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# The Vanishing Messiah and the Advent of the Messianic Society:

## *A Critical Reading of the Gospel of Mark*

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**ABSTRACT.** In this paper I will look at the paradox of the singularity of the Son in detail with a critical reading engagement of the Gospel based on the concept of “short circuit” proposed by Slavoj Žižek in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*. The paradox is that Jesus Messiah first appears as a sovereign figure, having sovereignty that Carl Schmitt defines, but finally reveals his singular identity, that is, the Messiah without sovereignty on the cross. I argue that this singularity is identified over against God. Therefore, I claim that what is covertly delivered in the Gospel of Mark is Jesus' distantiation from his Father, God. However, this distantiation is the salvational act to free humanity from sovereignty and bring about a Messianic society without a Messiah. In this new society no one knows nor longs for the Messiah with sovereignty anymore. Therefore, Jesus Messiah is the vanishing factor as much as the founding factor.

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The most striking aspect in the Gospel of Mark is that the Son of God, not the Father God,<sup>1</sup> appears on the stage, as if the age of God ends and that of his Son arrives as seen in the first word of Mark, Ἀρχῆ, which in the Roman Empire signaled the inauguration of its imperial or colonial reign in the world.<sup>2</sup> Markan Christology is fundamentally determined by this seemingly

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<sup>1</sup> Instead of the usual expression, "God the Father," because this may evoke the theological issue of the Trinity, in this paper, the expression is appropriated in its reverse version, namely, "the Father God," in order to highlight that, in relationship with Jesus, God appears exclusively to Jesus as his father. In other words, the only father of Jesus is God.

<sup>2</sup> The Roman usage of ἀρχῆ signals the beginning of the imperial or colonial reign of

royal procedure of God's abdication from and the Son's succession to the throne, allowing one to investigate Markan Christology in terms of the singularity of the Son. Here, this "singularity" first means that, as long as "the beginning" marks the end of an old age and the opening of a new age—that is, not as a continuation but as a rupture or discontinuity—the identity of the Son is nothing other than the founding sovereign figure who forcefully opens his own new epoch. But this is not the only aspect of the singularity of the Son in the Gospel of Mark.

I suggest that a radical shift takes place in Mark, namely, the Son no longer appears as such a sovereign figure in the face of the cross. Paradoxically, as the Son is no longer a sovereign messianic figure, his authentic singularity is revealed at the moment of his death on the cross; the Son's independent identity is radically distinct from that of his Father. This paradox is the contention of this paper. From this viewpoint, I argue that the singularity of the Son should be considered against the Father God; I will conclude that the Gospel of Mark covertly implies the Son's radical distantiation of himself from his Father, God, on the cross by the Son's resignation of his own sovereignty, and the Son vanishes in order to engender a Messianic society without a Messianic sovereign. Considering how our political thought and imagination for an alternative society or polity is inevitably tied with sovereignty, my argument intends to challenge such determination by problematizing God's sovereignty via Jesus Messiah.

To accomplish that challenge, this article employs a hermeneutic inspired by the concept of "short circuit" proposed by Slavoj Žižek in his very insightful book *The Puppet and the Dwarf*. In what follows, I will first demonstrate why this reading strategy is pertinent to the present topic by showing the limitation of traditional historical biblical studies on Markan Christology. By "traditional historical biblical studies," I refer to the historical-critical hermeneutical methods inaugurated by modern German and Anglo biblical scholarship. Then, I will assert that "Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1) in Mark appears as the one and only heir to the divine kingship of the Father God, not to the Davidic royal line. Furthermore, I argue that Mark's Jesus takes on the look of a sovereign by drawing on Carl

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Roman Empire in the world. See for details Simon Samuel, *A Postcolonial Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 89-92. In light of this, I argue that the Markan adoption of ἄρχῆ signifies the advent of the Messianic age of Jesus the Son of God.

Schmitt's concept of "sovereignty" in his work *Political Theology*. I will demonstrate how the crucifixion is the "radical distantiation" that discloses the singular identity of the Son as the Messiah without sovereignty; this singular death in the long run tells of the advent of a Messianic society without a Messianic sovereign. In this way, this article ultimately takes a political consideration of the singularity of Jesus Messiah, the Son of God.

### **The Shift from Traditional Historical-Critical Readings to a Critical Reading of Mark**

There is no single Markan Christology but only Markan Christologies as scholarly work on the subject never converges on the single portrait of Jesus. Here I suggest that, no matter how Markan Christologies may differ, each with their own massive research on historical or literary backgrounds behind the Gospel of Mark, they can be circumscribed within a fence. Even though the present article does not intend to investigate the history of the scholarship on Markan Christology, I consult briefly some research on it in order to show the relevance of my own critical reading of Markan Christology.<sup>3</sup>

