Mark's audience must have therefore been predicated on the author's ability to imbue it with positive value. The final chapter of this paper will explore what was at stake for those members of Mark's audience who shed their old identity and lived according to the one implicit in this narrative.

Chapter Four

Mark's Identity of Suffering as Positive: Towards the Kingdom of God

The last chapter established that the normative identity present within Mark's narrative was one of suffering, played out in a fictive kinship group characterized by a servant leadership that was modeled after the traditional role of women. Social identity theory dictates that in order to form a strong, cohesive group, the ingroup identity must be internally evaluated as more positive than alternate outgroup identities. This means that Mark must somehow present his suffering servant model as more attractive than its first century alternatives.

Jesus is represented as continuously defeating the outgroups in the Markan narrative (namely, the scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, and Jerusalem hierarchy) in honor/shame competitions. As the prototype for Mark's community, this earns honor for the intended identity of the gospel. Jesus' ultimate honor/shame contest occurs at the cross, where he is publicly declared victorious and truly the Son of God. Mark's audience is invited into this honor as Jesus' kin, thus reconfiguring suffering as an honorable state. The internal logic of suffering as honorable is motivated by a promise of membership in the kingdom of God, an imminent reality for Mark's constructed community.

ALTERNATIVE IDENTITIES IN THE FIRST CENTURY: THE OUTGROUPS

Within Mark's narrative, Jesus and his opponents engage in competitions that ultimately end positively for the gospel's prototype. As Myers notes, in some of these sections "the story clearly addresses issues more specifically germane to Mark's own time" (1988, 107) than to the time of Jesus. The Pharisees, for example, were more powerful in the latter half of the first

century and thus would have provided a bigger threat to the Jesus movement than to Jesus and his teachings.

Myers asserts that Mark's portrayal of Jesus as successful against is opponents is a positive message for his own audience:

> Second- and third-generation Christian communities needed to be reminded that the justification for their social deviance…lay in Jesus himself, who both spoke authoritatively from the past and was still living and present, defending them against their opponents in the conflicts of the gospel story. Thus the paranetic sections of the Gospel are primarily concerned with defending or promoting the practice of Mark's community against its critics. (1988, 107)

Jesus' success in the contests in the narrative lends to the salience of social identity theory in reading the gospel. Each time Jesus, the intended group's prototype, engages with an agonistic outgroup member and emerges victorious, the esteem of the gospel's identity is bolstered.

The gospel suggests that its audience evaluate itself positively against several groups in particular. As the narrative progresses, Jesus is depicted as victorious over his opponents—and particular opponents are increasingly threatened by his mission. In this way, the gospel narrative establishes boundaries (albeit permeable ones) around the ingroup of Markan believers, separating them from the war-torn Judeo-Roman world around them.

The scribes

The narrative begins to portray Jesus as a positive figure who manages to appropriate the authority of established Jewish groups in his first public act (1:21-27). Mark starts to create Jesus' character by evaluating him against an outside group. He does this by editorializing Jesus'

teaching: “They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, *and not as the scribes*” (1:22, emphasis mine). The scribes were, in ancient Judaism, “the literate elite” (NRSV 2007, NT 59), and as such would have been authoritative teachers. Here, from a social identity perspective, Mark’s narrative comments are an element of social competition (Esler 1998, 53). Esler cites Tajfel and Turner[29] in explaining how a less-powerful group could attain positive status vis-à-vis a more elite outgroup: “members try to ‘reverse the relative positions of the ingroup and outgroup on salient dimensions’ ” (Esler 1998, 54). The salient dimension here is authoritative teaching, and Mark creates a reversal by remarking that Jesus (not the scribes) teaches with an authority that moves the crowds. Jesus leaves his listeners “astounded” (1:22). In this opening episode in Mark, the narrative introduces Jesus as a person who usurps the traditional position of the scribes.

