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'Who is Jesus?'

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The New Testament explains Jesus using Jewish language like Messiah, Son of Man, Son of David, Lamb of God, or even 'new Temple,' clearly anchoring Jesus in the Jewish story. Indeed, on the Emmaus Road, Jesus explained his role and identity by going through 'Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms' (Lk.24:27, 44). But in relatively short order, the Christian creeds left the Jewish language behind. They said in various ways that Jesus was fully God and fully human. Christians then explored what it meant to be human: spiritually, relationally, and politically. How did they go from one to the other? How did they connect the rich and varied biblical language to Jesus' humanity? Is the lack of attention to Jewish language just one more example of Christian violence done to Judaism? To the contrary, I suggest that the early Christian creeds accurately and succinctly summarize the deepest concern of the Hebrew Bible. 'Who is Jesus?' has implications for what we think of 'humanity' and 'human nature' today.

What does it mean to be human? That question – which is helpful to consider before we ask about Jesus – is deeply rooted in Scripture. It stretches throughout Scripture using repeated literary motifs such as blessing, fruitfulness, and garden land. God began with Adam and Eve in a garden land, blessing them to be fruitful, to spread His garden along the rivers, and to partake of a deeper life with Him (Gen.1:26 – 31; 2:4 – 25). Misled by jealousy, they resisted and instead corrupted the human nature within themselves. Out of love, God withdrew the garden so they could not immortalize their sin. After human beings became exceedingly violent, God protected Noah and his family by ushering in a new creation of sorts with the flood water. As He did in the original creation, God's Spirit-wind blew over the waters, eventually leaving Noah and his family on dry ground as a kind of new humanity. They planted a new garden, but their human nature was still corrupted as before (Gen.8:21) so they committed a different kind of violence (Gen.9:19 – 29). Human beings repopulated the world again, although with oppression and injustice (Gen.10:8 – 12 echoes Gen.4:17 – 24). In response, God started over with Abraham and Sarah and brought them to another garden land, promising to give it to their descendants while renewing the creational blessing on them. But by the third generation, the family's sinfulness led them outside the garden land, into Egypt. So God delivered the nation of Israel (and others with them) out of Egypt into the garden land to be yet another attempt at a new humanity. But even with favorable external circumstances (garden land, Mosaic law, etc.), biblical Israel resisted God. So after long centuries of patience, God exiled them from the garden land, much like He exiled Adam and Eve from another garden long before. Israel's exile continued even after Jews started returning to the land (Neh.9:36). Who was God's true humanity now? By tracing this literary thread, we can see a poignant question posed within the Hebrew Scriptures. Would anyone inherit the full creational blessing and the garden land? Would anyone bring the purposes of the good Creator God to fruition in the languishing world?

What was the human problem? Israel came to understand that to be truly human, according to God's definition, meant that God would have to perform a type of heart surgery (circumcision) within people in order to heal them. Human beings had internalized the desire to define "good and evil" for themselves rather than letting God do that, corrupting themselves and alienating themselves from God. God had lamented the condition of the human heart both before the flood (Gen.6:5 – 6) and after it (Gen.8:21), giving an accurate diagnosis of the disease that had set into human nature, made worse by our own choices. But bringing human beings - who were intent on evading true responsibility - to that same understanding and into a willingness to be healed would not be an easy task, even for God. Simply transplanting the Israelites from Egypt to another kind of garden land did not suffice; the change to better circumstances did not ultimately solve the problem of human evil. It took ages for one person to agree with God's diagnosis: Moses, at the end of his life. Because of his long and intimate observation of his people and himself, Moses understood that Israel would break the Sinai covenant and that exile was inevitable. Moses saw that God would have to circumcise the hearts of the Israelites after the exile (Dt.30:6) and began documenting the disease and its effects. The narrators of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings similarly argued that Israel and the house of David were failing the covenant. The Sinaitic covenant and its law, which made Israel unique among the nations, helped the Israelites continue diagnosing their own condition and document it. King David's confession of sin and cry for a cleansed heart would be enshrined in Israel's liturgy (Ps.51:9 – 10). And on the cusp of exile, the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel also diagnosed the root cause behind Israel's resistance to God, their injustice, their oppression of the poor and vulnerable: the corruption of human nature, even their own human nature. God needed to heal and transform the human heart and place His Spirit there (Jer.4:4; 17:1 – 10; 31:31 – 34; Ezk.11:18; 36:25 – 27), for Israel's fundamental human nature retained the same infection the Gentiles' human nature did.

