The centurion’s confession is often regarded as the first acknowledgment of Jesus as the Son of God by a human being, even a gentile. It is, however, questionable if this interpretation does justice to the gospel text when his confession is taken to be an outright testimony of Christian faith. From a semio-literary point of view, the centurion’s confession only represents a step forward in the story’s revelation of the secret about Jesus’ true identity. Like Peter’s confession (Mark 8:29) the officer’s statement only catches vague aspects of Jesus’ role and dignity. But we shall rather equate the centurion’s verbal confession with Joseph from Arimathea’s confession in acting, his entombment of Jesus. Despite their sympathy for Jesus, however, neither the Gentile commander nor the Jewish member of the council has the resurrection in mind but regard his death as final. The question, therefore, remains if any human character of the gospel story ever arrives at the proper understanding for an adequate Christian confession of Jesus as the Son of God.


As reference translation of the Greek text, I use the New Revised Standard Version.
The Centurion’s Confession:  
Mark 15:39 in a Semio-literary Perspective

Ole Davidsen, Aarhus University

1. Introduction

Gerd Theissen has proposed to view the Gospel of Mark as a unified composition thanks to some thorough “arches of tension,” thought to keep together, as it were, the story’s beginning, middle, and ending. Theissen identifies three such arches of tension, an aretalogical, a mythical, and a biographical one.¹

The aretalogical one (aretalogy: the study of gods’ and godlike humans’ heroic achievements and excellent properties) is characterized by a search “nach Erkenntnis der wahren Würde Jesu.” In the first half of the gospel story, the question about Jesus’ identity is raised because of his words and deeds. However, no unequivocal answer is given, neither by the spectators, the listeners or the directly concerned persons. Peter’s confession (8:29) shows a beginning insight, but it does not express any adequate understanding of whom Jesus really is, why this arch of tension is uncompleted at that moment. It will not be completed until the centurion’s confession at the cross (15:39): “Hier spricht zum ersten Mal ein Mensch aus, dass Jesus Sohn Gottes ist.” When the curtain of the temple is torn next to this confession, Mark suggests, that the gospel story’s secret up till now has been revealed to the centurion as a character in the story (the reader has known it right from the beginning, 1:1).

The mythical arch of tension, also named “das mythische Stufenschema,” includes the baptism, the transfiguration, and the death on the cross. However, since the centurion’s confession plays such a significant role in connection to the death of Jesus, Theissen does not lay the stress on the mythical arch of tension as “stufenweise Realisierung der Würde Jesu,” but as “sukzessive Offenbarung und Anerkennung.” Jesus becomes God’s son at the baptism (adoption), and God reveals him as such to the disciples at the transfiguration on the mountain. The death on the cross is the moment when Jesus manifests himself publicly to the world to be rejected or recognized. Thus, the centurion’s confession ends the aretalogical as well as the mythical arch of tension. However, contrary to the aretalogical arch

of tension is the mythical arch of tension incomplete. So, because, according to Theissen, it is in lack of mythical prehistory, and only the Parousia will bring the mythical action to accomplishment. Thus, the Gospel of Mark has its regular character from the aretalogical arch of tension and is as such to identify as “eine aretalogische Evangelienkomposition.”

The biographical arch of tension is first present in the Passion Narrative but includes any biographical and chronological information about Jesus. In principle from the cradle to the grave, but the Gospel of Mark has no infancy narrative, no comprehensive description of Jesus’ life. The Gospel of Mark has no interest in the life of Jesus but in the unity of the action which seeks the recognition of Jesus as the son of God. The only partially present biographical arch of tension also ends with the death on the cross. Thus, all the three arches of tension culminate with the centurion’s confession, but the aretalogical, the only completed one, dominates.

