

GOD OF ABRAHAM, GOD OF THE LIVING:
JESUS' USE OF EXODUS 3:6 IN MARK 12:26-27

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I. Introduction

It is often thought that the authors of the NT place meanings on OT texts that are foreign to those texts and that therefore modern interpreters should not reproduce the hermeneutics of the NT authors.¹ One text that has been taken to support this claim is Mark 12:18-27, where Jesus argues against the Sadducees that Exod 3:6 (“I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”)² teaches the resurrection of the dead.³ So Peter Enns says, “To understand

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¹ For example, Morna D. Hooker argues that the NT authors “tear passages out of context, use allegory or typology to give old stories new meanings, contradict the plain meaning of the text, find references to Christ in passages where the original authors certainly never intended any, and adapt or even alter the wording in order to make it yield the meaning they require. Often one is left exclaiming: whatever the passage from the Old Testament originally meant, it certainly was not this!” (“Beyond the Things That Are Written? Saint Paul’s Use of Scripture,” in *Right Doctrines from the Wrong Texts? Essays on the Use of the Old Testament in the New* [ed. G. K. Beale; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994], 279-94, esp. 279). Richard N. Longenecker, while not as negative in his assessment of the NT use of the OT, argues that the doctrine of the apostles is normative whereas the hermeneutics of the apostles is descriptive, and therefore the modern exegete should not attempt to reproduce their hermeneutics (“Who Is the Prophet Talking About? Some Reflections on the New Testament Use of the Old,” in *Right Doctrines from the Wrong Texts?*, 375-86, esp. 385). More recently Peter Enns has argued that the “NT writers attribute meaning to OT texts that clearly differ from the intention of the OT author” (“Apostolic Hermeneutics and an Evangelical Doctrine of Scripture: Moving Beyond a Modernist Impasse,” *WTJ* 65 [2003]: 263-87, esp. 267).

² All Bible quotations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the ESV. This particular quotation is from Mark 12:26, which is worded slightly differently from Exod 3:6: “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”

³ To be sure, Mark merely quotes Jesus as saying, “And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God spoke to him, saying, ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not God of the dead, but of the living. You are quite wrong” (Mark 12:26-27). This is not to say, as Enns seems to imply, that Jesus read Exod 3:6 as if “the topic of conversation” suddenly shifted to resurrection (*Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005], 114). Jesus likely understood Exod 3:6 as it is typically understood today, as God’s self-identification to Moses that was intended to prepare Moses to go back to Pharaoh and demand the release of God’s people. As will be argued in this article, resurrection is merely an implication of that self-revelation but one that Jesus clearly implies cannot be denied (see Luke 20:37, where the wording is stronger: “that the dead are raised, even Moses showed”).

Exod 3:6 as demonstrating that ‘the dead rise’ (Luke 20:37), as Jesus does, violates our hermeneutical sensibilities, and we should not pretend otherwise.”⁴ This article will investigate Jesus’ use of Exod 3:6 in Mark 12:26-27 to determine if this is the case. After analyzing the context of Jesus’ argument in Mark, we will explore the two most common understandings of the text: (1) that the argument is based on the tense of εἰμί and (2) that progressive revelation adds a meaning to Exod 3:6 that was not initially there. Then we will consider the possibility that Moses had an afterlife belief, and finally we will investigate other views of Jesus’ line of argumentation. This study will demonstrate that Mark presents Jesus’ use of Scripture here as normative, that the interpretation of Exod 3:6 does not “go beyond what is written” in the OT text (cf. 1 Cor 4:6), and that by following Jesus’ hermeneutic our own understanding of the OT will be improved.

II. *The Context of Jesus’ Argument in Mark*

Studies of Jesus’ use of Exod 3:6 often neglect to consider the broader context in which Jesus’ argument occurs. Mark 11:1–13:37 forms a unit that focuses on judgment of the leaders in Jerusalem.⁵ These chapters can be diagrammed concentrically as follows:

⁴ Enns, “Apostolic Hermeneutics,” 269-70. This is the main example Enns gives of the many times “that the Apostles approached the Old Testament in ways that are adverse to grammatical-historical exegesis.”

⁵ In 11:1-11 we read of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, where he rides on the colt, alluding to Zech 9:11, where the people are given the hope that their king will come on a colt bringing peace and replacing the corrupt leaders of Judah (cf. Zech 10:3). As Jesus enters the city, the people quote Ps 118:25-26, which is closely linked to Ps 118:22 (“The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone”), a verse that Jesus will use in the next chapter to demonstrate that the Jewish leadership has wrongly rejected the cornerstone. In Mark 11:11 Jesus enters the temple and “look[s] around at everything,” as if taking in the situation in Jerusalem in order to make his judgment. Jesus’ judgment is clear as he curses the fig tree in the very next section (11:12-14) and then cleanses the temple (11:15-19), quoting Isa 56:7 and Jer 7:11 to demonstrate how the religious leaders have fallen short of God’s standard. The “cleansing,” therefore, was not so much a cleansing as a prophecy of judgment (R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* [NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002], 438; James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* [PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002], 339; etc.). The chief priests and scribes saw it as such and therefore sought to kill Jesus (Mark 11:18).

