Moral Vision and Eschatology in Mark’s Gospel: Coherence or Conflict?

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Within the so-called Abrahamic tradition of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the scriptural sanction of violence poses a perplexing array of interrelated hermeneutical, theological, moral, and practical questions. John J. Collins focused on some of these in his presidential address at the SBL annual meeting in Toronto in 2002, “The Zeal of Phinehas: The Bible and the Legitimation of Violence.”1 Illuminating and sagacious as his discussion is, his illustrations of biblical legitimation of human violence all derive from Jewish Scripture and tradition, even in the case of examples taken from Christian history to demonstrate how biblical texts have been appropriated to authorize violence. Only in his penultimate section, “Eschatological Vengeance,” in which he shifts the searchlight to scriptural expectations of divine retributive violence, does he refer to a small sampling of NT texts, most notably the book of Revelation. More could have been said about violence in the NT,2 yet for Collins to have done so would not have made more stark the question provoked by his discussion of eschatological vengeance: Is the God of biblical tradition violent?

That the God of biblical tradition is depicted as commanding, condoning, or committing violence is reason enough for some to answer this question in the affirmative. For others, different biblical depictions of God that are incongruent with the notion of a violent God call for a more nuanced response. One of the hermeneu-

1 JBL 122 (2003): 3–21. This essay was subsequently edited and reprinted as a Facets Series booklet, Does the Bible Justify Violence? (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004).
tical strategies Collins recommends in dealing with biblical texts that sanction violence is to draw attention to the diversity of perspectives in the Bible, thereby relativizing those texts that legitimate violence. In this connection, NT traditions concerning Jesus of Nazareth comprise a corpus of texts that to some extent counterbalances the cluster of traditions that display God as one who both authorizes violence and ultimately resorts to violence. Nevertheless, even within the fabric of traditions emanating from Jesus, texts of violence stain the whole. Of these, the most disturbing are instances of vehement anti-Judaic invective on the part of Jesus, especially in the Gospels according to Matthew and John, and seemingly eager anticipations of eschatological vengeance. In short, with respect to the issue of biblical legitimation of violence, NT interpreters must confront the same complex of hermeneutical, theological, moral, and practical questions faced by biblical scholars generally.

Various NT writers interpreted the mission and message of Jesus along peace-making lines—both theologically and morally. One expression of this perception of Jesus’ mission is Mark’s (re)interpretation of the nature, quality, or “dynamic” of messiahship by identifying Jesus’ service and suffering as God’s way of reigning and dealing with evil in the world. This (re)interpretation of God’s reign and power is presented dramatically in Mark 8:22–10:52, within which Jesus’ “model of messiahship” serves as both pattern and norm for authentic discipleship, and also in Mark’s crucifixion narrative.

According to many Markan scholars, a significant part of Mark’s purpose was to bolster hope among distressed readers/hearers by assuring them that the one who was crucified will soon return as “Son of humanity” (ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου) to overpower the forces of evil. Yet if the hope Mark articulated was that when the Son of humanity returns, he will overpower evil forces in the same way—only definitively—as those forces had overpowered him, this conflicts with Mark’s conviction that it is precisely in and through Jesus’ nonviolent mission, voluntary suffering, and ignominious death that God defeats or undoes evil. On this interpretation, Mark’s nonviolent christology and ethic of discipleship are undermined by his eschatology.

3 Collins, “Zeal of Phinehas,” 19. Yet for Collins, the most important interpretive task with respect to biblically sanctioned violence is to relativize the Bible’s “presumed divine authority,” which tends to inculcate an attitude of certitude with respect to the will of God (p. 20).
4 For an attempt to (re)place peace at the heart of NT theology and ethics, see Willard M. Swartley, Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).
5 Cf. Richard A. Horsley, Hearing the Whole Story: The Politics of Plot in Mark’s Gospel (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), who contests a theological reading of Mark’s Gospel, especially with reference to the theme of discipleship. Yet it is difficult to hear Mark’s story of Jesus as unconcerned with God, especially given that Mark’s principal theme is the reign of God (ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ), a point Horsley concedes. For Horsley to separate theological reflection from ordinary life in the way he does is akin to interpreting Israelite religion in isolation from politics and economics in first-century Galilee or Judea, a practice he disparages.
Since the rediscovery by Johannes Weiss of the significance of eschatology for comprehending the worldview(s) of Jesus and early Christians, primitive Christian ethics has been conceived as conditioned by expectation of an imminent end-event. For example, in *The Origins of Christian Morality*, Wayne Meeks observed:

What is perhaps most evident from our sampling of the eschatological language of the writings that have come down to us from the first two centuries of the Christian movement is its variety, both in formulation and in application. *Through all the variable images, nevertheless, we discern a controlling conviction that the defining point for the responsible and flourishing life lies in the divinely appointed future moment.*

With respect to Mark’s narrative, I would not deny that the encroaching reign of God provides the rationale for Jesus’ moral vision. But the specific contour and content of the moral vision attributed to Jesus by Mark warrant that it be given critical status vis-à-vis the interpretation of yet-to-be-realized aspects of the already-inaugurated reign of God. In other words, in the exegesis and interpretation of Mark’s Gospel, Markan ethics should impinge on eschatological anticipation no less than Markan eschatology impinges on ethics. Otherwise, the reign of God, as Mark depicts it, is subject to the dictum articulated by Jesus in 3:24 about any reign at odds with itself.

In recent critical discussion of what might be called the mechanics of atonement, as understood in the Christian tradition, concerns have been raised about the conception of God inherent in theories of atonement that emphasize propitiation, penal substitution, or satisfaction of divine honor. No less troubling is the image

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6 Johannes Weiss, *Jesus’ Proclamation of the Kingdom of God* (trans. and ed. [with introduction] Richard H. Hiers and D. Larrimore Holland; Lives of Jesus; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971; repr., Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985); trans. of *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1892; rev. ed., 1900). Ever since Weiss, the relation between eschatology and ethics, both in historically descriptive and theologically constructive senses, has been a burning question in NT interpretation. Nothing in this study should be taken to imply that I am arguing for a noneschatological Jesus or for a diminution of the eschatological dimension in Mark’s Gospel.


of God inherent in eschatological expectations that feature vindictive retribution on the part of God and/or God’s agent(s). The expectation that ultimately God will inflict violent retribution on evildoers is equally, if not more, likely to authorize violent behavior in the here and now as atonement theories predicated on the necessity of divine violence, especially when coupled with the conviction that one (or one’s group) is on God’s side and knows God’s will.9

An eschatology characterized by violent retribution seems to have been part of the convictional framework of some early Christians. Within the NT, one thinks of 2 Thess 1:5–10, perhaps Rom 12:19–20, and the Gospel according to Matthew.10 There is also the violent imagery associated with the eschatology of the Apocalypse, of which Collins asserts: “The expectation of vengeance is . . . pivotal in the book of Revelation.”11 But did all early Christians entertain a violent eschatology? My question is whether Mark’s Gospel is an early Christian witness to an alternative eschatological expectation more in keeping with the message and mission of its protagonist, whose instruction and conduct Mark held to be normative and exemplary. If so, the Gospel according to Mark serves as a hermeneutical resource for advocating a teleology of peace.