In Theissen’s view, the centurion’s confession plays a decisive role. It is indeed the very culmination of the gospel story seen as the progressive revelation of the truth about Jesus to the story’s characters. It is, however, questionable if the centurion’s confession has the key function that Theissen (and other scholars) assigns to it. I have earlier on raised some questions concerning Theissen’s definitions of these arches of tension.²

First, it is surprising that the resurrection does not play a role in any of them. Is it possible to identify the unifying action of the gospel story without including this event? Second, it is odd to the principles of classification that the centurion’s confession appears in all three since it strictly speaking denies the relevance of distinguishing between them. Third, it is surprising that the centurion’s faith in the mythical arch of tension is given the undeserved honor to be put on the same footing as God’s confession/announcement at the baptism and the transfiguration. It seems more natural to compare the centurion’s confession with Peter’s confession, which Theissen also assigns to the aretalogical arch of tension. Peter does express evaluation of Jesus, but he has no notion of the real significance of his being. Peter is enthusiastically confessing Jesus to be Christ but has not yet realized what the Christ-role implies. The centurion confesses Jesus to be “God’s son,” but it is uncertain if he has the adequate conception of this title. It seems, therefore, to be a premature conclusion to have the gospel story culminating in and be completed by the centurion’s narrated confession, just as it would be over-hasty to let it end with the account of the death of Jesus.

The interpretation of the centurion’s confession is thus still an interesting exegetical challenge. And it gives occasion to consider some central problems for a semio-literary reading. They concern the relation between the story’s pragmatic and cognitive dimension, as well as the relation between the narrative’s story and discourse. The pragmatic dimension (the actions’ and events’ somatic and material dimension) forms the cognitive dimension’s story-internal referent. The characters’ cognitive knowledge and belief are directed towards the results of these actions and events. The centurion’s confession is thus an expression of his cognitive evaluation of Jesus dying on the cross.

The narrative’s story is the third person utterance which the narrator (first person) presents to his reader/listener (second person) in the narrative’s discourse, the oral or written speech that carries the story. The narrator is hiding behind the story, of which he is never the less in charge. The story is told from the narrator’s point of view and reveals his evaluation of the story’s actions and events. However, that evaluation might be concealed or undisguised. A story is an indirect form of communication, and yet sometimes the narrator may communicate more directly with his reader, as when he in Mark 1:1 opens his discourse with the words “The beginning of the good news of [of the gospel story about] Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Mark is telling out of the conviction that Jesus is Christ, the Son of God, and with his narrative, he wishes to validate to the reader, that this is in fact so.

2. The Cognition and its Subject Matter
Now, the question is, whether the Gospel of Mark solely tells about the cognitive realization of Jesus’ actual being, or if it tells about the cognitive realization of Jesus’ being in the making. Thus, we have two possible views of the evolution of the story.

2.1. The Two Views of the Story’s Cognitive Complex of Problems
According to the first one Jesus has his full divine dignity from the very beginning, at least since the baptismal event, but concealed. It is a secret that Jesus is Christ, God’s Son, but this mystery is disclosed step by step until it is wholly unveiled by the centurion’s confession. So, the cognitive position of this person in the story coincides with the narrator’s cognitive place in the discourse. The centurion and the narrator mutually confirm each other. However, the difficulty of this (tendentially docetic) Christology is given by the fact that Jesus is not at all at stake in this narrated drama. Whether he is dead or alive does not matter. Jesus has his divine being from the very beginning and preserves it despite whatever he is meeting.
The pragmatic/somatic level of being is unchangeable; change may only take place in the cognitive register. But, so it is, as far as I understand, according to Theissen’s finding.

According to the second view, it is challenging to the human characters in the story-world to achieve an adequate understanding of Jesus’ identity, because his dignity can only be clarified by his full destiny still in the making. One may get the impression that he might be something special, but the clear picture of what Christ and God’s Son mean will only become known after his death and resurrection. Only the resurrection can show that the death of Jesus had special importance as a step towards his realization of full divine being. According to this view is Jesus establishing a new order of being, and the successive disclosure of his being follows his achievement of that being. The stepwise or hermeneutically growing perception of Jesus’ dignity is thus not due to his interpreters’ lack of cognitive abilities. It is because the being to be comprehended is only established stepwise or progressively. That is my suggestion, which thus seeks to keep together a pragmatic and a cognitive line of development, in Theissen’s words regards the story as “stufenweise Realisierung der Würde Jesu” as well as “sukzessive Offenbarung und Anerkennung der Würde Jesu.”

