

## Article

# Living the Kingdom of God: The Communal and Renewing Spirituality of Jesus in Mark

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**Abstract:** Understanding spirituality as “the sense or experience of God and the way one lives in response to that experience”, Jesus’ spirituality according to Mark may be described as relational and communal, with less attention given to the interior spiritual lives of individuals in favor of a way of relating to “all nations and all people” as beloved children of God which can renew all creation. Mark shows Jesus shaped by the experience of the God of the Exodus, Isaiah, and Daniel so that when he announced that “The Kingdom of God has drawn near”, he was proclaiming the fulfillment of the promises of this God. Furthermore, Mark shows Jesus living into this fulfillment, not merely saying it. The result is his teaching and modeling a renewing way of living among his followers, which dismantles hierarchies in favor of welcome, service, justice, etc., and enables resistance to Roman oppression without violence and death. He called followers to see how powerful this renewal of God is. When Rome recognized its power and turned their violence against him, he continued on “the Way of the Lord”, trusting in resurrection and God’s life-giving power. Thus, Mark presents Jesus as demonstrating a life-filled, communal spirituality of renewal for his followers.

**Keywords:** Spirituality; the Way of the Lord; Exodus; apocalyptic; Kingdom of God; inclusion; hierarchy; service; seeing; God’s Life



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## 1. Introduction: Understanding Jesus’ Spirituality in Mark

“Spirituality” has been a notoriously difficult term to define with precision. In a previous work, I adapted a definition proposed by Edward Kinerk (“A spirituality... is the expression of a dialectical personal growth from the inauthentic to the authentic” (Kinerk 1981, p. 6; Minor 1996, p. 6) so as to study the spirituality which Mark’s gospel urges readers/hearers to embrace. The definition I used then was: “The expression of the experience of God through Jesus Christ which calls believers to dialectical personal growth moving from inauthentic responses to God’s initiatives toward authentic responses to God’s initiatives” (Minor 1996, p. 6). For the purposes of this essay, I am “tweaking” that understanding slightly. Since Mark believed that Jesus demonstrated authentic responses to God,<sup>1</sup> I’ll seek to answer this question here: “What is Jesus’ sense or experience of God (according to Mark), and how did he live in response to that experience?” Using this question as a guide, I will examine Mark’s presentation of the spirituality which Jesus himself practiced, or perhaps better, embodied. That is, what does Mark convey to us in his narrative about Jesus’ sense or experience of God, and how Jesus lived in response to this experience?<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Jesus’ Experience of God in Mark

Mark records Jesus having two direct experiences of God during the time period covered in the Gospel: The first is at his baptism (1:9–11); the second at the Transfiguration (9:2–8). Thus, Mark’s storytelling shows Jesus named as God’s son, who is empowered at baptism to travel the “Way of the Lord” in carrying out the mission to which God called him. Then, Jesus is confirmed during the Transfiguration as the Son who faithfully follows this Way (the voice of God cries out, “Listen to him!” 9:7) even as he has just announced that

the Way will lead to his death (8:31). Notably, in both of these moments, Jesus is affirmed as God's "beloved son". In a world where sons carried great importance as the inheritors of their fathers' household, work, place in the community, and honor, Mark's affirmation of Jesus as God's beloved and faithful Son provides a starting point for understanding Jesus' spirituality in this Gospel.<sup>3</sup>

Despite showing Jesus as beloved son, Mark records Jesus speaking directly to God only twice, in Gethsemane (14:36) and from the cross (15:34). Jesus' faithfulness to God is demonstrated again in these moments, as he names to God his fear and anticipation of suffering but continues on the Way of the Lord, even so. In addition, Jesus speaks directly about God rarely in Mark. Four times in the Gospel, Jesus declares, in varying ways, that all things are possible with God (9:23, 10:27, 11:23–24, 14:36). In the dispute over resurrection with the Pharisees, Jesus names God as "God of the living ones", or "the living God" (12:27). In the apocalyptic discourse, he describes God as merciful (13:20) and as the One who alone knows how God's ultimate purpose for creation will unfold (13:32). In his trial before the Jerusalem authorities, Jesus simply refers to God as "Power" (14:62). Though few, these references present the God whom Jesus had experienced as powerful, merciful, and God of the living, which is a striking description, given that Mark does not sugarcoat the difficulty of the Way of the Lord which Jesus followed or the torturous death he suffered as a result of following this Way.

Readers of Mark may wish for Jesus to explain how to relate his being God's beloved son alongside his declarations of God's power, mercy, and life with his own painful path. However, we will not find such an explanation in Mark's Gospel. We can surmise from the narrative, however, more about Jesus' sense or experience of this God. Mark presents Jesus as shaped by the stories and poetry of his Jewish tradition. In particular, we see Jesus in Mark impacted by the God of the Exodus, the God of Isaiah, and the God of Daniel.