Jesus himself undermines the social location of the scribes by engaging with them in honor/shame contests. Jesus first encounters the scribes when he is healing the paralytic who has been lowered through the roof of his home in Capernaum (2:6-12). Neyrey describes an ancient honor/shame competition as progressing as follows: “(1) claim of worth and value, (2) challenge to that claim or refusal to acknowledge the claim, (3) riposte or defense of the claim, and (4) public verdict of success awarded to either claimant or challenger” (1998, 20). In 2:6-12, the action is set when Jesus tells the paralytic that his sins are forgiven (2:5) (the claim of value) and the scribes question his assertion (2:6-7) (the challenge). They do not openly confront Jesus, however; instead, they are “questioning in their hearts” (2:6), accusing Jesus of blasphemy as only God alone can forgive sins. Mark here provides another testament to Jesus, stating that he is able to answer for himself because he “perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these

[29] 1979, 44.

questions among themselves" (2:8). The honor/shame competition is underway: Jesus' initial actions have been challenged (albeit silently) and he proceeds to answer this challenge. Mark presents Jesus as victorious over the scribes, thus gaining honor at their expense. When the paralytic is healed, he takes up his mat and walks away. The public judgment of the contest comes in 2:12b when those who witness are "amazed and glorified God" because of Jesus' words and actions. Jesus has won the competition.

The narrative continues to assert Jesus as possessing greater wisdom than the scribes. By proxy, Mark's intended audience, which sees itself in light of its prototype's identity and accomplishments, will internalize Jesus' verbal victories over the scribes as indicative of their own greater worth. The tensions between Jesus and the scribes reach a head when Jesus mocks them in the temple, to the crowd's "delight" (12:37). He then warns his listeners about their hypocrisy and pride: "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation" (12:38-41). This characterization of the scribes runs counter to Mark's identity for his listeners, who are not to expect places of honor but rather are to act as servants.

The Pharisees

Mark also presents Jesus as engaging in social competition with the Pharisees and usurping their first century social location (Esler 1998, 53). When the narrative first introduces the Pharisees in 2:23, Jesus' disciples are picking grain to eat on the sabbath. "The Pharisees then said to him, 'Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?' " (2:24). The

Pharisees were, in ancient Judaism, interpreters of the law. They were concerned with "applied" exegesis, or applying the tenets of the Torah and other Jewish writings to common contemporary situations (Peters 2004, 88). Jesus ignores their authority here, first allowing his disciples to do what is considered illegal on the sabbath and subsequently arguing with the Pharisees about it. Jesus gets the final word, at least according to the narrative, signifying that the gospel wants to present Jesus' logic as more coherent than that of the Pharisees, who simply argue that picking grain on the sabbath is prohibited. Now Jesus occupies the position of interpreter of the law, and in a limited good society, the diminishment of the authority of the Pharisees is inversely proportional to the increase in authority afforded to Jesus' own identity.

That the Markan audience should view itself as more positive than the Pharisees again becomes apparent in Jesus' reconfiguration of the Mosaic purity laws (7:1-23). Rather than living by the traditions perpetuated by the Pharisees, which includes in this case the proper way to enact the ritual purity laws required in the Torah, Jesus asserts that they (and the scribes and elders) are "hypocrites" for adhering to a tradition that does not properly interpret the commandment of God (7:6-8).

Before Jesus warns the crowd in the temple about the scribes, he first warns his disciples about the "yeast of the Pharisees" (8:15). This comes following an episode where the Pharisees confront Jesus to test him. As Jesus continues to succeed in his verbal competitions with this group, Mark shows that the Pharisees grow frustrated by their continued defeat and increase their attempts to thwart Jesus' mission.

The Sadducees

Jesus also successfully appropriates for himself the interpretive authority of the Sadducees. In 12:18-27, this group approaches Jesus and asks a question about marital logistics in the resurrection. The narrative establishes for its audience that the Sadducees as a collective "say there is no resurrection," thus signifying that although they address Jesus as "Teacher," their question is a challenge.

