

## Article

# Questioning the Questions around Jesus's Authority in Mark 11:27–33: A Performance Perspective

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**Abstract:** The rise of performance criticism prompts questions about its relationship to other disciplines, most notably narrative criticism. While narrative critics traditionally focus solely on the textual elements within their cultural context, performance critics adopt a broader understanding of the term “text”, encompassing not only the cultural context but also performative aspects, such as the setting for public reading, the involvement of a skilled performer, and dynamics introduced by a diverse performance audience. This article demonstrates the distinctiveness of a performance-critical approach through a reappraisal of Mark 11:27–33, showing how such an approach yields different interpretive results when compared to traditional narrative criticism. More specifically, whereas traditional narrative readings generally conclude that Jesus is merely evading his interlocutors, I argue that a performance-critical approach suggests that many ancient listeners would have concluded that the lector-as-Jesus was insinuating, for those with ears to hear, that Jesus’s authority derives from God and was granted at his baptism.

**Keywords:** performance; ancient rhetoric; questions; inference; baptism; Gospel of Mark; Jesus; audience analysis; cognitive narratology



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## 1. Introduction

The rise of performance criticism prompts questions about its relationship to other disciplines, most notably narrative criticism<sup>1</sup>. Certainly, there are similarities, yet stark differences remain, particularly those swirling around the nature of the text and audience and the audience’s experience of that text. These shifting configurations result in tangibly different readings of ancient narratives. Traditional narrative-critical readings of the confrontation between the Jewish leaders and Jesus in Mark 11:27–33 illustrate these divergences particularly well.

The scene begins with leaders of the Jewish religious establishment confronting Jesus with a question about the origins of his authority: “By what authority are you doing these things? Or who gave you the authority to do them?” (11:28)<sup>2</sup>. Jesus agrees to answer them on the condition that they answer a question about the origins of *John’s* baptism (11:29–30). Trapped, they refuse to answer him, so Jesus says he will not answer them either (11:31–33). Three questions receive no direct answer in the episode, which has led scholars to almost universally suggest that Mark’s Jesus uses his counter-question as an evasive tactic.<sup>3</sup>

While the use of questions as a means of evasion is by no means unusual or implausible, these scholars underappreciate the importance of the performance context for (re)imagining early Christian textual experiences. Narrative critics have classically confined themselves to the words on the page, typically situated in their cultural context, whereas performance critics have moved beyond thinking only about the words on the page to include a contextualized analysis of what we might call the performative context, including the setting for a public reading, accounting for a trained lector (or “reader” or “performer”), a diverse performance audience, and so on.<sup>4</sup> My own work in performance criticism has led me to scour both ancient rhetoric and cognitive sciences to try to best

account for how audiences might have been practiced at “hearing between the lines” in performance events.<sup>5</sup>

In this article, I return to what many scholars seem to view as a nonquestion: the rhetorical function of Jesus’s counter-question in Mark 11:29–30. I argue that when we appreciate this episode’s performative context, including clues from ancient rhetoric and modern cognitive studies, it becomes quite likely that early listeners would have thought Jesus answered the Jewish leaders’ questions through his own question. More specifically, in an ancient performance, we ought to expect that many hearers intuited from the lector that Jesus received his authority from God during his baptism by John. Indeed, while Jesus’s interlocutors failed to understand, we ought to expect that at least some audience members would have intuited Jesus’s answer-as-question without much effort at all. Along the way, I will demonstrate that performance criticism explores a different (albeit related) set of questions than its older disciplinary sibling of narrative criticism.

My approach to performance criticism works from a hypothetical performance, so in this article, I first address the composition of the hypothetical performance audience and the factors influencing their participation with Mark’s Gospel.<sup>6</sup> I then turn to the mechanics of questions in ancient rhetorical and cognitive perspectives before offering a performance-critical reading of Mark 11:27–33. Ultimately, I argue that many—if not most—ancient audience members in a hypothetical performance would understand the lector-as-Jesus as insinuating that he gained his authority and power from God when he was baptized by John. However, I begin with a brief sketch of the methodological commitments of narrative criticism that will help set performance criticism in relief.

## 2. Performance Criticism in Narrative-Critical Perspective

Narrative criticism tries to explore the story world of the Gospels rather than reconstruct the historical world that gave rise to these texts. In order to do this, narrative critics typically apply some version of Seymour Chatman’s narrative communication model that links implied author → narrator → narratee → implied reader.<sup>7</sup> There are real authors and real readers, but they exist outside the text and thus beyond the purview of pure narrative criticism, which tends instead to focus on the characters within the narrative, their conflicts, and the development of the plot. The implied (or idealized) author and reader emerge from a close reading of the narrative itself, with the implied reader always understanding the message conveyed by the implied author. It is an exceedingly clean operation. For their part, narrative critics are free to scour a narrative for hooks, inclusions, intertexts, and intratexts, importing the significance of key terms from one episode to another. They can do this because the text is a static finished product, with all the variables that gave rise to meaning now lost to history. Narrative critics have made enormously important contributions to the study of ancient Christian narratives, none of which do I mean to diminish with this necessarily brief overview. However, I cannot help but notice key differences between narrative criticism and performance criticism.

As the name indicates, performance criticism is interested in narrative texts as stories that were read aloud.<sup>8</sup> The introduction of this key difference sets off a cascade of changes: Chatman’s model must be revised (at the least) to something like author → performer → narrator/characters → audience. Historical reconstruction will be essential to understand the most likely performance context, audience composition, and so on.<sup>9</sup> Most performance critics agree that early Christian performances probably took place after a communal meal at a gathering loosely modeled after the symposia (Shiell 2004, pp. 102–37). These performances were probably done by a single trained lector (not a cast), who delivered the text aloud before their audience. Sometimes (perhaps especially initially), even long narratives (like Mark’s gospel) were likely performed in their entirety, while most were probably performed over several meetings simply for the sake of convenience (Nässelqvist 2015, p. 110; Whitenton 2017, pp. 29–31). Because audience members listened as another person read the text, they could not pause the performance to reflect or make the complex connections narrative critics often do. This observation does not rule out interpretive sophistication on

the part of ancient audiences (or performance critics), but it does often mean that it would take place only after the performance event and typically in a communal context.

