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# Narrative Atonement Theology in the Gospel of Mark

Julie M. Smith

Since each of the four New Testament Gospels contains an account of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, it is perplexing that they receive so little attention in discussions of the Atonement: thinkers both ancient and modern are more likely to turn to Leviticus, Isaiah, or Paul's letters than they are to the actual accounts of Jesus's death. But the Gospels—particularly Mark's Gospel as the oldest canonized account of the life and death of Jesus Christ—surely deserve attention when thinking about the concept of atonement. Yet at the level of discourse,<sup>1</sup> Mark is almost silent on the meaning of Jesus's death: save a line here or there,<sup>2</sup> reasons for the death—and the impact of that death on humanity—are barely mentioned in the text, and these scant wisps of discourse-level

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1. By “discourse,” I refer to words spoken by the narrator, Jesus, or other characters in the text. I use “narrative” to refer to the stories in the text. Sometimes, truths can be revealed on the level of narrative that are not mentioned on the level of discourse. For example, when Jesus multiplies loaves and fishes in Mark 6:30–44, the narrative implicitly identifies Jesus with the Lord who provides manna during the Exodus (see Ex. 16). But there is nothing in the discourse in Mark 6:30–44—no words by the narrator, by Jesus, or by others in the story—that says anything about Jesus's identity. By contrast, we can imagine a discourse where Peter responds to the feeding by saying to Jesus, “You are like the Lord who fed his people in the wilderness.” In that case, the discourse would make the connection specific. Part of Mark's literary art is to reveal on the level of narrative many things that remain concealed on the level of discourse.

2. See Mark 10:43–45, which can be read as support for the ransom theory and the moral exemplar theory. See also Peter J. Scaer, “The Atonement in Mark's Sacramental Theology,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 72 (July 2008): 227–42.

atonement theology are inadequate to the importance of the topic, especially since on the three occasions<sup>3</sup> when Jesus predicts his suffering and death and shows their necessity, neither Jesus himself nor Mark explains their meaning.

But that does not signify that Mark is barren ground for efforts to harvest meaning from Jesus's death. We just need to orient our gaze away from discourse and toward narrative. In the last few decades, scholars have increasingly examined Mark's Gospel as a narrative, looking for ways in which his message is conveyed through the stories that he tells about Jesus.<sup>4</sup> Recent research emphasizing the origin of Mark's Gospel as an oral performance designed for storytelling<sup>5</sup> has further invigorated the idea that this text should be interpreted with close attention to its narrative. One advantage of a narrative approach is that it acknowledges that Mark is primarily a storyteller and not a systematic theologian.

This essay applies a narrative focus specifically to the meaning of Jesus's death and seeks to identify narrative atonement theology in the Gospel of Mark. Mark describes Jesus's death quite briefly: "And Jesus cried with a loud voice, and gave up the ghost" (Mark 15:37). But then Mark recounts three events that take place immediately after Jesus dies. By looking closely at these three brief stories, we will see how Mark uses each one to explain the meaning of Jesus's atoning death. And we will find that each story yields greater light when refracted through the prism of Jesus's baptism.

### **First Reaction: The Temple Veil**

Immediately after Jesus dies, the veil of the temple is torn in two from top to bottom (Mark 15:38).<sup>6</sup> This veil was the barrier between the main area

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3. See Mark 8:31; 9:31; and 10:33–34; compare Mark 9:12 and 14:49.

4. See David M. Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

5. See Richard A. Horsley, Jonathan A. Draper, John Miles Foley, and Werner H. Kelber, *Performing the Gospel: Orality, Memory, and Mark: Essays Dedicated to Werner Kelber* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006).