In the next pericope (Mark 11:27-33), the religious leaders question Jesus’ authority, and Jesus responds with a question about John the Baptist’s authority. The fact that the leaders could not answer showed that they were unable to perform their function as Jewish leaders. As D. A. Carson states, “If they cannot discern Jesus’ authority, it is because their previous unbelief has blinded their minds to God’s revelation. . . . Rejection of revelation already given is indeed a slender basis on which to ask for more. In one sense the Sanhedrin enjoyed not only the right but the duty to check the credentials of those who claimed to be spokesmen for God. But because they misunderstood the revelation already given in the Scriptures and rejected the witness of the Baptist, the leaders proved unequal to their responsibility. They raised the question of Jesus’ authority; he raised the question of their competence to judge such an issue” (D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *Matthew, Mark, Luke* [The Expositor’s Bible Commentary 8; ed. Frank E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984], 448).

- A Jesus curses a fig tree and cleanses the temple as a sign of judgment (11:12-26);
- B The religious leaders question Jesus' authority (11:27-33), and Jesus tells a parable condemning the religious leaders (12:1-12);
- C The religious leaders test Jesus' interpretation of Scripture (12:13-34);
- C' Jesus exposes the scribes' misinterpretation of Scripture (12:35-37);
- B' Jesus condemns the scribes (12:38-40) and commends the widow who loves God with all she has (12:41-44);
- A' Jesus prophesies the destruction of the temple and uses a fig tree for a lesson (13:1-36).

That Mark 12:13-37 is a battle for authority between Jesus and the religious leaders is clear from the surrounding pericopes. That the battle is centered on who is the better interpreter of Scripture is clear from the focus on the Law in these verses. In 12:14 the Pharisees and Herodians ask what is lawful regarding taxes; in 12:18-27 the Sadducees are condemned for not knowing "the Scriptures nor the power of God";⁶ in 12:28-34 a scribe tests Jesus on what is the most important part of the Law. In the last case, Jesus not only answers in a way that satisfies the scribe, but he also places himself as a judge over the scribe, saying he is "not far from the kingdom of God" (Mark 12:34). Jesus then discusses Ps 110 to show that the scribes have misunderstood Scripture and therefore the authority of Christ. Having demonstrated the failure of the religious leadership and his own superiority, Jesus speaks the verdict: "Beware of the scribes. . . . They will receive the greater condemnation" (12:38, 40). This reveals that the primary purpose of Jesus' argument in Mark 12:26-27 is not to give a scriptural warrant for belief in a resurrection but to expose the religious leaders as poor interpreters of Scripture and demonstrate Jesus' superior ability to interpret Scripture.⁷

Jesus then tells a parable that ends with the owner of the vineyard (God) coming and destroying the tenants (the Jewish leaders) and giving the vineyard to others (Mark 12:1-9). This leads to three last attempts to "trap [Jesus] in his talk" (12:13), first by "some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians" (12:13-17), then by the Sadducees (12:18-27), and finally by "one of the scribes" (12:28-34). Increasingly through this section, the Law is the focus, as will be demonstrated. Mark 12 closes with the commendation of the poor widow who puts two copper coins in the offering, which in itself is a judgment of the wealthy who merely give "out of their abundance" (12:44). Notice that this woman puts into practice what the scribe says is the most important commandment. She does not give "whole burnt offerings and sacrifices" like the religious leadership, but she does love God with everything she has. Then, in Mark 13 Jesus prophesies that the Jerusalem temple will be destroyed (13:2) and that the disciples will be the new light "to all nations" (13:10).

⁶ Notice how Jesus' words, "Have you not read," highlight the ignorance of his opponents with regard to the Scriptures.

⁷ So James Luther Mays, "Is This Not Why You Are Wrong? Exegetical Reflections on Mark 12:18-27," *Int* 60 (2006): 33-34.

In Mark 12:24, Jesus says the Sadducees' problem is that they "know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God." Many scholars argue that Jesus addresses these two problems in reverse order, showing first in 12:25 that God's power enables a greater transformation in the afterlife than the Sadducees had assumed and second in 12:26-27 that Scripture indeed teaches resurrection.⁸ It should be noted, however, that both problems are addressed in each argument. In v. 25 Jesus refutes the Sadducees by demonstrating that they misinterpret *Scripture* because they do not know the *power of God*. In vv. 26-27, Jesus presents a positive argument from *Scripture* demonstrating *God's power* to raise the dead.⁹ This will become clearer as we investigate the citation more carefully.

III. *Is Jesus Making a Grammatical Argument?*

The most common understanding of Jesus' argument is that he is making a grammatical point based on the present tense of the verb εἰμί in Exod 3:6 LXX. As Morris states in his Matthew commentary, "The present tense is important. . . . If there is no afterlife, they should have said ['God *was* the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'] when they referred to the patriarchs and their God."¹⁰ Many commentaries on Mark make a similar point.¹¹ There are a number of problems with this view.