Mark’s protagonist, Jesus the crucified Nazarene (Mark 16:6), is presented as the herald-inaugurator of God’s encroaching reign, as an authoritative teacher whose words effect liberation, healing, discernment, and judgment, and as one who arrogates to himself the image of “one like a person” (Dan 7:13–14) as the most apposite (or perhaps least misleading) public designation of his identity.12 In Mark’s


12 I am not concerned with whether and, if so, how the historical Jesus made use of the Danielic image of “one like a son of man.” For a survey of research on this contested issue, see Delbert Burkett, The Son of Man Debate: A History and Evaluation (SNTSMS 107; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Cf. Walter Wink, The Human Being: Jesus and the Enigma of the Son of the Man (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), who explicitly seeks to construct a “Christology from below” based on the various “Son of humanity” sayings. I share Wink’s concern with the disjunction between the nonviolent mission of Jesus and traditional beliefs about the “return” or “second coming” of Jesus as “Son of humanity.” In support of the view that Daniel 7 is the interpretive backdrop for Mark’s usage of the linguistically awkward phrase, “the son of the person”
narrative, these depictions coalesce to form a portrait of one who elicits faith, instills hope, and unveils the moral vision for a life of discipleship lived in the hinterland created by God’s encroaching reign—and this even though the whole of Mark’s narrative moves steadily toward its denouement in the ignominious execution of Jesus on a Roman cross and virtually ends there.13 For Mark, crucifixion signified not only Roman hegemony but also divine judgment and abandonment (15:34; cf. Gal 3:13), yet he interpreted the shameful death of Jesus as integral to divine action in, and on behalf of, the world; paradoxically, God was present in Jesus’ experience of divine forsakenness and potently active in and through Jesus’ voluntary powerlessness.14

This brings us to Mark’s moral vision, which is both tradition-dependent, in the sense that it is reliant on and inexplicable apart from Jewish Scripture, and revisionary, insofar as traditional moral norms are critically revised—not simply revised—in light of Jesus’ mission. No doubt Mark’s reconfigured moral vision was molded by his scripturally resourced reinterpretation of the crucifixion of Jesus. No less than for Paul, and conceivably influenced by Paul,15 the fulcrum of Mark’s theology and ethics is Jesus, the crucified Messiah. Certainly what he gathered together and recorded of Jesus’ teaching on self-renunciation and social reversal in 8:31–10:45 coheres with his interpretation of Jesus’ suffering and death in chs. 14–15.16 But can one say the same of his understanding of the eschatological role of that personlike One alluded to in Mark’s three future-oriented references to the Son of humanity (8:38; 13:26; 14:62)?17 In other words, did Mark envisage the Son of


13 In literary terms, the brief conclusion in Mark 15:40–16:8 may be regarded as but an appendix to the passion narrative in Mark 14:1–15:39.

14 I explore this paradox in “God’s Presence and Power: Christology, Eschatology and ‘Theodicy’ in Mark’s Crucifixion Narrative,” in Theodicy and Eschatology (ed. Bruce Barber and David Neville; Task of Theology Today 4; Adelaide: ATF, 2005), 19–41.

15 See Joel Marcus, “Mark—Interpreter of Paul,” NTS 46 (2000): 473–87, especially with respect to Paul’s and Mark’s theologia crucis. The view that Mark’s theological perspective was influenced by Paul stands in tension with, but does not necessarily contradict, patristic traditions about Mark’s association with Peter. See C. Clifton Black, Mark: Images of an Apostolic Interpreter (Studies on Personalities of the New Testament; Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1994). Evidence in Mark’s Gospel indicates that Peter was unreceptive to a theologia crucis; whether Peter’s perspective changed after his postresurrection encounter with Jesus (Mark 16:7; 1 Cor 15:5) is an open question.


17 Mark 8:38; 13:26; and 14:62 are the most obvious allusions within Mark’s narrative to the image of “one like a son of man” in Dan 7:13–14. If the unidiomatic ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου (literally, “the son of the person”) was a pointed allusion to that manlike figure in Daniel 7, under-
humanity’s future realization of the reign of God to conform to the moral vision displayed in that self-same Son of humanity’s service-oriented mission, teaching on self-renunciation/social reversal, and voluntary relinquishment of power in his passion? Or did Mark imagine that once God had vindicated the Son of humanity in his role as “Suffering Servant,” it was acceptable that he execute the same vengeance that had destroyed him?

I. Mark’s Moral Vision

According to Dan Via, “It is proper to say that Mark has an ethic, because central ethical categories come to manifest expression in the Gospel, although they are obviously not formally announced as such.” Ethical categories that Via detects in Mark’s Gospel are moral norms (articulated as both principles and rules), moral intentions and motives (forward- and backward-looking reasons for acting or behaving in particular ways), moral agency, which Via terms “enablement” (by God, since Mark’s ethic is non-autonomous), and sensitivity both to historically conditioned circumstances (within which moral agents act) and consequences of actions and behaviors. If the presence of such ethical categories constitutes an ethic, one may agree that Mark has an ethic. Yet Via’s qualifying observation that Mark’s ethical categories are not “formally announced” suggests that “ethic” is perhaps too formal a term for the moral content and implications of Mark’s Gospel. In moral discourse, ethics generally comprises both a systematic presentation of what constitutes the good life and critical reflection on reasons for judging any person, disposition, or behavior to be good or otherwise. For this reason and also because stood in a generic sense to mean (one like) a human being/person, then the phrase, the (or that) personlike One, is not only gender-inclusive but also more transparently indicative of the allusive function of the Greek phrase and faithful to the generic meaning of the original Semitic idiom. To facilitate ease of reading, however, I refer to “the Son of humanity.” For a discussion of the linguistic evidence and context-sensitive translation options, see Adela Yarbro Collins, Cosmology and Eschatology in Jewish and Christian Apocalypticism (JSJSup 50; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 139–58.

18 Mark 9:12 suggests familiarity with a scriptural tradition associating the Son of humanity with suffering and shame, language reminiscent of the Servant figure in Deutero-Isaiah. A coalescing of the “Son of humanity” and “Servant” figures would help to make sense of “Son of humanity” texts that feature suffering (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34, 45). See the Similitudes of Enoch for a parallel, but not identical, coalescing of these two scriptural figures, notwithstanding problems associated with dating the Similitudes. But perhaps no coalescing of separate figures is necessary to explain Mark 9:12, if Eugene Lembic is correct that the phrase “Son of Man” in the Old Greek of Daniel signifies human vulnerability (see Lembic, “Son of Man,” ‘Pitiable Man,’ ‘Rejected Man’: Equivalent Expressions in the Old Greek of Daniel,” TynBul 56 [2005]: 43–60).

19 Dan O. Via, Jr., The Ethics of Mark’s Gospel—In the Middle of Time (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 81.

20 Cf. Meeks, Origins of Christian Morality, 4: “I take ‘ethics’ in the sense of a reflective,
Mark's Gospel is a narrative rather than a formal ethical treatise, it seems more appropriate to speak of Mark's moral vision.

In *Ethics and the New Testament*, J. L. Houlden drew attention to the relative paucity of ethical material in Mark's Gospel. In so speaking, Houlden evaluated Mark's Gospel relative to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, each of which devotes considerably more space to the specific moral teaching of Jesus. Yet, as more recent treatments of Markan “ethics” have shown, it is not simply the ethical teaching of Jesus presented by Mark that has moral significance. Equally if not more important is the story-world into which Mark invites hearers and readers so as to shape or reshape, challenge or reinforce their attitudes and priorities, depending on their existing orientation. Moreover, as Allen Verhey points out, Mark’s focus on the theme of discipleship, especially discipleship patterned on the mission of Jesus, “makes the whole narrative a form of moral exhortation.” As a result, Mark’s narrative as a whole, but also any particular part within it, bristles with the potential to alter one’s perspective, transform understanding, provoke character evaluation, and reorient assumptions about the nature of reality and standard patterns of human relationships, all of which are either profoundly moral in and of themselves or have moral implications. In this respect, the programmatic summary in Mark 1:14–15 is instructive. Mark’s summary of Jesus’ proclamation of the good news concerning God (τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ θεοῦ), rather than from or about Caesar,

second-order activity: it is morality rendered self-conscious; it asks about the logic of moral discourse and action, about the grounds for judgment, about the anatomy of duty or the roots and structure of virtue.” See also Leander E. Keck, “Rethinking ‘New Testament Ethics,’” *JBL* 115 (1996): 7: “if morality describes and prescribes proper behavior as well as proscribes what is unacceptable, ethics is critical reflection on the prescribed and proscribed, the allowed and the forbidden, the urged and the discouraged.”