The shift away from a text-based implied audience toward a historically reconstructed performance audience leads to questions of audience composition.

### 3. Audience Composition

While narrative critics often assume a single implied audience based on internal cues, these textual features do not necessarily reveal the actual audience(s) for whom the narrative was performed (see further, [Hartvigsen \(2012, pp. 13–14\)](#); cf. [Holmberg \(1990, pp. 118–44\)](#)). Embracing a performative approach destabilizes the idea of a homogeneous audience, prompting us to consider real, individual listeners with unique perspectives. This shift aligns with depictions of audiences in early Christian literature and is supported by empirical and theoretical research from sociology and psychology.<sup>10</sup>

For this article, I adopt a heterogeneous hypothetical audience for the Gospel of Mark. This audience comprises both “insiders” and “outsiders”, encompassing Jews and Gentiles residing in the Roman Empire during the late first century of the Common Era. I also assume that these audience members are present for a complete performance of Mark’s Gospel, which took place after a communal meal.<sup>11</sup> Further, each audience member’s experience of the Gospel performance is influenced by their own context within the wider Greco-Roman world, their familiarity with the cultural memory rooted in the LXX (or lack thereof) and circulating Jesus traditions, and their individual experiences. In keeping with an uneven relevant prior knowledge, I also assume that while some audience members have experienced the entirety of Mark’s gospel before, others will have heard Mark, in its entirety, for the first time in this hypothetical performance.<sup>12</sup>

In sum, the diverse intersection of the story with their individual experiences, values, and beliefs will ensure that the rhetorical texture of the performance would elicit unique responses from each audience member. Of course, this means that my approach is necessarily speculative, as is all historical work. Yet, my approach differs from traditional narrative readings by striving to acknowledge and accommodate the probable diversity among real audience members at a hypothetical communal textual experience.

### 4. Factors Influencing Audience Participation

Experiencing a narrative, especially in an oral–aural setting like a performance, involves an imaginative and creative process where the boundaries between the real world and the narrative world become blurred. This phenomenon, known as the “diegetic effect”, describes how the narrative world permeates the real world and envelops the audience ([Tan 1994, pp. 10–13](#)).<sup>13</sup> From a neuroscientific perspective, the internal simulation of the narrative, facilitated by mirror neurons, is triggered by the story itself ([Oatley 1994, pp. 53–74](#); [Cupchik 1997, pp. 11–22](#); [Slater 2002, p. 172](#); [Ronning 2003, pp. 236–38](#); [Hartvigsen 2012, pp. 69–71](#); [Whitenton 2019, pp. 17–18](#)). The story engulfs audience members in the narrative world, thus changing their perspective from that of “outside observer” to “invisible witness”. As such, they are part of the narrative world, which subjects them to its values, beliefs, biases, and so on. As invisible witnesses, even engaged audience members remain unable to act within the narrative, although they bring the narrative world into the real world if they are changed by what they experience in it ([Tan 1994, pp. 10–26](#)).<sup>14</sup>

The lector’s delivery and the audience’s compulsory mental simulation of the narrative forge audience identification with characters and their goals. As a result, audience members often consider how they would respond in a particular scenario or how they might answer a question voiced in the narrative. The lector may induce audience identification through glances, gestures, pausing, intonation, and the like.<sup>15</sup> While much of the action in performance occurs with an “on-stage focus”, as though between characters in the story world, the performer is also able to engage the audience through an “off-stage focus”, thereby directly involving the audience in the unfolding narrative.<sup>16</sup> Unlike traditional

narrative criticism, performance criticism understands the positionality of its diverse audience members as dynamic and malleable, dependent on a combination of prior knowledge, experience, and the delivery of the lector.

I now turn to the rhetoric of questions and to their role in persuasion.

## 5. The Rhetoric of Questions

### 5.1. *The Rhetoric of Questions in Ancient Rhetorical Theory*

Rhetoricians have long valued questions for their persuasive power. Both questions and counter-questions, or asking a question in response to a question, featured prominently in ancient Greek and Latin rhetoric.<sup>17</sup> Across our extant sources, questions were far more than ways to extract information. They also emphasized points, directed audiences to connect the dots on their own, and invited further reflection on a complex topic. In short, (counter) questions were a vital part of the rhetorical toolbox for directing audiences and winning debates.

In the 4th century BCE, Aristotle taught that questions could effectively shut down an opponent's argument and recapitulate or even amplify one's own (*Rhet.* 3.18.1, 3.19.5). In the same section, Aristotle addresses the value of questions for helping an opponent to convince themselves of the argument. As an example, he quotes Plato's *Apology*, in which Socrates used questions (and counter-questions) to defend against accusations that he was an atheist: "Is there a man, then, who can admit that the children of the gods exist without at the same time admitting that the gods exist?" (*Rhet.* 3.18.3 [Freese, LCL]; cf. Plato, *Apology* 27d–e). If the audience answers Socrates's question, they will have their answer to the question of Socrates's atheism. Thus, for Aristotle, questions were neither purely evasive nor only inquisitive. In fact, they could exert persuasive power over an audience by luring them into convincing themselves of the speaker's point of view. A few centuries later, Ps-Demetrius's *On Style* (2nd or 1st c. BCE) stands with both feet in the Aristotelian stream. For Ps-Demetrius, questions (τὸ ἐρωτῶντα) provide a distinctive means to express points to the audience with unique advantages over statements. He writes that "it is forceful to express some points by asking the audience questions rather than by disclosing one's own view" (*Eloc.* 279).<sup>18</sup> It is not always in a speaker's best interest to tell an audience something plainly. Ps-Demetrius illustrates this use of questions with Demosthenes's speech *On the Crown* (330 BCE), where the famous orator uses questions to prove his point to Aeschines that Philip was an unjust king and the one responsible for breaking the peace (*Cor.* 71). The result is that "Demosthenes forces his listener into a sort of corner, so that he seems to be cross-examined and unable to reply" (*Eloc.* 279 [Innes, LCL]).<sup>19</sup> In sum, indicative statements might invite a retort, whereas strategic questions leave an opponent unable to reply without supporting their opponent's point.