6. There is some debate as to whether Mark is describing the inner or outer curtain of the temple. The weight of evidence implies that it is the inner curtain (see Daniel M. Gurtner, "LXX Syntax and the Identity of the NT Veil," *Novum Testamentum* 47 [January 1, 2005]: 344–53): (1) the letter to the Hebrews takes the rent curtain to be the inner one (see Heb. 6:19, 9:3, and 10:19–20), and (2) the fact that there is no theological symbolism in the outer curtain also

of the temple and the Holy of Holies (see Ex. 26:33), which was the sacred space that could be entered only once per year and only by the high priest. It was the appointed site where the Lord would visit his people, sitting on the mercy seat (see Ex. 25:22). Its rending signifies that this most sacred of spaces is now accessible to all people because of Jesus's death. The barrier between God and humans has been torn asunder. Access to the divine is no longer limited to one person and to one day of the year, but is now available to all as a direct result of the death of Jesus. The fact that the rending of the veil is the very first thing that Mark mentions after Jesus's death highlights its importance.

The one day when the high priest was permitted to enter the Holy of Holies was on the Day of Atonement (see Lev. 16). Via the ripping of the veil, Mark implies that Jesus's death is the day of atonement<sup>7</sup> and that his death has an atoning effect. Because there were cherubim woven onto the temple curtain (see Ex. 36:35) and because the Holy of Holies was the place where the Lord could be present, it is possible to think of those cherubim as the embroidered equivalent of the fiery cherubim who guarded the Garden of Eden after the Fall (see Gen. 3:24). The rending of the veil thus suggests that the cherubim are no longer performing that function. On that interpretation, because of the death of Jesus, humans can once again enter the presence of God. To be sure, this development is something of a double-edged sword: entering the Holy of Holies was regarded as dangerous (Ex. 19:12, 21; 20:18–19; 28:43; Lev. 16:2, 13; and Isaiah 6:5 describe the danger inherent in the divine presence); surely the unworthy would be in grave danger if they attempted to approach the Lord. It is unlikely that the average Israelite would have desired to enter the Holy of Holies. While the concept of entering the symbolic presence of the Lord might have been terrifying, this way of reading Mark's message shows that the death of Jesus with its concomitant atonement makes it possible. Following Jesus can be terrifying in Mark's Gospel (see Mark 5:17, 5:30, 6:49, and especially 13:9), but the implicit promise is that Jesus will support his disciples and

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makes it more likely that the inner curtain is in view. However, to the extent that the curtains are symbolically similar (both restrict access to the worthy only and both suggest the heavens/creation), then choosing between the two may not matter.

7. In Mark 2:19–20, Jesus taught that his disciples did not fast, but they would fast on the day when he was taken from them. Given that the only mandated fast in the law of Moses was on the Day of Atonement, this would have been Mark's audience's first hint that Jesus's death would be a figurative Day of Atonement.

that his death will make it possible for them to enter into the divine presence without fatal effect; Isaiah 6:5–7 presents the idea that atoning action allows the unworthy to endure the divine presence. The invitation for all to enter the Holy of Holies—which, presumably, is not an invitation that will endanger their lives—itself implies an atoning aspect to Jesus’s death.

The symbolic nature of the rending of the veil is readily apparent not only because of the symbolism of the veil itself, but as a result of how Mark weaves the ripping into the story: telling the audience about the veil requires Mark to abruptly shift the narrative to a different geographical location and then just as quickly to bring the audience back to the foot of the cross. Further, no one in the story is aware of the rending of the veil—this is information for the listening or reading audience only. Mark may imply that God has ripped the veil because the rip starts at the top of the curtain and because it is described with a passive verb form, something often used to connote divine action.<sup>8</sup> The idea that Jesus’s death permits access to God’s presence is a key component of Mark’s theology of the Atonement.<sup>9</sup> So through the ripping of the veil, Mark presents a profound insight into the meaning of Jesus’s death and its atoning action, particularly considering that it is narrated in a mere dozen Greek words.

One of those words is the verb *schizō*, which Mark uses to describe what happens to the veil. He uses this rare verb,<sup>10</sup> which is vivid and violent,<sup>11</sup> only one other time—to characterize the opening of the heavens immediately after Jesus is baptized. The opening of the heavens also removes a barrier between God and humanity. The two occurrences of *schizō* invite us to compare the baptism and the death,<sup>12</sup> with further encouragement coming from the fact that the only time in Mark’s

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8. See Matthew L. Bowen, “‘Thy Will Be Done’: The Savior’s Use of the Divine Passive,” in *The Sermon on the Mount in Latter-day Scripture: The 39th Annual BYU Sydney B. Sperry Symposium*, ed. Gaye Strathearn, Thomas A. Wayment, and Daniel L. Belnap (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010), 230–48.

