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## Nature's Lament for Jesus

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## Nature's Lament for Jesus

DAVID E. FREDRICKSON

If ever a text cried out for explanation, it is Mark 15:38: “And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.” Christian interpreters have answered the call. The curtain, they tell us, was a well-known symbol of separation between God (holy and immortal) and humans (sinful and finite). Jesus’ death somehow makes that distance navigable.<sup>1</sup> Regrettably, some Christians have taken the logic of the gap a step further. They claim the torn curtain symbolizes divine judgment and the end of Jewish cultic practice.<sup>2</sup>

### NATURE’S GRIEF

There is another way to explain the tearing of the temple curtain. I believe we make better sense of the strange circumstances surrounding Jesus’ death if we think of the curtain as a visual representation of the cosmos. Then the tearing of the curtain becomes one of two events (the other is the darkening of the sun) that express nature’s grief over Jesus’ death.

<sup>1</sup>For Donald Juel a torn curtain opens *God’s access to us*. Juel’s famous phrase “God...is on the loose” neatly slaps in the face the presumption of liberal Protestantism that the issue is our access to God. See his *A Master of Surprise: Mark Interpreted* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 35–36. Nevertheless, in spite of the reversal of direction—or precisely because it is *merely* a reversal—Juel reinvigorates the problematic notion that the curtain represents the separation of God and humans.

<sup>2</sup>Anti-Jewish readings are present in early Christian interpretation. See Thomas C. Oden and Christopher A. Hall, *Mark* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998) 234–235. For a contemporary example, see Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001) 509–510.

*Might Mark’s torn curtain, darkened sun, and descending dove have a significance different from that offered by most interpreters? In the light of Greek art and poetry, they can be seen to portray nature’s lament for Jesus in a kind of grave-relief that opens new doors of meaning.*

*The torn curtain*

How does this work? If the curtain represents the natural world, then in its torn condition it symbolizes the mourning of the entire universe. In antiquity, universal sympathy for a deceased loved one is an important feature of poetry and, to a lesser degree, of the visual arts. It has lived on in grieving rituals among Orthodox Christians when they mark Christ's death.<sup>3</sup> What follows is an attempt to listen to these extra-biblical sources and let them help us discern nature's empathic response to the death of Jesus. I will also ask what theological significance nature's lament for Jesus might have.

For Aristeas and Josephus the temple curtain is good art. They agree that the most interesting thing about the curtain is its capacity to imitate the universe, not to separate the sacred from the profane. Writing in the second century B.C.E., Aristeas, whose famous letter to his brother Philocrates reports on the origin of the Septuagint, tells also of his journey to Jerusalem and what he saw there. The temple was "built with a lavishness and sumptuousness beyond all precedent." From a description of the magnificent doorposts and lintel he goes on to the curtain, which "corresponded in every respect to the door; especially when the fabric was kept in unceasing motion by the current of wind (πνεῦμα) beneath, since, the current being from below, the curtain bulged out from the bottom to its fullest extent, the spectacle was highly agreeable and hard to tear oneself from."<sup>4</sup> In Stoic fashion, Aristeas calls attention to the penetration of πνεῦμα (spirit) through the fabric as if he were describing a body, which of course he was. Since Stoics thought of any individual body as a microcosm of the universe, when Aristeas saw the billowing curtain he witnessed the breathing cosmos. Little wonder it was difficult to look away!<sup>5</sup>

Josephus makes the same point in a different way, using concepts of contemporary physical science and aesthetics:

Before these [the golden doors] hung a veil of equal length, of Babylonian tapestry, with embroidery of blue and fine linen, of scarlet also and purple, wrought with marvelous skill. Nor was the mixture of materials without its mystic meaning: it typified the universe (εἰκόνα τῶν ὅλων). For the scarlet seemed emblematical of fire, the fine linen of the earth, the blue of the air, and the purple of the sea; the comparison in two cases being suggested by their colour, and in that of the fine linen and purple by their origin, as the one is produced by the earth and the other by the sea. On this tapestry was portrayed a panorama of the heavens, the signs of the Zodiac excepted.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Margaret Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974) 65–72.