The Sadducees were a religiously conservative "aristocratic priestly party of property, power, and privilege" (NRSV 2007, NT 81). They believed only in the Torah, or the five books of Moses—later developments, such as the resurrection, did not figure into their Judaism (Peters 2004, 88). The high priest was usually a Sadducee (Saldarini 1996, 957), which is indicative of the elevated status of this group in Jesus' cultural milieu. Prior to the fall of the temple, they were a powerful group both religiously and socially, given their cordial relationship with the Roman establishment.

The Sadducees think they are tricking Jesus, confronting him on a topic that, in their interpretive framework, does not exist. But Jesus is ready with a strongly worded reply: "Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God?" (12:24). He then moves the debate into the Torah, where the Sadducees are comfortable, proving that even on their terms, his interpretation and explanation are more sound. "You are quite wrong," he says again as he concludes his speech (12:27).

Following this debate Jesus is characterized as having "answered [the Sadducees] well" (12:28). This positive and respectful evaluation shows that Jesus has truly solidified his interpretive perspective over that of his Sadducean opponent. For Mark's audience, the invitation

into the social identity of the narrative now includes honor won from verbal competition with the religious elite.

The Herodians

Myers characterizes the Herodians as occupying a social role similar to that of the Sadducees—they are part of the "collaborationist aristocracy" (1988, 86). They are the "representatives of Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee" (NRSV 2007, NT 62). In Mark's narrative, this group would represent, among other things, the prevalent political order of the day. This hierarchical order was under attack in Mark's new service-oriented identity. While the scribes and the Pharisees appear repeatedly throughout the gospel, the Herodians appear only twice in the narrative: first as conspiring against Jesus with the Pharisees (3:6) and next as seeking to challenge Jesus, again with the Pharisees in 12:13.

The Herodians gain their significance in being the first group to appear in the narrative with a seemingly innate dislike of Jesus. Even before they directly approach him and are outwitted (12:13-17), they are clear in their opposition. It is their threat to Jesus, rather than his verbal victory over them, that first and foremost defines this group. Mark leaves unclear why this particular group feels threatened by Jesus to the point where they need to plot his demise. The Herodians' perception of Jesus and their subsequent reaction fit the narrative well, however, in that they exemplify the suffering that Mark warns is to come for those who accept the gospel's formative identity. Simply being a member of the Jesus movement is enough to bring this persecution; just as there is seemingly no reason for the Herodians' distaste for Jesus, so too will the ingroup's suffering seemingly defy logic.

The Herodians heighten the threat against Jesus, reminding the audience that while Jesus continuously emerges as victorious over his opponents, demonstrating sound logic that defeats, shames, and frustrates his challengers and translates into a positive outlook for the group's identity, there will still be negative temporal consequences associated with membership in this movement.

THE CROSS AS THE ULTIMATE HONOR/SHAME COMPETITION: THE ELDERS, THE CHIEF PRIESTS, AND THE SCRIBES

The Herodians were not the only group in the gospel to plot against Jesus. For example, the Markan narrative has made it clear from Jesus' first interactions with the Pharisees that they are out to "destroy" him, in conjunction with the Herodians (3:6). But Jesus' ultimate demise comes at the hands of a collective of his most vehement opponents: the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes.[30]

Mark presents Jesus as knowing that this group is out to get him even before the religious leaders make an appearance in the narrative. During the first passion prediction, in 8:31, Jesus teaches his disciples that "the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and that he must be killed." This is mirrored in Jesus' third prediction in 10:33, although in this version it is only the chief priests and scribes who will condemn him.

Mark presents the opposition of these groups to Jesus as predicated upon his success; in 11:18 the chief priests and the scribes seek to kill him because "they feared him." They are right to fear Jesus' authority. The only place in the narrative where they, as a unit, are depicted as

[30] While the scribes have already been mentioned, they are important here not as an individual group but as part of a unit—a unit that the Markan narrative eventually holds responsible for Jesus' arrest.

engaging in verbal competition with Jesus (11:27-33) ends poorly for them and reveals their insecurity in the face of the crowd.

It is the chief priests, elders, and scribes who send the crowd to arrest Jesus in Gethsemane (14:43), fulfilling Jesus' prediction in 8:31. They then hand him over to Pilate after questioning him (15:1). As Jesus' passion draws to a close, the chief priests and scribes are present at the cross, "mocking him among themselves" (15:31). Amid this taunting, Jesus cries out, asking God why he has forsaken him (15:34). Soon after, he dies (15:37).

