

# That tough guy from Nazareth: A psychological assessment of Jesus

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## Note:

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Christmas gives us that 'sweet little Jesus Boy' and Lent follows that with the 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild.' He was neither of those. In point of fact, he was the 'tough guy from Nazareth.' He was consistently abrasive, if not abusive, to his mother (Lk 2:49; Jn 2:4; Mt 12:48) and aggressively hard on males, particularly those in authority. In Mark 8 he cursed and damned Peter for failing to get Jesus' esoteric definition of Messiah correct. Nobody else understood it either. Jesus had made it up himself and not adequately explained it to anybody until then. He called the religious authorities snakes, corrupt tombs, filthy chinaware, fakes, and Mosaic legalists who had forgotten God's real revelation of universal grace and salvation in the Abraham Covenant. He tore up the temple in the middle of a worship service and cursed those present for turning God's house of prayer into a den of thieves, when actually they were kind, helping out-of-town tourists obtain the proper sacrifices for the liturgical rituals. Jesus was persistently aggressive, often angry and not infrequently irrational, killing an innocent fig tree with his curse, for example. He constantly attacked the Pharisees and their proposals for renewing the spiritual vitality of the Jewish Community. He abused numerous people by healing them on the Sabbath just to make his political point against the religious leaders. He could just as well have healed them on Tuesday, if he really wanted to heal them. By healing the blind man in John 9 on the Sabbath, for example, he caused the man to be driven out of his synagogue, his family, and his community of faith; isolated and abandoned as if he were a leper. Even when he said surprising things about children, his focus was not on the children but on his disciples, using the children as tools for making an assertive teaching point. Jesus' life was one of perpetually aggressive claims for his vision of God's reign. He constantly and intentionally provoked conflict and disruption of the *status quo*, spiritually and politically. He refused to negotiate, compromise, palliate, or mollify his insistence upon keeping his elbow perpetually in the eye of the people in power. In all this he would not back down. The principle by which Jesus operated was absolute and that is why he did not back down, even though they killed him for this very reason. His principle was simply that the renewal of Jewish spirituality could only come from a return to the Abrahamic Covenant, which declared (Gn 12; Rm 8) that God is gracious and universally forgiving towards all humankind, unconditional to our conduct and behaviour, and radically in that it removes all fear, guilt, and shame from the equation of our relationship with God (Mi 7:18-20). He saw that the Pharisees and Scribes were absolutely wrong in assuming that the Mosaic legal system would renew the Jewish relationship with God. He was not the gentle Jesus, meek and mild. He was that tough guy from Nazareth! He had good reason and he was willing to go the distance for what he stood for, even to death on the cross.

## Introduction

Jesus is the greatest enigma in the world of Western culture. Nonetheless, he is perhaps the most articulate figure in Western history, measured in terms of the impact of his core values and claims in shaping our world for the last two millennia. No other personage has shaped the Western notions of God and personal spirituality, influenced social organisation and personal values, set religious programs and patterns of behaviour, and determined psychological notions and intellectual thought systems as definitively as he. Few characters have incited such a stream of scholarly studies and such a wealth of popular publications. Every new volume about him brings rewarding insight to many and consternation to some. Leading biblical scholars all seem to feel a great need to write their own books about Jesus to crown their scholarly work. Of all these insightful publications, the greatest surprise is that there are no two such scholarly views that are alike.

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Dates: Received: 02 Sept. 2013 | Accepted: 28 Nov. 2013 | Published: 26 Mar. 2014

How to cite this article: Ellens, J.H., 2014, 'That tough guy from Nazareth: A psychological assessment of Jesus', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 70(1), Art. #2059, 8 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i1.2059>

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For more than 30 years, the Jesus Seminar, a scholarly subunit of Westar Institute, engaged nearly a hundred senior scholars in a quest to search out and find the 1st-century historical person, Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee. They achieved some valuable consensus over that extended period. When the leading academics and churchmen of that conclave finally sat down to write their own understandings of the story of Jesus' life and person, however, each scholar's view of Jesus' person, character, and ministry proved to be remarkably different from all the others. Although they had studied that man from Nazareth together for more than three decades, they each came away with radically different perceptions of his nature and story, and with surprisingly different assessments of him and his mission.

Humorous commentators of the last two centuries have remarked upon the surprisingly disparate outcomes amongst scholars engaged in the quest for the historical Jesus. The books they have produced, after that long quest, derive from the manner in which each of those research scholars has looked down the deep well of history to find that person of 2000 years ago. The humour arises from the question of what one sees looking down a well. Of course, the answer is that one sees the reflection of one's own face.