9. This idea is also taken up in other texts: see especially Hebrews 9 but also Hebrews 6:19–20 and 10:19–20. Also, see Revelation 11:19 and 15:5, which picture the opening of the temple.

10. *Schizō* is used only nine times in the New Testament; by way of comparison, *anoigō*, the common word for “open,” occurs seventy-five times in the New Testament. Both Matthew and Luke change *schizō* to *anoigō* in their accounts of the baptism (see Matt. 3:16 and Luke 3:21); in so doing, they lose the link to the rending of the temple veil (for which they still use *schizō*).

11. See Robert G. Bratcher and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator’s Handbook on the Gospel of Mark* (Leiden: Brill, 1961), 28.

12. See Daniel M. Gurtner, “The Rending of the Veil and Markan Christology: ‘Unveiling’ the HUIOS THEOU (Mark 15:38–39),” *Biblical Interpretation* 15,

Gospel where Jesus mentions his baptism, he uses it as a metaphor for his death (see Mark 10:38). Mark encourages his audience to interpret the rending of the temple veil in light of the rending of the heavens, and thus the death in light of the baptism. By presenting masses of people (“all”) coming from the south for baptism (Mark 1:5), while Jesus comes for baptism as a lone figure from the north (Mark 1:9), Mark presents Jesus as the embodiment of all of Israel,<sup>13</sup> as a representative for all of humanity. In Mark’s Gospel, the postbaptismal vision appears to be experienced by Jesus alone, so the fact that the death of Jesus literally opens up access to the divine presence for all people, and not just Jesus, teaches something about Mark’s understanding of the Atonement.

The entire scene can similarly be read as a “rewinding” of history with Jesus as the new Adam. So this suggests that at his death, he is also acting on behalf of all people. Both the baptism and the death have the same narrative pattern, with the main event narrated only briefly and greater attention given to the results. The several reactions to the baptism parallel the several reactions to the death.<sup>14</sup> Echoing backwards through Mark, the rent veil echoes Jesus’s torn flesh, echoes the heavens ripped after Jesus’s baptism—all instances where old wineskins ripped under the pressure of new wine.<sup>15</sup> Jesus’s death ends the need for a high priest, now that everyone has access to the Holy of Holies—and a good thing, too, since the high priest just rent his own clothes in fury at Jesus’s blasphemy (Mark 14:63). Similarly, at Jesus’s baptism, the rent heavens dethrone the old order of things under John, who had recognized that a stronger one was coming (Mark 1:7). Both rendings are divine actions: after the baptism, the Spirit tears through the heavens to descend upon Jesus (Mark 1:10); after the death, God’s action rends the veil, implying that neither the baptism nor the death were random events but divinely orchestrated ones,<sup>16</sup> a point further emphasized by how the death follows the pattern set by the baptism.

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no. 3 (2007): 292–306. See also David Ulansey, “The Heavenly Veil Torn: Mark’s Cosmic Inclusio,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110 (Spring 1991): 123–25.

13. See Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001), 73.

14. Hebrews 10:20 takes the concept further than Mark does by identifying the veil with Jesus’s flesh.

15. Mark 2:21 uses the noun form of *schizō* (Greek: *schisma*; KJV: “rent”) in the context of the inability to mix the new with the old.