In his essay, Daniel Johansson explores the scholarship of Markan Christology from the late nineteenth century to the present date.<sup>4</sup> While dividing Markan scholarship on Christology into three periods—"the latter part of the nineteenth century," "the period 1900-1970," and "1970 to the present time"—Johansson's survey shows that scholarship has developed or fluctuated basically between "a low Christology" and "a high Christology," though those two thematic (or descriptive) terms are appropriated by scholars differently.<sup>5</sup> According to Johansson, the first period is characterized by the standpoint that "a high view of Mark as history [supports] a low Christology" in which Jesus is understood as "a non-divine royal Messiah."<sup>6</sup> About the second period, Johansson explores

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<sup>3</sup> For traditional scholarship on Markan Christology, among many studies, see James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry Into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), D. M. Rhoads and D. Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of A Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), and J. D. Kingsbury, *The Christology of Mark's Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Johansson, "The Identity of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark: Past and Present Proposals," *Currents in Biblical Research* 9 (2010): 364-393, here 364.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 364-365.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 365-366.

three linguistic groups: “German-speaking,” “English-speaking,” and “French-speaking.”<sup>7</sup> This period is determined by “a high Christology” in which scholars tried to prove the divine nature of Jesus, whether it is supernatural, metaphysical, transcendent, or pre-existential, from Jewish or Hellenistic traditions.<sup>8</sup> Then, Johansson investigates the last period by classifying it into seven groups: on the one hand, the first five—“The Royal Messiah,” “The Suffering Righteous One,” “Narrative Christologies,” “Lack of Pre-existence,” and “The Constraint of Jewish Monotheism”—belong to “a low Christology,” all of which primarily emphasize the Jewish tradition, whether it is the Hebrew Bible, early Judaism, or Second Temple Judaism<sup>9</sup>; on the other hand, the other two—“A Hellenistic High Christology” and “Other Approaches Ascribing a High Christology to Mark,” which mostly argue that Mark itself affirms Jesus’ divine nature—come under “a high Christology.”<sup>10</sup> Apart from the question of whether Johansson’s categorization of Markan scholarship on Christology is correct, his survey shows that Markan Christologies can be fenced within the four determinations: Jewish backgrounds, Hellenistic backgrounds, humanity, and divinity. Probably, traditional historical-critical readings of Jesus in Mark have been worked out within this quadrangle structure and have continually been circulated in this closed domain.<sup>11</sup>

Even though such readings never yield a single Christology, they are nonetheless strongly relevant as they draw on historical backgrounds or contexts of the Gospel of Mark. Additionally, they may basically assume the singularity of Jesus in terms of him being distinct from all other human figures, whether they are Jewish or Hellenistic heroes. Nevertheless, these readings never consider his singularity over against God and thus miss the political radicalness of the Gospel of Mark.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 366-371.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 371.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 371-382.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 382-388.

<sup>11</sup> See two essays, both of which come up after Johansson’s research, prove this circumscription. One is the essay by J. R. Daniel Kirk and Stephen L. Young, “‘I Will Set His Hand to the Sea’: Psalm 88:26 LXX and Christology in Mark,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133 (2014): 333-340. They tone down “a divine Christology,” while appealing to Psalm 88:26. Another essay is the essay by Richard Bauckham, “Markan Christology according to Richard Hays: Some Addenda,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 11 (2017): 21-36. While arguing that Mark 1:2’s exegetical technique of Mal 3:1 “identifies two divine persons, one of who addresses the other,” Bauckham further strengthens a “Christology of divine identity.”

However, what if Mark implies the singularity of Jesus as being distinct from God? If the Gospel of Mark is more or less freed or loosened from the complete containment of all historical backgrounds, it would be apparent that Mark describes Jesus absolutely otherwise; Mark's Jesus seems to depart from all the historical-critical Christologies; this is the point that the present paper maintains and is why I draw on a way of critical reading invented by Žižek to propose a radically different reading of Mark.

In *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, Žižek figures critical reading as “a short circuit” due to “a faulty connection.” Here, the point is that a critical reading always deviates from an authorized standard reading and thus appears to be abnormal, false, or unacceptable just as such a break takes place due to “a faulty connection in the network.” This is how Žižek describes such a critical reading:

[A] critical reading . . . [is] to take a major classic (text, author, notion), and read it in a short-circuiting way, through the lens of a “minor” author, text, or conceptual apparatus (“minor” should be understood here in Deleuze's sense: not “of lesser quality,” but marginalized, disavowed by the hegemonic ideology, or dealing with a “lower,” less dignified topic).<sup>12</sup>

While pointing out this reading found in Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche, about the relevance, effectiveness, or objective of such a critical reading, Žižek says as follows:

[T]he aim of such an approach is, rather, the inherent decentering of the interpreted text, which brings to light *its “unthought,” its disavowed presuppositions and consequences*. . . . “Short Circuits” intends to revive a practice of reading which confronts a classic text, author, or notion with its own hidden presuppositions, and thus reveals *its disavowed truth*. . . . [T]he point is, rather, to make him or her aware of another—disturbing—side of something he or she knew all the time.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), Series Foreword.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, Series Foreword, my emphasis.