It would appear that the chief priests, elders, and scribes have finally established themselves as victorious over Jesus. They have accomplished what they set out to do as soon as Jesus arrived in Jerusalem for the Passover. Jesus has died in a great deal of pain and utterly alone, abandoned by his disciples and also seemingly by his God. He has suffered greatly during his passion, both physically and emotionally. He has died on a Roman cross, a form of torture reserved for dissidents and slaves. Mark describes the chief priests and the scribes mocking Jesus, saying, "Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe" (15:32). While there were divergent themes relating to messianic hope, this was not the outcome that would befall the *real* messiah.[31] Instead of saving himself and coming down from the cross, Jesus continued to suffer and soon "gave a loud cry and breathed his last" (15:37).

Like many of Jesus' other encounters with his opponents, Mark frames the crucifixion as an honor/shame contest—it has a "claim of value," a subsequent challenge, a defense, and ends with a "public verdict" (Neyrey 1998, 19). When the high priest asks Jesus, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" (14:61) and Jesus responds with the affirmative and

[31] In Jacob Neusner's article "Messianic Themes in Formative Judaism," he outlines messianic expectations present in rabbinic writings. These texts date from the centuries immediately following Jesus' crucifixion, and a suffering and dying messiah is never mentioned as a Jewish expectation (1984, 360-364).

identifying, "I am" (14:62), the claim of value has been set. Jesus has alleged his right to a status of honor. The Jerusalem hierarchy immediately challenges his claim, asserting that Jesus' statement was one of "blasphemy," and "all of them condemned him as deserving death" (14:64). Jesus remains silent throughout the passion narrative, and the height of the challenge to his identity comes when the hierarchy demands that he save himself and come down that they may "see and believe" in 15:31-32. The next step in the competition is for Jesus to respond. But instead of preserving his honor by fulfilling the demands of the scribes and chief priests and coming down off the cross to vindicate himself and prove that he truly does deserve the title of Messiah, Jesus remains on the cross. It appears that he has ignored the taunts of his opponents, speaking only to God during the last hours of his life (15:34).

From the cultural perspective of the first century, Mark has portrayed Jesus as losing this final competition. Death itself "means the collapse of health, the total loss of power, and the severing of status markers such as patron-client relationships" (Neyrey 1998, 139). It is not an intrinsically honorable state. Furthermore, death in the ancient world had the potential to be viewed in a decidedly negative light as it could "even signal defeat by a rival's superior power" (Neyrey 1998, 139). This seems to be the case with Jesus, whom Mark depicts as failing to defend his identity while on the cross. And as deSilva asserts, "death on a cross has long been recognized as a supremely shameful death" (1995, 167; cf. also Neyrey 1998, 139-140).[32]

But Mark has not yet displayed the public verdict in this competition. In 8:31, when Jesus taught his disciples about the messiah, he taught them that the Son of Man "*must* undergo great

[32] While crucifixion was a shameful mode of execution in the first century, Vernon Robbins details Greco-Roman cultural precedent for the idea of a "suffering, dying king" (2009b, 188). He argues, "kingship as manifested in the mockery, abuse, crying out, and death of Jesus is well understood by the general member of Mediterranean society as authentic kingship that does not lord it over others, but serves people, suffering and dying for them as the true shepherd of the people over whom he has domain" (190). That Jesus is viewed in light of this role is evident from the fact that he is endowed with the title "King of the Jews" as he goes to his crucifixion (188), and the fact that elements of Mark's passion narrative mirror a Persian tradition recorded by Dio Chrysostom.

suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed." As Marianne Sawicki argues, "the sacrifice motif in the passion…is the keynote in the Markan orchestration, the fuel for [Jesus'] soteriology. Jesus cannot have died inadvertently; the Christ has to sacrifice himself" (2001, 166). Suffering is the defining characteristic of the messiah's identity. So when the chief priests and scribes demand that the messiah come down from the cross in order that they might believe, they misunderstand Jesus' mission.