### 3. The Experience of the God of the Exodus

Allusions to the Exodus abound in Mark's gospel. The story begins with John the baptizer in the wilderness (1:4), which is followed by Jesus being driven into the wilderness by the Spirit to be "tempted" for 40 days (1:12–13). The section of Mark between 6:30–8:10 is framed by two stories of Jesus feeding crowds with bread "in the wilderness" (6:30–44, 8:1–10). Those familiar with the Exodus story will know the importance of Israel's 40-year wandering in the wilderness and God feeding them with bread (manna) there. Mark's first feeding story is preceded by an evil ruler lurking and threatening (6:14–29), and followed by Jesus praying on a mountain and a miraculous sea crossing, wherein Jesus identifies himself as "I am" (6:45–52), all of which evokes the Exodus story. The Transfiguration story (9:2–8) also abounds with Exodus echoes, as Jesus goes up a mountain to encounter God, "shines" with the glory of God, and is met there by Moses (along with Elijah). Peter wants to build "booths" (or tents) for them there, and God speaks from a cloud. All of these references indicate that Mark wanted readers to recognize Israel's Exodus story as significant for understanding Jesus.<sup>4</sup>

There may be multiple ways that Mark saw the Exodus tradition impacting Jesus' spirituality, but one in particular stands out as his narrative unfolds. Warren Carter describes first-century Roman propaganda as proclaiming that the gods had chosen Rome to rule over the (Mediterranean) world. The gods had "blessed" Rome with power so that its rulers brought peace to all those in the Empire (Carter 2000, p. 7). The Exodus story, however, presents a counter-narrative to Rome's propaganda, as it tells of as it tells of a God who heard the cries of the slaves, rather than the rulers, down in Egypt. Then God liberated a God who heard the cries of the slaves down in Egypt, then liberated, led, and provided for those slaves. The God of the Exodus operated differently in the world than the gods of Roman propaganda. Jesus in Mark lives into this difference.

#### 4. The Experience of the God of Isaiah

Mark's story begins with a quote which the writer attributes to Isaiah (Mark 1:2–3). Thus, commences the impact of this great book in the Hebrew Bible on the portrayal of Jesus in the Second Gospel. The Isaiah traditions<sup>5</sup> of the true son of David who is coming to bring peace and righteousness (e.g., Isa. 9:6–7) into the world is likely an obvious influence on Mark's understanding of Jesus' spirituality. Equally significant for Mark's story, however, is Isaiah's emphasis on the inclusion of all nations and all people in the redemption and renewal which God promised. All nations and all people will be welcomed to the Lord's mountain to learn the ways of God and share in the feast, peace, and joy which God will make possible for them (see, e.g., Isaiah 2:2–4, 25:6–7, 49:6, 56:3–8, 66:18–21).

So, Mark tells us that the first ones Jesus calls to join him in God's work were fishermen (1:16–20), manual laborers, whose job demands likely meant they struggled to keep purity requirements. Thus, they were ranked among the lowly ones of their day. From that beginning, Mark depicts Jesus "eating with tax collectors and sinners" (2:15–16), feeding multitudes on both the Jewish (6:31–44) and Gentile (8:1–10) sides of the Sea of Galilee, healing the daughters of a respected Jewish man (5:22–24, 35–43) and a Syrophenician woman (7:24–30), and, though Mark is late in telling us, welcoming women among his disciples from the beginning of his mission (15:40–41). Thus, we can see that the God of the Exodus who heard the cries of the slaves in Egypt, and the God of Isaiah who welcomes all nations and all people, flow together in Mark's presentation of Jesus' experience of God and impact Jesus' spirituality as he carries out his mission on behalf of God.

#### 5. The Experience of the God of Daniel (and Other Apocalyptic Thinkers)

The great Jewish apocalyptic tradition, birthed during the oppressive rule of the Syrian tyrant Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century BCE, promised Israelites that evil would not have the last word in creation. God was already at work, these thinkers proclaimed, to bring creation to a moment when evildoers would be judged, the righteous ones vindicated, and all of creation renewed.<sup>6</sup> Creation belongs to God, and God's purposes for creation will be realized.

Scholars have long noted the impact of the apocalyptic sections of the book of Daniel (likely composed during Antiochus' tyranny) on Mark's story of Jesus.<sup>7</sup> Jesus in Mark calls himself the "son of man", who will come in glory (Mark 8:38; see Dan 7:13–14). In the "apocalyptic discourse" of Mark 13, Jesus uses the language of apocalyptic thinkers like Daniel, Joel, and Ezekiel to describe evil in the world (Mark 13:14; see Dan 9:27) and God's ultimate redemption of creation (Mark 13:24–27; see Joel 2, Eze 32, Zech 2). Mark conveys to us that Jesus was able to continue on the Way of the Lord because of his hope for resurrection, which was an apocalyptic hope (Mark 8:31, 9:31, 10:33–34; see Dan 12:1–3, Isa 25:8).