24 For an illuminating analysis of this Markan summary, see Christopher D. Marshall, *Faith as a Theme in Mark’s Narrative* (SNTSMS 64; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 34–54.

25 The anti- or counter-imperial dimension of much of the NT is now a scholarly commonplace. The crucial point is not that a Gospel, or Revelation, or one of Paul’s letters is anti-
centered on the fulfillment of time as a result of the pressing (and pressuring) encroachment of God’s reign, calls for radical attitudinal and behavioral reorientation ("repentance," which is not feeling remorseful) leading to the possibility of a life of faith—and a faithful life.

While the whole of Mark’s Gospel is morally meaningful, it is nevertheless the case that certain sections more obviously display Mark’s moral vision. One such section is the clearly demarcated narrative unit 8:22–10:52, which is bracketed by two stories of Jesus restoring sight to blind men.26 It is widely acknowledged that this central section is concerned with Jesus’ efforts to alter his disciples’ perception of and perspective on discipleship.27 As Richard Hays points out, this section is carefully structured around three three-part sequences in which (1) Jesus predicts his—that is, the Son of humanity’s—inevitable fate; (2) the disciples or representative disciples act in ways that reveal misunderstanding of his identity and mission; and (3) Jesus provides corrective instruction that reinforces the attitudes and behaviors that constitute authentic discipleship in the reign of God.28 Without subscribing to any particular hypothesis about Mark’s polemical purpose(s), one may reasonably suppose that Mark composed this section of his narrative with an eye to developments in the Jesus movement(s) of which he was aware.

Along the way, Jesus instructs his disciples (both actual and would-be) that to be followers of this recently perceived and confessed Messiah (Mark 8:27–29), they

imperial, since what is anti-imperial can so easily become imperialistic if the tables are turned. Mark’s Gospel is not only anti-imperial but anti-imperial on its own terms, that is, counter-imperialistic, because in the mission of Jesus the reign of God is displayed as qualitatively different from usual patterns of ruling. On Mark’s counter-imperial thrust, see, e.g., Craig A. Evans, Mark 8:27–16:20 (WBC 34B; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), lxxx–xci; Gerd Theissen, Gospel Writing and Church Politics: A Socio-rhetorical Approach (Hong Kong: Theology Division, Chung Chi College, 2001), 16–28; and Horsley, Hearing the Whole Story, esp. chs. 2 and 6.


must “renounce self” (8:34) and exercise “social reversal” (9:35; 10:43–44). In all likelihood, the language of voluntary social reversal in 9:35 and 10:43–44 means much the same as self-renunciation in 8:34. In an honor/shame culture, self-renunciation signified the voluntary relinquishment of status or rank, not the erasure of one’s identity. It had to do with how one perceived oneself in relation to others and therefore with how one interacted with others. So, each time that Jesus corrects his disciples’ misunderstanding, he addresses the basic issue of how interpersonal power is exercised within a network of social relationships. With ever-increasing clarity, Mark shows that an integral dimension of discipleship in the reign of God is the culture-subverting renunciation of honor, status, and rank rather than the culturally conditioned—as well as instinctive—impulse to arrogate to oneself the highest possible level of honor, status, and rank. And on what grounds? Mark might legitimately have had Jesus say that voluntary renunciation of status and deliberate social reversal result in more just and peaceful social relations. But the rationale he records Jesus providing follows a different, nonconsequentialist logic: “For even the Son of humanity came not to be served [as one with high honor

29 Sharyn Dowd points out that Mark 8:34 is a “second calling of disciples” (Reading Mark: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Second Gospel [Reading the New Testament; Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2000], 88). “The stakes are higher now because the disciples and the audience must decide whether to continue to follow, not only a preacher and healer, but also a life-giver whose way leads to a shameful death.”

30 Cf. Joanna Dewey, “‘Let Them Renounce Themselves and Take up Their Cross’: A Feminist Reading of Mark 8:34 in Mark’s Social and Narrative World,” BTB 34 (2004): 98–104. Dewey correctly notes that “Mark 8:34 is not an exhortation to suffering and victimage in general” (p. 103), but I think that self-renunciation in this saying means something more precise than renouncing one’s kinship group, as she contends. This is not to say that group or family loyalty may not be at stake. If Mark’s depiction of Jesus is anything to go by, his own self-renunciation consists not so much in renouncing family as in repudiating opportunities to avoid the shame of crucifixion. In addition, in Mark 8:22–10:52, it is reasonable to interpret the corrective instruction of Jesus in 8:34; 9:35; and 10:42–44 as mutually illuminating. Mark 1:18, 20 and 10:28–29 use the language of “leaving behind” or “abandonment” (ἀφίημι) rather than “renunciation” (ἀπαρνέομαι) for describing disruption of kinship ties as a result of loyalty to Jesus. Mark 10:31 is a reminder that social reversal is the fundamental feature of the life of discipleship. The study to which Dewey appeals in support of interpreting self-renunciation as renouncing kin is Bruce J. Malina, “‘Let Him Deny Himself’ (Mark 8:34 & Par): A Social Psychological Model of Self-Denial,” BTB 24 (1994): 106–19. On the basis of a Q/Thomas tradition about cross bearing that makes no reference to self-denial but stresses family friction (Matt 10:34–38; Luke 14:25–27; Gos. Thom. 55), Malina contends that both self-denial and kin-denial are parallel to taking up the cross. Even if this is granted, despite the connection between self-denial and cross bearing being much closer than that between kin-denial and cross bearing, this does not imply that self-denial and kin-denial are identical in meaning. So, although Malina makes a case for equating self-denial with kindenial, in the context of a first-century collectivist culture, his textual point of departure allows one to affirm only that self-denial and kin-denial are parallel “cross-bearing” costs of discipleship.
status would be entitled] but to serve [status-renunciation], and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).31 Yet whatever the rationale, the focus of Jesus’ teaching here has to do with reconceiving and reorganizing social interrelations within the reign of God. As Richard Horsley avers,

Jesus gets to specific instructions about political relations in the movement in [Mark] 10:42–44. That the point of this passage is the internal politics of the movement is often missed because the sanction on the teaching stated in [Mark] 10:45 has been so important to Christian faith in Christ’s death as a “ransom for many.” In Mark’s story, however, the saying about “the son of man” giving his life as a ransom is not the point of the episode but functions as a motive clause for the preceding teaching.32

In view of later developments within the Christian movement, it is significant that Jesus’ instruction on self-renunciation and social reversal was directed toward persons intent on enhancing their honor and status; it was not directed toward persons without hope of gaining honor and status. In this connection, Gerd Theissen’s observation in his lecture entitled “The Two Basic Values of the Primitive Christian Ethic: Love of Neighbour and Renunciation of Status” is noteworthy:

Thus in the Synoptic tradition humility is clearly “renunciation of status,” and this renunciation of status is bound up with a critical impetus against those who have a lofty status. In the framework of this tradition humility is not a virtue of the lowly who fit into their lowly status by subordinating themselves to rule. On the contrary, humility is an imitation of the ruler of the world who voluntarily renounces his status. Humility is the virtue of the powerful.33

So, although Markan language about self-denial and servanthood has been used to maintain—rather than unsettle—status distinctions, this was not Mark’s intent. Indeed, as Alberto de Mingo Kaminouchi argues in his exploration of Mark 10:32–45, Mark not only records Jesus’ subversion of powerful status by redefining greatness as service but also reveals, through his depiction of two representatives of Roman imperial power (Herod and Pilate), that “apparent rulers” (οἱ δοκοῦντες ἄρχειν) and “great ones” not only misuse their power but are also impotent in certain respects precisely because of their powerful status:

31 The logic of this saying is analogical rather than teleological; it appeals to an interpersonal code of loyalty rather than to perceived social or eschatological benefits.