First, the fact that Mark and Luke (unlike Matthew) do not even include the verb in their quotation of Exod 3:6 suggests that they understand Jesus' argument to rest on a different point.¹² Second, a number of aspect theorists have argued that the present tense does not communicate time at all, and even if it does, εἰμί is an aspectually vague verb to begin with.¹³ Third, it is unlikely that

⁸ Otto Schwankl, *Die Sadduzäerfrage (Mk. 12, 18-27 par): Eine exegetisch-theologische Studie zur Auferstehungserwartung* (BBB 66; Frankfurt: Athenäum, 1987), 365; Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 81; Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 703; France, *Mark*, 474; Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002), 238; etc.

⁹ Watts also sees Jesus' argument from Exod 3:6 as a criticism of the Sadducees' "failure to comprehend God's power" (Rikk E. Watts, "Mark," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* [ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007], 215). See also Ulrich Luz, *Matthew: A Commentary* (trans. James E. Crouch; 3 vols.; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 3:73; and Bradley R. Trick, "Death, Covenants, and the Proof of Resurrection in Mark 12:18-27," *NovT* 49 (2007): 232-56, esp. 240.

¹⁰ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 561.

¹¹ See, e.g., Hugh Anderson, *Mark* (NCB; London: Oliphants, 1976), 279; James A. Brooks, *Mark* (NAC 23; Nashville: Broadman, 1991), 196; Donald H. Juell, *The Gospel of Mark* (Interpreting Biblical Texts; Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 78; and D. E. Nineham, *Saint Mark* (Westminster Pelican Commentaries; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 322.

¹² So Childs, *Exodus*, 81; Trick, "Death," 245; France, *Mark*, 471, 475. Matthew's inclusion of the verb does not necessarily imply that he saw the tense of the verb as the basis of the argument; he may have been merely bringing Mark's quotation into closer agreement with the LXX or improving the grammar by supplying the verb.

¹³ For example, see Stanley E. Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament, with Reference to Tense and Mood* (Studies in Biblical Greek 1; New York: Peter Lang, 1989).

Mark or his readers would have made inferences about the present condition of the patriarchs based on the fact that the present tense is used of God in Exod 3:6, much less that they would have expected such an argument to silence the Sadducees (cf. Mark 12:34).¹⁴ Fourth, if Mark's goal, as we have shown, is to portray Jesus as the superior interpreter of Scripture, his purpose would not be served if Jesus merely exploits an ambiguity in wording using questionable logic that could be easily refuted.

Finally, the particular OT passage that is cited suggests that there is more here than an exploited ambiguity. Other rabbis argued for resurrection from Num 18:28 or Deut 31:16,¹⁵ but Jesus did not choose an obscure passage; he chose a central biblical text that involves God's self-revelation, displays God's covenantal loyalty, and anticipates one of the greatest displays of "the power of God" in the history of the world.¹⁶ The words of Exod 3:6 were central to first-century Jews. The first benediction of the Amidah blesses the "God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob." Notably the second benediction repeatedly uses the words, "You revive the dead."¹⁷ In addition to this example, Dreyfus points to a number

¹⁴ *B. Sanh. 90b* records a debate in which Rabbi Gamaliel argues for resurrection from texts in the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings, but the Sadducees repeatedly refute him. If this is an accurate portrayal of how the Sadducees responded to scriptural arguments for resurrection, then an easily refuted grammatical point would certainly not silence the Sadducees. So J. Gerald Janzen, "Resurrection and Hermeneutics: On Exodus 3:6 in Mark 12:26," *JNT* 23 (1985): 47.

¹⁵ *B. Sanh. 90b* teaches that Aaron will be resurrected since Num 18:28 says the tithe is to be given "to Aaron the priest." In the same text, Rabbi Gamaliel is said to have argued that the resurrection can be proved from the Pentateuch based on Deut 31:16 with a different sentence division than in the MT ("You are about to lie down with your fathers and rise"). Pao and Schnabel list a number of other texts that rabbis used to defend resurrection (Exod 6:4; 15:1; Deut 4:4; 11:9; 31:16; 32:1, 39; 33:6). See David W. Pao and Eckhard J. Schnabel, "Luke," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 369.

Some of the rabbis' arguments have more weight to them than others. I would object to arguing for the resurrection based on Num 18:28 or Deut 31:16, but based on some of the principles of interpretation that will become clear in this article I think resurrection can be fairly seen in a passage like Deut 11:9, where it says that the land was sworn to the fathers and their offspring. The only land Abraham owned in Canaan when he died was a tomb. As the author of Hebrews says, Abraham "died in faith, not having received the things promised" (Heb 11:13).