Perhaps most importantly, Mark tells us that Jesus initiated his work on God's behalf by proclaiming that "the Kingdom of God has drawn near" (1:14–15). Since "Kingdom of God" was one way that apocalyptic thinkers referred to the time of God's promised renewal,<sup>8</sup> Jesus' announcement signaled that his understanding that God, who had inspired the hope of the writers of Daniel and other apocalyptic texts, was fulfilling the promises which had kindled their hope.

These three elements of Jesus' experience of God come together in Mark's account of Jesus' baptism. As Jesus rose from the water, he encountered God's Spirit descending onto him and heard God's affirmation of him as "beloved son" (1:9–11). As Culpepper notes (534) (Culpepper 2015), Isaiah 42:1 stands in the background of Mark's narrative: God's servant, in whom God delights, is the one on whom God's Spirit rests so that he "will bring forth justice to the nations". The story also likely evoked apocalyptic promises of the coming of the Spirit in the "last days" as in Joel 3:28. The Spirit then "drove" Jesus into a 40-day sojourn in the wilderness (1:12), a clear allusion to the Exodus story as already noted. Freeing the slaves is surely a renewing act of justice for the nations as promised by apocalyptic (and prophetic) teachers. Thus, the Exodus story, Isaiah, and the apocalyptic

hopes of Israel are key aspects of Mark's baptism narrative. Furthermore, Mark presents this baptism experience as empowering Jesus for the Way which lay before him and shaping his spirituality as he traveled the Way.

This brief review demonstrates Mark's understanding of Jesus' experience that the God of the Exodus, of Isaiah, and of apocalyptic writers, especially Daniel, was at work in creation as promised. This God had called and empowered Jesus by God's Spirit to be the agent of God's work as God's beloved son, and showed Jesus the "Way of the Lord", which Jesus must follow to actuate God's purpose. In Mark's Gospel the story of Jesus following this Way of the Lord is essentially the story of Jesus' spirituality, which is his response to the character, work, and promises of the God of the Exodus, Isaiah, and the apocalyptic writers.

## 6. Jesus' Response to His Experience of God According to Mark

Often, the kinds of responses to God associated with the idea of "spirituality" include prayer, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, worship, confession, and fasting. Mark mentions several of these practices in his story of Jesus who attends synagogue (1:21; 3:1; 6:2), prays (1:35; 6:46; 14:32), and confirms his disciples' fasting (2:18–20). However, Mark emphasizes none of these practices. Instead, in Mark's presentation, Jesus' response to God is focused on his first and primary announcement: "The Kingdom of God has drawn near".

Jesus' statement in the aftermath of his baptism and testing in the wilderness is *not* that God's Kingdom "will draw near", but that it *has* done so (the Greek verb is perfect tense). In addition, Mark describes Jesus as "Teacher" of the arrival of God's Kingdom. Curiously, however, there is less of Jesus' actual teaching presented in Mark compared to the other gospels, though what is presented is significant, as we will see. What Mark narrates instead is that Jesus' spirituality entails living as if God's Kingdom has indeed arrived.<sup>9</sup>

Before pushing ahead, we should note the significant concerns raised by feminist and post-colonial scholars, among others, regarding the Greek word *basileia*, which is nearly always translated into English as "kingdom". These scholars have raised this important question: If Jesus in Mark announced that God is replacing one "kingdom" with another, then where is any renewal?<sup>10</sup> I was persuaded long ago by Schussler Fiorenza that Jesus' use of the term *basileia* does not ascribe "imperial power" to God and that the internal dynamics and ethos of God's *basileia* are decidedly not like Rome's (as we will see).<sup>11</sup> Such an understanding does not, however, alleviate the problems created for us in our time by Jesus' use of *basileia*, the way imperial terms (like "kingdom") have impacted Christians' theological imaginations, or the challenge of translating *basileia* so as not to convey that God was only replacing one imperial kingdom with another. Since in this article I am working with what Mark has given us, and since no contemporary alternatives to "kingdom" have "caught on" widely, I will reluctantly stay with the usual English translation of "kingdom" but use the idea of "community" whenever I can. I also hope readers will note carefully that Mark understands God's "kingdom" to do far more than "replace" Rome's.

Jesus' first act in Mark after announcing that God's Kingdom has drawn near was to call fishermen to join him in God's work (1:16–20). Fishermen, though manual laborers in an occupation that the higher classes in the first century likely despised, were welcome to share life in God's Kingdom, as was the mother-in-law of one of those fishermen (1:29–31), though women were undervalued in that culture. Soon, Jesus was "eating with tax collectors and sinners" (2:13–17), a charge which became the most common one leveled against him by his opponents in the Synoptic Gospels. As scholars of the first-century Mediterranean world have shown, Rome's practice of "divide and conquer" among its subject peoples worked with traditional cultural and religious divisions to create an order in the Empire in which people were separated from one another along race, class, gender, and sometimes occupation lines. First-century table practices illustrated these divisions clearly. People only ate with others like themselves (Malina and Rohrbaugh 1992, pp. 191–92). Mark's

Jesus, however, ate with fishermen, tax collectors, sinners, women, and apparently anyone else who wanted a place at the table.<sup>12</sup>