Mark quickly makes clear the failure of the Jerusalem hierarchy's challenge. Just when it appears that Jesus has died without defending himself, Mark reconfigures the traditional honor/shame competition to include an outside actor: God steps in and provides the necessary defense of Jesus' identity (Neyrey 1998, 141). This occurs when the temple curtain "was torn in two, from top to bottom" (15:38). Mark here employs a Greco-Roman cultural model of "posthumous honor" and mirrors Suetonius' account of comets occurring at the death of Julius Caesar (Neyrey 1998, 141).

Mark draws the honor/shame contest of the crucifixion to a close in his account of the public verdict. The centurion verbalizes judgment in favor of Jesus when he "saw that in this way [Jesus] breathed his last," and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!" (15:39). Jesus has died on the cross, and for the first time in the narrative Mark places Jesus' identity on human lips. Jesus has solidified his messianic identity with his death. In this ultimate competition, he has appropriated honor from the established Jewish leadership (cf. also Robbins 1996a, 82).

In successfully establishing himself as the messiah, Mark's Jesus has set the stage for his ultimate victory: he has suffered and died, as he predicted. Now, after three days, he can rise again (8:31). This victory is declared to Mark's audience in 16:6-7 when the young man explains to the women that Jesus is not in the tomb but is on his way to Galilee. He has "been raised"

(16:6), much as the temple curtain "was torn" (15:38). Here again, God is the implied actor who achieves the victory for Jesus. He is the messiah, the Son of God, and God has defeated even death in his honor (cf. also Neyrey 1998, 141ff.).

RECONFIGURING SUFFERING AS A POSITIVE INGROUP IDENTITY

A share in Jesus' honor

Because acquired honor is derived from familial ties,[33] those who identify with Jesus in the fictive kinship presented in Mark's narrative are awarded a share in the honor that he has won in his passion (deSilva 1995, 290-291). In order to share in this honor, Mark's audience must also adopt the identity of suffering perpetuated by the narrative, thus fulfilling their role as good fictive kin. But even as one must be willing to suffer in order to share in Jesus' honor, the honor won through Jesus' death reconfigures suffering as positive for Mark's audience. James Kelhoffer elaborates on the positive evaluation of suffering in early Christian groups in his 2010 book, *Persecution, Persuasion, and Power: Readiness to withstand hardship as a corroboration of legitimacy in the New Testament.*

Even if the outside world did not place a high value on suffering, it became important in the internal value system of the Markan identity.[34] Kelhoffer asserts his thesis "in Bourdieusian terms": "in much of the NT withstanding persecution constitutes a form of cultural capital that can be translated into social capital, namely standing, or even a position of leadership, within the

[33] Cf. here my discussion of honor on page 11.

[34] Other scholars would disagree with this position. Dewey, for example, focuses more on the gospel message's potential for eradicating future suffering than the positive nature of present suffering—this temporary pain is instead just a function of ordinary ancient life (2001, 29-30).

church community" (2010, 11).[35] In simple terms, within the Jesus movement, willingness to suffer correlates with perceived social standing (Kelhoffer 2010, 10). From Kelhoffer's definition, Mark holds as cultural capital the knowledge that suffering is necessary. Possession of this cultural capital will elevate the narrative's audience into Jesus' fictive family.

Beyond suffering, towards the kingdom of God

Willingness to suffer as a constitutive element of cultural capital was not an idea shared across the Greco-Roman world. Instead, it represented the internal logic of a community that evaluated itself not according to contemporary social and cultural standards but according to an alternate system of meaning.[36] Just as Mark has reconfigured the honor/shame structure to include God as Jesus' defender in the contest of the cross and as the one who has raised him from the dead, his audience is called to evaluate their identity in terms of membership in a Godly kingdom.[37] Implicit in viewing suffering as a form of social and cultural capital is the eschatological benefit Mark's narrative attributes to upholding his challenging identity. There is great capital associated with suffering because suffering is presented as a stepping-stone to great things.