¹⁶ So Luz: "Differently from the later rabbis, who also know scriptural proofs for the resurrection of the dead, Jesus bases his claim on the central biblical text Exod 3:6 (cf. 3:15), which is immediately connected with the self-revelation of the name of God (3:14)" (*Matthew*, 3:71); and Bruner: "Jesus did not pull his doctrine of the resurrection out of some marginal texts in Hebrew Scriptures, nor did he argue from the prophetic or poetic books. Jesus used Judaism's fundamental law to teach the gospel's fundamental hope" (Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary* [2 vols.; rev. and exp. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004], 2:408). See also John J. Kilgallen, "The Sadducees and Resurrection of the Dead: Luke 20:27-40," *Bib* 67 (1986): 489; Morris, *Matthew*, 561; Pierre Bonnard, *L'évangile selon Saint Matthieu* (CNT 2/1; 2d ed.; Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1982), 326; Ernst Lohmeyer, *Das Evangelium des Markus* (KEK 1/2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1937), 327; and Watts, "Mark," 216.

¹⁷ While the Amidah has evolved to some extent over the centuries, it is likely that its basic form goes back to the first century A.D. So F. Dreyfus, "L'argument scripturaire de Jésus en faveur de la résurrection des morts," *RB* 66 (1959): 216; Luz, *Matthew*, 3:72; Pao and Schnabel, "Luke," 369. According to Pao and Schnabel, "the *Shemoneh Esreh* thus links the names of the three patriarchs with the hope of the resurrection of the dead" (*ibid.*).

of other texts (*Pr. Man.* 1; *As. Mos.* 3:9; *Jub.* 45:3) that use this formula to draw attention to God as “the protector, the savior (shield, rock, mighty one) of the three Patriarchs.”¹⁸ Furthermore, the three other occurrences of this formula in the NT all address God’s faithfulness to the covenant (Acts 3:13; 5:30; Heb 11:16).¹⁹ If this expression is so closely tied in Jewish thought to God’s faithfulness to the covenant, it is unlikely that its use in Mark 12 centers merely on a grammatical point.

That the covenant plays a significant role in Exod 3:6 is clear. Exodus 3:6-7 purposefully echoes the language of Exod 2:24-25, which is tied to the covenant. There we find the only previous reference to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the book of Exodus: “And God *heard* their groaning, and God *remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.* God *saw* the *people* of Israel—and God *knew.*” In Exod 3:6-7, the first thing God says after identifying himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is, “I have surely *seen* the affliction of my *people* who are in Egypt and have *heard* their cry because of their taskmasters. I *know* their sufferings” (Exod 3:7).²⁰ So the verse that Jesus quotes is a verse where God reveals who he is, and that is one who is faithful to the covenant made to the patriarchs. God’s self-revelation in Exod 3:6 is in effect a declaration that the God who was present in the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is present now because God is always faithful to those with whom he has entered into a covenant. It is likely then that this truth forms the basis of the proof of the resurrection in Mark 12.

IV. *Is Jesus Arguing from Progressive Revelation?*

Among those who see the covenant as having a significant role, there are still a variety of ways of understanding Jesus’ argument. After showing the significance of God’s self-identification as God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Dreyfus argues that “in the mind of the redactor of Exodus, [the divine guarantee of protection and relief] was fully realized if the Patriarchs died old, happy, and full of days.”²¹ This then would be a case of *sensus plenior*, where the redactor of Exodus did not perceive the depth of the text “although it was implied.”²²

¹⁸ Dreyfus, “L’argument,” 217. Dreyfus also demonstrates that the many passages that use the expression “God of the fathers” almost always express the same idea, calling for “the protection afforded by God to the Fathers . . . which is the guarantee of equal protection for the present generation” (p. 218). (All translations of French and German works herein are my own.)

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 219.

²⁰ So Peter Enns, *Exodus* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 99; Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (trans. Israel Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967), 33; Cornelius Houtman, *Exodus*, vol. 1 (trans. Johan Rebel and Sierd Woudstra; Historical Commentary on the Old Testament; Kampen: Kok, 1993), 354; Terrence E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (IBC; Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 57; Trick, “Death,” 250. As Trick observes, “By invoking the three names again in 3:6, the text indicates that the Exodus to which God is calling Moses arises out of God’s faithfulness to his covenantal obligations to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (*ibid.*).

²¹ Dreyfus, “L’argument,” 221.

²² *Ibid.*, 222.

Similarly, Schwankl argues that in the time of Moses, life was so “collectively anchored and understood” that people felt that a person’s death did not destroy his life but that he “lived on” in his descendants. Therefore in that time “one could long refrain from postulating a personal survival of the individual after death.”²³ In the time of the exile, however, “the escalation of the experience of death and the simultaneous development of individualism [would have made] integration of these experiences into the belief system impossible according to the previous model.”²⁴ Therefore the deep-rooted convictions of faith in Yahweh, which are rooted in the Exodus experience, would have led to a new belief in the resurrection.