2.2. The Recognition of Jesus as God’s Son
The cognitive level plays a dominant role in the Gospel of Mark, and it is quite right that the narrative’s purpose is to authenticate Jesus as the Son of God. However, that is only interesting if the story concurrently discloses what this title implies. Therefore, a valid confession of Jesus as God’s Son must be founded on an adequate conception of what “God’s Son” means. I sense that we tend to hypostatize the cognitive level. Thus, before we take a closer look at the centurion’s confession, I shall explain what the recognition of Jesus as the Son of God must be said to imply.

As proclaimer of “the good news of God” (1:14), Jesus performs in the role of the influencer.3 His cognitive doing has a pragmatic aim. He is trying to prompt a virtual subject of doing to do something freely. So, Jesus informs this subject of doing (in principle anybody) that it is found to be in a situation of being where an opportunity is given to take on a task. Let us assume that the assignment consists of leaving everything to follow Jesus and have a part in the benefits of the kingdom of God. To persuade the virtual subject of doing to act, the influencer must give rise to specific motives for acting. He must induce hope for

3 Here I use Bremond’s definition of l’influenceur as a methodic horizon of questioning, Claude Bremond, Logique du récit (Paris: Seuil 1973), 242ff.
the satisfaction in which the performance of this act will result and inspire fear for the dissatisfaction which the renunciation of this act will entail. Whatever else the kingdom of God may mean, it represents a definite order of being in which one can have part and lot if one follows the proclaimer’s instruction. Jesus must invoke the hope that the imitation will imply a satisfaction that is greater than what one would achieve by renunciation to act, and weightier than the dissatisfaction one may fear to meet performing the task. It is at the same time to expect that Jesus’ proclamation will raise the fear that the refusal to act (i.e., not to follow Jesus) will entail a dissatisfaction which is greater than what one could fear to meet performing the act, and more extensive than the satisfaction one might hope to achieve by the rejection to act.

The story about the calling of the disciples does not give us any insight into their possible consideration for or against to follow Jesus. One, therefore, gets the impression that Jesus’ charismatic authority is so overwhelming that the called upon, without any thoughtfulness or independent attitude, right away submissively respond to an irresistible verbal suggestion and leave everything to follow him. In the story-world, however, it does make sense to claim that Jesus must induce the hope that the imitation will imply a change of being for the better (salvation of a kind); possibly (like John the Baptist) raise fear of the worsening of being (damnation of a kind) which the refusal of this act will imply. The hope for improvement must furthermore be stronger than the fear of that dissatisfaction which one may meet performing the task. The disciples’ betrayal, denial, and fleeing show that the balance between these motives is changing as the narrative develops (one could speak of “psychologizing” here, but if so of “narrative psychologizing”).

The entire drama is given because the motives inducted by the influencer may be well founded (anticipating realizable satisfaction or dissatisfaction) or unfounded (predicting fantasied pleasure or displeasure). Thus, the influencer performs soon as a revelator soon as an impostor. We further distinguish between the voluntary (intentional) and involuntary (unintentional) revelator/impostor. If the deliberate influencer is in good faith, convinced of the truth of his information, he is performing in the role as voluntary revelator. But if he is the victim of self-deception, he is at the same time acting in the role as an involuntary deceiver. A story may omit to point out, whether the influencer’s information is true

\[4\] The story’s logic or narrative rationality refers not only to the narrator’s cognitive competence but also to our own. We use that competence - intuitively as ordinary readers, in a systematical way, and with a conscience, i.e., methodically, as narrative exegetes - when we by interpretation is trying to establish meaning.
or false, but most often the narrator will take a side and specify, whether the informer is a revelator or an impostor. Thus, overall, the Gospel of Mark presents Jesus as a voluntary revelator, but the religious and political leaders execute him as an involuntary impostor. The picture of Jesus is therefore ambiguous, and one could argue that the gospel story intends to substantiate that Jesus is, in fact, a voluntary revelator.