In Latin rhetoric, *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (1st c. BCE) commends the skilled use of interrogation, in which questions are used at the close of an argument to reinforce one's points over against the speaker's adversary (4.15.22). As in Ps-Demetrius, interrogation works so well because it forces the listener to fill in the information for themselves rather than more passively receiving an indicative from the speaker. For Quintilian (1st c. CE), any teacher worth their salt would set questions before their pupils. In addition to instruction, teachers were supposed "to ask frequent questions and test their students' judgement". Unsurprisingly, questions kept the students' attention and facilitated more effective teaching than merely lecturing (*Inst.* 2.5.13). Outside of the classroom, Quintilian taught that a would-be orator ought to make liberal use of questioning their audience, whether to (1) emphasize a point, (2) get an opponent to confirm something, or (3) engage in pondering a complex idea.<sup>20</sup> Quintilian also specifically recommended counter-questions as a way to stir the emotions of the audience and refocus attention on a vital aspect of the speaker's argument (9.2.12–13). For Quintilian, such counter-questions come close to amounting to a confession because they convey the speaker's answer in the form of a question (9.2.14). These answers-as-questions may slightly obscure an answer but only as a means of increasing persuasive power.

For ancient rhetors and rhetoricians, questions and counter-questions were powerful tools because they could back one's opponent into a corner, forcing them to admit to defeat. Counter-questions, in particular, could also redirect the conversation back toward the interlocutor with all the information they need to answer their original question. In a performance event, where a speech or narrative was read aloud before an interested audience, questions and counter-questions served the same function, along with increasing listener attention and participation. As we shall now see, modern empirical research suggests that these ancient scholars were not far from the mark.

## 5.2. *The Rhetoric of Questions in Cognitive Perspective*

Research from the cognitive sciences and adjacent disciplines explains the rationale for ancient rhetorical approaches to questions. Alice Freed (1994, pp. 621–44) places all questions on a scale, with “information sought” on one end and “information conveyed” on the other (see further, Koshik 2005, p. 1; Schegloff 1985, pp. 28–52; Heritage and Roth 1995, pp. 1–60). Communication theorists often delineate between a question as a locutionary act, its illocutionary force, and its perlocutionary force. The “locutionary act” refers to the actual utterance, whereas the “illocutionary force” is the intended effect of the locutionary act. The “perlocutionary force” refers to the psychological consequences of a speech act upon a listener (e.g., persuading, convincing, scaring, inspiring, moving to action, etc.). While some questions genuinely seek to uncover unknown information, others convey a sentiment, invite a behavior, or imply an answer to a question (see Koshik 2005, pp. 1–2; cf. Schegloff 1985, pp. 28–52). The latter make up “rhetorical” questions, which move beyond information seeking to exerting power over the addressee through claim making.<sup>21</sup>

Mounting empirical research shows that questions either assist or inhibit persuasion by increasing attention in audience members.<sup>22</sup> When listeners hear a question, their minds instinctively engage in central processing (rational reflection) to find a suitable response. Questions enhance persuasion if the listener's central processing complements the arguments from the speaker. If not, the question actually triggers the audience member's own competing viewpoints, biases, or more prominent aims and hampers the persuasive impact. In other words, questions affect persuasion by stimulating central processing pathways to make listeners more aware of the speaker's arguments and their relative strength.<sup>23</sup>

To sum up, ancient rhetors and modern researchers agree that questions can be useful teaching tools to convey information to listeners through audience inference by peaking their attention and participation. However, questions can also inhibit persuasion if they raise counter arguments beyond an acceptable threshold. With this in mind, we are in a better position to assess how ancient audience members might have experienced the dance of questions in Mark 11:27–33.

## 6. *Moment-by-Moment Account of Inferences in Response to Mark 11:27–33*

Performance-critical readings broaden the focus from the written words on the page to the dynamic interplay between the lector and their audience. The preceding episodes frame Mark 11:27–33 as a scene fraught with tension in which hostile opponents scrutinize Jesus, who answers with forceful but guarded precision. Since entering Jerusalem with ironic pomp and circumstance, Mark's Jesus has caused quite the stir, and the temple incident provides enough stimulus for the chief priests, scribes, and elders to start plotting his murder (11:15–18).<sup>24</sup> For his part, Jesus has already set himself in opposition to the Jewish religious establishment by his symbolic cursing of the fig tree (11:12–25).<sup>25</sup> Thus, engaged audience members may infer contention and even aggression behind the questions in Mark 11:28: “By what authority are you doing these things? Or who gave you the authority to do them?”<sup>26</sup> Not only have these characters consistently been cast in a negative light thus far, but they are strongly associated with the temple establishment, which Mark's Jesus has just castigated as a “hide out for robbers” (Mark 11:17) (see, e.g., Mark 2:1–12, 21–28; cf. Hartvigsen 2012, pp. 400–1). They thus appear hostile from the outset.<sup>27</sup>



As audience members hear Mark 11:27–33 read aloud, their brains will cobble together meaning through the raw materials of the actual words and the scripts and schemas present in their mental lexicons (just as you, dear reader, are doing right now). By paying attention to the probable direction of these inferences, we will be able to shed new light on these old questions. In the context of Mark 11:27–33, audience members eavesdrop and ponder the exchange from their own situatedness. In what follows, I offer a plausible moment-by-moment account of audience inferences in response to Mark 11:27–33. I argue that because our hypothetical audience members have the benefit of having heard the preceding Markan narrative in performance—and most will not share the same hostility to Jesus as his interlocutors—the exchange will lead many—perhaps most—to the conclusion that Jesus received his authority from God at his baptism (cf. 1:9–11).