<sup>4</sup>Moses Hadas, *Letter of Aristeas* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951) 133–135.

<sup>5</sup>Aristeas's amazement over this living textile reflects the aesthetic ideals that had taken shape in third-century Alexandria. See Richard Hunter, *Theocritus and the Archaeology of Greek Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 116–123.

<sup>6</sup>Josephus, *Jewish War* 5.212–214. (Unless otherwise indicated, translations are from the Loeb Classical Library). Admittedly, Josephus is not describing the inner curtain. Is it reasonable, then, to apply the mimetic quality of his curtain to Mark's? Probably so. Josephus himself (*Jewish War* 5.219, 232) implies the temple's two curtains were identical. For this problem, see David Ulansey, "The Heavenly Veil Torn: Mark's Cosmic *Inclusio*," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110/1 (1991) 123–125.

The reigning scientific paradigm of this era said the universe is composed of fire, earth, air, and water. As for the influence of aesthetics, Josephus uses a theory-laden term (icon, εἰκῶν) for the two distinct ways the curtain refers to the universe: through a relation of visual similarity (scarlet/fire and blue/air) and through a relation of origin (linen/earth and purple/sea).<sup>7</sup> Aristeas and Josephus teach us that by the first century the temple curtain had acquired a reputation, a public way of being perceived; it was a marvelous representation of the cosmos.

To read Mark 15:38 as nature's lament, we now need only document what we might have intuited. To rip fabric in the ancient world was to mourn. Examples are plentiful. The much-honored Sappho (7th century B.C.E.) composed a lament for Adonis in which the nymphs and Kythereia (Aphrodite) sing to each other: "Tender Adonis is dying, Kythereia. What are we to do? / Beat your breasts, maidens, and rend your tunics."<sup>8</sup> Other mourners throughout the ages have accepted grief-stricken Aphrodite's advice.<sup>9</sup> Significantly, the closing moment of human life when the soul tears itself (ψυχορραγεῖν) from the body is like the ripping of fabric.<sup>10</sup> Returning to Mark, if we combine what we have learned about the temple curtain as icon with the ritual of rending garments, then our suggestion that the evangelist surrounds Jesus' death with nature's lament gains some plausibility.

#### *The darkened sun*

On the front side of Jesus' death is the darkening of the sun: "When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon" (Mark 15:33). The sun's behavior is an example of what literary critics, following John Ruskin, have called the pathetic fallacy—attribution of human emotions to aspects of nature.<sup>11</sup> A few vase scenes of trees gently bending over the dying or dead have been cited as significant instances of the pathetic fallacy in archaic and classical art.<sup>12</sup> With the Hellenistic period come more trees at sorrowful inclination.<sup>13</sup> Christian artists continued the tradition from the early sculpted representation of the crucifixion to the remarkable embroidery of Theodosia Pouloupos (late sixteenth century) and Despoineta of Constantinople (seventeenth century).<sup>14</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Purple dye was produced from a limited variety of mollusks. For the various ways ancient art made reference, see Maurizio Bettini, *The Portrait of the Lover* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). "Icon" is at the heart of his discussion.

<sup>8</sup>Translation is from Alexiou, *Ritual Lament*, 55.

<sup>9</sup>Alexiou, *Ritual Lament*, 28–29, 33.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 4, 25–27.

<sup>11</sup>J. L. Butler, "The Pathetic Fallacy in Hellenistic Pastoral," *Ramus* 10 (1981) 35–52.

<sup>12</sup>Jeffrey M. Hurwit, "Palm Trees and the Pathetic Fallacy in Archaic Greek Poetry and Art," *The Classical Journal* 77 (1982) 193–199.

<sup>13</sup>Barbara Hughes Fowler, *The Hellenistic Aesthetic* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989) 104–109.

<sup>14</sup>Images available at <http://www.benaki.gr/collections/greece/postbyzantine/en/thumbs.htm> (accessed 1 August 2005).