32 Horsley, Hearing the Whole Story, 194. What Horsley neglects to say is that the motivational power of the “motive clause” derives from the manumission effected by the Son of humanity’s submission of his life.

33 Gerd Theissen, A Theory of Primitive Christian Religion (trans. John Bowden; London: SCM Press, 1999), 75–76 (emphasis mine). Here one detects traces of Theissen’s view that in early Christianity certain aristocratic values were adopted but also adapted; thus the Jesus movement contributed to a “charismatische Wertrevolution.” See Gerd Theissen, “Jesusbewegung als charismatische Wertrevolution,” NTS 35 (1989): 343–60. The crucial point is that self-renunciation (renunciation of status) was not intended to maintain hierarchical distinctions.
Mark wants to show the reader how power works. Power can be imagined as the property of the powerful. It is normally accepted that some people, like the rulers, have power. The vision presented by Mark in these two pericopes [about Herod and Pilate in Mark 6:14–29 and 15:1–15] is quite different. Power is represented as a network of relationships and expected behaviors in which a complex set of actors are engaged. The powerful do not do their will. . . . Reading both passages, the message that comes through is that power is a web in which everybody is trapped, even those who supposedly rule.34

As indicated above, Theissen identifies love of neighbor and renunciation of status as the two basic values of the early Christian ethic. But were these the two values basic for Mark? Hays thinks not. In his view, love is not a prominent theme in Mark’s Gospel and does not feature as a “distinctive mark of discipleship.”35 True, love does not feature explicitly in Jesus’ instructions to his disciples in 8:22–10:52. Yet in view of Jesus’ remark to the scribe in 12:34, “You are not far from the reign of God,” it would not be far-fetched to interpret Jesus’ teaching on self-renunciation and voluntary social reversal as manifestations of loving one’s neighbor as oneself. The dialogue between the scribe and Jesus in 12:28–34 reveals that, for Mark, (1) love of the one God together with love of neighbor as oneself constitutes the heart of the “word of God” (Torah; cf. Mark 7:1–13);36 (2) love of God and neighbor is of greater value than sacrifices ordained by God; and (3) understanding these interrelated insights puts one near the reign of God, which suggests that to progress beyond understanding to living in accordance with these two indivisible commandments is to enter God’s reign (cf. 9:47; 10:15, 23–27).

That Mark records Jesus interpreting love of the one God with all one’s being and love of neighbor as oneself as both the pinnacle of Torah and of greater value than the sacrificial system suggests that love is central to Mark’s moral vision. It is surely significant that Mark concludes this pericope by noting that no one dared to question Jesus further. What needs to be said—above all else—has been said. The next time Jesus is interrogated, it is by the high priest (14:60–61). Also significant is that almost immediately after this pericope featuring an insightful scribe, Mark records Jesus denouncing scribes who crave honor and honoring a destitute widow (12:38–44). Thus, were one in a position to ask Mark whether self-renunciation and voluntary social reversal expressed or enacted love of neighbor as oneself, it is difficult to imagine him responding in the negative. In any case, whether or not

35 Hays, Moral Vision, 84. Hays thinks it important that the only Markan pericope to address the theme of love explicitly occurs in a controversy discourse rather than in instruction to disciples.
love is the motivation for self-renunciation, both love of neighbor and voluntary social reversal fit neatly within a coherent moral vision.

If Mark’s Jesus-inspired moral vision may be said to be characterized by renunciation of status and “re-cognizing” service as greatness—which in turn may be regarded as expressions of love for one’s neighbor, the indispensable moral corollary of wholehearted love for the one God—this is not far from an ethic of peace. Although the immediate context of the mysterious combination of sayings in Mark 9:49–50 seems to indicate that Mark placed these sayings where he did solely on the basis of a series of verbal associations (fire, salt), the broader context is more revealing. The exhortation, “Have salt among yourselves and practice peace among yourselves” (ἔχετε ἐν ἑαυτοῖς ἅλα καὶ εἰρήνευτε ἐν ἀλλήλοις), is antithetical to the disciples’ dispute over who among them was greatest, which provokes this segment of Jesus’ corrective instruction (9:33–34). In place of self-aggrandizement, Jesus exhorts being peaceable or practicing peace. As Willard Swartley observes, “Drawing on the imagery of well-prepared salted sacrifices (Lev 2:13), Jesus calls for the self to be purified of evil and ambitious desires, and for his followers to desire to live peaceably with one another (vv. 49–50). This contrasts to the segment’s opening portrait of the disciples’ disputing with one another over who is the greatest.”

If enough has been said in favor of crediting Mark’s Gospel with displaying a peace-oriented or nonviolent moral vision, what is one to make of the motif of the “divine warrior” discerned by many within Mark’s narrative? A prominent theme in Jewish Scripture, the divine warrior motif reappears in the Synoptic Gospels as one means of explicating the identity and significance of Jesus. Yet it is not the presence of this motif so much as how it is used that counts. It may seem surprising that in Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics, Willard Swartley should give such prominence to the divine warrior motif in his treatment of Mark’s Gospel. Yet much is clarified if one reads his discussion there in light of his earlier book, Israel’s Scripture Traditions and the Synoptic Gospels: Story Shaping Story, which is a narrative and tradition-historical analysis of the common core of the Synoptic tradition. In the earlier work, Swartley shows how all three Synoptic Gospels were shaped to varying degrees by an interwoven complex of four scriptural traditions relating to God’s redeeming activity: (1) exodus, (2) conquest, (3) temple, and (4) kingship. The motif of the divine warrior inheres in each of these four traditions yet is most prominent in the first two. Swartley argues that the second tradition, which he designates “way-conquest,” is responsible for both the shape of Mark 8:27–10:52 and many of its key themes, including

39 Swartley, Covenant of Peace, 92–120.
the identity of Jesus as “Son of humanity.” Yet his argument is persuasive only because he demonstrates that, in addition to drawing on crucial scriptural traditions, Mark also transformed those traditions. Thus, although Swartley detects numerous echoes of the divine warrior, he shows how this motif is consistently reinterpreted nonviolently. “Mark’s Gospel,” he summarizes in *Covenant of Peace*, “utilizes divine warfare traditions, and transforms them by Jesus’ surprising victory through his acts of deliverance, confrontation of evil, and nonretaliation.”

Consonant with other aspects of his narrative, even Mark’s interpretive activity bespeaks a peace-oriented moral vision. But can one say the same about his eschatology?

**II. Perspectives on Mark’s Eschatology**

At the turn of the new millennium, John Carroll and three collaborators published a collection of studies entitled *The Return of Jesus in Early Christianity*. Introducing the first study, “The Parousia of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts,” Carroll observed:

> For all the signs of God’s activity in Jesus’ own life and words, in the end, one was still left waiting and hoping. Even the triumph of Easter left the agenda unfinished: Jesus may be installed in power by God’s own side in heaven, but life on earth continues much as before. So he will come again to complete his mission, calling evil to account and gathering the faithful into God’s eternal realm. This second coming, then, would differ dramatically from the first: he would come in power, in glory, and in triumph. None will escape his coming. The whole world—indeed, the whole universe—will take note.