Thus, the way of critical reading would always appear heretical, disturbing, or illegitimate and thus anti-truth, anti-knowledge, or anti-traditional. However, is not the duty of critique to target the center of the standard or norm, which is admitted to be legitimately or reasonably established? Basically, this is the concept of critical reading as a “short circuit” to which I assent.

However, my goal in this study is not to investigate directly and criticize a certain alleged standard or dominant ideology by which the current scholarship of Markan Christology is determined. In other words, I will not be embarking on an ideological critique of historical-critical scholarship on Markan Christology in this essay. Rather, my intention is to read the Gospel of Mark with an “unthought” or “disavowed” assumption, to reflect on Jesus’ singularity over against God, which has not been considered yet by traditional historical-critical readings of Mark. Perhaps such a supposition would be considered as historically implausible, theologically unthinkable, or going against the grain. That is why I appeal to Žižek’s concept of critical reading.

### **Jesus as the Sole Kingly Heir**

At first glance, the first phrase in Mark 1:1 seems to fully disclose the identity of Jesus Christ very clearly, but the word Χριστοῦ repels such an initial impression. The Hebrew word משיח, from which Χριστός was translated, is associated with three different official positions: king, priest, and prophet.<sup>14</sup> As the Hebrew word means “anointed,” those three positions are related to the ritual performance of anointing the one who takes one of those roles. For instance, Saul is anointed by Samuel in 1 Sam 10:1; priests are anointed as seen in Lev 4:3; and God commands Elijah to anoint Elisha in 1 Kings 19:16. These usages of the word make it difficult for one to immediately decide Jesus’ identity among them. Nevertheless, a clue comes from Mark itself. Though Jesus is identified by people as a prophet as seen in 6:14-15 and 8:27-28, there is no association of Jesus

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<sup>14</sup> About the terminological indeterminacy of the word משיח, see John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: Messianism in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI; Eerdmans, 2010), 16-20.

with priesthood in Mark.<sup>15</sup> The difficulty still remains. In this section, I argue that Mark confirms Jesus as the single kingly heir of God by two expressions: εὐαγγελίου and υἱοῦ θεοῦ.

Scholarly research on the word εὐαγγέλιον proves that it is a royal term exclusively appropriated by ancient monarchy, in particular, Roman imperialism. For instance, Helmut Koester indicates that the early Christian usage of εὐαγγέλιον is influenced by that of the Greco-Roman world in which the term is adopted for the celebration of Augustus' victories and benefactions and the new age initiated by the latter.<sup>16</sup> Recently some biblical studies on the word pay more attention to its imperial signification reflected in the Gospel of Mark. For instance, Simon Samuel, while arguing for a reading of how Mark as “a postcolonial discourse of a minoritarian community under subjection and surveillance. . . mimics the *imperium* of Rome,”<sup>17</sup> shows that the word εὐαγγέλιον is an instance of such mimicry. Samuel indicates that it is used to describe Rome’s victories and emperors’ salvational deeds.<sup>18</sup> He continues to argue that in the LXX, in Deutero-Isaiah in particular, the “the good news for Isaiah is about YHWH’s *imperium* (reign) implying directly the end of Persian *imperium* over his people.”<sup>19</sup> These examples of the association of the word εὐαγγέλιον with the “reign” suggest that Mark identifies Jesus as a “king” from the very beginning (1:1) among the three positions of “the anointed one.”

Along the same line, the phrase υἱοῦ θεοῦ confirms that Χριστός in Mark means a “king.” According to Warren Carter, the expression signifies God’s selection as “agents of God’s will and purpose.” In this regard, in addition to Israelite kings, Israel itself and the sage in Wisdom of Solomon 2 are called υἱοῦ θεοῦ.<sup>20</sup> But we don’t have any text in which a prophet or a priest is called thus. Rather, as seen in the texts such as Psalm 2:7; 89:27, 2

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<sup>15</sup> The Letter to the Hebrews emphasizes the association Jesus with the high priest, for instance, in Heb. 6:20.

<sup>16</sup> Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 3-4.

<sup>17</sup> Samuel, *A Postcolonial Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus*, 4-5.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 91-92.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>20</sup> Warren Carter, *Telling Tales About Jesus: An Introduction to the New Testament Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 51-52. Also we see the other instances of the term “the son of God” in Gen 6:2 and Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7. In those texts it seems that the son of God is associated with certain angelic or supernatural figures. Even the Satan is also considered as one of the sons of God.



Sam 7:14, υἱοῦ θεοῦ is related to the titular of king.<sup>21</sup> From these instances, it is plausible to assume that Χριστοῦ υἱοῦ θεοῦ identifies Jesus as a kingly figure or king.

Once Jesus is understood as a king or kingly figure, one may probably wonder whether his kingship is legitimated by the Davidic royal line. Adela Yarbro Collins and John J. Collins point out that "The word משיח... is a generic way of referring to kings, especially those of the Davidic line."<sup>22</sup> In light of this, it would be easy to judge that Jesus Messiah implies the restoration of the Davidic kingly line. Actually, Mark seems to locate its Christology in those Jewish backgrounds. In particular, Mark 10:46-52 supports this impression. When Bartimaeus son of Timaeus calls Jesus υἱὸς Δαυὶδ meaning the Son of David, Jesus endorses Bartimaeus' faith rather than corrects him. Thus, it seems that Jesus acknowledges his belonging to the Davidic line.