### 6.1. Questions about Jesus's Authority (11:27–28)

Audience members listen in as members of the Jewish leadership (the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders) confront Jesus with a question about his authority as he was walking in the temple. Sympathetic audience members may notice feelings of antipathy at the arrival of the Jewish leadership, especially if their (re)introduction primes recent conflicts between them and Jesus (cf. 11:15–19).<sup>28</sup> Their questions will set off a cascade of sense making based on a combination of the preceding narrative and each audience member's prior knowledge: ἐν ποίᾳ ἐξουσίᾳ ταῦτα ποιεῖς; ἢ τίς σοι ἔδωκεν τὴν ἐξουσίαν ταύτην ἵνα ταῦτα ποιῇς. In particular, the repetition of the “authority” language will easily trigger relevant associations from earlier in the narrative (and perhaps from extradiegetic prior knowledge) (see, e.g., 1:22, 27; 2:10; 3:15; 6:7). The reference to Jesus's authority will also reliably activate related entries in people's mental lexicons, establishing connections with episodes that demonstrate his authority, even if they do not explicitly mention the term ἐξουσία (see, e.g., 1:9–11; 3:7–12; 4:35–41; 5:1–20; 6:45–50; 8:27–33; 9:2–13).<sup>29</sup> Likewise, the mention of “these things” (ταῦτα ποιεῖς), referring to Jesus's ongoing actions, will likely activate connections either with his disruptive behavior in Jerusalem, especially the temple commotion (cf. 11:15–17), or all of Jesus's actions depicted in the narrative so far.<sup>30</sup> While we might expect diversity among the audience on this point, the proximity of Jesus's actions in the temple suggests those as the predominant referent, especially since the audience has just heard that the Jewish leaders began to plot his murder after the incident in the temple (cf. 11:18–19).

When the audience hears the second part of their question (ἢ τίς σοι ἔδωκεν τὴν ἐξουσίαν ταύτην ἵνα ταῦτα ποιῇς;), they may appreciate that the emphasis falls on τίς σοι ἔδωκεν τὴν ἐξουσίαν ταύτην because τίς σοι is frontloaded and ἔδωκεν τὴν ἐξουσίαν ταύτην employs homoioteleuton. Homoioteleuton refers to the repetition of sounds (here, a ν sound in ἔδωκεν τὴν ἐξουσίαν ταύτην) at the end of consecutive words in a sentence, creating a rhyme that is aurally pleasing (cf. Demetrius, *Eloc.* 26–27; Quintilian, *Inst.* 9.3.77; Rhet. Her. 4.20.28.) (Noticeable on its own, the lector could have emphasized this shift in aural intensity by modulating tone and dramatic pausing at the homoioteleuton). As a result, the emphasis falls on the circumstances during which Jesus received his authority.

Given the cognitive studies described above, as audience members hear these questions read aloud, their brains will begin searching for a response of their own. Most audience members will hear these questions as side-participants with varying levels of identification with Jesus.<sup>31</sup> Based on knowledge of the preceding narrative alone, some in the audience will likely automatically intuit that Jesus received his authority from God as his anointed (Mark 1:1), who is greater than John (1:7), who will baptize with the Holy Spirit (1:8), whom the heavenly voice declared “my beloved son” (1:12), and whom even unclean spirits hail as “the holy one of God” (1:24). In fact, it is difficult to imagine anyone in our hypothetical audience *not* inferring that, in Mark's Gospel, God granted Jesus his authority on the basis of the prologue (1:1–13) alone.<sup>32</sup>

Because a performance does not stop for reflection, the audience will only have a second or two to intuit the origin of Jesus's authority (and even then, perhaps only

automatically as part of the compulsory sense-making process). However, as we shall see, Jesus's response will (re)activate the prologue, which has already been primed for many in the audience.

## 6.2. Jesus's Counter-Question (11:29–30)

The lector now changes characters and voices Jesus's response: ἐπερωτήσω ὑμᾶς ἓνα λόγον, καὶ ἀποκριθήτε μοι καὶ ἐρῶ ὑμῖν ἐν ποίᾳ ἐξουσίᾳ ταῦτα ποιῶ. The sentence exhibits a heightened aural intensity through its rhythmic repetition of “o” sounds and the energetic use of verbs for asking and answering (note the placement of ἐπερωτήσω, ἀποκριθήτε, and ἐρῶ). The sentence's dynamic phrasing and length contribute to its auditory impact, providing the lector with the opportunity for a particularly engaging delivery that might contribute to a sense of momentum for audience members. Some audience members may note the contrast between the Jewish leadership's two questions and Jesus's single question (ἐπερωτήσω ὑμᾶς ἓνα λόγον), which underscores that Jesus is the one in control in this exchange, even if he did not start it. Finally, the placement of καὶ suggests a sequential relationship between their answer to his question and his answering of theirs but does not specify how that answer might take place. The speech act could be translated as something like, “I will ask you a question and you answer me. Then I will tell you by what authority I do these things” (11:29). If this utterance activates Jesus's penchant for speaking in veiled or coded language for some engaged audience members, they may intuit that the forthcoming λόγον will mean more than it says (cf. Mark 3:20–4:34; 7:14–23; 8:14–21).<sup>33</sup> For such audience members, the continued parabolic speech after this episode will only confirm their suspicions (cf. 12:1–37). Jesus's earlier parabolic speech divided those who could understand the deeper meaning from those who were left at the surface. In this context, such audience members might infer that, for those with ears to hear, Jesus's question may itself provide the answer to the questions posed by the Jewish leadership. In the second or first century BCE, Ps-Demetrius called this “allusive verbal innuendo” (τὸ ἐσχματισμένον ἐν λόγῳ) (*On Style*, 287–298), which flatters listeners with their own intelligence by luring them to supply missing information on their own.<sup>34</sup> It is important to emphasize that Jesus's counter question may function in this way for audience members, regardless of how Jesus's interlocutors experience the question in the story. In performance, the story takes place both in the narrative and between the lector and their audience. Mark's Gospel is replete with this rhetoric of inference, which relies on an expectation that the audience will complete meaning to which the characters may be oblivious (cf. 8:14–21; see [Whitenton 2017](#)). This is the context in which the audience hears the lector deliver Jesus's counter question: τὸ βάπτισμα τὸ Ἰωάννου ἐξ οὐρανοῦ ἢν ἢ ἐξ ἀνθρώπων; ἀποκριθήτε μοι. (11:30).