A multitude of stories further demonstrate Jesus' inclusive spirituality, many of which occur during the "Galilean ministry" phase of Mark's story (1:16–8:26), as Jesus lived into God's Kingdom. For example, "family" for Jesus was less about bloodlines, which were important in his world, and instead about doing the will of God (3:34–35), which was possible for anyone, regardless of his or her family ties. As mentioned earlier, he fed multitudes on both the Jewish (6:31–44) and Gentile (8:1–10) sides of the sea of Galilee. He healed Jews (1:40–45, 3:1–6, etc.), Gentiles (5:1–20, 7:24–30), women and daughters (5:21–43, 7:24–30) as well as sons (9:14–27), and beggars (10:46–52). One of his teaching sections (7:1–23) is devoted to undoing purity requirements which separated Jews and Gentiles, but also divided Jews from each other. In much of his work of Mark, Brian Blount aptly describes this aspect of Jesus' mission as "boundary-breaking", meaning Jesus is undoing the divisions human beings establish between themselves and others.<sup>13</sup> As Mark tells the story, the God of the Exodus has again heard the cries of Israel's subject people and sent Jesus to fulfill God's promises recorded in Isaiah: to gather all nations and all people to feast on God's Holy Mountain. Far more than simply announcing such fulfillment, Jesus in Mark responded to God's work by living as if that announcement was true.

In addition to being divided, people in the first-century Roman world were also "ranked". That is, Roman order was arranged hierarchically and patriarchally, so that only a few men (estimates are 2–5% of the population)<sup>14</sup> ruled the world for everyone else. Caesar, of course, sat atop this pyramid-like hierarchy in the Empire, within which local rulers then allied themselves with Caesar and sat atop local hierarchies. Everyone else was assigned their "place" in the order and expected to act accordingly. Doing so, Roman propaganda declared, brought peace to everyone (Carter 2001, p. 25). When their propaganda failed to persuade people to stay in their place, Rome used violence to enforce conformity. Here, are the necessary "tools" for such an order. Since only a few men ruled the world for everyone else, those rulers needed both a strong propaganda effort, bolstered by the threat of violence, to convince the majority of subjects that their best interests lay in cooperating with the order these powerful men had put in place.

However, Jesus, according to Mark was among those who refused to cooperate. Welcoming and including everyone as he did directly challenged Rome's hierarchical order. His practices, like welcoming everyone to the table and teaching that membership in Jesus' family was determined by doing the will of God, conveyed that none is more chosen, blessed, or worthy than others. Bloodlines are irrelevant. Ranking of groups should not happen in his family. As Mark's story unfolds, we find Jesus' spirituality involves explicitly teaching and living these convictions in response to the God of the Exodus and of Isaiah. Many of these stories happen during the "Journey to Jerusalem" phase of the Gospel, as he is traveling to the Holy City to confront the powers directly (8:27–10:52).

Most explicit in this regard is Jesus' response following James' and John's request to sit on his right and left hands in his "glory" (10:35–37). Calling the other ten to join them, Jesus declared: "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you. . ." (10:42–43). Instead, disciples choose to serve one another, even as he came to serve rather than be served (10:42–45). Significantly, Jesus did not contrast the exercise of good authority with the exercise of bad authority. He contrasted authority and service and called his followers to choose service as participants in God's Kingdom, as his own spirituality led him to do (10:45).

The above description means that I disagree with those scholars who claim that Mark's Jesus, as God's only Son and heir, "is at the pinnacle of the hierarchy of his household, just as the Gentile or Roman rulers are at the pinnacle of their hierarchy of power".<sup>15</sup> Since responding in detail to such provocative arguments (provocative in a good way) is beyond the scope of this article, I will limit my comments here to three. First, new communities as described above may still need leadership, which does not automatically mean the



return of a hierarchical order. Instead, the kind of leadership exercised is crucial if the communities will be “transformative pockets of renewal” (borrowing the great language of Brian Blount 1998, pp. 9–12). Mark records Jesus saying that tyranny and domination are not what his followers do (10:42). Instead, Jesus models a different leadership when he says that he himself came to serve rather than “lord over” others and to “give” his life rather than gain things for himself (10:45). Second, disciples choose to be part of this community, where all are welcome and members serve one another (rather than those in power). They are not forced to join and serve, which would necessarily indicate that some are “above them” and have power to force their service. Thus, we see that when the rich ruler walked away from Jesus’ call, Jesus loved him and let him go (10:21–22). Such choice is an essential element of justice and mercy. Third, Mark’s Jesus eschews violence (see 14:47–49) which, as noted, is a necessary tool for enforcing a hierarchical order. For these reasons, among others, I am persuaded that Mark presents Jesus as envisioning a nonhierarchical community of inclusion and service which can bring renewal.<sup>16</sup>

Since the story of James’ and John’s request is one of the last ones “on the way” to Jerusalem, we can work backward from here to see that these words of Jesus reflect the spirituality he has been living all along *the Way*. In the previous story of the man who asked Jesus about inheriting eternal life, Mark tells us that the man was rich (10:22). While in our world wealth makes a person powerful, in the first-century world, power made one wealthy, mostly by making it possible to take advantage of others, i.e., by defrauding them (see 10:19).<sup>17</sup> Therefore, when Jesus calls the man to give up his wealth (10:21), he is calling him also to give up his position of authority, which enabled his wealth in the first place. Then, the man can follow Jesus and live into God’s Kingdom, as Jesus was doing. As noted above, the man chose not to respond to Jesus’ call.