However, this understanding of Jesus as a Davidic heir is refuted by Mark itself. Mark 12:35-37 clearly says that Jesus Messiah is not related to the kingly line,<sup>23</sup> but rather that Jesus Messiah is more elevated than David as Jesus here points out that David refers to Χριστός as his κύριος. In addition, having considered that there is no one whom David can call κύριος other than God, this text seems to assume that Jesus Messiah is identical to God. It is not because Jesus shares the same divinity as God but because Jesus succeeds to God's throne.<sup>24</sup> Thus, while locating Jesus in the tradition of the expectation of a Davidic messiah, Mark raises Jesus as holding God's divine kingship over the Davidic kingship. This uniqueness of Jesus' kingship is also supported by his intimate relationship with God in

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<sup>21</sup> About the royal signification of "the son of God" in the ancient time, see Adela Yarbro Collins and John J. Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God: Divine, Human, and Angelic Messianic Figures in Biblical and Related Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 2-24.

<sup>22</sup> Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 1. About the expectation of a Davidic messiah, also see Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 52-83.

<sup>23</sup> While indicating that in "there is no indication in 11:1-11 that Jesus as 'son of David' is inadequate," Collins says that the identification of Jesus as "son of David" can be supported by Bartimaeus. See Collins, *Mark*, 581. Unlike Collins, while claiming that Jesus asks the crowd to "demystify the authority of the scribal class," Ched Myers argues that Mark 12:35-37 ascertains that Jesus Messiah "will not rehabilitate the old imperial version [of the expectation of a Davidic messiah]." See Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 319.

<sup>24</sup> According to Tolbert, while refuting any attribution of Jesus to the Davidic line, this text shows that "The Christ is God's heir, not David's." Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 255-256.

Mark 14:36 where Jesus Messiah calls God "Abba, Father."<sup>25</sup> Though Israel's kings are called the sons of God, they never call God in this intimate way.

### **Jesus Messiah the Son of God as the Absolute Sovereign**

Having determined Jesus Messiah as the sole kingly heir to God's throne, what is the character of that Messianic kingship? What is the singularity of such divine kingship of Jesus Messiah? More concretely, how is Jesus' kingship different from that of Israel's kings? To answer the question, we need first to figure out Markan appropriation of "the Son of God" on its own terms. This demonstrates how the nature of Jesus' Messianic kingship is that of absolute sovereignty, which is distinct from the Israelite monarchy.

Pss. 2:7, 89:27, and 2 Sam. 7:14 show the concept of the king being the son of God. According to Adela Yarbro Collins and John J. Collins, it reflects the influence of the Egyptian concept of kingship through the Canaanites on the Israelites.<sup>26</sup> They argue that, unlike the Egyptian appropriation of the term which was used in order to address the pharaoh's divine sonship, the appropriation of the term in the Jewish milieu claimed that the king has a higher status than humans with the explicit awareness that the king is not as divine as God.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the Son of God is placed between God and humans. Also they point out that kingship is limited as seen in Deuteronomistic and prophetic literature; it is subordinate to the law and will be nullified as a king violates the law.<sup>28</sup> These observations demonstrate that kingship is not absolute but theologically and legally limited; the king, as God's appointed agent, can be abandoned by God, as we can see in 2 Samuel 7, for instance. This is the restricted nature of the Israel monarchy.

Unlike this restricted kingship, Jesus is not an agent of God. As I showed in the previous section, Jesus Messiah is identical to God in that

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<sup>25</sup> William L. Lane indicates that Jesus' usage of the term is very unique in the Jewish tradition. See William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 518.

<sup>26</sup> For details, see Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 10-19.

<sup>27</sup> For details, see *Ibid.*, 19-24.

<sup>28</sup> For details, see *Ibid.*, 25-47.

the divine kingship is not just shared with Jesus the Son but is completely handed over to him.<sup>29</sup> Jesus is not merely God's regent; his kingship is absolute and unshakable. As long as Jesus Messiah himself does not forsake the throne, even the Father God cannot withdraw it from the Son. Thus, Jesus Messiah, the Son of God, appears as a figure of an absolute sovereign.

In this regard, I argue that Mark 1:15 and 2:27-28 present such a sovereign kingship. The problem is how to articulate this presentation in political terms, since such a sovereign image is not found in the Israelite kings because of their limited kingship. Rather, the reliable reference is the kingship of God occurring in the Hebrew Bible. Thus, it may be an effective way for such determination to draw a parallel between Jesus and God. However, such a survey does not say what sovereignty means. Hence, here I draw on a modern definition of sovereignty in order to characterize Jesus' sovereignty, and in so doing, define the sovereign character of Jesus' kingship without making a survey of such parallelism because this modern definition reflects the image or understanding of God.