Because this view sees the theological significance of the Exod 3:6 text, it is likely a better understanding of Jesus’ argument than the grammatical interpretation. Nevertheless, there are problems with this view. Most notably, Schwankl’s theory that people did not need to consider a personal afterlife in the time of Moses is highly questionable. If Israel came out of Egypt in the time of Moses, we need to consider how profoundly the Israelites would have been confronted with views of a personal afterlife. Egyptian belief in resurrection goes back to at least the fourth millennium B.C.²⁵ By the First Intermediate Period (ca. 2190–2050 B.C.), the belief was widespread that the dead would be identified with Osiris, the God of the Resurrection. In order for a person to survive death, Egyptians believed, the physical body needed to be preserved to serve as a home for the *ka* and the *ba* until the body took on a different form at the resurrection.²⁶ The fact that Genesis mentions both Jacob and Joseph being mummified suggests that the early Israelites shared some form of a belief in an afterlife with the Egyptians. Additionally, the fact that Moses needed to command against necromancy (Lev 19:31; 20:6; Deut 18:11) suggests that the Israelites were familiar with views of a personal afterlife.²⁷ Furthermore, there are several reasons to believe that hope for an afterlife was part of Israel’s covenantal expectations from the earliest stages.

²³ Schwankl, *Sadduzäerfrage*, 154.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 172.

²⁵ John H. Taylor, *Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 13.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

²⁷ While one may argue that this gives evidence that Moses *opposes* ancient Near Eastern beliefs in an afterlife, the text suggests that it is the practice of necromancy and not the belief in afterlife that is opposed. Lev 20:6 speaks of seeking a necromancer using the language of fornication (פְּדָה). Deut 18:9-15 compares necromancy to divination, fortune-telling, interpretation of omens, sorcery, etc., and says, “the Lord your God has not allowed you to do this,” but will instead “raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen.” In other words, God has appointed specific means for obtaining supernatural knowledge, and while other means exist, God has forbidden them and to turn to them would be fornication. These passages demonstrate that at an early stage Israel was aware of belief in an afterlife (contra Schwankl below), and nothing in these passages suggests that Israel did not believe that a person exists beyond death.

V. *Israel's Early Expectation of an Afterlife*

The Torah begins with answers to humanity's questions: Where do we come from? What is our purpose? How does God view us? Why do people die? The answer to this last question is of particular interest for our study. According to Gen 2:17; 3:19, 22-24, death is the result of Adam and Eve's first sin. Before sin entered the world, humans could access the tree of life and live forever. Once humans took on the knowledge of good and evil, God drove them out of the garden so that they could no longer access the tree of life. This indicates that God's intention was for life to be eternal but sin became the obstacle to that blessing.

The Torah, however, is designed to remove sin, the ideal being a return to the garden. So the promised land is depicted as being "like the garden of the Lord" (Gen 13:10), and Israel's Exodus was in some ways a journey to a new Eden.²⁸ The tabernacle was a place where God could dwell with humanity again as in the garden. As Beale observes, just as God "walked about" (מְהַלֵּךְ) in the garden, so he will "walk about" among them as they "reverence [his] sanctuary" (Lev 26:2, 12); just as Adam was to "work" (עָבַד) and "keep" (שָׁמַר) the garden, the Levites were to "work" and "keep" the tabernacle;²⁹ just as the tree of the knowledge of good and evil could not be touched, so the ark of the covenant, containing the Law that brings knowledge, could not be touched; just as the garden had a tree of life that would cause people to live forever, the tabernacle had the golden lampstand, patterned after a tree with trunk and branches, which was perpetually lit.³⁰

What should be concluded from this? That sin had separated humans from the tree of life, but by obeying Torah one could get as close to having a tree of life as possible, but still not live forever? It does not seem that this is what the Torah suggests. Rather, Enoch is given as an example of someone who could "walk with God" and therefore be taken. Repeatedly the Torah gives an invitation to walk with God³¹ "that you may live" (Deut 5:33). Of course a tension is created when others who "walk with God" (Gen 6:9; 24:40; 48:15) are not taken as Enoch was, but it seems that Enoch's experience is intended to generate a hope that walking with God will lead to eternal life.³²

Another text to consider is the so-called protoevangelium of Gen 3:15. While most scholars reject a messianic reading of this verse as foreign to the intention of the author of the Gen 3 narrative, a few scholars suggest that the verse is rightly read as an announcement that a particular seed of the woman will ultimately defeat the serpent, bringing an end to the curse. T. D. Alexander argues

²⁸ So Enns: "Entrance into Canaan is, in a manner of speaking, a return to the garden" (*Exodus*, 99 n. 13). See also Watts, "Mark," 215; and Fretheim, *Exodus*, 59.

²⁹ Num 3:7-8; 8:25-26; 18:5-6; cf. 1 Chr 23:32; Ezek 44:14.

³⁰ G. K. Beale, "Eden, the Temple, and the Church's Mission in the New Creation," *JETS* 48 (2005): 7-8.

³¹ Lev 18:4; 26:3; Deut 5:33; 8:6; 10:12; 11:22; 13:4; 19:9; 26:17; 28:9; 30:16.

