

How Would the God of Israel Show Up?: Some Thoughts on Jesus in the Jordan
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How would the God of Israel show up? What kind of “epiphany” would it be?

Many people in the first century were asking that question, and different answers emerged. The Israelite prophets had declared that God’s sovereign rule would one day be fully disclosed: Israel’s oppression would meet its end, justice would roll down like waters, the knowledge of the Lord would fill the earth like the waters cover the sea. “On that day,” Zechariah thundered, “the LORD will become king over all the earth, and God’s name will be one.” But how would it happen?

As far as we can tell, some (how many isn’t clear) thought that it would look like God’s invading the world and transforming the political landscape, perhaps even creation itself. God would do so either with or without human aid. Those who thought God needed help were eager to give it—such as several of the revolutionary groups that emerged around the time of the Jewish war with Rome. They could make a good case for their view: hadn’t God worked through leaders and armies before? Didn’t God use the Israelites as an instrument to defeat the Amalekites, to drive out the Canaanites, and to wrest Jerusalem from the Jebusites? Thanks to the work Flavius Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian, we know that some tried to repeat the drama of those earlier biblical episodes in the hope that God would at last “tear the heavens and come down” (Isaiah 64:1). He describes one group in particular—a group that was active in the late 40s CE:

⁹⁷ A certain magician, whose name was Theudas, persuaded a number of people to take their possessions with them and follow him to the river Jordan. For he told them he was a prophet and that he would by his own command divide the river and afford them an easy passage over it. ⁹⁸ Many were deluded by his words. However, Fadus (the Roman procurator) did not permit them to succeed in this wild attempt, but he sent a troop of horsemen out against them. They fell upon them unexpectedly, slew many of them, and took many of them alive. They also took Theudas alive, and cut off his head, and carried it to Jerusalem.

Antiquities of the Jews, 20.97-98

Allusions to the Exodus and Conquest stories are patent: the taking up of possessions, a journey to the Jordan, a dividing of water, the hope for some military victory. These characters were looking forward to a “new Exodus” just as marvelous as the last one under Moses and Joshua. The Romans obviously got the point and put an end to the plan. Josephus writes of many other movements that performed very similar actions—such as retreating “to the wilderness” in search for “signs of freedom” (e.g., *Jewish War*, 2.258-260). All such groups were swiftly put to the sword.

The Gospel of Mark was written at a time when such movements had come and gone, and likely when the Jewish War with Rome had all but run its course (cf. 13:1-23). For an early reader of Mark, then, the opening scene of “the gospel of Jesus Christ” (1:1) is loaded with historical subtext. Here we find another prophet, “in the wilderness,” calling masses of people to him, predicting a coming messianic leader (“the stronger one,” 1:7), and evoking the imagery of the Exodus and Conquest of old. Moreover, Mark begins (1:2) with a citation from Isaiah 40: a call to go to “the wilderness” where God’s “way” would be prepared. This very text from Isaiah likely inspired several of those revolutionary movements

to retreat “to the wilderness” and await God’s “signs of freedom.” We could imagine a first-century reader of Mark encountering these details and remarking, “Oh, I know how this story goes.” But in Mark what follows is a departure from historical precedent, and that departure is key to understanding the upshot of the epiphany that ensues. According to Mark, God does indeed show up: the heavens are torn open, the Spirit of God descends as a dove, and Jesus of Nazareth is marked out as God’s promised messianic leader. But what does this epiphany initiate? Paradoxically, the ministry of the suffering one who submits to die at the hands of the occupying Roman forces rather than oust them by raising an army. Jesus will next call four fishermen (1:16-20) and equip them for a different kind of battle—one of proclaiming the advent of God’s kingly rule in the face of religious and political opposition. Jesus will call them and others to “follow him” ... to Golgotha!

As historians and exegetes have known for a long time, this narrative in Mark contains a pretty radical redefinition of the messianic task as well as the contours of the long-awaited “way” of the LORD from Isaiah. There are hints at that redefinition in the words from heaven spoken to Jesus. God’s declaration to Jesus is composed of distinct phrases that are drawn from the Scriptures of Israel. The first one, “you are my son,” is found in a messianic enthronement Psalm (Ps 2) which functions here to declare that Jesus is Israel’s kingly Messiah. But what kind of Messiah is he? The rest of the words hint at and foreshadow what is to come. The heavenly voice says not only that Jesus is “my son” but also that Jesus is “the beloved” and the one “in whom I am well pleased.” The latter is a clear allusion to the opening of Isaiah 42 about God’s “servant”: “Behold my servant, whom I uphold. My chosen one in whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my spirit upon him, and he will bring forth justice to the nations.” We know from the rest of the Gospel of Mark that Jesus is precisely that “servant” mentioned by Isaiah—the one who tells his followers they must “serve” others and who dies on the cross in the form of the so-called “suffering servant” from Isaiah 53. Jesus is, then, the messianic “son” from Psalm 2, but he is *also* the servant of God who will give his life as a ransom for many.

How, then, would the God of Israel show up? What kind of “epiphany” would it be? The opening of Mark’s Gospel is an answer to that question, and a provocative one at that. God’s revelation is here also a reorientation; it is a manifestation of power but also a call to service and sacrifice. God’s epiphany in the desert looks forward to the epiphany of the cross.

We know from the gospel story itself that many who lived through and witnessed the ministry of Jesus didn’t “get” the epiphany at the time. According to Mark, it was Peter himself, the lead apostle, who actually rebuked Jesus when informed about the plan to suffer in Jerusalem! This example shows that the recognition of God’s epiphany in Jesus, and the extent of its reorienting claim, required time to understand and was most evident in retrospect. Here Mark raises some important questions for self-reflection and for conversation with others:

- 1) How have we perhaps seen God’s activity in our midst in retrospect, with the benefit of hindsight? What did we learn?
- 2) What does this epiphany text demand of us, today?
- 3) How might the text further reorient our assumptions about what God’s activity in our world looks like?