Through this alternative system of meaning, Mark formulates a social identity that functions to "reduce subjective uncertainty about [the] social world" (Hogg, Abrams, Otten, and Hinkle 2004, 256) through the logic of an apocalyptic worldview.

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[35] Cultural capital has been defined by Bourdieu and subsequently by such scholars as DiMaggio as familiarity with forms of knowledge that denote higher class standing (Lareau and Weininger 2003). Social capital is defined in terms of adherence to norms (Fukayama 1999) that translate into status.

[36] The language of "meaning-making systems" is Geertzian.

[37] This can be characterized as a counterculture that challenges and rejects the values of the dominant host culture; cf. Robbins 1996b, 169.

When Jesus first predicts his passion in 8:31, his description of his betrayal and death is accompanied by a final step: he will suffer and die, and "after three days rise again." Paralleling this outcome of Jesus' death is a similar outcome for the disciples. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me," Jesus tells the crowd (8:34). He details this road: it will include being mocked, flogged, and condemned to death (10:33-34). But there is a boon to this suffering: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (8:35). "Saving one's life" entails faithfulness to the identity of suffering that Mark presents. By acquiescing to the suffering at hand, the audience will be assured new life.

This is reiterated immediately preceding Jesus' third passion prediction. In 10:29, Jesus references the charge that his followers must isolate themselves from their previous familial identities, stressing that those who give up their kinship networks and accept the persecution inherent in this process will receive not only a new kinship network but also "eternal life" in the "age to come" (10:30).

Therefore, the suffering that the gospel calls its audience to undergo as a result of isolation from their previous sense of self is tempered by the eschatological knowledge implicit in this new identity. This eschatological knowledge is the ultimate cultural capital that will propel Mark's intended community to the forefront in the kingdom of God. By "opting out" of a society dominated by masculine honor and instead "opting in" to the identity necessary to join Jesus' family, they will have a preeminent social standing as Jesus' "elect" (13:27) in this kingdom. The payoff for their suffering will come when the Son of Man "comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels" (8:38). At this time, Jesus will gather his followers into the kingdom of God.

This new life is not a distant, future phenomenon. As soon as Jesus tells his disciples that they must incorporate suffering into their new identity as his followers, he tempers this demand with a promise that the eschatological moment, and their reward, is imminent. "Truly I tell you," he says to them, that "there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power" (9:1). By the time that Mark's audience is receiving this message, between thirty and forty years later, Palestine is embroiled in the Jewish Revolt, and the destruction of the temple looms on the horizon. Jesus' ominous predictions in the Little Apocalypse of Mark 13 appear to be coming to pass. Again in chapter 13 Jesus reassured the faithful: "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until these things have taken place" (13:30). Now, as the initial generations are beginning to disappear and the war rages, it would appear that the "beginning of the birth pangs" have arrived (13:8).[38]

Mark was not asking his audience to adopt an identity of endless suffering (cf. Dewey 2001, 31). Rather, he presented this identity as a necessity for something greater to come: entrance into the kingdom of God. The gospel does not possess a great deal of information about the nature of this future kingdom. It will be inaugurated by the return of Jesus, coming "in the clouds with great power and glory" (13:26) and gathering the elect (13:27). Jesus will then be present in this kingdom, eating and drinking there (14:25). Gerd Theissen believes that the kingdom is a temporal reality, "not purely a spiritual entity," that will result from a "miraculous change in this society" (2007, 92). This is what the audience of Mark is promised in return for their suffering. It is present from Jesus' first words in the narrative, when he comes out of the wilderness to Galilee, "proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near' " (1:14-15). The gospel was formative in calling together a

[38] This imminence is tempered by the narrative's uncertainty as to the exact time of the parousia. Even Jesus does not know, telling his disciples, "about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come" (13:32-33).

group that would adopt a culturally disdained identity, internally revalued as more honorable than alternative identities. Together they awaited the kingdom of God, promised to those who followed Jesus on the way.