As they hear this line, their minds will automatically pull from impressions formed about John's baptizing from the prologue (1:2–11). The prologue itself will still be fresh on the minds of many in the audience because it was activated by the Jewish leadership's original questions about Jesus's authority. Importantly, therefore, both the original question and the counter question will have activated the prologue and, more specifically, Jesus's baptism by John. Thus, Jesus's counter question revolves not around John per se but John's baptism. For sympathetic members of the performance audience, this question is so obvious as to nearly need no response. John's baptismal activity is rooted in his prophetic call from God to “prepare the way of the Lord” (1:3) and is inextricably linked to Jesus's own divinely sanctioned activity ([Whitenton 2017](#), pp. 115–26).

For those audience members appreciating the rhetoric of inference in this exchange, the fact that Jesus responds to a question about the origins of his authority with a question about the origins of John's baptism may spark the insinuation that Jesus's authority and John's baptism are intertwined. As we have already seen, many audience members will have already inferred that Jesus's authority comes from God in ways that primed the voice at Jesus's baptism. However, Jesus's strategic counter question may plant the seed for audience members that God granted Jesus his authority specifically when he was baptized

by John. These audience members may recall or recognize that Jesus only exercises his authority (confronting unclean spirits, healing the sick, forgiving sins, calming storms, feeding thousands, walking upon the sea, and so on) after the bird-like Spirit flies down *into* him (εἰς αὐτόν) at his baptism (1:10).<sup>35</sup> For these audience members, Jesus's counter-question may itself become the answer to the Jewish leadership's question. Jesus's authority derives from the divine visitation during his baptism.

The way the lector delivers Jesus's counter-question will play an important role here. If the lector offers a telling gaze to the audience when they deliver the line, τὸ βάπτισμα τὸ Ἰωάννου, it may help audience members pick up on the hint otherwise muted by the letters on the page. Moreover, if the lector were to shift their gaze to audience members as they deliver the line, ἀποκρίθητέ μοι, some audience members would hear this question as addressees with a personal responsibility to respond. While we cannot know that a lector ever delivered these lines in a leading manner, it is certainly plausible that our hypothetical lector might do so. Certainly, lectors were expected to pore over manuscripts in preparation for delivery in order to bring out the richness of the text to the performance audience.<sup>36</sup> That they would do so here would make sense and fits well within the proposed performance-critical reading.

We must remember that in a performance, sense making tends to happen nearly automatically or it must wait for post-performance and, most likely, communal reflection. Such reflection would likely take place in the form of conversations with others, where, under the influence of leaders, audience members could construct or modify cognitive frames that would then be used to interpret future hearings of Mark, as well as other texts. For now, however, there is simply no way to pause the performance. If audience members reflect on the counter-question in a sustained way, they will miss the rest of the scene. We ought to expect that some will have done exactly that, just as people “check out” during stories or movies today. For most, however, any sustained reflection will take place after the performance event. For now, we continue with the dialogue between Jesus and the Jewish leaders, picking back up with their response.

### 6.3. *The Deliberation (11:31–33)*

The line that the Jewish leadership are διελογίζοντο πρὸς ἑαυτοὺς may trigger, for many audience members, the earlier episodes in Mark where characters carefully considered the implications of an action or question (cf. 1:27; 2:6, 8; 8:11). In this case, because they are already primed to think of the Jewish leadership as antagonistic to Jesus, they will likely intuit that the Jewish leadership is attempting to be strategic with their answer. Such an inference would be confirmed by the content of their dialogue, which weighs the political fallout for responding either ἐξ οὐρανοῦ or ἐξ ἀνθρώπων. As the lector delivers the specific dialogue among the Jewish leadership, sympathetic audience members may feel frustration with the Jewish leadership, but they will also probably experience feelings of superiority if they had automatically and confidently answered that John's baptism is ἐξ οὐρανοῦ.<sup>37</sup> Those feelings of superiority would surely grow as they hear the Jewish leadership admit defeat: οὐκ οἶδμεν. Engaged audience members will likely conclude that the Jewish leadership is lying when they say, “we do not know”. Instead, they may conclude that it would be far more accurate to have said, “we do not want to say”, since their deliberations only weighed the ramifications of the potential answers.

The lector-as-Jesus's line, οὐδὲ ἐγὼ λέγω ὑμῖν ἐν ποίᾳ ἐξουσίᾳ ταῦτα ποιῶ, reminds audience members of the agreement and primes the question and counter question in their minds. Sympathetic audience members who understood Jesus's counter-question as a covert answer to the original question about the origins of his own authority may feel a sense of enjoyment at understanding what the Jewish leaders have missed. Despite being so close to Jesus, these characters missed what was right in front of them.

The relentless pace of the performance (and the inability to pause or rewind) may prevent some listeners from processing this episode in such detail during the performance itself. Still, the deliberations of the Jewish leadership model—and thus guide—deliberations



among audience members (11:31–33). Thus, rather than merely conveying the concerns of the Jewish leadership, the perlocutionary effect of these speech acts is to continue the listeners' own reflections upon the origins of John's baptism in relation to the question of the origins of Jesus's authority. In the end, the *characters* in the story are left between a rock and a hard place by Jesus's question, while the *audience members* are prompted to consider the relationship between Jesus's authority and John's baptism.<sup>38</sup>

In sum, when the lector delivers Mark 11:27–33, listeners are engaged and drawn to consider their own answers to the questions about Jesus's authority and John's baptism. Their elevated status allows them to fully grasp the strong connection between Jesus's earlier baptism and his authority, both established in the preceding narrative and emphasized in this episode, whether during the performance event or through later reflection.