16. Some recent interpretations of Mark’s Gospel suggest that the entire text should be regarded as an effort to show that there is nothing embarrassing about Jesus’s death and that a key way in which this is accomplished is through

After Jesus's baptism, the Spirit descends upon him. Jesus's death scene is full of references to descent, the most significant being the rent in the veil which runs from top to bottom, but with no fewer than six other references to downward motion at his death scene.<sup>17</sup> In the baptism scene, it is clear that the descent of the Spirit represents a new bestowal of God's power, and at the death, the rip in the veil makes possible increased access to that power. But this time, the new power is not restricted to Jesus: it extends to all people. His death broadens the access to God's Spirit that he alone enjoyed previously. In both stories, Isaiah's plea "Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens, that thou wouldest come down" (Isa. 64:1) is fulfilled as the presence and power of God are accessible on earth in new ways.

The manner in which Mark narrates Jesus's temptations in the wilderness implies that they are a direct result of his baptism; the Spirit that descended into Jesus immediately casts him into the wilderness (Mark 1:12), using the same verb found in the Septuagint (second-century BC Greek translation of the Old Testament) when Adam and Eve were cast out of the garden after the Fall (Gen. 3:24). So the result of Jesus being baptized is that he suffers the same consequence that Adam and Eve suffered,<sup>18</sup> despite the fact that he did not sin as they had. Similarly, he dies on the cross because of charges that do not apply to him (Mark 14:56)—charges that stem from his effort to restore to other people the wholeness that he already enjoys. Jesus's willingness to experience suffering that he has not merited is emphasized in both stories. And because his death restores access to God's presence, his death overcomes the effects of the Fall that buffeted him after his baptism, and thus we have come full circle. Jesus is baptized, which opens the heavens, and Jesus dies, which opens symbolic access to the presence of God, but both of these happen only because he is willing to suffer to benefit others.

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evidence of Jesus's and God's foreknowledge of Jesus's death. See Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993).

17. The references include: the mockery that Jesus would tear *down* the temple (Mark 15:29; KJV: "destroyeth"), the taunt that he should come *down* from the cross (this is referenced twice; see Mark 15:30 and 15:32; KJV: "descend"), the reference to Elijah taking Jesus *down* (Mark 15:36), the Greek word for the veil (which means something spread *down*; Mark 15:38), and the tear in the veil going from top *down* (Mark 15:38; KJV: "bottom"), with all six instances employing the same Greek root *kata*. See Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 282.

18. The idea of Jesus as the "new Adam" is also suggested by Romans 5:12–21.

## Second Reaction: The Centurion

Immediately after the temple veil is ripped,<sup>19</sup> Mark returns to the scene of the crucifixion and relates a response of incredible narrative importance—the first human reaction to Jesus’s death. Here is where we would expect a significant statement from Mark about what difference Jesus’s death makes to human beings. Instead, Mark has a centurion<sup>20</sup> announce, “Truly this man was the Son of God.” (Mark 15:39).<sup>21</sup> This statement is a remarkable reaction to Jesus’s death for several reasons, not the least of which is that the man was a Gentile, so for him to understand that Jesus was the Son of God would be extraordinary in any case, but even more so in this context because he did not reach this conclusion after watching Jesus walk on water or raise the dead, but rather after seeing him die as a condemned criminal. For that event to result in a recognition of Jesus’s true identity speaks volumes about the impact of Jesus’s death on a bystander: it makes it possible for the least likely person to gain vital knowledge that has previously been unattainable. In fact, up to this point in Mark’s narrative, no human being has been able to articulate that Jesus was the Son of God. After Jesus’s baptism, the voice from heaven said, “Thou art my beloved Son” (Mark 1:11), and the demons recognized Jesus as the Son of God (see Mark 3:11, 5:7, 9:7, and 13:32), but even Jesus’s closest disciples struggled, and largely failed,<sup>22</sup> to understand who he was. So the idea that a centurion could recognize the Son of God extends the theme established in the rending of the veil, namely, that access to and knowledge about God was being extended. The ripped

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19. While some have argued that the centurion is reacting to the ripped veil, this is not likely the case. First, he would not have been able to see it from the cross. Second, Mark specifically tells us in 15:39 that the centurion’s comment is motivated by his having seen “that [Jesus] so cried out,” not that the veil was rent. So the rending makes his statement possible, but he is not making the statement because he saw the rending.

20. It is possible that this centurion was just a random passerby, but it is more likely that he had been the person in charge of the crucifixion.