³² So John H. Sailhamer, "Genesis," in *Genesis-Numbers* (The Expositor's Bible Commentary 2; ed. Frank E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 73-74.

that failure to read the verse this way is rooted in a failure to read Genesis as a unity: “The importance of [the] genealogical framework [in Genesis] and the book’s special interest in tracing a specific line of descent” suggest that Gen 3:15 refers to an individual who will end the curse.³³ Gordon Wenham argues that Gen 2–3 is so highly symbolic throughout that we would expect the serpent to be the anti-God symbol here.³⁴ James Hamilton traces repeated references in Genesis to a seed who would reverse the curses:

Genesis 3:15 points to a seed of the woman who will crush the serpent’s head. Genesis 5:29 indicates that the godly line traced in the genealogies expected a seed of the woman who would reverse the curses (cf. Gen 5:29 with Gen 3:17-19). Genesis 12:1-3 announces that all the families of the earth will be blessed by Abraham, and 22:18 adds that the blessing will come through the seed of Abraham. Genesis 17:6 and 16 say kings will come from Abraham, and a natural conclusion to draw is that the seed of Abraham through whom the nations will be blessed will be a king.³⁵

Even if one is not convinced by the arguments for a protoevangelium in Gen 3:15, there is ample reason to believe that Moses had some theology of an afterlife.

It should also be noted that Exod 1–4 contains vivid resurrection imagery. Pharaoh condemns the Hebrew babies to death in the Nile River—a river associated with resurrection in Egyptian thought—and yet Moses comes out of the river alive. This story echoes that of Osiris, who was killed by being sealed in a chest and thrown into the Nile River, but was eventually drawn out and resurrected.³⁶ The miracles in Exod 3 are all resurrection images: the bush is not consumed by fire; Moses’ dead stick turns into a living serpent; Moses’ hand becomes leprous and is restored;³⁷ and Moses is given the ability to turn the Nile to blood, demonstrating his power over life and death.³⁸ This is not to suggest that

³³ T. Desmond Alexander, “From Adam to Judah: The Significance of the Family Tree in Genesis,” *EvQ* 61 (1989): 18. Alexander’s thesis is that this emphasis in Genesis arose later to give the ancestry of king David and point to his significance, but it is just as possible that the emphasis on the seed was already there even before a king in the line of Judah arose.

³⁴ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (WBC 1; Waco: Word, 1987), 80-81. So Sailhamer: “It is, however, unlikely that at such a pivotal point in the narrative the author would intend no more than a mere reference to snakes and their offspring and the fear of them among humanity” (“Genesis,” 56).

³⁵ James M. Hamilton, “Was Joseph a Type of the Messiah? Tracing the Typological Identification between Joseph, David, and Jesus,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 12/4 (Winter 2008): 59-60. Another study worth mentioning is that of C. John Collins, who argues that the reference to “seed” in Gen 3:15 is to be taken as an individual because, though there is diversity in verb inflections, whenever a *pronoun* refers back to the word עֶרְוָה, the pronoun is always plural if זָרָע is used in the collective sense (“A Syntactical Note [Genesis 3:15]: Is the Woman’s Seed Singular or Plural?,” *TynBul* 48 [1997]: 143-44).

³⁶ See Taylor, *Death and the Afterlife*, 27-28. Note also that in Egyptian thought the chief enemy who sought to prevent the resurrection of the sun each morning was a serpent, the same creature who, in Gen 3, caused death in the first place. In Egyptian mythology, the dead would associate with the sun god to fight the serpent (*ibid.*, 31).

³⁷ To be leprous is to be “as one dead” in Num 12:12. In 2 Kgs 5:7, the king of Israel compares curing leprosy to raising the dead.

³⁸ Watts, “Mark,” 215.

the main point of Exod 1–4 is to teach resurrection, but that God actually gave these miracles to inspire the Israelites to trust in *the power of God*. Resurrection imagery happens to be the most compelling way to demonstrate power. The message of Exod 1–4, then, is to trust God in all things, which would certainly include death since this is the theme behind the imagery God gives.

Before moving on to other views of Jesus' argument in Mark 12, one final note should be made about Exod 3. The emphasis throughout this passage is on God remembering, seeing affliction, and bringing the Israelites to the land. Canonically this comes within the story of the greater affliction of humanity caused by sin, leading to death, which took them out of the original "land," the garden of Eden. It would be perfectly legitimate to read from the lesser to the greater, seeing that if God reverses the curse of Egyptian slavery and brings his people back to the land that was promised them, we can expect him to also reverse the curse of slavery to sin and death and bring his people back to the land that was promised to Adam and Eve. Whether or not the human author intended this Gen 3–Exod 3 connection, it is clearly in line with his theology and clearly intended by the divine author.

VI. *Three Other Interpretations*

So far we have demonstrated that the argument for resurrection from Exod 3:6 flows out of a contextual reading of the passage and (against Schwankl and Dreyfus) that the author of Exodus could have seen this implication of the passage. Recent scholarship has produced three other ways of reading Jesus' argument that need to be addressed: (1) Jesus is arguing that God would not define himself in relation to mortals; (2) Jesus' argument is related to the former sterility of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and (3) Jesus is arguing that because death annuls a covenant and God is remaining faithful to the covenant, the patriarchs must still live to God.