However, this happens indirectly. What the discourse claims, must the story confirm, but that is full of characters who must struggle for clarity and even misunderstand and pronounce the wrong judgment. Whatever: Since Jesus himself pleads to have his information from God, the question is, if he is a real or false prophet/influencer. His Christological self-revelation is subordinated the same conditions as the rest of his proclamation: Either he is indeed Christ, God’s Son, or he is an impostor. Even here is the cognitive identification of dignity and being connected to a pragmatic perspective, since the Christological titles refer to Jesus as a pragmatic subject of doing, to his role in the establishment of that kingdom of God, the new order of being, he proclaims. It is quite right that the resurrection can be God’s objective confirmation of Jesus as a true prophet in the story-world. But thereby the content of his proclamation is confirmed, that he is Christ, the Son of God, and that the new order of being, he has promised, is being carried into effect, what the resurrection (as the first fruit) especially confirms. Jesus does not only proclaim a new order of being to come, but he plays a decisive role in the realization of this order of being, what he also has revealed in his self-disclosing proclamation. He is not just a prophetical proclaimer who suffers death because of his announcement for then to be raised by God as a reward for his preaching efforts. It is “the secret of the kingdom of God” (Mark 4:11) that Jesus plays a role in the establishment of this kingdom. His voluntary death on the cross in Jerusalem is an act which has a function in the stepwise establishment of that new order of being he has promised to come.

The recognition of Jesus as God’s Son, therefore, implies that Jesus as a prophet/influencer is a voluntary revelator and that the content of his proclamation is objectively real in the story-world. The death of Jesus is not only a crucifixion, where he has his life taken by the Jewish and Roman authorities altogether. It is a death on the cross, where he is giving his life (Mark 10:45) and thereby contributes to the pragmatic establishment of the new order of being called the kingdom of God. The resurrection confirms that this order of being is taking effect because God has recognized Jesus’ pragmatic deed.
3. The Centurion’s Confession

We now return to the centurion and ask what this person in the story-world can see and realize in the moment of confession. Does he have the information he needs to interpret whom Jesus is and what “God’s Son” means? Can we say something about the perceptive horizon which characterizes his cognitive position? After all, we must consider what he may mean by what he says. If we disregard the possibility that he speaks ironically and mockingly, is he then expressing an adequate and valid understanding of Jesus (of his cognitive proclamation and pragmatic action of obedience), or is he only on the scent of such an insight?5

Analysis of the centurion’s confession demands the use of more information from the story, but the main verses are Mark 15:37-39, which we take as the point of departure, and for a start the English text is sufficient:

Mark 15:37 Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. v38 And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. v39 Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, “Truly this man was God’s Son!”

3.1. The Curtain (15:38)

The first problem concerns the information, that “the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.” Is the centurion able to see and understand this event? Well, according to Raymond Brown:

There is no reason to think that the ancient Marcan audience (any more than most people today) would have had a problem with the centurion’s seeing the rending of the veil. And it would have made sense to them that this tremendous sign led him to understand that Jesus was not only innocent but indeed so closely related to God that the deity had begun to destroy the sanctuary of the people who had dared to mock him.6

It is, however, more than uncertain that Mark wanted to convey to his reader that the centurion saw this event. Here the omnipresent and omniscient narrator cuts in to give the reader a piece of information about a fact to which the story’s characters on Golgotha impossibly can have access. Mark conveys a bit of information, which serves the reader’s overall interpretation, including the evaluation of the centurion’s exclamation.

---

5 Considering the mockery and disdain Jesus’ opponents expose him to in the Passion Narrative one may, of course, wonder if the centurion’s confession is ironical; cf. Robert M. Fowler, Let the Reader Understand. Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1991), 206ff. However, here I disregard this possibility because I detect a correspondence between the officer’s verbal confession and Joseph from Arimathea’s burial of Jesus as a confessional act; cf. below. Although unclear in some respects we can hardly identify Joseph’s acting as intentional irony, even if it is full of dramatic irony.

3.2. The Loud Cry (15:37)
When we focus on the centurion’s situation, his cognitive position, we can thus omit verse 38 and disambiguate the text as follows:

* Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way [with a loud cry] he breathed his last, he said, “Truly this man was God’s Son!”

An external incident must activate the officer’s confession. It must be a response to an event he experiences by perception, i.e., sight and hearing, and that is right away Jesus’ peculiar expiration with a loud cry.