Just prior to the story of the rich man, the disciples had rebuked those who were bringing children to Jesus to touch (10:13). In the adult-oriented culture of the first century, wherein children were viewed as vulnerable, powerless, and honor-less (Malina and Rohrbaugh 1992, p. 238), the actions of the disciples would have been understandable to most people. However, Jesus was “indignant” with his followers and told them to let the children come to him, “for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs” (10:14). He then added, “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it” (10:15). Contemporary readers tend to interpret Jesus’ words according to our views of children (as guileless, trusting, etc.), but in his context, Jesus taught that God’s Kingdom belongs to the powerless ones, i.e., to those who were not part of the power structure of the day, as children were not,<sup>18</sup> and therefore, who were able to receive it like those with nothing to lose (Minor 1996, pp. 61–62).

While many first-century folks might have been sympathetic with the disciples’ initial response to those bringing children, Jesus likely was not one of them, since Mark tells us he’d already had a teaching moment with them about children. Earlier on the journey, after the disciples argued over who was the greatest among themselves (9:34), Jesus had placed a child in their midst, called them to service, and illustrated what he meant by service in telling them to receive the child (9:35–37). Since children in that culture were viewed as insignificant and powerless, nothing was gained socially, economically, or politically by “receiving” (i.e., welcoming and including) them. What, then, is the motivation for doing so? Just this: Receiving a child means they “receive” Jesus, and, in receiving Jesus, they “receive” the One who sent Jesus (9:37). Jesus indicates that the God who heard the cries of the slaves down in Egypt is once again in the midst of and attending to the powerless ones. So Jesus does as well.

Thus, the Markan Jesus is clear, particularly throughout the “journey to Jerusalem” section of the Gospel, that God’s Kingdom as he experienced it has no tyrants, no one who rules over others, and no one in a position to take advantage of others. It is composed of those who welcome all people and all nations to share in God’s feast, and who choose service to God and one another over self-advancement. A rejection of hierarchy, patriarchy, and exclusion has further implications for Jesus and his followers. Since hierarchy means

only a few at the top ruling over everyone else, it forms relationships among people that are necessarily competitive, comparative, and adversarial. Rejecting hierarchy, therefore, creates opportunities for different relationships based on welcome, grace, mercy, compassion, and generosity. No wonder, then, that we see Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners; healing Jews, Gentiles, a blind beggar, and the daughters of both a synagogue ruler and a Syrophenician woman; and feeding multitudes on both shores of the sea. No wonder that he took note of a suffering widow in the Temple (12:41–44), received and blessed the prophetic sign action of a woman prophet (14:3–9), and welcomed women among his followers from the beginning of his work in Galilee (15:40–41). Jesus' spirituality reflects his experience of God who heard the cries of the slaves in Egypt and acted on their behalf, who welcomes all people and nations onto God's holy mountain.

Mark indicates, however, that Jesus' teaching and living into God's Kingdom made painfully little headway among his disciples. Though a number of them followed him from Galilee to Jerusalem, they struggled to understand him, as their arguments over who was the greatest among them show. They seem to assume that hierarchy is "just the way things are". Consequently, change from their perspective requires replacing the people at the top with other rulers, which means competing—even among one another—for those coveted places. Roman propaganda appears to have worked on them. The coming of God's Kingdom for them apparently meant replacing one kingdom with another. As we are seeing, however, Jesus' practice of spirituality in response to God meant an entirely different kind of "kingdom".

Not surprisingly, then, Mark's first presentation of the content of Jesus' teaching (4:1–34) gives major attention to Jesus' emphasis on "Seeing". Since appearances can be deceiving (note the Parable of the Sower, which looks like a disaster, until it is not, 4:1–9; or the Mustard Seed Parable of growth that seems impossible, until it is not, 4:30–32), Jesus tells disciples they must "see" what they hear (4:24). Since seeing what they hear is not literally possible, Jesus is not speaking of literal sight (with our physical eyes) but of perception, or better yet, insightfulness.<sup>19</sup> That is, Jesus wants them to "see" God at work in creation, as he himself does. Those who are willing to see thusly will grasp more and more of what God is doing, while those unwilling to see will become unable to see (4:24–25).