Jesus therefore stepped into the place of Israel within the covenant with God, which is another way of saying that he came to be truly human. He came up out of Egypt like Israel did from bondage (Mt.2:13 – 21). He passed through water in his baptism like Israel did through the Red Sea (Mt.3:13 – 17). He encountered temptation in the wilderness for forty days like Israel did for forty years (Mt.4:1 – 11). He ascended a mountain to fully receive and proclaim God's law for the heart (Mt.5:1), like Israel should have at Mount Sinai in a preliminary way. On mountains, he manifested the presence of God in a human being as a new Temple (Mt.15:29; 17:1; 21:21), like Mount Zion where Israel experienced God in a stone Temple. He finally endured exile and death at the hands of Gentile captors (Mt.27:26 – 50), like Israel had done. Jesus' purpose in sharing all of Israel's experience was to do for Israel what Israel could not do for itself: condemn the corruption in human nature by never sinning. Like Harry Potter killed the piece of Voldemort's soul inside him, or like Frodo almost destroyed the Ring of Power, Jesus absolutely condemned every possible sin and aspect of human evil by dealing with the corruption of human nature in the ontological depth of human being, from within, as one of us. Jesus had taken on human flesh (Jn.1:14), the term for corrupted human nature (cf. Rom.7:18). Yet Jesus expressed the love of the Father to all, resisted the corruption within himself and eventually killed it at his death, transfigured his human nature with his divine nature in his resurrection, and healed his humanity in the love of the Father by the Spirit, so that he might now offer his cleansed, healed, and purified humanity to everyone by his Spirit. 'What the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh [of Israel], God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh [of Jesus]' (Rom.8:3). Jesus therefore retold Israel's story in the form God had always wanted it to take: fully receptive of the identity 'son of God', fully triumphant over temptation, fully joined with the Father by the Spirit and transfigured in glory. The cleansed heart – the hope of Moses, David, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel – had been perfected by Jesus, in his physical body. He was, and is, God's true humanity.

Since Jesus contains God's presence in human form, he is also a new type of 'Temple.' Jesus displaced the previous center of Israel's worship and corporate life because God did not originally want to live in buildings at a relational distance from people, but rather within people, in personal intimacy with them. The motif of God's presence on a mountain threads its way through the biblical writings like a massive theater backdrop sits on a stage for a play, and this also informs how we interpret Jesus. Eden was a mountain (Ezk.28:13 – 14), where God's presence once was. God intended human life and garden life to ripple outward over the world from Eden (Gen.2). Noah's ark rested on a mountain, and a new human community rippled outward from there (Gen.8:4). Sinai was another mountain where God became present in a unique way, inviting Israel to come up into the purifying fire to meet with him face to face (Ex.3:12; 19:13; Dt.5:4 – 5). Since Israel quailed in fear and refused God's invitation to ascend, Moses went up for them 'while the mountain was burning with fire' (Ex:24:12 – 18; Dt.9:15). At the top of the mountain, Moses received the physical pattern of the tabernacle so Israel could remember standing at the base of the mountain (the outer court), while their elders went up the mountain (the holy place), and Moses went higher still (the holy of holies). Moses went through the fire on their behalf at the top of Mount Sinai. Thus, in the tabernacle, the high priest offered sacrifices through fire and smoke to uniquely enter God's presence again, once a year (Lev.16). The high priest brought the corruption of Israel to God for Him to consume and send away from them. In return, he received uncorrupted animal blood as a motif of new life. God acted like a dialysis machine, taking Israel's impurity and giving back purity. On Mount Zion, David and Solomon erected that tabernacle pattern in stone and gold, and for centuries the high priest repeated the rite; he approached God through sacrifice and fire and smoke, renewed the covenant, and remembered Moses entering the divine fire atop Mount Sinai for them (2 Chr.5 – 6).

But the Temple was not ultimately God's 'Plan A.' So when Isaiah (Isa.4:3 – 5; 5:24 – 25; 30:19 – 33; 66:10 – 24), John the Baptist (Mt.3:10 – 12; Lk.3:7 – 10), and Jesus (Lk.12:49) spoke of renewal, they used fire in its double sense: joyful and painful purification for those who receive it, fearful torment for those who do not. At Pentecost, Jesus bestowed his presence by his Spirit using the motif of fire (Acts 2:1 – 13). Pentecost, significantly, was the commemoration of Israel receiving the law at Sinai. Therefore, the Spirit symbolically made each disciple a mini-Mount Sinai: a living, mini-Temple of God, not at an institutionalized distance from God, but lit up and empowered from within by the fiery Spirit of God. Yet the Spirit's outpouring was possible only because Jesus was something greater than the Temple, a new Temple (Mt.12:6; Jn.2:13 – 25). God was overcoming in Jesus the relational distance that the fall opened wide and that Israel institutionalized from Sinai. In Jesus, God embraced human nature, consumed the impurity and gives back purity. This thread of Scripture can be integrated with the internal heart change, above.

