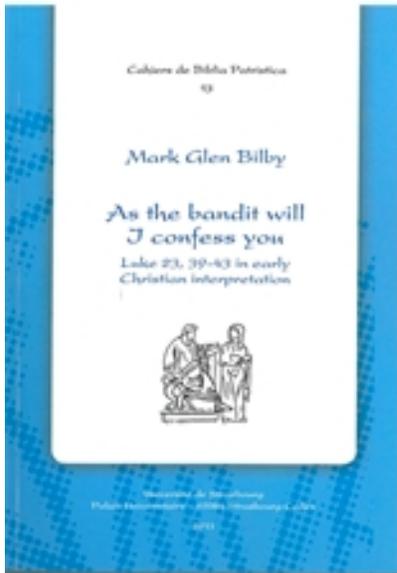


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Mark Glen Bilby

As the Bandit Will I Confess you: Luke 23.39–43 in Early Christian Interpretation

Cahiers de Biblia Patristica 13

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Mark Glen Bilby, now an academic librarian at California State University, here presents his doctoral dissertation completed under Harry Gamble at the University of Virginia in 2012. He writes, “This monograph comprises the first thorough, critical analysis of the early Christian interpretation of Lc 23, 39–43 (up to 450 CE)” (29). That is, the book explores the early reception of the story of the crucified “criminal” (*κακοῦργος*, Luke 23:33, 39; commonly identified “the thief on the cross”) who expresses faith in Jesus’s coming kingdom and receives in reply the promise of immediate entrance into paradise (Luke 23:39–43). Matthew (27:38, 44) and Mark (15:27) refer to the ones crucified alongside Jesus as *λησταί*, and early Christians commonly imported this term into their descriptions of the Lukan account. Bilby assembles, categorizes, and analyzes a remarkable number of early Christian engagements with this text, whether such engagement consists of exegesis or, more often, some less overt borrowing, which together demonstrate creative reuses of the Lukan source for the purpose of Christian edification. A substantial portion of the book is taken up with quotations in Greek, Latin, and Syriac, alongside English translations; Bilby confines himself to the latter only when the ancient source is preserved in some other language (Coptic, Armenian, Arabic, Georgian; see 30). The work focuses on patristic literary works, as the bandit does not appear in early Christian art (33 n. 58).

Bilby divides his book into three sections and nine chapters, with each chapter divided into clearly labeled sections. The first section, “Prolegomena,” consists of two chapters: “Emergence” (13–35) and “Finding the first reception” (37–57). The first chapter surveys the role of the bandits/criminals in the canonical gospels, briefly runs through the history of scholarship on the reception of this passage (there is not much scholarship on it), and then lays out the thesis, scope and sources, and methodology for the book. Bilby helpfully points out his method of discovering citations (30–31), and he presents his results in a “history of trajectories” manner. The main thesis seems to be to display the diversity of ways early Christians adapted this text.

Chapter 2 searches for the early reception of the episode. Marcion omitted the passage (or, at least, v. 43), according to Epiphanius, but Eustathius of Antioch perhaps offers countertestimony (37–39). With such uncertainty, Marcion cannot go down as having “received” this passage. The Gospel of Peter—which includes a similar though different account—probably shared a source with Luke but did not rely on Luke itself (42). The Diatessaron apparently included the episode, judging from Ephrem’s commentary, and therefore it becomes “the strongest candidate for the earliest, clear reception of this pericope” (50). Origen provides the earliest quotation of the passage (in a fragment on Genesis), and the monograph goes on to show that much of the patristic interaction with the good thief depends on Origen. We learn later (213) that Augustine invokes the passage most frequently (more than sixty times).

Luke’s story of this bandit presents two main difficulties for early Christian interpreters: (1) the contrast between the account of Matthew/Mark, where both bandits mock Jesus (Matt 27:44; Mark 15:32), and the Lukan account, where only one criminal does so; and (2) the timing of Jesus’s entrance into paradise. These issues occupy section 2, “Controversies.” The third chapter, “Harmonizing Dissonance” (61–87), shows two major solutions to the disharmony among the Synoptics. Origen proposed a chronological solution: both bandits did mock Jesus at first (in agreement with Matthew and Mark), but later, provoked by the darkness at the crucifixion (Mark 15:33 // Luke 23:44), one of the criminals repented. On the other hand, Epiphanius argued that Matthew and Mark were speaking more generally about those crucified with Jesus blaspheming him, while Luke more specifically distinguishes the one who did blaspheme from the other who did not, and Epiphanius cites other examples of Scripture speaking in this general way. Both solutions proved influential, though Origen’s more so.

Chapter 4, “Harmonious Endings” (89–119), deals with the other issue: Where did Jesus go when he died? If Christ descended into Hades (Acts 2:27, 31), into the heart of the earth (Matt 12:40; cf. 1 Pet 3:18–20; Eph 4:9–10), for three days after his crucifixion, how could he promise the bandit that he would be with him in paradise that very day (Luke

23:43)? This turns out to be more vexing of the two problems for early Christian exegetes. Bilby is able to show that Origen takes two positions, both of which he includes in his *Commentary on John* 32.396–397:

On a simpler level we say that quickly, before leaving for the so-called heart of the earth, he restored to the paradise of God the one who said to him, “Remember me when you come in your kingdom.” But on a deeper level, [we note] that today [appears] in many places in the scripture, and in all [of them] it pertains to the present age. [Here Origen cites Matt 28:15; Gen 19:37; Psa 95:7; Josh 22:29.] Therefore, it was promised to the one who thought it worthwhile to be remembered in the kingdom of God, that in the present age, before the coming age, he would make him to be with him in the kingdom of God. (translation by Bilby, 95–96)

Either Christ took the bandit to paradise first before descending into Hades—this is the simpler solution, which is not a point in its favor—or, on a deeper level, the “today” of Luke 23:43 does not point to a literal day but to the age in which they were living. Sometimes Origen offers a more Platonic reading of the passage, which seems to have (indirectly) influenced Augustine (117).

