

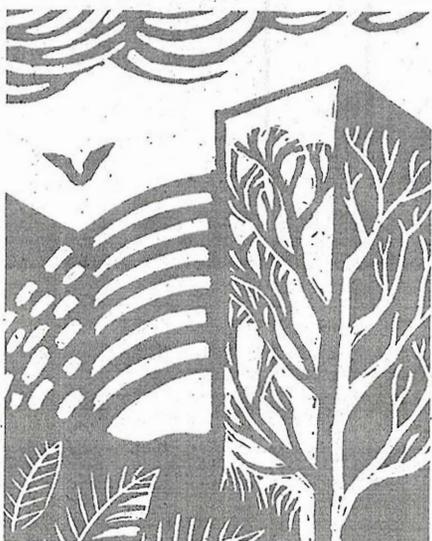
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UNSETTLING



THE WORD

BIBLICAL EXPERIMENTS IN DECOLONIZATION



Afterword by
Sylvia McAdam

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

Mark 1:1–3

A SHAMAN APPEARED IN VENTURA

Ched Myers

A CRITICAL TASK for today's church is to take up a "re-placed theology." That is, to reclaim symbols of redemption that are Indigenous to the bioregion in which the church dwells, to remember the stories of the peoples of the land, and to sing anew its old songs. These can then be woven together with the symbols, stories and songs of biblical radicalism.

I live and work in Oak View, California, the Ventura River Watershed. This is traditional territory of the Chumash people, with stories that go back millennia. How might I transpose the history, culture and landscape of the gospel story onto this context, so that I can become more attentive to, and literate in, the deep social history and ecology of each? The following is an effort to re-narrate Mark's portrait of John the Baptist (1:1-9) amongst the Chumash in the mid-19th century. It is excerpted from a longer, fuller treatment of Mark's prologue (1:1-18).

VERSE 1. *Here's how the "Good Way" of Jesús was rediscovered and passed on to another generation.*

I use the Spanish Jesús to acknowledge the colonial substrate of my historical and geopolitical context. Much of the Ventura Watershed is mountainous and still largely uninhabited, framed by the Santa Ynez and the Topa Topa ranges (Spanish and Chumash names). The Chumash are the First Peoples, a thriving and sustainable hunter-gatherer, seafaring, and complex culture until successive and brutal waves of Spanish (1769-1820), Mexican (1820-48), and American (1848-present)

colonization. They survive in small numbers, and, though they are not a federally recognized tribe, Chumash leaders persist in the long, slow struggle to rebuild their language, ceremonies, identity, and roles as traditional stewards of this land.

For my recontextualization, I choose a crucial point in the mid-19th century process of colonization in southern California as a temporal setting. On the eve of the U.S. takeover of California in 1848 (as part of the spoils of the Mexican-American war at the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo), the situation of the Chumash was dire. Settlers had driven most from their traditional villages and hunting grounds, and those who had been taken into the Mission system were largely abandoned after Mexican secularization in 1833. With neither treaties nor reservations, disease, dispossession, and slavery had taken a huge toll—though things would get much worse under American rule.

VERSES 2-3. *As was depicted in ancient cave paintings by the Old Ones, a shaman would appear in the backcountry of Ventura. He would be called by the Spirit to discover a new Rainbow Bridge for the People to cross to regain their health and freedom.*

There are many surviving pictograph sites throughout this terrain, believed to have been created by shamanic leaders; these are sacred to the Chumash, thus analogous to the Jewish scriptures Mark cites. The "Rainbow Bridge" is a Chumash creation/migration story. Hutash (Earth Mother) grew the People from magic seeds she planted on Limuw (Santa Cruz Island). But when it got too crowded, Hutash created a tall spanning bridge from a *wishtoyo* (a rainbow) for the people to walk across to the mainland. They migrated over the bridge to the Ventura and Santa Barbara areas, but some fell off into the ocean and became dolphins, whom the Chumash honour as relatives.

I am using this myth as a "new start" archetype comparable to Mark's notion of repentance (Gk. *metanoia*) as "turning around and heading in a new direction." The journey motif echoes Mark's invocation of the Exodus journey as the Way of Discipleship.

VERSE 4. *Kitsepawit came down from Iwihinmu. He began telling his people that the project of European colonization was all wrong and that the Great*

Spirit wanted to bring back the Old Ways. He invited them into a water ritual that signalled an intent to "turn things around."

At 8,847 feet, Iwihinmu (Mt. Pinos) is the highest point in Ventura County. Considered by the Chumash to be the centre of the world where everything is in balance, its summit lies at the heart of their traditional territory.

In response to 19th-century colonialism, native renewal movements often arose, frequently led by Indigenous prophets; the Ghost Dance in the American prairies during the 1890s is perhaps the most well-known example. I have imagined such a movement among the Chumash, though in fact there were only a few native revolts in southern California during the first 75 years of European colonization, and none was dramatically successful. Two of note were in 1785, led by a Tongva female shaman, Toypurina, and the 1824 Chumash revolt at Santa Barbara (the state's largest on record). But most Chumash in the central coast region survived through assimilation.