Carroll takes it as given, first, that all three Synoptic Gospels and Acts envisage a return of Jesus and, second, that this return must differ dramatically from the first, leading Carroll to define his task as that of describing “the patterns of parou-

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41 Swartley, *Covenant of Peace*, 119. Swartley’s attention to ways in which Mark reworked traditions selected to interpret the mission of Jesus is perhaps the most significant difference between his treatment of the influence of the divine warrior tradition on Mark’s Gospel and that offered by Tremper Longman III and Daniel G. Reid, *God Is a Warrior* (Studies in Old Testament Biblical Theology; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), chs. 7–8. For a view similar to Swartley’s, at least with respect to Mark’s reworking, and even occasional reversal, of scriptural traditions, see Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord: Christological Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Mark* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992).


sia expectation in each of the synoptics. . . .” \(^\text{44}\) But in the case of Mark's Gospel, there are grounds for disputing each of Carroll's assumptions. First, nowhere does Mark refer explicitly to the parousia, and texts that refer to the future “coming” of that Son of humanity (of whom Daniel spoke) do not self-evidently refer to a return to the realm of history and nature, but may instead refer to a coming to God. Second, even if such texts are construed as referring to a so-called second coming to earth, how dramatically different from Mark's depiction of Jesus’ (past) mission must this “second coming” be before subverting the “first coming” and thereby demonstrating that the way of Jesus is not, ultimately, God’s way of working in the world? Too much of what is commonly asserted about Markan eschatology is incompatible with the relatively clear, if counterintuitive, description of how God’s reign is exercised in the mission of Jesus, who, although authoritative, was not autocratic and, although potent to effect transformation, was voluntarily vulnerable in the face of coercive violence. If, in fact, Mark did envisage a return of Jesus in the guise of the Son of humanity, must he have envisaged a second arrival as radically different from the first? And if so, would that not signify the failure of his first coming to deal with evil in the world?

Discussions of Markan eschatology often focus on the three future-oriented “Son-of-humanity” sayings in Mark 8:38; 13:26; and 14:62. \(^\text{45}\) Yet there are other future-oriented eschatological texts in Mark, \(^\text{46}\) as well as numerous other texts that are eschatological in the sense that they characterize Jesus’ mission in terms of fulfillment. For Mark, the mission of Jesus signified the dawn of eschatological fulfillment. Nevertheless, the prominence of Mark's future-oriented Son-of-humanity sayings by virtue of their placement in especially significant contexts suggests that, by focusing on these sayings, one is attending to an eschatological dimension of Mark's narrative that he intended to emphasize. \(^\text{47}\)

Despite the absence of ς παροσία in Mark’s Gospel, the most common interpretation of Mark 8:38; 13:26; and 14:62 is that these texts refer to the parousia, return, or second coming of Jesus. For example, according to Carroll:

\(^{44}\) Ibid.

\(^{45}\) How best to categorize the various Son-of-humanity sayings within the Synoptic traditions is disputed. See Yarbro Collins, *Cosmology and Eschatology*, 144–45. Although she favors classifying the various Son-of-humanity sayings by form and function, she acknowledges that the three-fold classification associated with Bultmann is illuminating with respect to Mark's Gospel. See Adela Yarbro Collins, “The Influence of Daniel on the New Testament,” in John J. Collins, *Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 97–98. I refer to “future-oriented” rather than “apocalyptic” Son-of-humanity sayings so as not to cloud their meaning by evoking prejudicial associations.

\(^{46}\) See Mark 9:42–49 (on entering “life” or the reign of God vs. Gehenna); 10:17–30, esp. 10:30 (“and in the coming age eternal life”); 12:18–27 (on resurrection); and 14:25.

Three times in Mark, Jesus taps Daniel’s vision of the Son of humanity (Dan 7:13–14) to portray his own future coming in glory (8:38), or with clouds and great power and glory (13:26; 14:62). As in Daniel 7, Mark assigns the parousia both negative and positive functions. Negatively, the majestic presentation of the Son of humanity renders judgment against evil; positively, it vindicates the Son of humanity (and with him, the chosen people), and it is the occasion for the gathering or constitution in power of the elect community of God’s faithful.48

Since the parousia of Jesus was believed by at least some early Christians to be imminent, it is conceivable that Mark shared this belief. But all too often Mark’s future-oriented Son-of-humanity sayings are interpreted in light of what is more unambiguously expressed in texts written by other early Christians, without careful attention to what Mark himself wrote or, perhaps more importantly, did not write.49 Yet it is not whether Mark anticipated an imminent parousia that is most significant; what is more significant, if Mark did anticipate an imminent parousia, is the nature or character of the returning Son of humanity. For it is not simply that interpreters have generally understood Mark 8:38; 13:26; and 14:62 as references to the parousia, but also that many have understood that returning Son of humanity to act in ways contrary to the moral vision already articulated, enacted, and embodied by that same Son of humanity. For example, commenting on Mark 8:38, Craig Evans writes:

God’s reign on earth will be brought to completion in the drama of the coming of the “son of man,” that heavenly humanlike figure described in Dan 7:13–14, accompanied by “holy angels.” . . . As the suffering “son of man,” Jesus will be dragged before Caiaphas and the Jewish council, and then before Pilate and his brutal soldiers; later, as the returning heavenly “son of man,” Jesus will enter Jerusalem as a conquering warrior.50

A similar perspective pervades Tat-Siong Benny Liew’s Politics of Parousia: Reading Mark Inter(con)textually.51 For Liew, Mark’s Gospel is an apocalyptic text, by which he means that Mark anticipated an imminent divine intervention to end the reign of evil and usher in the reign of God. Moreover, Mark’s apocalyptic emphasis is revealed in texts that anticipate a future kingdom (9:1; 10:29–30; 14:62),


49 Cf. Horsley, Hearing the Whole Story, 123: “In striking contrast to Paul’s letters and Matthew’s Gospel . . . Mark contains nothing that could be called the parousia of the Son of Man (i.e., identified as Jesus returning in judgment).” Yet Horsley considers that by using “Son of Man” of both Jesus and some other eschatological figure, Mark took “a decisive step” toward the idea of a “second coming” of Jesus (p. 128).

50 Evans, Mark 8:27–16:20, 27.

51 (BIS 42; Leiden: Brill, 1999).
in the so-called Markan apocalypse (ch. 13), and in the parable of the tenants (Mark 12:1–12). Liew nowhere provides a detailed analysis of Mark's apocalyptic texts, but by tracing his various references to “parousia-texts” one gains a sense of why he regards Mark's anticipated parousia as a violent and vindictive intervention. His main reason for describing the parousia in violent and vindictive terms is the prominence given to 12:9 within Mark's eschatological framework. Liew seems to have adopted the view of his doctoral co-director, Mary Ann Tolbert, who argued that 12:1–12 serves as a “plot synopsis” of 11:1–16:8. As a result, 12:9 is considered (by Tolbert and Liew) to be the key to Mark's eschatology, in light of which his future-oriented eschatological texts are understood.