*The poetic witness*

Even more than painting, sculpture, or embroidery, however, poetry helps us discern nature's emotional response to Jesus' death in Mark's Gospel. We will look briefly at two poems from the Hellenistic period and then pluck some examples from the funerary epigrams of the *Greek Anthology*.<sup>15</sup> Homer and the poetic tradition had occasionally used nature as a screen onto which human emotions were projected, but Theocritus (early third century B.C.E.) was the first to incorporate the pathetic fallacy into a lament. In *Idyll* 1, the story is about the death of Daphnis, a friend to the beasts of the field, whose suffering was the melting kind. That is, Aphrodite punishes his refusal to fall in love by inflicting on him a "bitter love" (93). He dies dissolving into a river.

When Daphnis died the foxes wailed and the wolves they wailed full sore,  
The lion from the greenwood wept when Daphnis was no more...  
O many the lusty steers at his feet, and many the heifers slim,  
Many the calves and many the kine that made their moan for him.<sup>16</sup>

New in this poem is nature's compassion for an individual human being.<sup>17</sup> We encounter this same innovation in Pseudo-Moschus's *Lament for Bion*. He grieves the passing of the poet Bion of Smyrna in echoes of Bion's own lament for Adonis: "Glens and Dorian water, wail the dirges / Rivers, weep for beloved Bion. / Now, plants, wail and now, groves, weep. / Now blossoms, sigh with mournful clusters" (1–4).<sup>18</sup> This is just the beginning of a pathetic *tour de force*. Rose, windflower, flower-de-luce, nightingale, swan, hill, cow, bull, tree, flock, hive, swallow, sea—all mourn Bion's death. The poet adds an important twist that will figure into our consideration of the sun's failure to shine in Mark. He tells how entities in nature express grief without the aid of language. They do impossible things (ἀδύνατα). They act against their own nature.<sup>19</sup> Out of sorrow "the trees cast their fruit on the ground" and flowers wither, flocks give no milk and bees no honey.

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***"the motif of nature doing impossible things rings out,  
and this takes us back to the darkness in Mark"***

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To complete the illustration of the pathetic fallacy, we turn to the 748 funerary epigrams in Book 7 of the *Greek Anthology*. As a genre, epigram can be traced back to the brief laments inscribed on gravestones. Few of the epigrams collected in the *Greek Anthology* (AP), however, are taken from actual graves. They are imita-

<sup>15</sup>See *The Greek Anthology*, Loeb Classical Library, 67–68, 84–86, trans. W. R. Paton (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958–1963).

<sup>16</sup>Theocritus, *Idyll* 1.71–75.

<sup>17</sup>Butler, "Pathetic Fallacy," 45. *Epitaph on Adonis*, ascribed to Bion of Smyrna, echoes Theocritus's reserved use of the pathetic fallacy on the occasion of Adonis's death by tusk of boar. See J. D. Reed, *Bion of Smyrna: The Fragments and the Adonis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 125.

<sup>18</sup>Translation is from Butler, "Pathetic Fallacy," 36.

<sup>19</sup>This motif is anticipated by Theocritus. See Butler, "Pathetic Fallacy," 37.

tions of sepulchral poetry. The pathetic fallacy wends its way through these miniature literary productions. Rocks and trees moan for the dead Orpheus, who, like Theocritus's Daphnis, had a special bond with the natural world (AP 7.10). In lament for the dead, stones shed tears (AP 7.328), groan aloud (AP 7.468), and tear their cheeks (AP 7.491). The motif of nature doing impossible things rings out, and this takes us back to the darkness in Mark. Antipater of Sidon mourns the loss of an Egyptian prince: "The very moon was darkened by mourning and deserted the stars and her heavenly path" (AP 7.241; cf. AP 7.633). To find instances of darkness covering the earth in sympathy with human suffering we need only move to the tragedies of Seneca, a contemporary of the author of Mark, but I believe the point has been made.<sup>20</sup> The dimming of the sun and the tearing of the temple curtain express nature's grief over Jesus' death.

#### THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

We have yet to deal with the theological significance of nature's lament. What does nature's sympathy imply about God's relation to Jesus? God in Mark 15 presents a severe problem, because signs of divine absence are impossible to dismiss. Nature is noisy with grief, but unlike Jesus' baptism and transfiguration, crucifixion has no divine word. Might it be that the evangelist emphasizes nature's sympathy to imply God's apathy? Or has the reader been prepared to think otherwise about the divine silence surrounding Jesus' death? I do not know the answers to these questions. I would like to think that the latter is the case. What follows are some initial thoughts on how we might relate nature's emotions to God. We will find it helpful to focus on the Spirit of God.

We will adopt an indirect method and not work on the scene of the crucifixion itself. Mark 1:1–11 prefigures Jesus' death. Actually, it does much more. These verses indicate the hermeneutical key for the entire Gospel.<sup>21</sup> This means that if we can detect traces of nature's compassion for Jesus at the beginning of the Gospel we will have prepared ourselves for recognizing it in Mark 15. Even more important, Jesus sees the Spirit of God descending like a dove in conjunction with the tearing of the heavens. The narrative's beginning may help us gain ground on how nature's lament relates God to the suffering of Jesus. A visit to the beginning of the Gospel is in order.

#### *The significance of the dove*

After Jesus is baptized by John, he arises from the water to see "the heavens

<sup>20</sup>See Charles Segal, "Dissonant Sympathy: Song, Orpheus, and the Golden Age in Seneca's Tragedies," *Ramus* 12 (1983) 229–251. The sun's failing to shine was introduced into the poetic tradition by Archilochus (seventh century B.C.E.). See Fowler, *The Hellenistic Aesthetic*, 104.

<sup>21</sup>Some literary works, including the novels of Longus and Achilles Tatius, begin with description (ἐκφρασις) of a scene or object of art, in which clues for the story's meaning are contained. See *Ramus* 31 (2002). The entire volume, edited by Jas Elsner, is dedicated to the topic of ἐκφρασις. In the case of Mark, baptism into water suggests death. See Emily Vermeule, *Aspects of Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979) 179–209. Further, John indeed prepares Jesus' way—by decapitation. The Gospel of Mark makes its meaning through Jesus' death.

torn apart” (σχιζομένους, v. 10). Exegetes have rightly said this anticipates the tearing of the curtain, though they have not made the association with nature's lament that I have argued for above. So, if torn fabric signifies lament, we come to this: Jesus, seeing the heavens torn apart, perceives the same empathy of nature the reading audience will see in Mark 15. But then he sees something else, too: “the Spirit descending like a dove on him.” Here is another strange event, one to rival the curtain's fate. Might our remembrance of the dove help us when we encounter God's silence at the crucifixion?

The standard explanations of the dove (purity, peace, lack of guile) seem contrived when applied to this text, because they do not explain why the dove appears as the visual aspect of the Spirit in the context of death. Nor do they relate the dove to the torn heavens. We need to be more inquisitive about the dove than the exegetical tradition has allowed itself to be. Where in the ancient world did doves and death meet? A search of ancient literature finds no common ground, but we do find a meeting place in Greek funerary sculpture.

I will explain. From the late archaic period and through Roman times various forms of statuary depicting the deceased were erected over, near, or as part of the tomb. Repetition of motifs in sepulchral art over time insured that a visual language with a vocabulary of shapes and spatial relationships was available to all who visited a cemetery. Sometimes the dead person is represented alone, sometimes in a scene with family members. It would be overly ambitious to state categorically what all these statues meant to their viewers, but it does seem safe to say some grave-reliefs, especially beginning in the middle of the fifth century in Athens (earlier in outlying areas), expressed the family members' longing for connection to loved ones separated by death.<sup>22</sup> This is especially true of the significant number of grave-reliefs that feature doves.

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*“the symbolism of the dove needs to be understood as another motif of communion”*

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In a grave-relief, stone is carved in such a way that the figures seem to emerge from an unknowable and unknowing background—a fitting technique for the presentation of the dead. Two figures often are shown joining hands, likely a symbol of communion between the living and the dead.<sup>23</sup> The fact that it is sometimes not possible to distinguish between the deceased and the living suggests in yet another way that they exist together in the same mysterious sphere.<sup>24</sup> The symbolism of the dove, I believe, needs to be understood as another motif of communion. The dove brings into the visual field the consoling notion that death does not mean

<sup>22</sup>K. Friis Johansen, *The Attic Grave-Reliefs of the Classical Period* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1951) 53–64, 137–145, 148–151.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 149–151.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 151.