The first view is that Jesus is arguing that God would not define himself in relation to mortals and therefore the patriarchs must be immortal.³⁹ Philo similarly argues regarding this verse that the names of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob should be taken as allegorical references to the three virtues, "for the nature of mankind is mortal, but that of virtues is immortal; and it is more reasonable that the name of the everlasting God should be conjoined with what is immortal than with what is mortal, since what is immortal is akin to what is imperishable, but death is hostile to it."⁴⁰ Downing argues that this text sheds light on Jesus' argument, namely, "that God had related himself so closely to mortal men as to raise awkward and inescapable questions about mortality as such."⁴¹

³⁹ F. Gerald Downing, "The Resurrection of the Dead: Jesus and Philo," *JSNT* 15 (1982): 42-50; Moloney, *Mark*, 239.

⁴⁰ Philo, *Abr.* 55 (trans. C. D. Yonge), online at <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/yonge/book22.html> (accessed Jan. 21, 2012).

⁴¹ Downing, "Resurrection," 47.

Downing's observation is helpful, and in response to it we should consider the wording of Mark 12:27a: "He is not God of the dead, but of the living." There are two ways of understanding this verse. The majority of scholars hold that this is a second premise that leads to an unstated conclusion. In this case, the argument would be (1) God said he is the God of Abraham (12:26); (2) we know that he is not God of the dead (12:27a); therefore (3) Abraham must be living (implied).⁴² The other option is to understand Mark 12:27a as a conclusion, in which case Jesus' argument would be fully dependent upon the Exodus quotation: (1) God demonstrates in Exod 3:6 his faithfulness to the covenant (12:26); therefore (2) God cannot be God of the dead but must be God of the living (12:27a).⁴³

The advantage of the first view is that v. 27a is worded more like an auxiliary premise than a conclusion. There is no "therefore," and the phrase, "He is not the God of the dead," suggests that Jesus is pointing out that when Exod 3:6 is read against the Sadducees' theology, God is given an undesirable title.⁴⁴ The second view has several advantages as well. First, it prevents Jesus from making a circular argument that the Sadducees would likely have seen through and refuted.⁴⁵ Second, it avoids the danger of bringing an extratextual presupposition to Exod 3:6. In light of our argument that Exod 3:6 rightly applies to the question of resurrection even for its original author, one would expect the argument as a whole to flow out of the OT reference itself without need for a secondary premise. Furthermore, Mark's desire to show Jesus silencing the Sadducees from their own Scriptures suggests that he would not rely on an extratextual presupposition. Finally, the statement in v. 27a makes sense as a conclusion of the self-revelation of God in Exod 3:6, who is there clearly proven not to be "God of the dead."⁴⁶

⁴² For example, see Craig A. Evans, *Mark* (2 vols.; WBC 34B; Nashville: Nelson, 2001), 2:256-57. Ellis also argues for v. 27a to be a second premise, but he argues for a different implied conclusion. To Ellis, it is not that the patriarchs are now living in some sense but that God has to resurrect them in the future. Ellis adds that this is true not only of the patriarchs but also must be true of all "who share his covenant relationship with God" (E. Earle Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke* [NCB; rev. ed.; London: Oliphants, 1974], 235). Schwankl, Downing, and almost all who argue for a grammatical interpretation hold this view.

⁴³ Kilgallen, "Sadducees," 490; France, *Mark*, 475; cf. W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (3 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 3:231 n. 76; Luz, *Matthew*, 3:72-73; and Adolf von Schlatter, *Der Evangelist Matthäus: Seine Sprache, sein Ziel, seine Selbstständigkeit: Ein Kommentar zum ersten Evangelium* (6th ed.; Stuttgart: Calwer, 1963), 655.

⁴⁴ Schwankl, *Sadduzäerfrage*, 404-5.

⁴⁵ The circular argument would be even more clearly present in Luke, who adds the phrase "for all live to him" to the end of the verse. Luke would then be seeing Jesus' argument as starting with the assumption that "all live to [God]" (Luke 20:38b), concluding from this that God "is not God of the dead, but of the living" (v. 38a), which, when combined with the words of Exod 3:6, would lead to the conclusion that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob now live (v. 37b), from which the final conclusion must be made "that the dead are raised" (v. 37a). But this is a circular argument, and it is unlikely that the Sadducees would have agreed with the starting presupposition. More likely, then, Luke saw v. 38a (= Mark 12:27a) as a conclusion.

⁴⁶ France, *Mark*, 475.

Perhaps the best way of resolving this is to understand v. 27a in both ways. It is the natural conclusion of v. 26, and yet, when we read it alongside v. 26, a greater conclusion emerges, namely, that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob must live. This discussion is significant because the danger of Downing's view is that it could be seen as making v. 27a out to be only an auxiliary premise unrelated to Exod 3. As long as Downing's view is merged with the idea that the truth of v. 27a flows from Exod 3:6 itself, it seems to be in line with what is being argued in this study. We know that God would not identify himself with mortals *precisely because* in the Exodus narrative he reveals that those he identifies with will live forever.