In *Political Theology*, Carl Schmitt defines sovereignty in terms of exception and decision in juridical terms. This comes from his fundamental critique of juridical determinations of politics, particularly in terms of the theory of the state, for juridical normalization, neutralization, or rationalization by which politics is deprived of the idea of exception.<sup>30</sup> Against this trend, Schmitt argues that such a determination should not ignore its original resource, that is, "political theology," in which sovereignty and exception fundamentally matter.<sup>31</sup> Thus, Schmitt admits that

All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development—in which they were

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<sup>29</sup> For instance, Adela Yarbro Collins and John J. Collins point out that some divine or transcendent language was ascribed to the king as son of God by the influence of "the common association of kings with divinity in the Hellenistic world." For details, see Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 48-62.

<sup>30</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 14.

<sup>31</sup> Thus, perhaps, for Schmitt, the authentic theology may be always already political, in which what matters is the law in terms of its relation to exception.

transformed from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, *the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver*—but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological conception of these concepts. *The exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology.*<sup>32</sup>

From this awareness of this theological origin of the concept of sovereignty, Schmitt gives his own definition of sovereignty which consists of three elements—sovereign, decision, and exception. According to Schmitt, the authentic feature of the sovereign is one who, at his or her own will, decides to bring exception into the juridical order and suspend it, without being limited by the law.<sup>33</sup>

Though Schmitt never refers to any biblical text to support such a received theological provenance, doesn't this understanding of sovereignty exactly correspond to the portrayal of God appearing right after the sin of the couple in Eden in Genesis 3:1-21? God is supposed to sentence them to the punishment of death by the prohibition God alone establishes. But God issues an exception, suspending the divine ordinance in order to preserve their lives. God's seemingly self-contradictory aspect shows not just his violation of his own ordinances but the divine sovereignty, which exactly fits to Schmitt's definition of sovereignty.

Along the same line, Mark 1:15 and 2:27-28 seem to prove that Jesus' kingship is qualified by this definition of sovereignty:

Mark 1:15:

πεπλήρωται ὁ καιρὸς καὶ ἤγγικεν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ·  
μετανοεῖτε καὶ πιστεῦετε ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ

The time is fulfilled and the sovereignty<sup>34</sup> of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36, my emphasis.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-7, 12.

<sup>34</sup> Danker's dictionary gives meanings for the word βασιλεία: kingship, royal power, and royalty in general. Apart from them, I interpret βασιλεία as sovereignty because I think that all of these meanings are determined by it. In addition, I do so in order to relate ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ to the sovereignty of Jesus Messiah, which is inherited from the Father God.

<sup>35</sup> Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.

Mark 2:27-28:

τὸ σάββατον διὰ τὸν ἄνθρωπον ἐγένετο καὶ οὐχ ὁ  
ἄνθρωπος διὰ τὸ σάββατον· ὥστε κύριός ἐστιν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ  
ἀνθρώπου καὶ τοῦ σαββάτου

The Sabbath was made for *humanity*, and not *humanity* for the Sabbath so the Son of *humanity* is lord even of the Sabbath.

These two verses show two features of sovereignty. First in Mark 1:15, this proclamation, addressing the advent of the divine kingship, implies a kind of sovereign intervening in or inbreaking into the world dominated by the Roman imperial legal order. This is the sovereign act to make the world into the state of exception temporally and spatially, in which the Roman imperial order is suspended or deactivated, in order to bring the reign of the Jesus Messiah into the world. Hence, on the one hand, such an inaugurating act, signaling the advent of the Messianic reign, is the inevitable means to demonstrate the sovereignty of Jesus Messiah; on the other hand, in the long run, it will bring Jesus Messiah to the final confrontation with the sovereignty of the Roman Empire which presides over the world.

Second, Mark 2:27-28 presents Jesus as the sovereign with what Schmitt calls “the unlimited authority.” Here Jesus seems to appear as a certain humanitarian proponent of Jesus who prioritizes human rights above all else. More than this feature, Jesus Messiah places himself over the Sabbath as the lord of the Sabbath. This sovereign act doesn’t mean the abolition of the Sabbath but rather the inactivation of the enforcement of the Sabbath. As Schmitt says that “what characterizes an exception is principally unlimited authority, which means the suspension of the entire existing order,”<sup>36</sup> Jesus the sovereign is not limited by the existing legal norm and thus suspends it. These instances show that Jesus Messiah fulfills the definition of the sovereign.

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<sup>36</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 12.