## 7. Concluding Remarks

When read through a performative-critical methodological lens, Mark 11:27–33 moves beyond a tense exchange between Jesus and representatives of the Jewish leadership. Instead, the narrative event unfolds as a multilayered experience wherein the interaction between Jesus and the Jewish leadership exerts a distinct force on audience members who align themselves with Jesus, in contrast to the characters portrayed within Mark's Gospel. In particular, the initial questions posed by the Jewish leaders prompt the audience to contemplate the source of Jesus's authority. Next, Jesus's response, in the form of a counter-question, draws upon the established practice of utilizing questions to encourage listeners to persuade themselves. In so doing, the lector-as-Jesus skillfully connects Jesus's authority to the time Jesus was baptized by John. The lector thus primes the audience to side with Jesus, having prepared listeners with the preceding narrative to answer the questions accurately, unburdened by thorny social dynamics faced by Jesus's interlocutors. As a result, many audience members would likely conclude that Jesus's authority and power were conferred in a special way at his baptism. While intimations of such a reading are evident in select narrative approaches to Mark 11:27–33, it only reaches maturity when viewed through the lens of performance.

Narrative criticism offers invaluable tools for understanding ancient Christian stories, but it does not go far enough to encompass the complexity of early Christian narrative experiences. In particular, traditional narrative criticism omits the oral–aural dimensions of a text, including attention to the heterogeneity of audiences, continuous pacing of a performance, potential nonlinguistic elements of delivery (pausing, intonation, gestures, etc.), and research from cognitive studies. The wording of a text matters, but so does how that wording is delivered and how that wording is received and by whom. Performance criticism may have emerged from traditional narrative criticism, but it eclipses it in the ways it attempts to do justice to all that we currently know about early narrative experiences.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> On the rise of performance criticism and its relationship to narrative criticism, see, e.g., [Hearon \(2011\)](#), pp. 211–32) and [Iverson \(2014\)](#).

<sup>2</sup> ἐν ποίᾳ ἐξουσίᾳ ταῦτα ποιεῖς; ἢ τίς σοι ἔδωκεν τὴν ἐξουσίαν ταύτην ἵνα ταῦτα ποιῇς.

<sup>3</sup> For the counter-question as an evasive tactic, see [Heil \(1992\)](#), pp. 232–33; [Dowd \(2000\)](#), p. 128; [Donahue and Harrington \(2002\)](#), pp. 335–36). See further, [Tilly \(1994\)](#), pp. 62–63; [Best \(1983\)](#), p. 135; [Hurtado \(1983\)](#), pp. 177–78; [van Iersel \(1988\)](#), p. 148; 1998, pp. 361–64; [Juel \(1990\)](#), p. 161; [Evans \(2001\)](#), pp. 204–5; [Boring \(2006\)](#), pp. 325–27; [Yarbro Collins \(2007\)](#), pp. 539–40; [Marcus \(2009\)](#), pp. 798–801; [Beavis \(2011\)](#), p. 173; [Black \(2011\)](#), pp. 248–50; [Hartman \(2010\)](#), pp. 476–77; [Focant \(2012\)](#), pp. 464–69; [Garland \(2015\)](#),

p. 499). Breaking from this trend somewhat, John Paul Heil has insisted that Jesus's counter question enables the Jewish leaders to correctly answer their own questions about the origins of Jesus's authority (Heil 1992, pp. 232–33). More recently, Kristen Marie Hartvigsen (2012, p. 401) agrees that, "Through his question, Jesus seems to imply that John's baptism originates in heaven."

4 For a thorough discussion of theories of performance criticism, see Shiell (2004, pp. 34–136); Hartvigsen (2012, pp. 1–98); Nässelqvist (2015, pp. 15–180); Whitenton (2017, pp. 1–96); Iverson (2021); Eberhart (2023, pp. 28–79).

5 For my own previous work related to performance criticism, see Whitenton (2016b, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2021). I am by no means alone in my integration of ancient narrative and cognitive sciences. See, most recently, Shively and Rügge-meier (2021), as well as Shively and Rügge-meier (forthcoming). See also the public-facing collective site, <https://diegesis-in-mind.com/> (accessed 26 July 2023). On "hearing between the lines," see Maxwell (2010, pp. 27–118), who addresses the exploitation of narrative gaps in both ancient and modern literary theory, as well as in Hellenistic narrative literature.

6 These sections draw from Whitenton (2016a, pp. 275–80).

7 For a further discussion of Chatman's model of narrative communication, see Chatman (1978, p. 151). For an application of Chatman's model in narrative criticism of the gospels, see Malbon (2011, p. 45).

8 On the history and development of performance criticism, see Iverson (2021, esp. 1–15) and Eberhart (2023, pp. 28–79).

9 On historical reconstructions of plausible performance settings, see, e.g., Nässelqvist (2015, pp. 63–118) and Whitenton (2017, pp. 15–65).

10 In antiquity, we find evidence in Paul's actions and writings to support the existence of diverse audiences. Acts portrays Paul addressing Jewish people, God-fearing proselytes, and Gentile "outsiders" (Acts 13:13–52). Furthermore, Paul acknowledges the potential presence of unbelievers in house church assemblies in Corinth (1 Cor 14:22–24). These texts may not directly represent the social reality or a specific audience of Mark's Gospel, but they offer valuable insights. See Iverson (2011, pp. 181–206, here 205–6); cf. Aune (1987, p. 60). The social structures of Mediterranean life during the early centuries of the Common Era indicate the presence of intricate and dynamic audiences in household church gatherings. Apart from the more obvious distinctions in education, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, gender, and religion among audience members, their individual personal experiences, which shape their identities, ensure that each listener responds uniquely rather than as a collective entity. Even within a group characterized by common traits, individuals will differ in their values, aspirations, ideas, opinions, and life experiences. Rejecting the notion of a unified reading public, we cannot assume that all members of a group will have identical reading experiences or respond collectively. See Bortolussi and Dixon (2003, pp. 9–10).

11 Others have similarly conceived of performance contexts around a communal meal. See, e.g., Shiner (2003, pp. 49–52); Hartvigsen (2012, pp. 11–12); Nässelqvist (2015, p. 103); Whitenton (2017, pp. 20–31); Eberhart (2023, pp. 18–25).

12 The question of whether complete performances of the gospels took place is challenging to definitively address and cannot be adequately covered here. Although concrete evidence regarding the extent to which gospels were publicly read in first- and second-century Christian communities is scarce, a reasonable conclusion about early Christian practices suggests that at times, a gospel may have been read in its entirety, while on other occasions, only selected excerpts were chosen to accommodate time constraints. See further, Nässelqvist (2014, pp. 97–98).