We ought of cause to consider, if not other experiences could influence his view. As an officer to the soldiers who are crucifying Jesus, he may have witnessed other remarkable events around the death of Jesus. Thus, from a dramaturgical point of view, he can hardly have missed noticing that darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon or have failed to hear that Jesus cried out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (although he may not have understood the Aramaic words). And he must have witnessed how Jesus is mocked and becomes the object of malignity (15:33-36). All of this is not only probable but a fact inside the story’s dramaturgical universe – unless the narrator himself contests it, what he does not.

However, we never hear about the centurion’s reaction to those events. In fact, we learn nothing of what agitates him until he becomes convinced that Jesus is of godlike distinction. Categorically we must be dealing with a cognitive change, from “I am convinced, that Jesus is not of divine quality” to “I am convinced that Jesus is of divine quality.” Whether he has been in doubt in the meantime, so that the experience of Jesus’ moment of death decides the matter, we are left to speculate. But it lays near at hand to regard his “conversion” as an anagnorisis understood as a sudden cognitive reversal. Because that we know from other places in the strongly stylized Biblical story-tradition, which seldom gives us insight into the character’s inner life (cf. Adam and Eve, whose eyes are suddenly opened so that they know that they are naked, Gen 3:7; cf. also Luk 24:31). The centurion’s reaction is provoked by the way Jesus dies, that he expires with a loud cry. But how can a loud sound cause an anagnorisis?
3.3. The Premature Death (15:44-45)

When Joseph from Arimathea comes and asks for the body, Pilate is wondering if Jesus could be dead already. He, therefore, summons the Roman centurion, who then, as it were, issues the official death certificate, an act confirming him as the officer in charge of the soldiers, who carried out the torture and the execution. Pilate needs no more definite information. To him, it is merely essential that Jesus, in fact, is dead. When affirmed, he is ready to deliver the body to Joseph. Is Pilate’s wondering just a narrative remedial measure to prepare a way for the attestation of Jesus’ death, or is it at least as significant that Jesus dies faster than to be expected?

The death is maintained as a fact, which anticipates the reader’s possible misunderstanding, that Jesus was nothing but half death or apparent death when he was delivered, and that his subsequent restoration at the most was healing and resuscitation rather than the resurrection of a deceased person. It is, however, difficult to see, why it should be necessary to inform about Jesus’ early death to confirm his end. The information about the surprisingly hasty death must serve another purpose. Pilate does not care why Jesus dies so early. The reader, however, cannot avoid wondering what this information from Mark may suggest. But what can the answer be, if it is possible to find an explanation at all?

A possible explicative interpretation could be that Jesus is without staying power. Not necessarily because of a weak constitution. But because of the preceding extensive torture, he is already half dead before the crucifixion. The information that Simon of Cyrene is forced to carry his cross (15:21) indicates Jesus himself is too weak to take it. Is it, however, that insight Mark wishes to suggest to his reader with the information about Jesus’ premature death?

Another explanation could be that Jesus had to die fast so that he could be buried the same day before sunset (cf. Deut 21:22-23) and further before the Sabbat began to avoid blasphemy. The Romans then could not reject the request for the delivering of the body out of fear for a riot on holiday. But the possibility also exists (without excluding the just mentioned) that the establishment of Jesus’ early death as a fact shall affirm that he died an extraordinary way since he chose his moment of death.

It is Jesus’ last expiration with a loud cry which is the action that provokes the centurion’s reaction. He sees how Jesus dies. One may, of course, wonder if it is possible to see a cry, but first, the centurion observes the way in which Jesus dies, not only that he dies,
and this perception implies sight as well as hearing, and second this sight points to realization and insight.

As Robert Fowler (op. cit. 121) has pointed out, is Mark in more places giving his reader insight into what the story’s characters see or hear. In the story about the healing of the paralytic in Capernaum, Mark 2:1-12, we hear of four men, who are carrying a paralytic and will spare no effort to overcome obstacles and get to Jesus. It says that “Jesus saw their faith” (12:5), but what has he seen? He has observed their action and interpreted it as an expression of their strong belief that he will be able to help the paralytic. What Jesus realizes is the result of an interpretative inference based on observed behavior. “Jesus saw their faith” is a condensed expression of the interpretative insight that the action is a sign. Likewise, is the centurion’s confession a revealing inference based on observed behavior, i.e., Jesus’ way of dying as a sign. The question then is what it is about the way Jesus dies that makes him conclude that Jesus is a godlike person, although the situation otherwise seems to contradict such a judgment.