The call to "see!" persists throughout Mark's Gospel (note, e.g., 8:14–21; 13:5, 9, 23, 33), including in 9:1, where Jesus declares, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power". When we appreciate Jesus' call to disciples to "see" in Mark, and when we note that the Greek verb translated "has come" in 9:1 is perfect tense, we can understand Jesus to mean that some disciples are going to "get it" (as we might say).<sup>20</sup> They will *see* that the arrival of God's Kingdom, as Jesus in Mark lived and taught it, offers all God's children an alternative to Roman imperialism and oppression, even as Rome still dominated their world. By following Jesus on *the Way of the Lord* and living as he did, they create "transformative pockets of resistance" to Roman rule and order. They can be set free (as were the slaves in Egypt) to live out God's justice and mercy, as Jesus did. They can form different relationships which focus on welcoming one another to God's feast and sharing God's peace together (as Isaiah envisioned). They can spend their energy in welcome, service, and compassion rather than competing over who is the greatest. They can join Jesus in sharing God's renewal (as Daniel and the apocalyptic prophets had promised). Thus, they "see" the renewal brought about by living into the reality of God's Kingdom, as Jesus did according to Mark. Their own spirituality will be transformed to reflect that of Jesus.

Indeed, the manifestation of God's Kingdom, as Jesus in Mark lived and taught it, was too transformative for Rome to ignore. Since Roman propaganda had not persuaded Jesus to cooperate with Roman rule, Rome used its other tool to force conformity: Violence. In Mark's story, Rome's allies first plotted against Jesus as early as 3:6. Rome's primary allies, the Temple leadership in Jerusalem, decided to destroy him by the second day he was in the city (11:18, according to Mark's timetable). Jesus could certainly "see" their opposition (see 8:31, 9:31, 10:32–34). In the face of this threat, he continued on the Way of the Lord.

According to Mark's presentation, he did so because he trusted in the God of the living ones (12:27).

Three times on the journey to Jerusalem, Mark records Jesus announcing his death at the hands of the powers and his resurrection at the hands of God (understanding the passive verb, "will be raised", as a divine passive in 8:31, 9:31, 10:34). Following the first announcement, Jesus elaborates on the power of God's life, telling disciples that those who lose their lives for the sake of Jesus and the gospel "will save it" (8:35). On the way down the mountain after the Transfiguration, Jesus told disciples not to tell what they'd seen until after he "was raised from the dead" (9:9). Later in Jerusalem, even as the threat of death hung heavily over him, Jesus declares that "God is not God of the dead but of the living ones" (12:27) while debating with the Sadducees in the Temple. In Mark's third teaching section, the "apocalyptic discourse" in Mark 13, Jesus pronounces judgment on the Temple (13:2) for having become a "den of robbers", when it should have been a "house of prayer for all nations" (11:17). He also tells disciples that the destruction of the Temple is not *the* sign that "all things are about to be fulfilled" (13:4; my translation). Therefore, disciples should "see" and not be deceived by those who say such things (13:5–8). Instead, Jesus declares that God has promised ultimate fulfillment and that the faithful ones will share in it when it comes at a time only God knows (13:24–27). Though resurrection is not mentioned explicitly in this discourse, it is surely implied.

While repeatedly affirming the power of God's life, Jesus continued on the Way of the Lord even as it terrified him (14:33–36) and led him straight to a grisly death at Rome's hands (15:33–37). Mark does nothing to soften the horror of Jesus' journey to this moment. Given that Mark's audience knew all too well what Rome was capable of doing, we should not be surprised. Following Jesus and living into God's Kingdom (not Caesar's) as Jesus had done could lead his followers to a similar fate. How, then, are they able to follow? The young man at the tomb provides Mark's answer: "You seek Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He has been raised. He is not here. See the place where they laid him" (16:6). Resurrection, not crucifixion, gets the last spoken word in Mark's story of Jesus. Jesus' faithfulness to the Way of the Lord demonstrates to followers that the promise of God's life and resurrecting power overcomes Rome's death.

We can say, then, that God's life and resurrecting power surround and enliven Jesus' announcement that God's Kingdom has drawn near. He "saw" God's power for life and responded by trusting it all the way to Golgotha. Additionally, according to Mark, its relevance extends beyond Golgotha. Jesus' lived faith—not just what he said, but how he practiced his spirituality in response to the God of the living ones—thus ransoms his followers from "slavery" to death (see 10:45). Having experienced the power of the life-giving God via Jesus' resurrection, which nullified Rome's greatest weapon, they are now free from fear of that weapon and can live into renewing communities of transformative resistance as he had done. The God of the Exodus is at work again!

However, will they? As Mark presents it, living into God's Kingdom as Jesus had done is both hopeful and daunting. It is life-giving, but can also lead to death.<sup>21</sup> Will followers choose hope or fear? Will their spirituality reflect Jesus'? Mark's "open-ended" ending (16:8) leaves that question for readers to ponder.<sup>22</sup>

## 7. Conclusions

As demonstrated, Mark shows Jesus' spirituality as beginning with the sense or experience of the God of the Exodus, of Isaiah, and of Daniel. The God who heard the cries of the slaves down in Egypt; who promised a Messiah, a true son of David who would gather all nations and all people to feast together on God's holy mountain; who would resurrect the dead; and who promised to renew all of creation sent Jesus to announce, "The time is fulfilled. The Kingdom of God has drawn near". Then, Mark presents Jesus responding to God by living as if this announcement is true. According to Mark, Jesus did more than proclaim the arrival of God's Kingdom; he lived it. He practiced his spirituality.