Taking my cue from Mark's prologue, however, I imagine a "John the Baptist" type figure sparking a movement of Chumash renewal and resistance, drawing an analogy between first-century Jews (the principle "neo-Indigenous" population in Palestine) under Roman occupation, and 19th-century Chumash under Mexican/American occupation. (John was recognized by Herodian authorities as a dissident, and eventually arrested and executed.) I have chosen Fernando Librado Kitsepawit (1839–1915) as a "prophetic" figure, not because he played that role historically, but because we know a great deal about him (relative to most other 19th-century Chumash), as he was a major cultural informant to ethnographer John Harrington in 1912.

Kitsepawit's parents were brought from Santa Cruz Island as children to Mission San Buenaventura and married in 1830. Kitsepawit was raised at the Mission but lived much of his later life on ranches to the north. He was fluent in Spanish and English and knew how to read and write (his later-adopted name, Librado, means "book lover"). Though not a traditional shaman, Kitsepawit was literate in Chumash ritual, voyaging, and song.

Having witnessed the breakdown of the mission communities and the influx of American Settlers, Kitsepawit survived on the margins of

society, like most Chumash during this period. He often lived in a cave while working at local ranches and was known to have spent considerable time in the backcountry of Ventura and Santa Barbara, gathering food and plant medicine.

VERSE 5. *Chumash and others caught in the Mission system went out to Kitsepawit. They came from all over southern California. A few Settlers too, even all the way from the big pueblo of San Francisco. They came for his purification ceremony in Matilija Creek up in the mountains, washing the colonial civilization right off and out of them.*

In my re-imagining, Kitsepawit sparks a movement with a water ritual—traditionally used by Chumash healers for purification ceremonies—in Matilija Creek (a Chumash name of unknown meaning), one of the tributaries of the Ventura River. Because it is hidden away up in rugged mountain canyons, it would have been an ideal place for a native resistance movement. (Local lore claims that the notorious Mexican social bandit Joaquin Murrieta hid out there, where today there is a Murrieta Trail).

By the 1840s, the closest Chumash villages of Matilija and Ojai had been depopulated. Refugees from there and from San Buenaventura Mission built traditional *aps* (brush huts) near the mouth of the Ojai valley near Cañada Larga, close to a sacred sycamore tree, at the site of a Mission *Asistencia* (outlying chapel) not far from the Ventura River. While this would be a lovely site for my imagined baptism, it would have been too visible and vulnerable to the colonizers.

Los Angeles would have been the closest major pueblo, but the growing city of San Francisco would more accurately be the equivalent of Jerusalem in Mark's narrative, the political and socio-economic capital of Judea.

VERSE 6. *Now Kitsepawit was naked except for a loincloth, as in the old ways, and he ate acorns and chia, hunted squirrels and fished. He sang old songs.*

Acorns, chia seed (from sage) and small game were staples of the Chumash diet. Kitsepawit seems to have practised some of the old ways. American Settler John Begg recollected that, "His cave was a little

distance from the school.... That was where he kept his blankets, where he slept.... He used to travel all up through the hills here to get herbs for medicine." Alongside the gathering of traditional foods, Kitsepawit would have practised traditional songs. In 1913, he was recorded singing a customary song from the Santa Cruz Island Chumash.

VERSES 7–9. *Kitsepawit would paint in his cave and kept saying that another prophet was coming who was even wiser and more powerful, and that he was just apprenticing to that one. "I have cleansed you with water," he said, "but the coming one will purify you with Creator's Spirit." After a while a man named Jesús canoed in from Wi'ma, and he was immersed by Kitsepawit down into the creek there at the foot of the mountains.*

I chose Wi'ma (Santa Rosa Island) as Jesús' "home" because, as an off-shore island, it was out of the way and relatively ignored by the colonizers (like Nazareth). Archaeologists have found the oldest human remains in North America there, pre-dating the Aleutian land bridge by several thousand years (suggesting that the Chumash may have arrived originally by sea—Polynesia?). *Tomols* (traditional plank canoes) played an important role in the 1824 Chumash revolt at Santa Barbara. Today, the modern Chumash Maritime Society paddles to Limuw (Santa Cruz Island) to perform ceremony, and in so doing, honours the dignity, identity, and survival of the Chumash.



How might *you* renarrate this gospel episode in terms of your own bioregion? Which places in your watershed might be analogous to Mark's wilderness, or to the Jordan River? What historical dynamics of power and social crisis in your context might resemble Mark's geopolitical specificity, in which native inhabitants suffering under foreign domination were drawn out to the margins to encounter a wilderness prophet? In working with this exercise, both ancient text and our social and ecological context spring to life through analogical imagination. This can help us decolonize scripture, its interpretation, and our own contexts.