It is far from certain that a narrator conveys the necessary information for the reader to detect the connection between a character’s perception and inference. Without further explanation, the narrator may merely claim that a figure arrived at an understanding. However, Mark makes it clear that the centurion is overwhelmed with the vision on which he forms his confession because he sees how Jesus dies. And Mark expects his reader to apprehend that. In Mark 2:1-12 it is not difficult for the reader to understand that Jesus interprets the carriers’ eagerness as an expression of their faith, their belief, that Jesus will be able to help the paralytic. It may be less clear why the centurion can interpret Jesus’ way of dying as an expression of his godlike quality. But Mark’s presupposed reader may have had more experience with ways of dying than we have, not only in the case of the crucified person but also with ordinary people.

It is not common, somewhat quite unusual, that people die with a loud cry on their lips. A loud scream shows resistance and desire for life and is as such standing in glaring contrast to the usual death rattle. It is, therefore, a paradox when Jesus expires with a cry. A human being, not least a crucified one, who expires with a shout, is quite extraordinary and might have led the centurion to second thoughts. We may very well expect him to wonder (like so many others have questioned about Jesus’ deeds) if he has not yet made a judgment. However, it does not make sense to give the centurion time to wonder and interpret. We are rather dealing with an insight which arrives as suddenly as sense perception since
this insight has the quality of a revealed truth of evidence. When Jesus expires with a cry, it has nothing to do with the decreasing breakdown of a biological organism. We have a personal act, more precisely an intentional act from a human being, who through willpower has the control with his breathing. What the centurion sees is not that the crucified Jesus is dying expectedly, but that he dies by his sovereign giving up the spirit. This interpretation of the text can explain, how Mark and his presupposed reader could understand, why the centurion obtained insight when he observed how Jesus died. The centurion did not witness the death of Jesus as an organic incident, but as an event carried by an intentional act. Such an understanding of Jesus’ premature death would emphasize the foundational idea of the gospel story that Jesus, who on the manifest level has his life taken (the death on the cross as execution), on an immanent level is giving his life (the death on the cross as a voluntary sacrifice). The manifest crucifixion is hiding the secret that the death on the cross is obedient self-sacrifice where Jesus is giving his life (a ransom for many, 10:45). More happenings around Jesus’ ending suggest that his death is something more than what it is on the face of it. It is not (only) the religious and political authorities’ legitimate execution of an impostor (seeing Jesus as neither Christ/the Son of God nor the legitimate king of the Jews). It forms part of God’s stepwise establishment of the divine kingdom. Thus, by glimpses, the underlying meaning is breaking its way through the surface cover.

3.4. The Confession (15:39)
As a reaction to Jesus’ last and peculiar expiration, the officer exclaims: “Truly this man was God’s Son!” It is an epistemic judgment since the commander publicly states his subjective opinion. The centurion believes that Jesus was the Son of God, and we are facing an act of confession. It is, however, not quite clear how more elements in this conditional utterance (‘Αληθῶς οὖτος ὁ ἀνθρώπος υἱὸς θεοῦ ἦν.) is to understand. What does “truly” suggest, and what does the officer mean by “this man was God’s Son”; that “this man was God’s Son,” and finally that “this man was God’s Son”?

The adverb “truly” (ἀληθῶς) suggests that Jesus (according to the officer’s view) really, indeed was of divine dignity. An admitting affirmation is present which implies a previous denial or at least a doubt. As observer and henchman to Pilate, it is doubtful what shares the officer might have in Jesus’ fate. Nor do we hear anything of his knowledge about the legal action against the person he is ordered to crucify. We are, however, led to infer that he together with the other soldiers has mocked Jesus as the “king of the Jews.” Then the
reversal of knowledge happens: It turns out that Jesus is, what he has stated, and others claimed, that he is of divine quality.

The mentioning of Jesus as “this man” (ὁ ζυγός ὁ ἔνθρωπος) or perhaps better “this human being” indicates the observer’s distance to the person. The centurion takes an evaluative stand to the case as a witness. Whatever else he may mean, he senses that the human being he has crucified is of superhuman quality.