21. It is sometimes suggested that the centurion’s statement should be read ironically, as mockery of Jesus. While this is possible, this paper suggests that, in context, the statement is better interpreted as genuine. See Kelly R. Iverson, “A Centurion’s ‘Confession’: A Performance-Critical Analysis of Mark 15:39,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130 (Summer 2011): 329–50.

22. See Mark 8:31–33. The exception to this general trend is found in Mark 14:3–9; see Julie M. Smith, “‘She Hath Wrought a Good Work’: The Anointing of Jesus in Mark’s Gospel,” *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 5 (2013): 31–46.



veil symbolized the ability of people to “see” God; the announcement of the centurion is an example of that insight—he could recognize Jesus’s true identity, despite all appearance to the contrary. Two thousand years of Christian tradition have probably made it impossible for us to appreciate how odd it was for a soldier to look at the corpse of a criminal and announce that the dead man was God’s Son.

The previously discussed parallel with the baptism, where the voice from heaven pronounces Jesus to be God’s Son,<sup>23</sup> makes the centurion’s exclamation all the more profound because he is echoing the narrative role of God as the voice that attests to Jesus’s identity. Just as the rending of the heavens comes immediately before the divine announcement that Jesus is God’s Son at the baptism, the rending of the temple veil comes immediately before the centurion’s announcement that Jesus is God’s Son. In other words, Mark’s narrative teaches that the death of Jesus makes it possible for a centurion to do what God does. Even a hated pagan soldier can be elevated to a godlike status and possess a godlike knowledge because of the death of Jesus. It required the severing of the heavens and the temple veil, but the removal of these barriers has made possible the transmission of God’s knowledge to humans in a new way.

### **Third Reaction: The Women**

After the centurion’s statement, Mark narrates the third and final reaction to Jesus’s death: “There were also women looking on afar off: among whom was Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the less and of Joses, and Salome; (Who also, when he was in Galilee, followed him, and ministered unto him;) and many other women which came up with him unto Jerusalem” (Mark 15:40–41).

The primary role of the women here is watching; they are witnesses to Jesus’s death. Because most strains of Jewish thought interpreted the Torah to forbid female witnesses, the implication here in Mark is that Jesus’s death has opened new roles and responsibilities for women. And not only does this affect the women, but the entire community. One literally cannot be a Christian without accepting their witness because their testimony is crucial to the story of Jesus’s death; it is how the story was likely preserved—remember that, in the Gospel of Mark, all of the male disciples have fled by this point (see Mark 14:50). The same verb used

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23. The voice from heaven at the baptism is quoting Psalm 2:7, which is understood to be an enthronement psalm. By extension, the scene at the cross shows Jesus enthroned through death.

here for their looking will be used for the women again in 15:47 and 16:4, both instances where the women's witness will be crucial to preserving and transmitting the knowledge of Jesus's death and resurrection.

The comment about the women following Jesus and ministering to him is somewhat odd in that it provides the audience with information that was true in the past, but which was unknown to them until this moment in the narrative. The fact that the women's ministry is presented out of chronological order suggests that Mark wants to emphasize its role after the death of Jesus so that in its literary setting the death of Jesus is viewed as extending ministry opportunities to women or, at least, making possible their public recognition. Note that what happens here underscores the importance of the narrative art of Mark: it is through manipulating the time sequence that Mark is able to make his point about the women's ministry. The text rewards the reader's careful attention to narrative. It is only now, after Jesus's death, that we find out that there were women present all along, being disciples and engaging in ministry,<sup>24</sup> a reality that Mark had largely hidden from the audience's view. Jesus's death allows the women's actions to become public knowledge. The women aren't acting in this moment—the point of this text is not what they are doing but what they have already done. And so the audience, like the centurion, gains new knowledge—this time, knowledge about the effect that Jesus's death has on women's opportunities to minister and witness.