However, this does not yet show the singularity of Jesus Messiah, the Son of God, over against the Father God. While Mark 1:1 confirms the fatherly divine provenance of Jesus' kingship and the abdication of the Father God, it seems that the new reign still belongs to the Father God as seen in 1:15. The sovereignty of God in 1:15 implies that the Son is yet caught in the shadow of his Father since Jesus' kingship is determined by the Father God. Jesus Messiah cannot claim his own sovereignty, but rather only refers to "the sovereignty of God" as seen in Mark 4:11, 26; 9:1, 47; 10:14, 23-24; 12:34; 14:15; 15:43. Therefore, the determining element, that is, "the sovereignty," appears paradoxical just as Mark announces τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ θεοῦ in 1:14 as well as τοῦ εὐαγγελίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ in 1:1. As much as it makes the Son show himself as the Messiah with sovereignty, it subordinates the Son to his Father, reminding the Son of the fatherly origin of sovereignty. Jesus the Son must admit that he owes everything to the Father God, as seen in Mark 11:23-25. Thus, the Father God, like an abdicating sovereign, does not disappear entirely from the sovereign picture, but haunts Jesus the Son at every moment, making Jesus the Son appear more like an indebted regent king. How, then, can Jesus the Son exit from the paradox? Or, to put it precisely, how can the Son show his singularity and thus not be subordinated to his Father?<sup>37</sup>

## Radical Distantiation

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus Messiah suddenly becomes restless in the face of the crucifixion. Then, Jesus Messiah reveals both his and his Father's absolute weakness or powerlessness at the crucifixion. But Mark never directly tells of this. Rather it seems to prepare clues within itself by which the irony could be read otherwise. For instance, it is Mark 8:31-38; 10:35-45; 14:32-43 by which one could argue that the crucifixion shows that the way of the cross is the model of the non-violent way<sup>38</sup>; or that it is the

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<sup>37</sup> This kind of thinking is fundamentally political. In particular, considered in terms of revolution, it is more like that. Cannot revolution as a new generation/age's treason against the previous generation/age be understood in terms of this kind of tension between a son as an heir and his father?

<sup>38</sup> See, e.g., Robert R. Beck, *Nonviolent Story: Narrative Conflict Resolution in the Gospel of Mark* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

death of the righteous.<sup>39</sup> Perhaps these readings have strong relevance to Jewish literary backgrounds.<sup>40</sup>

However, Žižek argues that “the entire fate of Christianity, its innermost kernel, hinges on the possibility of interpreting [something perverse] in a nonperverse way.”<sup>41</sup> What if Mark’s exegesis of Jewish literary materials is an exegetical invention in order to obscure something subversive, heretical, disavowed, or frustrating? In this article, such a perverse thing is ultimately the breaking of the intimate relationship between the Son and the Father on the cross. If Mark itself is read without making traditional historical exegetical references to possible historical or literary backgrounds behind it, this severed relationship becomes apparent. In light of this suspicion of Markan exegetical invention, I present my reading of the crucifixion based on the concept of critical reading as a “short-circuit” by Žižek.

As he carries out this critical reading of Christianity by drawing on a Lacanian-Hegelian dialectical psychoanalysis, Žižek argues that the most fundamental “disavowed truth” of Christianity is that the death of Jesus the Son of God on the cross as an atheistic moment reveals “an impotent God.”<sup>42</sup> While pointing out that the appearance of Jesus is the case of “[the] radical difference of the One with regard to itself, the noncoincidence of the One with itself, with its own place,”<sup>43</sup> Žižek argues that the crucifixion signifies nothing other than “[God’s] own radical splitting or, rather, self-abandonment.”<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, even though the difference appears radical, it is already determined by God.

Therefore, for Žižek, no matter what is radical, the difference could not be the condition of the self-claim of Jesus the Son, distinct from the Father God. Žižek does not see that the appearance of the Son is that of the absolute sovereign who is distinct from all, including God, just as he never

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<sup>39</sup> See, e.g., Carter, *Telling Tales About Jesus*, 68-71. According to Carter, the suffering of the righteous is one of the possible perspectives on the crucifixion.

<sup>40</sup> For a comprehensive survey on Jewish literary backgrounds, see, e.g., George W. E. Nickelsburg, *Resurrection, Immortality, and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism and Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>41</sup> Among many perverse elements in Christianity, according to Žižek, Judas’ betrayal is one instance of such a reading way in which “Christ asked his followers to betray him in order to fulfill his mission.” Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, 16.

<sup>42</sup> Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, 126.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

considers the Gospels' Jesus, that is, the descriptions of the living life of Jesus before the cross, but only draws on Paul.<sup>45</sup> Even though I appeal to his concept of critical reading as a "short-circuit," this is the point where I diverge from Žižek. If one considers such a sovereign Jesus, eventually the "disavowed truth" of Christianity would not be one of God's self-abandonment, but would be Jesus' radical differentiation from the Father God.

While on the way to the cross, Mark seems no longer to present Jesus Messiah as the sovereign in two narrative moments in Mark 14:34-36 and 15:34. This is very contradictory to the sovereign kingship of Jesus Messiah. First, Jesus appears to be suffering from his own anxiety or inner conflict about the cross. Then he is hung on the cross powerlessly. Jesus the Son looks for the desire and help of the Father God.