Figure 1. Grave stele of a little girl, ca. 450–440 B.C. Greek, Parian marble. Metropolitan Museum of Art, [http://www.met-museum.org/toah/hd/dbag/hod\\_27.45.htm](http://www.met-museum.org/toah/hd/dbag/hod_27.45.htm)

desolation, because there is one, and perhaps more, who desires to be with the beloved even if that means the living must embrace death.<sup>25</sup>

A touching grave-relief from the middle of the fifth century found on Paros depicts a little girl, someone's dead daughter, clutching one dove to her chest and allowing another to perch on her wrist (fig. 1). The doves, willingly stationed, look at her. But deep in the sadness of death she looks past them.<sup>26</sup> This sculpture asks something of viewers. If there is to be consolation, they must hope the doves wake the girl from her morbid reverie. This sculpture probably did not resolve feelings of grief immediately, but it helps *us* ask a productive question when we see doves in other grave-reliefs: How is the dove related to the gaze of the figures in the relief and to the viewers' gaze?

Deceased grandmother and dead infant grandchild look at one another in a grave-relief of the early fourth century (fig. 2). The focal point for the viewer is the two dead beloved ones looking at each other. We discover the dove held leisurely by the grandmother after ex-

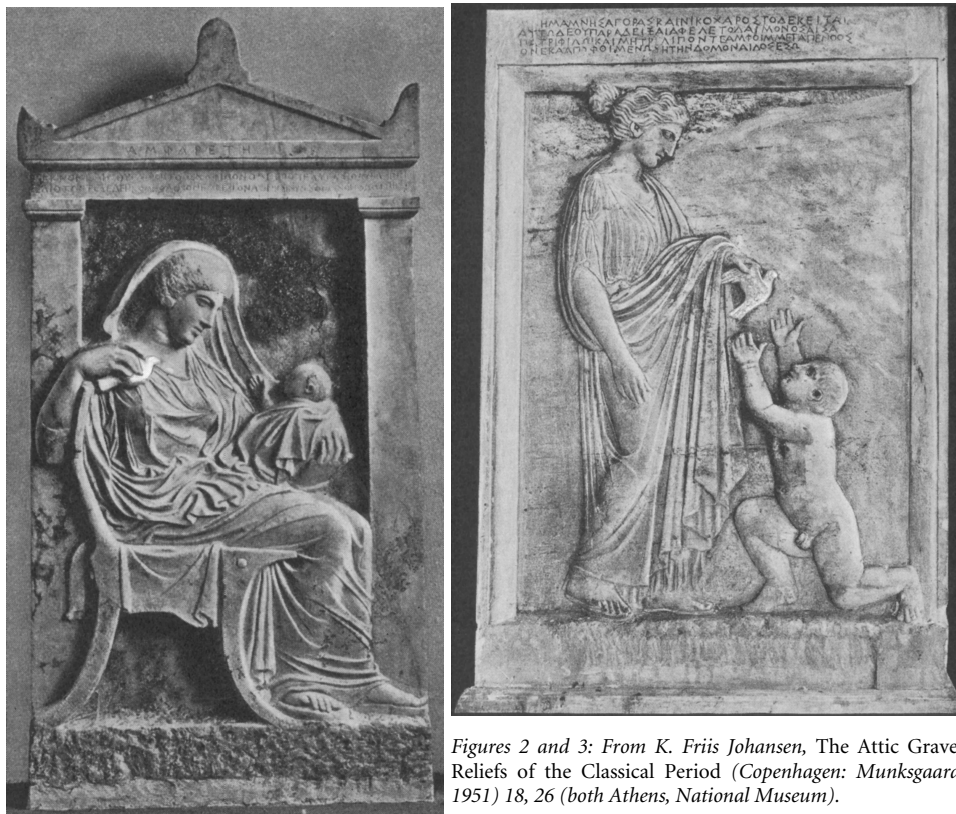
periencing the visual bond that links the two dead persons with the viewer. Shy member of this tableau, the dove is witness and symbol of the communion of the grandmother with her beloved child. This beautifully made relief is also remarkable for a revealing inscription above the scene on the architrave: "Here I hold my daughter's child (τέκνον), the beloved one (φίλον), which I used to hold on my knees when, living, we beheld the rays of the sun, and now, dead, I hold the dead child."<sup>27</sup> Both really are dead, but the union is nevertheless as real as these inscribed words can make it. They speak of the grandmother's pleasure in the child, a delight that even death does not disrupt.