Tolbert contends that Mark connected the prophetic discourse of ch. 13 with the parable of the tenants by structuring the beginning of the apocalyptic discourse in such a way as to recall the ending of the parable, where the rejected stone becomes the cornerstone. The remainder of ch. 13 explains how that reversal will come to pass. For Tolbert, the parabolic description of the lord of the vineyard's response to the killing of his son in 12:9 is the key to Mark's eschatological discourse; yet at the point where she discusses the parousia itself, it is described in wholly positive terms:

... [Q]uite unlike Matt. 25:31–46, the Gospel of Mark does not portray the coming as a judgment on the nations. Rather, the Son of man sends out the angels to bring together the elect “from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven” (Mark 13:27) in order to save them from the slaughter of the great tribulation (13:20). The coming is one of protection for those who have endured faithfully to the end (13:13). The meting out of divine punishment on the murderous authorities of this generation is unnecessary, for by plunging the world into that ultimate blood-bath of violence they bring down judgment on their own heads, securing their own demise. Rampant evil finally destroys even itself. The coming, then, is a saving, protective, and totally positive event; for Mark, it carries with it no threat of divine anger on the Christian community.

A question arises: How much interpretive weight is one able to place on one verb (ἀπολέσει) in a parable, especially since Mark 12:10 might be read exegetically to indicate that the manner of “destruction” is the reversal of rejection? Moreover, even if one accepts Tolbert's thesis that the parable of the tenants is a “plot synopsis” of 11:1–16:8, should what is said in parabolic form dictate how later prophetic utterances are understood or vice versa? There is also the question

52 Ibid., 46–47.
53 See ibid., 47, 87, 93, 103–4, 107, 120, 123, 125, 149.
55 Ibid., 237, 259.
56 Ibid., 265–66.
whether the coming of the Lord of the vineyard (not that of his killed son) equates to the coming Son of humanity in Mark 13:26 and 14:62.

Returning to Liew, there is good reason to question his presumption that Mark’s “parousia-texts” anticipate divine (or divinely authorized) violence and vindictive power. One may also question his concluding judgment that “Mark’s politics of parousia, by promising the utter destruction of both Jewish and Roman authorities upon Jesus’ resurrected return, is one that mimics or duplicates the authoritarian, exclusionary, and coercive politics of his colonizers.” Yet in making this judgment, Liew exposes a serious hermeneutical problem for any interpretation that envisages the parousia of the Son of humanity as bringing violence and vindictive retribution in its wake. For on this interpretation, either the inauguration of the reign of God by the suffering Son of humanity was ineffectual, so that the returning Son of humanity must revert to an old modus operandi of brute force and violent retribution, or Mark’s christology suffers from something akin to dissociative identity disorder.

Perhaps an alternative interpretation of Mark’s future-oriented Son-of-humanity sayings resolves this problem. Some scholars deny that any of these sayings refer to the parousia of Jesus and interpret 13:26 in particular as an allusive reference to the impending destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. Recent advocates of this interpretation include R. T. France, N. T. Wright, Thomas Hatina, and Keith Dyer. These scholars interpret the cosmic portents of 13:24–27 as tradi-

57 Liew, Politics of Parousia, 149.
58 Dissociative identity disorder is a more recent label for what was once described as multiple personality disorder. Cf. Wink, Human Being, 170: “The first coming [of the Human Being] was in obscurity. The second will be ‘seen’ by everyone. The church identifies this figure as Jesus, but it is not the Jesus we know from the gospel story. This Jesus comes in Roman ‘triumph,’ gathering the elect, judging the wrongdoers, avenging God’s honor, vindicating his execution.”
tional scriptural imagery of divine judgment against rebellious nations, except that, as a prophecy of judgment spoken by Jesus, it is directed against Jerusalem or at least its leadership. So, rather than referring to divine judgment at the end of history, Jesus was referring to divine judgment both within history and within a short time frame (Mark 13:30; cf. 9:1).60

Is there anything to commend this interpretation, at least with respect to Mark 13:26?61 First, it does not import the concept of parousia into a text from which the term is absent. Second, it takes seriously Mark's use of scriptural imagery in a first-century Jewish context. Third, it respects the broader literary context of Mark 13, which is focused on Jerusalem and the fate of the temple. And fourth, it makes sense of the solemn utterance in Mark 13:30 that “all these things” (ταῦτα πάντα) will have occurred within a generation.

On the other hand, this interpretation does not necessarily resolve the tension between what is anticipated in the (near) future and Mark’s moral vision. When reading some of these scholars’ interpretive comments on Mark’s future-oriented Son-of-humanity sayings, one encounters liberal intonation of two terms, “judgment” and “vindication,” indeed, “vindication through judgment.”62 In and of themselves, neither divine judgment nor vindication is problematic. In a first-century Jewish worldview, God would not be God if not the judge of the world,63 and divine vindication of one who suffered unjustly was a scriptural hope. What is problematic, given the moral vision of the Son of humanity (as displayed in Mark’s Gospel), is to view the carnage associated with the destruction of Jerusalem as the historical locus of his vindication through judgment.64


60 Randall Otto goes so far as to equate the parousia with the destruction of Jerusalem (“Dealing with Delay: A Critique of Christian Coping,” BTB 34 [2004]: 150–60).

61 Crispin Fletcher-Louis traces this interpretive tradition to John Lightfoot (1658) and includes George B. Caird as a more recent exponent. See Crispin H. T. Fletcher-Louis, “Jesus, the Temple and the Dissolution of Heaven and Earth,” in Apocalyptic in History and Tradition (ed. Christopher Rowland and John Barton; JSPSup 43; London/New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 118–19.


63 See, e.g., Marius Reiser, Jesus and Judgment: The Eschatological Proclamation in Its Jewish Context (trans. Linda M. Maloney; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997). Reiser’s study is concerned with the historical Jesus, not Mark, but one important point he makes is that Jesus’ proclamation of judgment was not motivated by the desire for vengeance.

One can accept that the destruction of Jerusalem vindicated or showed to be right the prophet who prophesied its demise. But on this alternative interpretation, one is required by some representative proponents to accept that an early Christian writer—in this case, Mark—envisioned the violence visited upon Jerusalem to be the work of the same God who authorized the nonviolent mission of Jesus. France, Wright, and Hatina contend that the future-oriented Son-of-humanity sayings are concerned not with the literal end of the world but with the end of the old order. Yet judgment by indiscriminate destruction belongs squarely to the old order, not the new order inaugurated via the mission of Jesus.65 The decisive part of Wright’s discussion of Mark 13 (and parallels), insofar as it is devoted to 13:24–31, is entitled “The Vindication of the Son of Man,”66 but occasionally one wonders whether “The Vindictiveness of the Son of Man” might not have been an equally apt heading. There are times when Wright can be understood as saying that Jesus was warning Jewish leaders of the inevitable natural consequence of rebelling against Rome, but he also speaks of divine judgment being exercised through Rome’s destruction of Jerusalem.67 So, too, Rome’s destruction of Jerusalem constitutes God’s vindication of Jesus and his followers.

There is something incongruous about this interpretation. Wright insists that Jesus’ own prophetic agenda was a challenge to Israel not to take the road of military rebellion, but he also insists that it is precisely through military violence

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65 Here the “old order” is not the OT. In fairness to France, it should be noted that the association between vindication of the Son of humanity and divine judgment through Rome’s destruction of Jerusalem is not a prominent feature of his interpretation.

66 Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, 360–65. For a critique of Wright’s interpretation of apocalyptic eschatology, primarily as it relates to Jesus, see Dale C. Allison, Jr., “Jesus & the Victory of Apocalypse,” in Jesus & the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N. T. Wright’s Jesus and the Victory of God (ed. Carey C. Newman; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 126–41, 310–13. One of many points Allison makes is that eschatological language can be associated with the transformation—rather than abolition—of the created order. On the interpretation of Mark’s future-oriented Son-of-humanity sayings as referring to the parousia, Allison’s emphasis on restoration or transformation is more in keeping with Mark’s moral vision.