What the English translation renders with “God’s Son” is in the Greek text more ambiguous, since “son” as well as “god” (υἱός θεοῦ) here lacks the definite article. Thus, an alternative translation could be: “Truly, this human being was a god’s son.” In this case, the centurion does realize that Jesus is more than an ordinary human being, but without having the real – the definitive – understanding of, what this would imply. It is also remarkable that he says “was” (ἦν) instead of “is” since that suggests that his realization arrives too late. He has made a mistake and has inadvertently crucified a being of some godlike quality.

I agree with Rudolf Pesch, who writes:

Mit dem Präteritum „war“ (ἦν) beurteilt er den Gestorbenen – er spricht kein christliches Bekenntnis zum Auferstandenen aus. ... Eine exklusiv titulare Interpretation ergibt sich erst in christlicher Perspektive, die dem Hauptmann noch nicht unterstellt ist.⁷

We can compare Peter’s confession with the centurion’s statement in certain respects. Sincerely both characters express their subjective opinion of Jesus’ identity, and in the wording are their statements identical or close to identical with the wording in the proper Christian confession. Peter confesses that Jesus is Christ, and so he rightly is, but in another way than Peter has it. What “Christ” really means will not be revealed but by the completed narrative. The centurion confesses that Jesus “was God’s Son” or “was a god’s son,” and the Greek wording is sufficiently ambiguous to make both perceptions possible. The question is, however, if he from his cognitive position can have the right idea of “God’s Son,” a notion which will only be defined by the gospel story in its entireness.

Robert Fowler may, of course, be right, when he points out that the centurion’s word may function one way in the story and in another way in the discourse. The word remains ambiguous on the story level, but on the discursive level will any reader realize that the centurion’s statement is a qualified summary of the narrator’s understanding of Jesus.

⁷ Rudolf Pesch, Das Markusevangelium, 2. Teil (Freiburg: Herder 1980), 500.
“No reader fails to understand at 15:39”, he writes (op. cit. 208), “what the narrator wants him to understand, which is not what the centurion’s attitude toward Jesus is but rather what the narrator’s attitude toward Jesus is.”

It is, however, still a relevant question, whether there is a difference between the centurion’s and the narrator’s cognitive position. When we often meet the opinion that the centurion’s statement represents a cognitive climax and we there even should be facing the first gentile’s Christian confession of Jesus as God’s Son, the explanation probably is that we are inclined to project the narrator’s understanding of Jesus unto that of the centurion. It seems more correct, however, to regard the centurion as a character who at best is on his way towards an adequate understanding of Jesus as God’s Son.

It is evident that the centurion’s act of confession functions as a narrative argument to support the narrator’s conviction and message. In the story, we have a spontaneous anagnorisis. Strictly speaking, we have no interpretation understood as a reflective evaluation, but a forced-on insight, as when the world presents us with objective truth. To the centurion, the way Jesus dies is an unambiguous sign of his divine quality, and that is confirmed by the narrative’s definition of the story world’s nature. It is a sound narrative argument when the responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus, a person who officially represents Pilate and the Romans, by the circumstances is forced to realize that the executed is “a god’s son.” The story’s objective reality is correcting the Romans’ subjective belief.

Now, we do not hear anything further about how the centurion experiences the situation, what thoughts he may have had, so we have room for different conjectures. As contra-weight to an all too romantic idea, we shall mention that the centurion also must arrive at the insight that the crucifixion is a challenge to God/the gods, why the fear of divine revenge is to be expected. Perhaps we should not speak of the centurion’s confession then but be content to talk about his (limited) insight – at least confine ourselves to understand “confession” as the sincere proclamation of a (limited) subjective belief. The important thing is that an officer, who represents the Roman part of Jesus’ opponents, suddenly realizes that his superiors’ comprehension of this Jesus was a mistake. It suggests that an otherwise settled case is now open for reevaluation from Roman/Gentile side. With this insight, the centurion is on his way to an understanding which could result in a genuine Christian confession of Jesus as God’s Son after the resurrection. For the moment the centurion has in no way the resurrected Jesus in mind but sees his death as the ultimate point. Jesus was “a god’s
son”; but now he is dead. Jesus’ end he will confirm later to Pilate (15,45), but he will hardly inform the prefect of his new insight.