In response to Origen, Eustathius offered a different solution to this puzzle: Christ’s divinity allowed him to be in two places at the same time. Such an approach found favor with several important authors (Athanasius, Hilary), but Jerome perhaps stated the point most clearly: “At one and the same time he both descended into hell and entered into paradise with the bandit” (112).

Part 3 of the book, “Themes,” includes four chapters that explore various interesting trajectories of interpretation of this passage. In chapter 5, “One of the Faithful” (123–83), the good bandit becomes a model of faith. While the bad bandit is often identified as a Jew and the good bandit as a gentile, a fragment possibly deriving from Origen says that the good bandit was a Jew (138). The theme also comes up in the Pelagian controversy: apparently Origen had earlier used the bandit as an example of justification by “faith alone” (actually using that phrase), but Rufinus later amplified that theme in his translation of Origen’s *Commentary on Romans*. While Augustine did not use the bandit in an anti-Pelagian way (179), Prosper of Aquitaine did (180–83).

The story of the bandit also compels the question as to why this character believed that Jesus would have a kingdom. We have seen Origen attempt to answer this question, partially by pointing to the darkness at the crucifixion (66), and other writers echo this solution (137). The reflections on this theme often drew a contrast between the bandit

and the Jewish leadership, since the latter had seen miracles and refused to believe, but this bandit without education had faith. But Chrysostom, who preached two sermons on the bandit, stressed that this criminal looked on Jesus with “the eyes of faith” (157), an expression he coined, and in one passage he suggests that Jesus’s death on the cross was itself an expression of royalty in the bandit’s mind (160). Chrysostom’s sermons influenced some Western authors, including Maximus of Turin, who proposed that the bandit recognized Jesus’s death as atoning for the bandit’s own sins (170).

Chapter 6, “Convert, Catechumen, Confessor, Martyr” (185–35) explores the speed with which the bandit converted, a point of emphasis often relying on the chronological harmonization initiated by Origen (and Origen is the first to stress the bandit’s speedy conversion). The bandit is an example for catechumens, and he confesses Christ, whereas Peter denied him. Should the bandit be considered a martyr? Several early interpreters chose to identify him as such, but, in one of the most fascinating parts of the monograph, Bilby shows that Augustine’s views on this question changed quite profoundly (213–28). At first denying the martyr status of the bandit in order to deny martyr status to persecuted Donatists, Augustine later accepted the bandit as a martyr as he argued against Vincent Victor on the nature of souls.

Several fathers struggled with the question of how the bandit could be saved without baptism (228–35). Cyprian spoke of the bandit as having received the baptism of blood because of his martyrdom. Augustine and Ephrem suggested that the bandit may have been baptized in the water coming from Jesus’s side. Ambrose insisted that the bandit received Holy Spirit baptism. Augustine did the same and compared the bandit to Cornelius (Acts 10). Augustine also suggested that the bandit may have actually received water baptism.

The final two chapters of this third section—“The Penitent Thief” (237–68) and “Type-Casting a Thief” (269–303)—similarly provide thoughtful reflections on patristic encounters with the text. In chapter 7 the bandit becomes an example of repentance, and in chapter 8 the bandit is contrasted with Adam or with Judas. The volume ends with chapter 9, the conclusion (305–20).

This review has tried to give some indication of the rich and varied collection of sources and analysis presented in this book. It is unfortunate that the book does not make the information more accessible. This lack of accessibility comes through in two ways. First, Bilby’s narrow focus on the actual use of the text in ancient Christian sources perhaps prevented him from explaining in more detail the implications of this reception for the wider issues involved. For instance, we are told that Hilary of Poitiers used the Lukan pericope against Arianism. The first passage quoted in support of this contention is then

described as presuming “a pro-Nicene, paradoxical logic” (140), but it is not clear (to me, at least) how Hilary’s words presume this logic. Augustine is supposed to echo Origen’s use of the bandit in support of a Platonic eschatological outlook (117), but Bilby’s explanation seem equally to relate Augustine’s position to that of Eustathius (without naming the latter). Speaking of eschatology, the use of the bandit’s conversation with Jesus in discussions of eschatology (ch. 4) is interesting but could have been clearer if the book had given a brief overview of early Christian eschatology, then situated the patristic citations within this broader discussion. I grant that, if Bilby needed to choose between offering more of his own explanation or more quotations of ancient sources, he has probably chosen the better path by opting for the latter.

The other way in which the book is somewhat inaccessible has more to do with its physical makeup. The book begins, after the title page, with a list of abbreviations and then chapter 1. No preface orients readers to what they are about to encounter. The table of contents at the end of the book would have been more helpful if it had included references to the sections within the chapters. The scripture index and index of ancient sources are both helpful, but a subject index would have aided readers in finding a specific discussion. Without such an index, and without even a detailed table of contents, the reader has little choice but to read through the book in order to find a particular theme. Some tables appear at the end of the book (335–48), labeled 1–8, but they contain no titles or references to the text of the monograph where they are introduced. The reader again must read through the book to discover this information.

One who does take time with this volume will find a great deal of early Christian reflection on this bandit that is worthy of consideration and further exploration. The book provides numerous examples of patristic creativity in using biblical traditions for theological contemplation and religious edification and is thus a valuable contribution to biblical reception studies.