(against a population largely innocent of rebellion against Rome) that Jesus’ vindication would be demonstrated. In other words, the historic mission of Jesus was nonviolent, but the vindication of his mission was via divinely authorized violence. Incongruity does not necessarily imply interpretive error, yet in this case it does pose a hermeneutical conundrum, which is not resolved simply by pointing to the frequency with which *Yhwh*’s judgments of Israel in the past were understood to feature destruction by foreign forces.

Another potential resolution of the tension between moral vision and eschatology in Mark’s Gospel might be found in William Telford’s contention that, while Mark took over from tradition the future-oriented “Son of Man” sayings, he nevertheless transformed or “eclipsed” them by means of his emphasis on the suffering Son of Man. According to Telford, Mark was heir to a primitive Jewish-Christian tradition that anticipated the imminent return of Jesus as “the victorious apocalyptic Son of Man.” This tradition equated soteriology with eschatology; in other words, salvation was anticipated at the parousia. However, the delay of the parousia forced Mark to reinterpret this perspective along Pauline lines by associating salvation with Jesus’ suffering and death, thereby diminishing (or perhaps obliterating) the traditional association of salvation with the parousia. In Telford’s view,

What we discern in Mark . . . is the claim that Jesus as Son of Man had not only already begun to exercise his eschatological role on earth, by virtue of the authority demonstrated in his teaching and activity (2.10, 28) but had done so supremely by means of his pre-ordained suffering, death and resurrection (Mk 8.31; 10.45). It is no accident then that Mark 10.45 . . . comes at the climax of the central section of the Gospel (Mk 8.27–10.45), and immediately prior to the start of the passion narrative. . . . The fact of Jesus’ death has acted back on the Messianic theology of the primitive tradition, and as a result the apocalyptic Son of Man has been transformed into the suffering Son of Man.70

While Telford accurately identifies the Markan focus on the suffering and death of Jesus, he makes Mark out to be a less than competent revisionist. After all, the pericope that begins with the first suffering Son-of-humanity saying (Mark 8:31) ends with the first future-oriented Son-of-humanity saying (8:38), leading to Wolfgang Schrage’s judgment that “Mark consciously associates the Son of man

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70 Ibid., 114.
who suffered and rose with the Son of man who is to come (8:31, 38).” Moreover, the final future-oriented Son-of-humanity saying occurs at a prominent juncture within the passion narrative itself (14:62), sealing as it does Jesus’ demise. Neither in Mark 8:38 nor in Mark 14:62 is there any indication that “the apocalyptic Son of Man has been transformed into the suffering Son of Man,” as Telford claims.

Telford also presumes that Mark incorporated from tradition aspects with which he sought to take issue. While this is not, in principle, implausible, one would expect that if Mark aimed to revise aspects of his tradition along the lines suggested by Telford, it would be more obvious. Telford sees Mark’s soteriology as similar to, and probably influenced by, Pauline thought, yet Paul retained the notion of future salvation despite his emphasis on the already accomplished liberation brought about by Jesus’ death and resurrection (see Phil 3:20–21; Rom 5:1–11; 13:11). So even if Mark had been influenced by Pauline thought to give prominence to the soteriological significance of Jesus’ suffering and death, this would not necessarily lead him to elide or suppress hope associated with the future-oriented Son-of-humanity sayings.

Despite my reservations about aspects of Telford’s argument, it is probably correct to say that the accent in Mark’s Gospel falls on what has already been accomplished in the mission of Jesus rather than on anticipated consummation in the future. As Horsley puts it, “Mark’s story displays a greater urgency and intensity about deliverance that is already happening. In Mark the long-awaited renewal of Israel is already beginning. Mark’s story is thus more focused on fulfillment and kingdom already underway, already present, and far less on the future, however imminent.” In this connection, there is much to be said for the view, advocated by such scholars as R. H. Lightfoot, Timothy Radcliffe, and Ched Myers, that Mark’s future-oriented Son-of-humanity sayings find their resolution in Mark’s passion narrative.

Yet as illuminating as the parallels between prophetic utterances and narrative resolution are, especially in Mark 13/14–15, the note of eschatological expectation lingers beyond the close of Mark’s Gospel; eschatological anticipation is not entirely resolved intratextually. As Joel Marcus notes, “The Markan corre-

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73 Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story*, 126–27. Horsley contests an “apocalyptic” reading of Mark and is here contrasting Mark’s Gospel, which he associates with “ordinary people,” with Judean apocalyptic literature, which he associates with scribal circles affiliated with ruling elites.

spondences between prophecies and narrative fulfillments . . . do not eliminate the note of future expectation. In fact, for Mark the belief that the eschatological fulfillment began in Jesus’ ministry probably feeds the sense of imminent expectation. . . .”75 Moreover, Schrage is probably correct that “Mark was well aware . . . that neither a theology of the cross (theologia crucis) nor a Christian life following in the footsteps of the crucified Jesus can be maintained without hope for an ultimate consummation.”76 Yet such hope need not have been more specific than the following: first, that the same God present and active in the mission of Jesus had revealed Jesus’ way to be God’s way (vindication via resurrection); second, that God’s vindication of Jesus had demonstrated an ongoing commitment to work in the world in ways analogous to the way of Jesus—hence the need for disciples faithful to Jesus’ moral vision; third, that God is responsible for bringing to completion that which was inaugurated in the mission of Jesus; and fourth, that that resolution on God’s part will be coherent with, rather than discordant from, the way of Jesus. The vindication-through-resurrection of the crucified One, perceived in faith, summons fragile disciples to continue along the path of vulnerable discipleship in the expectation that the God who both authorized and vindicated the crucified One will effect similar transformation through them. In turn, this life journey of discipleship, though costly at various levels, authenticates this particular faith perception.

Perhaps the mythical character of Mark’s narrative, as described by John Riches, serves notice that one should not expect to resolve certain tensions within this Gospel.77 In his finely nuanced analysis, Riches identifies an inherent “tensions in Mark’s cosmology,”78 which is the result of two incompatible yet intertwined mythical explanations for the presence of evil in the world and, corresponding to these conflicting cosmologies, two forms of eschatological expectation wrestling for supremacy, so to speak, within Mark’s narrative. As mythical narrative—that is, narrative in which a divine–human encounter is recounted with a view to reinforcing or challenging the worldview and conduct of its audience(s)—Mark’s Gospel exhibits two competing cosmologies or views of reality, especially with respect to the origins of evil and its (eventual) vanquishment. According to Riches, one of these cosmologies, the “cosmic dualist” worldview, explains the presence of evil in the world by recourse to malevolent and hostile cosmic forces, whereas the alternative, “forensic” worldview understands evil to be the natural consequence of human disobedience.79 The “cosmic dualist” cosmology envisages

75 Marcus, Mark 1–8, 72.
76 Schrage, Ethics of the NT, 139.
78 Riches, “Conflicting Mythologies,” 30, 49.
79 Here Riches acknowledges his dependence on Martinus C. de Boer, “Paul and Jewish
the vanquishing of evil via cosmic battle, whereas the “forensic” cosmology anticipates final judgment of human beings on the basis of their conduct. Each of these conflicting cosmologies is detectable in Mark’s narrative; indeed, as Riches demonstrates, it is possible to offer plausible interpretations of the Gospel by focusing solely on one view of reality or the other. Riches considers that the second, “forensic” mythology gains the upper hand toward the latter stages of Mark’s narrative, but he does not claim that in doing so it annuls the first, which is clearly evident in the earlier sections of the Gospel. For Riches, both mythologies are required to interpret different aspects of Mark’s narrative as a whole.