Mark 14:34-36:

... Περίλυπός ἐστιν ἡ ψυχὴ μου ἕως θανάτου· . . .  
προσηύχετο ἵνα εἰ δυνατόν ἐστιν παρέλθῃ ἀπ' αὐτοῦ ἡ  
ώρα, . . . ἀββα ὁ πατήρ, πάντα δυνατά σοι· . . . οὐ τί  
ἐγὼ θέλω ἀλλὰ τί σύ.

... My soul is deeply anxious up to death; . . . he was  
praying that, if it is possible, the hour might pass  
away from him, . . . Abba the Father, all things are  
possible for you; . . . not what I desire but what you  
desire.

Here the abdicating Father haunts the Son more strongly. The Son earnestly asks, "What do you want?" In other words, what do you want me to do with the sovereignty you gave me? But there is no reply from the Father. The Son will never know what the Father wants up to the death on the cross. While this silent Father like a bondholder appears mightier than ever, the Son like a debtor appears more anxious than ever. The filial intimacy with the Father is nothing other than the suffocating incessant

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 9.



awareness of the Father. Therefore, it is not the cross but the haunting Father that challenges the sovereignty of Jesus Messiah.

However, as long as the Father God completely bequeaths his sovereignty to Jesus the Son, technically, God should withhold power to help Jesus as if the abdicating Father doesn't have sovereignty; at least formally God doesn't have any authority to forsake Jesus the sovereign king. Therefore, the Father God can't save Jesus the Son from his anxiety or inner conflict. No one delivers Jesus the Son but himself. Is not that the fate of the sovereign? However, paradoxically, as long as the Son takes hold of sovereignty he cannot escape from that weight. Perhaps the Son may be tempted to flee from the chasing shadow of his Father by throwing off his sovereignty and thus tempted not to face the cross as he pretends not to have sovereignty in 14:36. In that case, it would result in just taking flight from the terror of the cross, not from the fatherly haunting. For the Son, sovereignty and the cross are intertwined because, if the Messianic sovereign wants to challenge the existing power, the Roman Empire, and bring about the Messianic society as seen in Mark 1:15, he should confront the cross, the embodiment of imperial power.

Therefore, Jesus the Son does not vacate his sovereignty by default as he hung on the cross. It is in this second moment in Mark 15:34 that he finally should solve the dilemma of whether to keep or abandon sovereignty. If Jesus the Son exercises sovereignty while on the cross, he can save his life from the cross, which would admit his indebtedness to the Father God. If Jesus the Son abandons sovereignty while on the cross, he should die. In that case, the Son would confront the terror of the cross and the fatherly haunting together. Therefore, it is only on the cross that the sovereignty is ultimately at issue. It is at this moment that Jesus the Son should finally decide whether he will abandon sovereignty or not.

In the long run, Jesus Messiah the Son takes the last sovereign decision to bring about the radical differentiation between Jesus the Son and the Father God. If Jesus the Son deserts his sovereignty, then there is no binding fatherly element or external force to limit Jesus the Son. This radical differentiation means the renunciation of his heirship to sovereignty and thereby the disengagement from the haunting fatherly restraint. When Jesus cries out in Mark 15:34, it does not mean that God abandons Jesus

but that Jesus abandons his inheritance, that is, his sovereignty. In a sense, this is emancipation or liberation. It is possible for Jesus the Son to completely escape from the suffocating obsession of God the Father and live his own life on his own terms only by this radical differentiation. Jesus the Son frees himself from the accountability of debt. This is the subversive kernel of the Gospel of Mark. The truth that is covertly hidden in Mark is this treason of the radical distantiating against the Father God. But paradoxically it gives Jesus the Son not life but death. It is at the moment of the intersection of life and death on the cross that Jesus the Son appears entirely fatherless and powerless. And it is the same moment that ultimately reveals the singular identity of Jesus Messiah the Son, that is, the Messiah without sovereignty.

### **The Advent of the Messianic Society without the Messiah**

If Jesus Messiah had deserted his sovereignty and accepted his death, he would not be free from the criticism that he has abandoned a great cause for the resolution of personal internal conflict. In that case, how could anyone affirm the crucifixion? To put it differently, having considered that the “sovereignty” of God in Mark 1:15 intends to realize an alternative society, as seen in Gerd Theissen’s understanding of Jesus, how could such a death be Messianic? In this section, I ask, what is the nature of the Messianic society now that Jesus Messiah has relinquished his sovereignty?

Theissen, while suggesting a political reading of Jesus in terms of power struggle dynamics,<sup>46</sup> argues that “a politics of symbols without coercion”<sup>47</sup> determines Jesus’ performance.<sup>48</sup> Jesus performs symbolic acts without accompanying actual or physical violence. With this view of a portrait of a non-violent Jesus, Theissen argues that Jesus intends to realize “an ancient humane ideal of governance,”<sup>49</sup> in order that “the rule of God: God’s kingdom” is finally established, with the assumption that “only God can realize a way of ruling without the use of force and coercion.”<sup>50</sup> This is

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<sup>46</sup> Gerd Theissen, “The Political Dimension of Jesus’ Activities” in *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Wolfgang Stegemann, Bruce J. Malina, and Gerd Theissen (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002): 225-250, here 225-226.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

the eschatological hope that the Messianic society, which is initiated by Jesus Messiah, will be fully realized by God. In this way, divine sovereignty is idealized.