<sup>25</sup>That the dove (ἡ περιστερά) was associated with Aphrodite should tip us off that we are dealing with intercourse of *some* kind, not simply a favorite pet or symbol of the soul as some interpreters of grave-reliefs have suggested. For the dove as "love-bird," see Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, "Reading" *Greek Culture: Texts and Images, Rituals and Myths* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991) 177. A quick review of the surprisingly few literary references shows doves to be gentle and gregarious. They exemplify κοινονία and φίλα. It was reported by Aristotle that the male suffered with the female when she gave birth. A fanciful etymology derived περιστερά from περισοῶς (exceedingly) and ἐρᾶν (to love). For these and more fun facts, see D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson, *A Glossary of Greek Birds* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936) 238–247.

<sup>26</sup>The youth, Hedylos, likewise looks past the bird he holds in his lowered right hand. See Carl Blümel, *Die klassisch griechischen Skulpturen der staatlichen Museen zu Berlin* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1966), plate 34.

<sup>27</sup>Translation is from Johansen, *Attic Grave-Reliefs*, 151.





Figures 2 and 3: From K. Friis Johansen, *The Attic Grave-Reliefs of the Classical Period* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1951) 18, 26 (both Athens, National Museum).

The same paradox of life and death is emphasized in a grave-relief dated to 430 B.C.E. (fig. 3). Above the carved figures an epitaph states the parents' grief over the absence of their children. Yet the compelling sculptural *presence* of the young woman Mnesagora and her little brother Nichocharos opposes the parents' loss. A dove, caught in the moment of descent, organizes the visual experience of all involved. It gathers together the gaze of sister, brother, and viewers. It creates and represents communion between the living and the dead.

*Mark 1:9–11 as grave-relief*

Might not the dove in Mark 1:10 similarly organize our imagination of the scene? Might we not read 1:9–11 as we would read a grave-relief?<sup>28</sup> Here is an attempt. Jesus the son emerges from the water, that symbol of death, as carved funerary figures stand out from stone. He looks at the heavens torn apart. We viewers know he sees nature lamenting his death. He discovers he is not alone. He gazes also at the maker of communion between the living and dead, the Spirit, who descends in the form of a dove, symbol of communion. From above the scene, from

<sup>28</sup>Recently classicists have emphasized that ancient public and private spaces were full of statues, and this greatly influenced both the composition and the reading of literature. See Deborah Tarn Steiner, *Images in Mind: Statues in Archaic and Classical Greek Literature and Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), and Peter Stewart, *Statues in Roman Society: Representation and Response* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

the heavens, come words like an epitaph, but they are directed to Jesus, not to us, though we do indeed overhear them just as strangers read the thoughts of the living for their dear dead on gravestones: “You are my beloved son; in you I was well pleased” (my translation). The living voice delighted in the death-bearing son, and because the “you are” is spoken by a living one, pleasure goes on in spite of death, but only as the words make it so and only as the Spirit of the living one is willingly stationed in the bosom of the crucified one or perched, perhaps, on his wrist.

We have attended to the various gazes within the scene, our own looking, and the relationship between voiced text and figures. To read this passage as a grave-relief has also meant that we are looking for consolation not in victory over death, since this was never a theme of the grave-relief, but in the mysterious communion of the living with the dead in which each shares with the other its own truth. This Markan passage before us is a marvelous grave-relief because the living one is God. What will this sharing mean for the living one? What will it mean for the one who has died? Only one way to find out. Read on. ⊕

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