If Riches is right, perhaps one should simply accept that the tension between moral vision and eschatology in Mark is the necessary by-product of “conflicting mythologies.” The eschatological scenario associated with Mark’s future-oriented Son-of-humanity sayings belongs to one mythology, whereas his moral vision is associated with what Riches understands to be “Mark’s primary focus . . . the struggle for the human will”—in short, an expression of another mythology. It is tempting to view Mark’s future-oriented Son-of-humanity sayings as part and parcel of the cosmic-dualist mythology that makes sense of Jesus’ confrontation with demonic forces in the earlier parts of Mark’s Gospel. On this view, Mark envisages that the Son of humanity referred to in Mark 8:38; 13:26; and 14:62 will ultimately vanquish the suprapersonal forces that oppress the world. It is also tempting to connect Mark’s nonviolent moral vision with the second, “forensic” mythology, especially in view of Riches’s contention that this second view of reality gradually becomes dominant in Mark’s narrative.

Without dismissing outright the possibility that Riches’s proposal enables one to resolve the tension between Mark’s moral vision and his eschatology, two points deserve consideration. First, Riches is more confident (and, indeed, more convincing) that both “conflicting mythologies” operate within, and thereby “interanimate,” the dynamic of Mark’s narrative than that one eventually emerges dominant. One suspects that to resolve this dialectical tension in Mark’s narrative would rob it of its inherent dynamism. Related to this, one wonders whether Riches’s contention that the second, “forensic” mythology becomes the dominant worldview in the latter part of Mark’s narrative will find support among Markan scholars.


80 Riches, “Conflicting Mythologies,” 47.

81 Marcus (Mark 1–8, 72) considers that “cosmic apocalyptic eschatology,” as described by de Boer, “fits Mark’s narrative perfectly,” so it will be interesting to see how he responds to Riches’s thesis in the second volume of his commentary.
A second consideration that gives one pause is that Mark’s future-oriented Son-of-humanity sayings downplay “cosmic-dualist” motifs and in certain respects seem more aligned with Riches’s “forensic” mythology. As Yarbro Collins points out:

It is striking . . . that the portrayals of the coming of the Son of Man do not emphasize the motif of battle with foreign powers and eschatological adversaries or the motif of cosmic transformation. . . . In Jesus’ response to the high priest, the remark “You will see the Son of Man . . .” suggests that the arrival of the Son of Man will vindicate Jesus in some way, but the punishment of those who have rejected him is not thematized in this context. Rather, the arrival of the Son of Man is linked with the judgment of the individual followers of Jesus in Mark 8:38 and with the gathering of the elect in Mark 13:27.82

Riches himself concedes that Mark’s future-oriented Son-of-humanity sayings omit motifs commonly associated with “cosmic dualist” eschatology, and at one point he associates Mark 14:62 with “forensic” or “restorationist” eschatology. As a result, it seems prudent not to attribute Mark’s future-oriented Son-of-humanity sayings to one mythology and Mark’s moral vision to another. Yet even if one decides that Mark’s moral vision and eschatology do not coexist without tension, it does seem fair to say that these elements in Mark’s narrative “interanimate” one another to the extent that Mark’s eschatology is (re)animated by his moral vision.

**Conclusion**

This preliminary probing of the relation between moral vision and eschatology in Mark’s Gospel disallows definitive conclusions. The traditional parousia interpretation of Mark’s future-oriented Son-of-humanity sayings has not (yet) been overturned.83 On the other hand, the main alternative interpretation of these sayings has not relieved the tension between Mark’s moral vision and his eschatology, except perhaps in Dyer’s work. Both interpretations incline toward envisaging God resorting to violent retribution to achieve the divine purpose, despite Mark’s vastly different conception of God’s way of working in the world via the mission of Jesus. Telford’s view that Mark “eclipsed” future-oriented Son-of-humanity (i.e., parousia) sayings by means of suffering Son-of-humanity sayings does not do justice to the narrative pattern of Mark’s various Son-of-humanity sayings, nor is his rationale for Mark’s doing this compelling. Riches’s notion of “conflicting mytholo-

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gies” is suggestive, but in this context it serves mainly as a reminder that one must acknowledge that in a narrative such as Mark’s Gospel, not all tensions may be resolvable. Nevertheless, even in the absence of definitive conclusions, the following points seem defensible.

First, the Gospel according to Mark deserves to be read on its own terms, not simply as a representative of what was believed by early Christians generally. In particular, Markan eschatology should not be interpreted from a Matthean perspective. Whatever the nature of the relation between the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, Mark’s eschatological outlook is markedly more peaceful. If Mark was familiar with Pauline traditions, as seems likely, the same might be said of Mark with respect to Paul’s eschatology, especially if one includes 2 Thessalonians among Paul’s authentic letters. In view of Mark’s willingness to rework scriptural traditions, there is no reason to think that he was unwilling to rework early Christian traditions. So, with respect to eschatology, Mark should be permitted to make his own mark.

Second, given Mark’s christologically focused moral vision, it is reasonable to appeal to his portrayal of Jesus’ nonviolent mission and message as a criterion for evaluating his eschatology. This seems unobjectionable at a hermeneutical level, but I suggest that even at the level of exegesis Mark’s moral vision ought to function as a check on what one asserts about his eschatology. While it is conceivable that Mark held inconsistent, even incompatible, convictions, one should not presume this to be so. Only if what Mark discloses about his eschatological expectations is clearly incongruous with his narrative account of the mission of Jesus should one concede that his eschatology conflicts with his moral vision. Whichever interpretation of Mark’s future-oriented Son-of-humanity sayings one finds compelling, what stands out in Mark 8:38; 13:26; and 14:62 is the absence of vindictive retribution. This is not to say that judgment is not intimated in Mark 8:38 and 13:24–27. But in view of the paradoxical way in which God is shown to work through Jesus’ mission and the counterintuitive nature of significant aspects of


85 Here I echo Dyer, Prophecy on the Mount, 260.

86 Cf. Wink, Human Being, 13–16, where he announces that he privileges Jesus’ critique of “domination” as his principal hermeneutical criterion for discerning what was revelatory about Jesus. On Jesus’ nonviolent confrontation against the “Domination System,” see Walter Wink, Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

87 Horsley (Hearing the Whole Story, 11–21) highlights Mark’s ambiguities, inconsistencies, and incongruities—not all of which are unintentional. An illuminating history of post-Enlightenment Markan criticism could probably be written by focusing on the various explanations offered for perceived tensions and inconsistencies in Mark’s Gospel.
Jesus’ moral teaching, one should be open to the possibility that Mark’s understanding of divine judgment envisaged something more creative and restorative than the standard retributive forms of judgment with which he was undoubtedly familiar. To my mind, tension between moral vision and eschatology inheres not so much in Mark’s narrative itself as in interpretations that fail to attend carefully to Mark on his own terms.

Third, present-day squeamishness about violent retribution does not validate interpretive violation; in other words, concerns about eschatological vengeance do not legitimize the coercion of nonretributive meaning from texts that foresee divinely authorized retribution. Things are complicated, however, by the fact that it is Mark’s own narrative—perhaps more than any other early Christian text apart from the Sermon on the Mount—that has inculcated suspicion about the moral value and validity of violence.

Finally, no less than Jesus’ original disciples within Mark’s narrative, we find it difficult to imagine that violence and coercive power can ultimately be vanquished by anything other than greater violence and coercive power. Yet that is precisely the logic falsified by the paradoxically transforming power revealed in and by Mark’s story of the crucified One.