However, this reading of Markan Christology overlooks the radicalness of the Messianic society. While Theissen idealizes the concept of rule by appealing to the ancient traditions of ideal rule, among which servanthood is a form of ideal “rulership,”<sup>51</sup> I argue that sovereignty cannot be idealized in the long run. Rather Jesus Messiah completely abrogates it. If sovereignty is still in this new society, such a situation is oppositional to what Jesus teaches his disciples in Mark 9:33-37 and 10:42-45, that is, a society without sovereignty. Perhaps a sovereign can appear very nice to the extent that the sovereign appears a servant, pretending not to hold sovereignty. Is such self-control of sovereignty what Jesus intends in both teachings? Obviously, Jesus suggests the form of slavery or servanthood as the new principle for this new society in those teachings. However, Jesus goes further.

The originality and radicalness of Jesus’ concept of slavery goes beyond such self-restraint of sovereignty and consists in the absolute resignation of it and its consequential salvational act. From this view, as one looks at 9:33-37 and 10:42-45, it becomes apparent that Jesus’ words target the Roman emperors. In both teachings, it is not plausible to assume that Jesus’ disciples want to be the first unless they conceive who will be the successor of Jesus Messiah. Rather, they want to be ranked right after Jesus as seen in 10:42-45. They do not desire to take the sovereignty now belonging to Jesus Messiah; they want to share some power with Jesus Messiah. Therefore, the main object of Jesus’ reproach is not his disciples but may be the Roman emperors who are most honored as the ones standing over all people. They are worshiped and at the top of the pyramid of the patronage system.<sup>52</sup> They are completely in opposition to Jesus’ teachings.

However, ultimately those words come back to haunt Jesus. How can the Messiah, the Son of God and absolute sovereign succeeding God’s divine throne and the one who is *πρῶτος* (9:35) and *μέγας* (10:43), at the

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 239-241.

<sup>52</sup> Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), 22-24.

same time be ἔσχατος (9:35), διάκονος (9:35), and δοῦλος (10:44)? This is why Jesus refers to his death. The paradox of divine absolute sovereignty and Messianic lowness or humbleness can only be solved when Jesus renounces his sovereignty on the cross.

In addition, this self-abandonment is above all the Messianic death to emancipate humanity from the hand of absolute sovereignty and bring about a Messianic society<sup>53</sup> without a Messiah. As Jesus negates his own sovereignty, the imperial sovereignty of the Roman emperor also cancels itself by exposing its injustice in Jesus' death on the cross. In this sense, the crucifixion is nothing other than the death of sovereignty; whoever affirms Jesus' death comes to see the appearance of a society freed from sovereignty. In this new society no one knows nor longs for the Messiah with sovereignty any more. Therefore, Jesus Messiah is the vanishing factor as much as the founding factor. No one sees Jesus Messiah any longer after his death in Mark 16. Jesus Messiah cannot join this new society but rather should vanish. Otherwise, the society will fall under kingly sovereignty again. Perhaps Jesus of Nazareth, who is freed from the title of Messiah and its sovereignty, is allowed to be a member of this Messianic society without a Messiah.<sup>54</sup>

## Conclusion

It is unimaginable or implausible to think of God without sovereignty, the state without sovereignty, and the people without sovereignty. Sovereignty functions as the *sine qua non* of these three in that way. Nevertheless, we never problematize sovereignty. Rather, what is ultimately at stake is who takes sovereignty to the extent that one cannot fathom or anticipate a society without sovereignty and even the kingdom of God without God's reign. Is there any way to live together, freed from the war to win sovereignty and thus from a sovereign rule, whatever political form it takes? As long as politics is fundamentally determined by sovereignty, such

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<sup>53</sup> In this paper, instead of the term "community," "society" is adopted from the awareness that the former's connotation seems to reduce what Jesus intends to bring about to a sectarian and small-scale group. From this perspective, the term "community" is not appropriate to reflect on the feature of the Messianic death, which is for many.

<sup>54</sup> The phrase "Jesus of the Nazareth," which is not related to any Christological terms, first and last comes in 16:6.

idealism may be considered anti-political in that it conceives to eliminate the kernel of politics, that is, sovereignty, from politics.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to challenge sovereignty in order to uncouple our political imagination from this circumscription of politics by sovereignty. Otherwise, how can we think of a new society, in particular, the Kingdom of God, differently? In this regard, the Gospel of Mark seems to invite us to imagine a totally different kingdom of God. That is, the kingdom of God as the Messianic society without a Messiah with no sovereignty and no subordination. This Messiah-less Messianic society enables for the conditions that lead to hospitality, that is, to welcoming the other or each other in Mark 9:37, as the new principle for such a society. In this way, we can take the Gospel of Mark, the ancient document, as our political text.

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