CONCLUSION

The gospel of Mark serves to foster an identity of suffering in a new fictive kinship group. This ingroup identity is more positive than the various alternative identities present in the first century because Jesus has usurped the honor and status of these groups, instead attributing that honor to his own group in the apocalyptic age. Mark's formative identity is therefore not intended to sustain his audience forever. Rather, he draws listeners into his fictive kinship by presenting them with a new normative framework, implicit in an eschatological meaning-making system. Suffering is a valued identity because it achieves membership not only in Mark's gospel community but also in the kingdom of God. While John the Baptist is depicted as preparing the way for Jesus' earthly ministry, Mark prepares the way for the glorified Jesus of the parousia. To this end, he fashions for his audience an identity of discipleship.

Conclusion

The Special Place of Mark in the Twenty-First Century

The gospel of Mark is the second book of the New Testament, one of four gospel accounts to be included in the church's canon. To contemporary Christians, "Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John" is an easy, automatic litany, the remnant of evangelism in the first generations of the Jesus movement. But given the fact that ninety-nine percent of Mark's narrative is contained in either Matthew or Luke (Robbins 2009b, 209), it is worth considering why Mark's narrative endured through the early centuries of the church. Why was it granted a place among the church's official canon at all if all of its constitutive pericopes are found elsewhere? And, given that it retained its importance, what has Mark added to the character of Christianity as it exists today?

Although Mark is the first extant gospel, a pioneer of form and of identity-fostering function in the early Christian world, its importance in telling the story of Jesus of Nazareth was usurped by Matthew— the gospel that appears first in the New Testament. Mark was therefore the preeminent account of Jesus' life and death for less than two decades before it was incorporated into and ultimately surpassed by Matthew. That Matthew and later Luke gained acclaim over and above Mark's narrative is not surprising; both of the later synoptic gospels are arguably fuller, richer texts than Mark's early document. Vernon Robbins provides a succinct defense of Matthew and Luke's inclusion within the canon:

> It is easy to see why the Gospel of Matthew was preserved, since it contains so many quotations from the Old Testament, traditions about the heritage and birth of Jesus, and the Sermon on the Mount containing the Beatitudes and the Lord's

> Prayer. It is also easy to see why the Gospel of Luke was preserved with its beautiful hymns to Mary and Zechariah, its parables of the Good Samaritan and prodigal son, and its dramatic stories about the resurrected Jesus. (2009b, 209)

Likewise, John adds new biographical information to the early Christian portrait of Jesus and establishes what became the church's dominant Christology.

Rather than focusing on the information that Mark brings to Christian discourse, it is more worthwhile to examine Mark's contributions to Christianity in terms of the ideological lens it offers its readers. In a series of lectures presented at Emory University in the fall of 2011, author and former Catholic priest James Carroll detailed the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE as the "great interruption" that dictated the subsequent direction of the Jesus movement. It was in light of this event that Mark's proposed identity of suffering and idea of death as honorable flourished. It became such a normative perspective within the first century Christian context that Matthew and Luke were able to appropriate Mark's portrait of a suffering messiah without feeling the need to further legitimate this construct.

The answer to the question of why Mark was preserved may rest in the fact that Matthew and Luke dilute the identity of suffering perpetuated by the first gospel.[39] Mark's author himself may have envisioned his narrative as having limited use: the identity implicit in the gospel was supposed to entail temporary suffering followed by an eschatological reversal of this role. Once the kingdom arrived, the faithful would no longer have to suffer. They would no longer have to isolate themselves, or wait, or endure physical persecution. But the kingdom did not arrive, as the narrative suggested it would. Those who waited were handed over to councils. They were beaten in the synagogues and made to stand before governors and kings because of Jesus (13:9).

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[39] Robbins argues, similarly, that "the acceptance of rejection, suffering, and death as the way to salvation in Mark appears to have been an achievement that sustained the importance of this document for many members of early Christianity" (2009b, 210).

But he never returned in the clouds to gather his elect (13:26). The generations passed away and still those who remained faithful suffered.