The next view to consider is posited by Janzen, who claims that Jesus' argument has to do with infertility. Notably the Sadducees' question uses the word ἀνίστημι in a different sense than "resurrection": the brother is supposed to "raise up" children for his dead brother but is unable (Mark 12:19). According to Janzen, this is an intentional wordplay that shows that the Sadducees' objection "operates on two levels."⁴⁷ At one level there is the issue of the woman having multiple husbands and thereby breaking the Mosaic law. But at a deeper level, there is an argument from lesser to greater:

If God by the very means divinely provided in the Torah—the Levirate law—cannot or will not raise up children to a dead man (not even after an ideal number of opportunities), on what basis is one entitled to hope that God either will or can raise up that dead man himself—something for which the Mosaic Torah makes no provision at all? If we identify this deeper objection in this way, we see that it has two facets, one having to do with scriptural warrant and one having to do with divine will and power.⁴⁸

Janzen goes on to argue that Jesus' response is also multi-faceted and that by appealing to Exod 3:6, Jesus "is countering [the Sadducees'] story with a reminder of the *ancestors'* story."⁴⁹ Just as the Sadducees' story was one of sterility, conjuring to mind the story of Tamar in Gen 38, Jesus brings to mind the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who faced sterility issues and saw God miraculously raise up descendants for them. Therefore Jesus forces them to choose "which story has the better claim to ground one's reading of reality."⁵⁰

Janzen's argument gives a compelling reason for concluding from the Torah that God will raise the dead who are in covenant with him, but there is no indication in Mark 12 that this is the argument that is being made from Exod 3:6. For one, the *περὶ δέ* clause in v. 26 suggests that Jesus is no longer addressing the Sadducees' case but is moving to the topic of resurrection in general.⁵¹ Second, one would expect more indication that Jesus is referring to the sterility of the patriarchs, but there are no hints of this in Jesus' words. Finally, if this is the argument, why does Jesus refer to Exod 3:6 rather than Gen 21:2 or Exod 1:7, which

⁴⁷ Janzen, "Resurrection and Hermeneutics," 47.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 48. See also Trick, "Death," 237-39.

⁴⁹ Janzen, "Resurrection and Hermeneutics," 50; emphasis his.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁵¹ France, *Mark*, 474.

address the issue of sterility more clearly? Janzen's defense of resurrection is compelling, but it is unlikely that this is the argument Jesus makes in Mark 12.

The final view we will consider is that of Bradley Trick, who claims that Jesus' argument is based on the nature of covenants. According to Trick, covenants end when one party dies. The Sadducees failed to acknowledge this in their presentation of the problem, thinking that the woman was still married to each of the seven husbands. So when Jesus responds, he argues that they have misunderstood not God's power in relation to transforming the body, but "the nature of the marriage covenant implied by the very scripture passage on which they have based their attack."⁵² Once Jesus has shown this problem, a new difficulty arises in the Sadducees' understanding of Exod 3:6, namely,

If the death of a covenantal party effectively annuls the covenant, then the fact that the Exodus represents an act of God's faithfulness to his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob must imply that the three patriarchs are in some sense still alive to God. Otherwise their deaths would have annulled the covenant.⁵³

Trick goes on to argue that not only are the patriarchs alive in some sense to God, but also they will need to be resurrected since their continuation obligates God "to fulfill all of his covenant promises, one of which is to give the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession to the patriarchs."⁵⁴ This argument has a number of strengths and is quite compatible both with Downing's view that God would not associate himself with mortal beings and with the lessons learned from this present study. There is good reason to think that God's faithfulness to the covenant with Abraham is evidence that Abraham "live[s] to God" (cf. Luke 20:38) and therefore that God "is not God of the dead, but of the living" (Mark 12:27a). Therefore, it is quite likely that both Downing's view and Trick's view capture elements of the line of argument in Mark 12:26-27.

VII. Conclusion

This study has shown that Mark presents Jesus' use of Exod 3:6 as a normative hermeneutic and that Exod 3 genuinely has implications that necessitate resurrection belief. There is no need to postulate a *sensus plenior* reading or the effect of progressive revelation as the basis for the interpretation of Exod 3:6 proffered in Mark 12. Therefore, contra Enns, the use of Exod 3:6 here does not "violate . . . our hermeneutical sensibilities."⁵⁵ Furthermore, this study has given evidence for rejecting the majority view that the argument is based on the tense of εἶμι and has denied Janzen's claim that the argument is based on the issue of sterility. At the same time we have argued that there is no reason to choose between v. 27a being an auxiliary premise or it being a conclusion, which has allowed us to affirm

⁵² Trick, "Death," 244.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 250-51.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁵⁵ Enns, "Apostolic Hermeneutics," 269-70; cf. Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 114-16.

a couple of the current views of the line of argumentation given here (namely, those of Downing and Trick).

One last comment to be made concerns the lack of discussion of resurrection in Exodus commentaries. While it is true that resurrection itself is not the main point of Exod 3, it is an important implication of that text, and there is much imagery in the text to suggest resurrection. Therefore this topic should receive more attention in modern analyses of Exod 3. It is important for us to see the truths that God's word reveals. Otherwise we ourselves might be in danger of knowing neither the Scriptures nor the power of God.



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