13 This phenomenon finds precedent in Aristotle's exploration of mimesis within the realm of tragedy, where the audience experienced a catharsis of, for example, pity and fear in response to these emotions evoked by the tragedy itself. On the meaning of catharsis in Aristotle, see Janko (1987, pp. xvi–xx); Cuddon and Preston (1998, p. 115). Keith Oatley's (1994, pp. 53–74) theory of mimesis, as simulation offers a compelling and complementary rationale for how we become so engrossed in a narrative. Drawing from Aristotle's concept of mimesis, Oatley proposes that audience members naturally engage in mental simulation of a narrative as it unfolds, creating an internal imaginary version of the story. This phenomenon becomes particularly vivid during performances (as opposed to private reading), even in more subdued formats like public readings, because the lector's delivery guides the audience to envision the events.

14 Those who become deeply involved in the narrative may become a "side-participant" or even an "addressee" (Hartvigsen 2012, pp. 63–64; cf. Clark and Carlson 1982, pp. 342–43). That is, listeners may experience the narrative in a more informational capacity in which they do not necessarily experience compulsory obligation to abide by the suggested actions in the address ("side-participants"). Alternatively, they may identify so closely with the character(s) that they hear words addressed to the characters as literally addressed to them ("addressees"). Naturally, these categories are fluid, blending together to varying degrees for each individual audience member based on their unique perspective. On the fluidity of audience positionality, see Oatley (1994, pp. 53–74).

15 For a thorough discussion of the nonverbal elements of delivery in performance, see Giles and Doan (2009, pp. 21–22); Ruge-Jones (2009, pp. 29–43, here 35–36); Boomersshine (2011, pp. 115–42); Iverson (2013, pp. 2–19, here 15–16).

16 We see this technique frequently in modern performances of Mark's Gospel, like those by Max McLean and Tom Boomersshine. See, e.g., Max McLean's performance of the entire gospel from memory in his "Mark's Gospel on Stage with Max McLean" (Worcester: Vision Video, 2010). Boomersshine has likewise performed a number of scenes from Mark's Gospel, which are available at <https://tinyurl.com/mvzfumbx> (accessed 26 July 2023). Both McLean and Boomersshine present a performance of Mark that, in certain aspects, surpasses the expected style of a first- or second-century lector. However, it is important to acknowledge that a skilled lector of that time may have delivered the gospel with a more meticulous and captivating approach than these contemporary performers. While the analogy is imperfect, these modern interpreters embody an essence similar to what we

encounter in ancient rhetorical theory. See [Shiner \(2003\)](#), pp. 172–75). In his first-century treatise, *On the Sublime*, Ps-Longinus discusses a rhetorical tactic whereby a lector could draw their audience into the performance by addressing them directly through a shift from the third person to the second person ([*Subl.*] 26.1–3). Likewise, an author ought to tailor the length of the address, style, and delivery so as to prepare the audience to actively participate in the performance event. See further, Aristotle *Rhet.* 3.9.6; Quintilian, *Inst.* 11.3.2 (cf. 6.1.30); see also, Cicero, *De Or.* 2.178; 2.188; 2.191,193; 3.216.

The tendency to use questions and counter questions for strategic rhetorical benefit also pervades Rabbinic Judaism. See, e.g., b. Sanh. 65b; Gen. Rab. 27.4; Tanch B 9 (97a). As in the Greek and Roman sources, the use of questions and counter questions in Rabbinic Judaism stimulates critical thinking, encourages active participation, and fosters a deeper understanding of the text or topic under examination. For questions and counter questions in Rabbinic Judaism, see [Strack and Billerbeck \(1922\)](#), pp. 861–62). Cf. [Shae \(1974\)](#), pp. 13–14).

δεινὸν δὲ καὶ τὸ ἐρωτῶντα τοὺς ἀκούοντάς ἐνια λέγειν, καὶ μὴ ἀποφαινόμενον.

Ps-Longinus's *On the Sublime* (1st c. CE) similarly commends questions as figures that provide “much greater realism, vigour and tension” ([*Subl.*] 18.2 [Fife, LCL]). After providing a flurry of examples of the skillful use of questions from loose quotations of Demosthenes's *Philippic* 4.10 and 44, Ps-Longinus argues that the “inspiration and quick play of the question and answer” create both a “loftier” and “more convincing” speech; indeed, “here a bare statement would have been utterly inadequate” ([*Subl.*] 18.1–2 [Fife, LCL]).

Other objectives include vilifying, cultivating pity, and pressuring or stopping an opponent from pretending to misunderstand (*Inst.* 9.2.7–11).

Colloquially, some people think of rhetorical questions as only those questions that do not require a response (e.g., “You don't want to be grounded, do you?”), although even these questions usually elicit some response. This is even a problem within the scholarly literature; see, e.g., [Han \(2002\)](#), pp. 201–29; cf. [Koshik \(2005\)](#), p. 2; [Wang \(2006\)](#), pp. 529–48). For empirical evidence, see [Freed \(1994\)](#), pp. 621–44).

[Roskos-Ewoldsen \(2003\)](#), pp. 297–322). By way of practical application of the persuasiveness of rhetorical questions, note that [Howard \(1988\)](#), pp. 89–112 found that twenty percent of advertisements analyzed from top consumer magazines contained some form of a question—usually rhetorical questions.

For further discussion on the role of questions in persuasion and their affect on central processing, see [Petty et al. \(1981\)](#), pp. 432–40; [Leonard and Lowery \(1984\)](#), pp. 377–84; [Swasy and Munch \(1985\)](#), pp. 877–86; [Munch and Swasy \(1988\)](#), pp. 69–76; [Munch et al. \(1993\)](#), pp. 294–302). Cf. [Roskos-Ewoldsen \(2003\)](#), pp. 311–14).

On the irony of the political welcome of Mark's Jesus, see [Whitenton \(2017\)](#), pp. 218–24).