While Mark shows Jesus doing the kinds of personal practices that we often associate with spirituality, like praying and attending synagogue, Mark gives greatest attention to the communal and relational aspects of Jesus' living into God's Kingdom. Jesus called, healed, fed, and ate with anyone whom he encountered regardless of race, gender, class, or age, thus including "all nations" and "all people" in God's Kingdom, as the prophets promised. Mark further emphasizes this inclusion when he notes that Jesus' "family" is comprised of those who do the will of God, so that anyone can be family since bloodlines are irrelevant. Such inclusivity means no one and no group is more worthy or more chosen, so hierarchies are undone. Since hierarchies are necessarily competitive, comparative, and adversarial, their demise creates opportunities for new relationships among God's people and new communities of faithful ones who follow Jesus on this "Way of the Lord", and practice welcome, grace, mercy, compassion, generosity, and justice, as Jesus did. These new relationships and communities have the power to renew disciples' lives and all the world around them, if only they can "see" this power. They can ignore Roman rule and order and live into the "Way of the Lord", as Jesus himself had done. They can practice his communal and renewing spirituality.

Oddly, the ones who saw most clearly the power of God's Kingdom as Jesus lived it are Roman officials and their allies in Israel. That is, they grasped the danger he presented to their hierarchical and patriarchal order. So, they threatened him with death and then carried out that threat when it failed to force his conformity to their order. However, Jesus' trust in the "God of the living ones" (12:27) bears fruit when God resurrected him (16:6). Jesus' faith, which led to the demonstration of God's life-producing power in his resurrection, freed him to live as God intended, despite Roman violence. His faith and resurrection also free disciples to follow him on the Way of the Lord and to find life as he did, even when Rome threatens them with death (8:34).

Christians in our time who are interested in spirituality often give greatest attention to practices which deepen their individual spiritual lives (such as prayer, meditation, and learning *lectio divina*), which is not surprising, given our individualistic culture. Furthermore, these practices are clearly meaningful. They nurture and sustain us for our spiritual journeys. However, even in our individualistic cultures, spiritual teachers and mental health professionals tell us that the groups and communities of which we are a part have significant impact on our spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being. Whenever our families, church communities, work places, neighborhoods, etc., are adversarial and competitive, oppressive and exploitive, perhaps even violent, then individual participants will struggle to find meaningful lives and thriving health, either spiritual or physical.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Krista Tippett, founder and host of the NPR show/podcast *On Being*, believes the question of the twenty-first century is: "Who will we be to each other?" She adds a call for us to offer what is "life-giving" to each other in the midst of the difficulties of our time.<sup>24</sup> Jesus' spirituality in Mark shows "the way" to offer what is life-giving and resist any toxicity around us: We form new communities or "families" as described above, inspired by the God of the Exodus, Isaiah, and Daniel as Jesus was who frees, gathers, graces, heals, feeds, and renews all of creation, as God's Kingdom has drawn near. That is, we practice his communal and renewing spirituality.