It is irony of fate that a Roman officer as the first expresses a positive evaluation of Jesus after this one’s death. It underlines that the immanent truth (the mystery) cannot but break through the manifestation’s cover, even by categorical opponents. In that respect, we can detect parallelism between the centurion’s confession by word and Joseph from Arimathea’s subsequent confession by an act, the burial of Jesus.

Joseph from Arimathea is introduced as “a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God” (15,43). The first part of this information suggests that Joseph takes part in the death sentence of Jesus. As such he represents the Jewish party among Jesus’ definite opponents. The second part modifies this impression, however without making him a close disciple of Jesus (nor does he take contact to the women among Jesus’ followers who remain and witness the crucifixion from a distance, cf. 15,41-47). He is, therefore, rather in line with the centurion, a person among the categorical opponents who shows some sympathy with Jesus. Jesus’ family, as well as his disciples, are out of the picture, and it is once more irony of fate when a member of the Synedrion, which condemned Jesus as deserving death, is taking care of his burial. If the centurion is the first gentile to show a positive attitude towards the dead Jesus, then Joseph is the first Jew doing so. However, just as the centurion attests Jesus’ death without any sense of the subsequent resurrection, so Joseph entombs Jesus’ body and seals the grave with a large stone. To both the death is the end of story.

Jesus’ proclamation and actions have divided the people into two campsites: supporters and opponents. We may expect a continuum between the wholehearted supporters and the hardhearted opponents, but categorically the narrative operates with the following articulation of semantics:

```
Actant  Antactant
Supporter  Opponent
Negantactant  Negactant
Non-opponent  Non-supporter
```
The *Actant* represents the wholehearted supporters, first the Twelve elected by Jesus. The *Antactant* represents, on the other hand, the hardhearted opponents, the Roman and Jewish leaders, Pilate and the Synedrion, who jointly have Jesus convicted and executed. The centurion is per definition *Opponent*, and so it is said, that he stood facing Jesus (15:39). His task is partly to watch that no one comes and takes Jesus down to rescue him, partly to witness his death to confirm it. With his recognition/confession, the centurion changes his position. However, instead of seeing him as a *Supporter*, we shall regard him as a *Non-opponent*, since he denies the official Roman view of Jesus, but does not yet confirm the exact Christian perception of him. As a member of the Synedrion is Joseph from Arimathea likewise an *Opponent* per definition. With his confessional act, he denies the official Jewish opinion of Jesus, however without confirming the Christian understanding of him.

This movement (→) from *Antactant* to *Negantactant*, which inclines (↑) towards *Actant*, corresponds in the story to another movement (→) from *Actant* to *Negactant*, which tends towards (↑) *Antactant*. The Twelve are disciples who, to begin with, are categorical *Supporters* of Jesus. Judas’ betrayal, Peter’s denial, and the other disciples’ fleeing point to a rejection (as *Non-supporter*), which tends towards outright enmity (*Opponent*). “Whoever is not against us is for us,” it is said in Mark 9:40, which gives us an example of how the *Negantactant* (as a sympathizer or as a more passive, partial supporter) tends towards the *Actant* position. The likewise but reverse movement we meet with the *Negactant*, the doubtful or denying disciple, who might end up as an *Antactant* like Judas. Thus, we must ask: do we at all have a valid Christian confession of Jesus as God’s Son in the Gospel of Mark?

One could point to the fact that God himself in a certain sense is “confessing” Jesus in 1:11 and 9:7, and that the demons do it in 1:24, 3:11, and 5:7. However, besides these transcendent beings, who like the narrator is occupying a privileged cognitive position, none of the story’s characters presents an unambiguous confession of Jesus as God’s Son — except for Jesus himself (14:62; perhaps 15,2). Mark leaves his reader with the picture of a complex, cognitive dynamics, where supporters ten-dentially become opponents, while opponents ten-dentially become supporters. The only human being that can be said to express a valid Christian confession is Mark himself, doing so by telling the good story about “Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (1:1), a challenge to cocksure opponents as well as too confident supporters.