This continued prevalence of suffering in the early Christian world explains Mark's place in the canon despite the popularity of the other synoptic gospels. Mark was preserved because it remained relevant. The identity formulated within the gospel, while initially intended for a particular social and cultural context, gained traction in its universality. In this way, Bauckham's critique rings true. Mark was preserved because it *became* a "gospel for all Christians" during the years prior to Constantine's recognition of the church as a legitimate religious group.

Throughout the centuries, Mark has held its ground because it provides hope for the sufferer and lauds positions of weakness. From institutionalized persecution in the Roman Empire to the plagues of the Middle Ages, from religious wars to modern liberation theology, the salience of Mark's intended identity has not faltered.

THE CONTEMPORARY MARKAN IDENTITY

We still read Mark today because the identity that beckoned to Mark's earliest audience is particularly pertinent in a broken world. For Carroll, just as the destruction of the temple was the first cataclysmic "interruption" of Christian history, the Holocaust was the second "great interruption." Carroll asserts that the violence of this era harkens back to Palestine and the turmoil of the first century. I believe that the events of the last century imbue Mark with a new relevance. This "second interruption" renders the earliest gospel as salient today as it was to its original audience.

While Carroll focuses on the Holocaust as a discrete event in human history, from my perspective it must instead be viewed contextually as a devastatingly climactic moment in an era

of unprecedented human suffering. With the world still reeling from the destruction of World War I, World War II showcased the propensity of humans for intentional violence. The latter half of the twentieth century represents a continuous interruption of history, pockmarked by memories like Hiroshima, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf, Somalia, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Cambodia. The events of the twentieth century spiraled through the end of the millennium, continuing on September 11, 2001, when war threatened in the wake of the World Trade Center attacks. War came in the form of US invasions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Casualties, the constant companion of war, were in no short order, and women and children died alongside combatants. The noble fell with the oppressors; friends fell alongside enemies, and in some cases it was difficult to tell the difference.

The world is currently balanced on another ledge that is about to give out—a precipice of delicate relations between Israel and Iran. A preemptive Israeli strike on Iran to quell the development of its nuclear program is an increasing likelihood as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Ehud Barak quietly prepare for military action (Bronner 2012). As Israel's most powerful ally, war simulations show that America would surely be drawn into the resulting fray (Mazzetti and Shanker 2012). The impact of the strike would also reverberate through the Middle East, driving area nations to take sides and even engage in conflict. A decade after September 11, we are again poised at the edge of war, the edge of another stage in the "great interruption" begun by the Holocaust.

In light of looming global conflict, a conflict whose nexus is remarkably close to that of the great cataclysm of the first century, the identity of purposeful suffering perpetuated by Mark beckons. Just as Mark's audience stood at a crossroads in the context of the Jewish Revolt, we,

too, stand at a crossroads. Shortly, just as the rebel recruiters came from Jerusalem to drum up support in Galilee, contemporary Christians may be called into conflict with Iran. But Mark gives us a space outside of this dichotomy and instead fosters a place where Christians can assert that we will not opt in to participation in events that support destruction. Instead, we can opt in to the suffering that accompanies breaking ties with an old way of life and in this way opt out of the world's dominant values of supremacy and pride.

In this alternate space, although the rest of society may ridicule them, those who accept Mark's identity can follow Jesus' example, engaging not in conflict but in service to humanity. By eschewing participation in an Israeli-Iranian war, and evaluating ourselves not as "disengaged" but rather as engaged in a value system whose source is not earthly but heavenly, Christians can carve out a space in the midst of the turmoil that is to come. From this place, we can be models of service rather than aggression. While the world falls apart around us, we can follow the normative example of the gospel—feeding, teaching, and loving our neighbor.

Perhaps we can even realize a bit of the elusive kingdom of God through our adoption of the social identity formulated by Mark so many centuries ago. In the meantime, for us, Mark can model endurance and give us a means to positively reconfigure our minority position. In an era where the world possesses the nuclear capabilities to bring its own apocalypse, we are instead called to look to God. Mark speaks to contemporary Christians the way it spoke to its first audience, calling us to hold fast to this identity and hope for better days.

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