

Listening to Mark's Gospel

By [John Dart](#)

August 8, 2011

Unlike my *Century* colleagues, I am not an avid book reader; I have no new history, novel or memoir to commend for our [summer reading list](#). My spare-time reading consists mostly of seeking research gems or insights in critical biblical journals. Yes, sounds like work.

But this exercise brings great pleasure. The [growing ranks of professional biblical scholars](#) make this a dynamic field. My special interest is the Gospel of Mark. Within a single generation of scholarship, Mark has been upgraded from a cut-and-paste, less-than-elegant Gospel to a marvelously crafted narrative filled with irony, intrigue and inspiration.

Many researchers are now examining how the mostly illiterate audiences in the Greco-Roman world were likely to have heard the Gospels recited--or rather performed, with theatrical flourish. In the *Journal of Biblical Literature's* summer issue, Kelly Iverson [draws on](#) oral/aural studies to interpret Mark 15:39, the centurion's confession that "truly this man was God's Son!" (subscription required).

Recently some scholars have suggested that the Roman soldier speaks sarcastically, just as earlier in the passion story when the soldiers viciously mock Jesus. Iverson argues instead that the centurion offers a "sincere affirmation." While a godly voice calls Jesus his beloved son at the beginning of Mark (1:11) and near the middle (9:7), the soldier is the first (and only) human to identify Jesus as God's son. Placed so close to the Gospel's conclusion, the centurion's confession offers a great applause line for the boisterous audiences of that era, according to Iverson.

Iverson also points out that Mark typically uses descriptive words to let audiences know who the good and bad guys are. But the centurion simply "said" his belief. This is another example of Mark subverting audience expectations, as when Jesus eats with sinners or breaks Sabbath rules--or when people behave out of character. One of the scribes seeking to test Jesus instead praises him (12:32-33); Joseph of

Arimathea, a respected member of the council, boldly asks for the body of Jesus to bury him (15:43) in the absence of Jesus' disciples and brothers.

Louise Lawrence also emphasizes the importance of the spoken word in Mark. [Writing](#) in the *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* (subscription required), she notes the Gospel's frequent portrayal of people hearing and listening (or failing to). According to Lawrence, Mark is ambiguous about the importance of sight: "Mark's was a world in which one did not have to see to believe." But the Parable of the Sower illustrates the power of spreading the word, and the Gospel ends with the failure of the frightened women running from the empty tomb and telling no one what they saw.

Lawrence could have cited the Transfiguration, in which a heavenly voice identifies Jesus as God's beloved son (9:7). God doesn't go on to say, "follow him faithfully," "watch him and do likewise" or "believe him with all your heart." Instead, God says this: "Listen to him!"