

# JESUS AND THE WILD ANIMALS

Mark 1:12-13

Years ago, I read *S/Z*, a book by French philosopher and semiotician Roland Barthes in which he performed a structural analysis of Honoré de Balzac's short story *Sarrasine*. *S/Z* – in case the preceding sentence did not tip you off – it was not an enjoyable book, but it was one I thought I needed to read at the time. I read with the goal of better understanding some linguistic and philosophical ideas but came away with an unexpected insight into the Bible. Barthes argued that texts contain a layered network of parts whose interactions give rise to its meaning(s). While I do not agree with all of Barthes' understandings about meaning, he nevertheless helped me see an important feature of God's Bible – there is nothing accidental nor incidental in it; all of its parts work together in layered ways to develop its meaning. We will therefore consider the opening verses of Mark's gospel as an example of the Bible's layering and consider what it means for us.

## Wilderness, the Spirit, and wild animals

Mark's gospel presents Jesus as the one who fulfills Israel's story in a new, unexpected way – he is the mighty messiah who, at the same time, is the suffering servant. Mark introduces those important insights into Jesus' identity and mission in only a handful of verses at the beginning of his book. While the quick-paced nature of the text might lead one to gloss over the opening verses, those verses offer a very carefully crafted introduction to Mark's presentation of Jesus that deserves attention.

### *Mark 1:1-8*

Mark's gospel opens with a brief account of John the Baptist's ministry told in a way that reenacts Israel's history and hope.

### *Mark 1:9-11*

Mark's compacted description of Jesus' baptism portrays Jesus as a new Israel and his baptism as reality-changing event.

### *Mark 1:12-13*

Mark's two-verse record of Jesus' temptation extends his picture of Jesus as a new Israel in a way that both establishes his authority and provides a foretaste of what he will accomplish.

## *Mark 1:14-15*

Mark's short presentation of Jesus' baptism and temptation establishes his authority to announce the arrival of God's long-anticipated – but different than expected – kingdom.

### Applications

The curious details Mark includes in the opening of his gospel remind us that:

- We have to learn to be discerning readers of God's Bible; sometimes the Bible's curious bits are not merely curiosities but intentional signs connecting the Bible's many parts together into a convicting whole.
- While the Bible offers easy points of entry into its story, it also contains inexhaustible depths. We should therefore never tire of studying our Bible because it will continually yield more and more treasures to those who devote themselves to it.

Mark's curious details, when understood in his story of Jesus, offer us insights into Jesus like:

- Jesus' identity and mission surprised people in his world and, when we begin to understand him, he remains surprising today.
- Sin makes our world a wilderness, but God does not intend for us to live in a wilderness.
- Jesus brings real hope to the world by offering us a way out of the wilderness.

May God help us better understand His Bible so that we can appreciate His desires for our lives and Jesus' important place in making those desires a reality.