While there are hints throughout Mark's Gospel that Jesus has female disciples (see Mark 3:31–35), the idea is not developed. But this verse tells us boldly that Jesus has had female disciples all along. Not only that, but the women “ministered” unto him. This verb (Greek: *diakoneō*) was first used in Mark to describe the actions of the angels to Jesus after the temptation (Mark 1:13), creating a strong parallel to this passage since the temptations immediately followed the baptism. So just as his baptism led directly to the angels' ministry, his death leads directly to the women's ministry. This verb for “ministered” is used two times elsewhere in Mark: for Simon's mother-in-law after Jesus has healed her (see Mark 1:31) and by Jesus to describe his own mission (see Mark 10:45). Simon's mother-in-law's ministry is one of the undeveloped hints in the narrative; Jesus's ministry sets the template for what ministry should be. In the women at the foot of the cross, we see an example of Christlike ministry made possible through his death.

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24. See Susan Miller, *Women in Mark's Gospel* (New York: T and T Clark International, 2004).

Mark also notes that, in addition to the women he has named, many other unnamed women also came up to Jerusalem with Jesus and were present at the crucifixion. This large group of women creates a compelling contrast to the single centurion in the narrative and suggests that the effects of Jesus's ministry are not limited to select individuals or even to people whose names we know, but rather to all who are willing to follow Jesus.<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusions

I draw three conclusions from Mark's narrative of the reactions to Jesus's death. First, each one of the three is tightly interwoven with the story of Jesus's baptism. From the ripping and opening of the barriers between God and humans, to the recognition that Jesus is God's Son, to the role of ministering, each of the reactions to Jesus's death is better understood when refracted through the story of the baptism. The similarities between these two scenes invite a closer consideration of their other parallels. Both scenes use the same Greek word for "voice" (*phōnē*): at the baptism, the voice from heaven quotes a psalm when speaking to Jesus (Mark 1:11, quoting Ps. 2:7), and at the cross, Jesus quotes a psalm when speaking to God (Mark 15:34, quoting Ps. 22:1). It is remarkable that in both instances, psalms are the medium for communication between God and Jesus. Even more remarkable is the inversion of the sentiment, with the first psalm announcing, "Thou art my beloved Son" (Mark 1:11), and the second psalm asking, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). The similarity of the form heightens the clash in content and thus the rupture in the relationship. And yet the note of triumph and universal worship at the end of the psalm that Jesus quotes also holds out hope for reconciliation and ultimate victory. The fact that the psalm quoted at the baptism was likely used for the enthronement of kings is also evocative, inasmuch as it implies that Jesus is enthroned through his death.

Both the baptism and the death allude to Elijah: the baptism scene, because John the Baptist is dressed as Elijah (see Mark 1:6), and, as Mark

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25. This verse is also strong evidence that women were present at the Last Supper, since that Passover meal was the reason that Jesus went to Jerusalem (see also Mark 16:1–8). Their presence would not have been surprising to ancient audiences but comes as news to many modern readers.

shows us, fulfills the role of Elijah.<sup>26</sup> At the death scene, bystanders think that Jesus is calling Elijah (Mark 15:35). What is interesting about this is the misunderstanding: Jesus is calling God, not Elijah (the crowd confuses *Eloi* ["God"] with *Eliyahu* ["Elijah"]). Elijah is not, in fact, present at the cross—what is present is Jesus's unanswered plea to God that sounds like a call to Elijah. Because Elijah's return was associated with turning "the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers" (Mal. 4:6), his absence at the cross once again highlights the rupture in the relationship between Jesus and God at this moment. The links between the baptism and the death lead to a somber conclusion: in Mark, baptism is intertwined with death. Jesus's baptism sets the pattern—in this narrative, quite literally—for his death.