For similar readings of the symbolic cursing of the fig tree, see [Hooker \(1991\)](#), pp. 261, 265; [Moloney \(2002\)](#), pp. 226–27; [Boring \(2006\)](#), p. 319; [Yarbro Collins \(2007\)](#), pp. 533–34; [Beavis \(2011\)](#), p. 171; [Hartvigsen \(2012\)](#), p. 399).

ἐν ποίᾳ ἐξουσίᾳ ταῦτα ποιεῖς; ἢ τίς σοι ἔδωκεν τὴν ἐξουσίαν ταύτην ἵνα ταῦτα ποιῇς.

Although they have different aims, form critics have long marked this episode as the beginning of a series of “controversy stories”.

On assessing emotional response to narrative, see [Oatley \(1994\)](#), p. 57). For detailed emotional response cues, see [Tan \(1994\)](#), pp. 7–32; [Hogan \(2003\)](#), pp. 140–66). In ancient narrative in particular, see [Hartvigsen \(2012\)](#), p. 76; [Whitenton \(2016a\)](#), pp. 280–85).

To be sure, audience members may or may not be aware that these episodes are primed. We saw above that the vast majority of sense making is an unconscious, automatic process. Only when coherence cannot be maintained do people become aware of their struggle to make sense of a text. On content addressability and its function for audiences in the presence of a lack of verbatim correspondence, see [Hogan \(2003\)](#), p. 43).

For a temple referent, see [Yarbro Collins \(2007\)](#), p. 539). For a global referent, see [Dwyer \(1996\)](#), p. 167).

If any audience members are known as wonder workers or healers, perhaps they will hear these questions as addressees and ponder the question with regard to their own lives, when they believe they received the authority to do such works and by whom.

On the framing importance of the prologue in Mark's Gospel, see [Whitenton \(2017\)](#), pp. 104–8).

By “parabolic speech”, I do not mean to wade into debates about “parables” in Mark and their origins. Instead, I refer to the pregnant language in Mark through which the author intends to convey something beyond a plain meaning. On such parabolic speech in Mark, see [Beavis \(2011\)](#), pp. 74–75).

“For when [the listener] infers what you have omitted, he is not only listening to you, but he becomes your witness and reacts more favorably. For he is made aware of his own intelligence through you, who have given him the opportunity to be intelligent” (συνεῖς γὰρ τὸ ἐλλειφθὲν ὑπὸ σοῦ οὐκ ἀκροατὴς μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ μάρτυς σου γίνεται, καὶ ἅμα εὐμενέστερος. Συνετὸς γὰρ ἑαυτῷ δοκεῖ διὰ σὲ τὸν ἀφορμὴν παρεσχικότα αὐτῷ τοῦ συνιέναι.) (*On Style* 222). From the fourth century BCE onward, we find ancient rhetoricians who capitalized on the persuasive value of leaving some things unsaid. Theophrastus (*Frag.* 696) spoke of omitting material as recruiting listeners as “witnesses” to your own side by leading them to discover your point on their own (see [Fortenbaugh et al. 1992](#)). Centuries later, Demetrius writes, “you should not elaborate on everything in punctilious detail but should omit some points for the listener to infer and work out for himself” (*Eloc.* 222). Rhetoric ad Herennium also shows awareness of this idea in its discussions of a figure called emphasis, through which one “leaves more to be suspected than has

been actually asserted" (Rhet. Her. 4.63.67 [Caplan, LCL]). Similarly, Seneca refers to speech that is intentionally "full of innuendo, into which one must read more meaning than was intended to meet the ear" (*Ep.* 114.1 [Gummere, LCL]). Clarity may have been essential, but the masters of persuasion knew that too much clarity could be counterproductive. See also, Quintilian, *Inst.* 8.3.83, 9.2.71, 78, 96–97. See further Whitenton (2017, pp. 65–87). Across Greek and Latin authors, emphasis was aimed at increasing persuasive power in general, but it thrived in particular contexts. In the most detailed discussion on the topic, Quintilian (1st c. CE) prescribes emphasis for hostile encounters and delicate topics (*Inst.* 9.2.67–99). In hostile encounters, a skilled speaker could omit vital material to prevent self-incrimination while encouraging listeners to convince themselves through their own inductive powers (cf. Demetrius, *Eloc.* 222). Alternatively, when discussing delicate topics, speakers could adhere to proper standards of decorum and avoid unseemliness through circumlocution. While a speaker could strategically omit material in many ways, well-placed questions could be used to box an opponent into a corner where the only way out would spell self-defeat.

<sup>35</sup> Dixon (2009, pp. 759–80). See *Il.* 18.616–617; 19.349–350; *Aen.* 4.238–241, 252–58; 9.20–21; cf. Cic. *Top.* 20.77. See further, Whitenton (2017, pp. 130–36). Scholars are divided over whether the audience would more likely understand εἰς αὐτόν to indicate that the Spirit was descending, "to," "into", or "upon" Jesus. However, as Dixon notes, the evangelist does not use εἰς with a verb of motion elsewhere to denote movement toward a personal object. For a thorough discussion of the scholarly opinions on this important prepositional phrase, see Dixon (2009, p. 771 n. 41). Similarly, Boring (2006, pp. 43, 45); Edwards (1991, p. 293). See further, Whitenton (2017, pp. 134–35).

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Quintilian, *Inst.* 10.1.20–21. See further, Whitenton (2017, pp. 53–56).

<sup>37</sup> On emotional response to narrative, again see Oatley (1994, p. 57). For a detailed discussion of emotional response cues, see Tan (1994, pp. 7–32); Hogan (2003, pp. 140–66). In ancient narrative in particular, see Hartvigsen (2012, p. 76); Whitenton (2016a, pp. 280–85).

<sup>38</sup> Audience members inferring that Jesus received his authority from God at his baptism from John might find confirmation in other episodes, such as Jesus's healing of the bleeding woman in 5:24–35 and his transfiguration in 9:2–7, where his divine power leaks out of him unexpectedly and is dramatically revealed for audiences, respectively. On Mark 5, see Moss (2010, pp. 507–19). On Mark 9, see Whitenton (2017, pp. 200–7).

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