Centuries after Mark, however, hierarchies, competitiveness, and violence are still with and among us. The rise in the US<sup>25</sup> of divisiveness generally, and of white supremacy particularly, demonstrates clearly this painful reality. In such a time as this, we might consider the spirituality of Jesus in Mark as fantasy, as merely wishful thinking. However, let us remember this: While Jesus in Mark rarely speaks directly about God, when he does, he says four times in varying ways that "All things are possible with God" (9:23, 10:27, 11:22–23, 14:36). All things, apparently even a spirituality that leads to non-hierarchical communities of welcome, service, grace, justice, compassion, generosity, and renewal are possible with the God of Jesus when we follow the Way of Lord as Jesus did, according to Mark.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The exception is Jesus' initial response to the Syrophoenician woman in 7:24–30. Among the reasons this story is so memorable is how different it is from Mark's other stories involving Jesus so that, for my purposes here, it is the "exception which proves the rule".
- <sup>2</sup> To avoid being tedious, I will not add "according to Mark" every time I note something about Jesus. So I will affirm here that all that I say about Jesus in this essay is "according to Mark", I will not be commenting on the "historical Jesus".
- <sup>3</sup> As a feminist, I am aware of the troubling aspects of identifying God as "father" and focusing on Jesus as "son". As a student of the first-century Roman world, I cannot ignore the significance of the roles of fathers and sons there, and thus the importance of Mark using those roles metaphorically to describe the relationship of Jesus to God. Therefore, I will use this note to remind us that Mark's metaphorical use of those roles in no way ascribes maleness to God or implies that Jesus' maleness was essential to his work on God's behalf. For more on fathers and sons in the first-century Mediterranean world, see [Schussler Fiorenza \(1999, p. 161\)](#); [Polaski \(2005, pp. 71–72\)](#), among many good sources for such information.
- <sup>4</sup> See [Boring \(2006, pp. 39, 183, 190, 261–62\)](#), among other scholars who note the importance of the Exodus story for Mark's gospel.
- <sup>5</sup> Like many scholars today, I understand Isaiah to be a beautiful compilation of the work of at least three phases of Israelite prophetic traditions spanning several centuries. However, first-century people, including Jesus, would have considered the book as a single work. For this essay, then, I am going to refer to it as they would have, as simply "Isaiah".
- <sup>6</sup> See Isaiah 24–27 as an example of such a hope. See [Wright \(2003, pp. 122–27\)](#) for a fuller treatment of this apocalyptic hope.
- <sup>7</sup> Back in 1977, Howard Clark Kee called Mark an "apocalyptic gospel", in part because of the impact of the Jewish apocalyptic tradition, including Daniel, in Mark's story of Jesus. See his work *Community of the New Age* ([Kee 1977](#)).
- <sup>8</sup> See, e.g., 1 Enoch 25:3–5, Psalm of Solomon 17:4.
- <sup>9</sup> I was once privileged to hear Baptist preacher, civil rights activist, and author Will Campbell tell seminarians that we must live "as if" the gospel is true. Podcaster Krista Tippett recounted an interview she did with the late John Lewis, who said, "What if the beloved community is here and we live as if that is true?" (the On Being podcast for 9 June 2022). I remember these wise teachers when I note that Jesus lived "as if" God's Kingdom has truly drawn near.
- <sup>10</sup> See, among others, ([Moore 2007](#)).
- <sup>11</sup> See, among others of Schussler Fiorenza's works, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet*, 92. ([Schussler Fiorenza 1994](#)).
- <sup>12</sup> Though writing about Luke, Robert Karris has famously said that Jesus was killed because of the way he ate, as he noted the impact of Jesus' practice of eating with the "wrong" people. See [Karris \(2006, p. 97\)](#).
- <sup>13</sup> In fact, Blount says Mark is a "textbook on boundary trespass", in "Is the Joke on Us?" ([Blount 2005, p. 25](#)). See also his frequent use of the "boundary-breaking" description in [Blount and Charles \(2002\)](#).
- <sup>14</sup> Though I have seen 2–5% more often, [Carter \(2001, p. 3\)](#) actually says the ruling elites made up only 2–3% of the population.
- <sup>15</sup> This quote is from [Tat-siong Benny Liew \(2007\)](#). I have an e-copy of this work, so I am only able to note that it appears at "location 1815".
- <sup>16</sup> I acknowledge that in a few places the language in Mark does not perfectly reflect such a non-hierarchical community as in 13:34–36. I remain persuaded, however, that a few language imperfections should be "called out" but do not diminish the primary vision by Mark's story of Jesus.
- <sup>17</sup> See [Malina and Rohrbaugh \(1992, p. 244\)](#), for a description of a man such as this one.
- <sup>18</sup> See [Myers \(1990, p. 268\)](#); [Malina and Rohrbaugh \(1992, p. 238\)](#).
- <sup>19</sup> Jesus' teaching in Mark 4:1–25 reminds me of this famous quote from the classic children's story *The Little Prince* by Antoine De St Exupery: "And now here is my secret, a very simple secret: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye".
- <sup>20</sup> Interpreters have long wrestled with 9:1, often struggling with Jesus seeming to be wrong since God's Kingdom did not come fully prior to the deaths of his followers. See [Boring \(2006, pp. 246–48\)](#) for a review of these wrestlings. I am among those persuaded, as noted above, that Mark did not understand Jesus to be addressing the future arrival of God's Kingdom, but the coming insightfulness of followers, or at least some of them. Before they die, they will see that God's Kingdom *has come* in power. When read this way, Jesus' statement is, historically speaking, quite correct.

- 21 See Raquel A. St. Clair, *Call and Consequences: A Womanist Reading of Mark*, for a thorough presentation of Jesus' death as the inevitable consequence of his mission. (St. Clair 2008).
- 22 I am among those scholars who believe Mark intended to end the Gospel at 16:8. What I have presented here reflects my reading of Mark's ending. For a fuller presentation of my understanding of Mark's ending see *The Power of Mark's Story* (Minor 2001, chp. 5). For a discussion of options scholars have offered for understanding 16:8 as Mark's ending, see Blount (2005). For an argument that Mark did not intend to end at 16:8, see Croy (2003).
- 23 See, as an example of a spiritual teacher giving attention to the importance of our communities, Jennings (2020).
- 24 Tippet offers these views in a number of *On Being* podcasts. I heard these specific words in the 1 May 2022 *City Arts & Lectures* podcast, in which Tippet was the interviewee rather than the interviewer.
- 25 Such divisiveness exists in other places also, but I speak as an American about my own country.

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