The parallels between the baptism and the death encourage the audience to read these stories as the bookends around Jesus's life story. Bracketing Jesus's life by his baptism and death emphasizes the theme of breaking barriers and implies that the granting of access to God's powers and presence is also a key element in the story of Jesus's life. This narrative structure can then guide our interpretation of the text. For example, some scholars argue that the rending of the temple veil is an expression of God's displeasure with the temple system or of his mourning at Jesus's death. In isolation, these readings are possible, but when read in light of the baptism, a discerning reader would infer that the rending of the heavens at the baptism did not express God's displeasure or mourning. Reading the baptism and death stories together channels our interpretation of the death scene. The narrative structure might also explain why Mark includes neither nativity nor resurrection appearances.<sup>27</sup>

Second, the three reactions show that Mark's approach is outcome-oriented, not process-oriented, as he constructs the meaning of Jesus's death. In not one of the three cases does Mark describe precisely how it is that Jesus's death was able to rend the veil, enlighten the centurion, or empower the women; he simply tells us that it was so. The focus is on the outcome, not the process; the result, not the method. Mark's approach

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26. See Robert H. Stein, *Mark* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008), 48.

27. There is very strong evidence that Mark 16:9–20 was not originally part of the text; there is dispute as to whether 16:8 was the original ending or whether the original ending has been lost. See Robert H. Stein, "The Ending of Mark," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 18 (Winter 2008): 79–98.

contrasts with most Christian thought about the Atonement, which examines the way the Atonement worked instead of its results.

Christian tradition has had a penchant for analogizing the Atonement in order to explain it. Mark's narrative suggests not that these analogies are misguided; after all, each of the three reactions could be understood as an analogy, that is, as a parabolic enactment of the meaning of the Atonement. Rather, Mark's example suggests that analogies are more productive when focused on the end and not the means of the Atonement. Mark makes no effort to explain precisely how Jesus's death changes things; rather, he shows the ways in which it does in fact change things. So a narrative atonement theology for Mark departs from the classical approaches to the Atonement, which focus on Jesus's death as substitution, redemption, ransom, or example. All of these theories attempt to explain the mechanism by which the Atonement happens but are relatively silent about its results.

Third, the three results of Jesus's death can all be unified under the banner of increased access to God. The rent veil, the centurion, and the women all show that what was previously restricted—the divine presence, knowledge, and ministry—is now available to all. Mark cleverly manipulates narrative space in order to show how this is so. Because the temple veil was not visible from the cross, Mark must transport the audience and therefore grants them a heavenly perspective on events.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, the centurion is described as being “over against” Jesus, suggesting opposition.<sup>29</sup> But his proclamation shows that his position has changed—he may have begun “over against” Jesus, but after Jesus's death, the centurion knows who Jesus is—he is, in other words, now for him. Along the same lines, the women are described as “looking on afar off,” a distance that they overcome as their contribution to Jesus's ministry can now be observed and described in the narrative at close hand. Mark has carefully constructed narrative space in each of the three reactions to Jesus's death in order to suggest that distance is overcome by Jesus's death—the distance between the audience and the temple, the distance between the centurion and Jesus, and the distance between the women and the audience.

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28. In the Old Testament, one of the functions of God's Spirit is to transport people from one location to another. See 1 Kings 18:12; 2 Kings 2:16; and Ezekiel 3:12, 14.

29. Compare Mark 12:41. (Note that while the KJV wording is identical, the Greek text is not, although the same point is made.)

In addition to narrative space, Mark employs careful characterization to show that access to God is extended through Jesus's death. By featuring a Gentile and women, Mark makes clear that the previously restricted access to God has now been expanded. In Jesus's time, the temple complex included a "court of the Gentiles" and a "court of women." So it is perhaps no surprise that Mark has chosen a Gentile and women to showcase the human responses to Jesus's death, since these were the people who had been formally excluded from the symbolic presence of the Lord. Now, as a result of Jesus's death, they can be symbolically invited into the presence of the Lord, where they can share God's knowledge and have a role in Jesus's ministry.

The powerful symbolism of the open heavens (at the baptism) and the rent veil (at the death) as an invitation into God's presence is extended by the reference to the centurion, which makes clear that this invitation is not just for the Israelites. Then it is further extended by the mention of the women, which makes clear that this invitation is not just for men. In a remarkably compact narrative, Mark teaches that not only has the possibility of access to God increased as a result of Jesus's death, but it has increased for all people.

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