Who is Jesus? If this course through the Hebrew Scriptures is (in part) the one Jesus charted, then we can conclude that the New Testament writers discerned themes that were already woven together in the Scriptures themselves, because the patterns that were already present in the Scriptures were simply continued by Jesus. They were being utterly respectful and true to the biblical story and its inner dynamic. We can be fairly confident that Jesus was the one who taught his disciples to not violently grab proof-texts from the Hebrew Scriptures to make whatever claims about him they possibly could. And we can also conclude that the Christian creeds about Jesus were not displacing the Hebrew Scriptures, but were shorthand for them, to guide our reading of Scripture.

More importantly, if Jesus is God's true humanity, then we can say that Jesus confirms the diagnosis of the Hebrew Scriptures, and offers the only solution to the problem within human nature. Psychologist Carl Jung, in a BBC interview in 1959, said, 'We need more understanding of human nature, because the only real danger that exists is man himself... We know nothing of man, far too little. His psyche should be studied because we are the origin of all coming evil.' Jung's concern remains potent. While there is an original and residual goodness in human nature, there is also an abiding corruption in it, self-contradictions in our commitment to 'good and evil', 'love,' and 'justice,' and a relational resistance to this pursuing, loving God who is our origin and end. We often treat 'evil' as if it were only external to us: in bad systems of government, bad laws, bad circumstances, broken families, etc. Christians are called to address those conditions, but Jesus insists that the human heart is the source of sin, and must be changed by him (Mt.15:18 – 20). I think the role of biblical Israel as the human partner to God in diagnosing and documenting the disease is invaluable, and worth mentioning in this issue of the Harvard Ichthus because in a November, 2013 blog post, a truncated perspective by 'an anonymous Jew' (noticed by the Boston Globe and now taken down by the Ichthus) gave the impression that in Christian theology, biblical Israel simply serves as the foil to Jesus. Not so.

If Jesus is God's true humanity, then we can also say that Jesus offers us a normative human nature and a normative human experience. Debates about the nature of mental health, the challenge of monogamy and the benefits of open marriages, or the formation of sexual orientation eventually pursue some definition of human nature and experience. Studies of the brain, behavior, and environment are sometimes helpful. But if human nature had an original condition that now lies outside our empiricism, and if we have been damaged and can be redeemed only in connection with Jesus, then the scientific study of the brain, mind, and body cannot be considered decisive, however helpful they are. For only Jesus in his life and teaching prescribes for us what human nature and experience are supposed to be. Properly situated, Jesus can be studied in the fields of history, theology, and literary analysis of Scripture. So the epistemological door is open to all.

In particular, Jesus, in his life and especially in his resurrection, shows us that we are not simply human beings, but human becomings. We are all still in the process of becoming. There are choices that we make regarding our bodies and desires in the present that will somehow have an impact on our bodies and desires in the future – for as Jesus shows us, the normative human experience is to yield to the Spirit of God, and resist our tendency to sin. We have a hard time understanding human experiences that we have not yet gone through, yet we are invited to imagine it nevertheless as we reflect on Jesus' own resurrection. What will our bodies be like on that day Jesus returns? They will be like Jesus' body, but what will that be like? We barely glimpse it. My small children have no idea what it will feel like to inhabit bodies that will one day be bigger and stronger than the ones they inhabit now. But we know that there are things they can do now that will prepare their bodies and minds to be healthy and ready for that day. That is an analogue to our own situation, spiritually, as we peer into the resurrection future which Jesus' people will share with him. And just as my children experience flashes of strength and beauty in the process of maturing from childhood to adulthood, we can experience in our own selves, by the presence of Jesus' Spirit, glimpses of that hope and strength, and yes, even purity, which will one day be fully ours. I am not saying that a person's internal and emotional struggles will necessarily go away today because of Jesus. But I am saying that Jesus, at the renewal of all things, will make our present struggles worthwhile.

Finally, if Jesus is God's true humanity, then Jesus shows us a God who is 100% good. Every other articulation of God seems to make Him either passively or actively evil. A deist 'god' stands at a distance from human evil, uninvolved and uninterested; unfortunately, to be passive in the face of human evil is to be evil. A grand puppeteer 'god' actively causes human evil and seems to require it to show us goodness by contrast. A pantheistic 'god' encompasses all good and evil, and ultimately renders the distinction between good and evil moot. So if there is a 'god' who claims to love each person and seeks to cultivate our ability to genuinely love and grow in goodness, then such a being must seek to undo and heal all human evil, in every human person, by calling for our willing

partnership. What does it mean to be human? To be, with Jesus, a human partner to this particular God and growing in love for Him.