The suggestion is that the very great difference in how each scholar views Jesus is a result of the fact that each of us sees him through our own eyes and through the spectacles each of us wears because of the unique outlook each of us has on life. We see him through the eyes of our personal worldview. We can, after all, only perceive life and history through the lenses of our own experience and intellectual, psychological, and spiritual needs, expectations, assumptions, and certainties. So the Jesus we think we see and about whom we testify is the Jesus whom we have fit into our individual perspective on life. We testify to that model of Jesus because it is that picture that has given us some degree of personal satisfaction in viewing him in that way. If I am negative or hostile toward Jesus, the Bible, the Church, religion in general, or issues of my own spirituality, I am going to get a lot of satisfaction out of painting a negative picture of Jesus. If, on the other hand, my study, development, and psycho-spiritual experience of Jesus have been a constructive life-changing process for me, as it was in the dramatic change in St. Paul's life, I will certainly write Jesus' story in terms of that sense of gratification and renewal.

The Jesus Seminar leaders, who have written the Jesus-story after more than 30 years of work on the quest to find him, are many and varied. John Dominic Crossan, formerly a Catholic priest, sees Jesus as merely a Mediterranean Jewish peasant (Crossan 1993). His popularised biography of Jesus depicts that history-changing figure as an ordinary man with some extraordinary people skills. Crossan views Jesus through literary, historical, and anthropological lenses and so critiques the biblical narrative about Jesus of Nazareth. He dismisses out of hand the story of Jesus' virgin birth, his ability to heal diseases or raise the dead, and the narratives of his resurrection. He is not even quite sure

about the crucifixion. Crossan basically sees Jesus as a failed revolutionary whose cause was rescued by St. Paul and turned into a transcendental theological ideology not really inherent to the original human Jesus story (Crossan 2009). Crossan's humanist perspective leads him to conclude that what we 'know' about Jesus from the Bible and extra-biblical sources, is a spiritual mythology.

E.P. Sanders agrees with Crossan that the narrative of Jesus' life has been mythically elaborated over the years, but contrary to Crossan, he does not see that fact as preventing us from discerning through the historical evidence what Jesus was really like (Sanders 1985, 1996). Sanders feels that the deficits derived from our tendencies to mythologise reports on people of the past who are worth commenting upon, are typical of any account of history and historical figures. Sanders presents a fresh look at Jesus in which the certain and uncertain facets of the story of Jesus are carefully sorted out in an historical and descriptive way, rather than in terms of dogmatic claims or negatively critical arguments. He presents Jesus as a real person. He acknowledges that the gospel accounts are difficult to harmonise and sometimes disconcertingly contradictory. We can know, nonetheless, who Jesus was, in general terms, in the historical and cultural context of Palestine, in the prosperous and powerful Roman era. We have the evidence of where he fits in, what the main line of his teaching was, the activities that characterised his ministry, and what kind of people became his admirers. Sanders seems to believe that whilst we must admit that Jesus remains an enigma, we can know more about him and his real life than a lot of people realise.

The most prominent Jesus Seminar participant, indeed its founder, James M. Robinson, released a study of Jesus 6 years ago (Robinson 2007). He declares in his introduction to that volume:

If you are accustomed to the New Testament Gospels, you probably don't realize what you have been missing until you catch sight of Jesus as he really was: what we might in modern terms call a pure idealist, a fully committed radical, a very profound person. (p. viii)

Robinson sees Jesus as an idealistic believer in God, an uncommonly naive ascetic, and an itinerant Galilean preacher.

Despite their very different perspectives on the person, life, and work of Jesus, these three preeminent biblical scholars have uncovered a great deal about that man from Nazareth as he became an unforgettable presence in this world 20 centuries ago. History has unfolded and still does, in terms of his brief ministry so long ago, and everything in our world has been reshaped by his visit ever since.

## Jesus' psychology and spirituality

So who was Jesus of Nazareth? Why did he have such a life-changing affect upon individual persons and entire communities, societies, and cultures? We all have an intense

emotional or spiritual desire for, and a strong intellectual intrigue about, knowing who he was and what he was really up to. We all, Jesus' followers, as well as spiritually disinterested persons, would really like to have a clearer understanding of this enigmatic figure.

What was the genius of his person and vision that makes it impossible to forget him? Was it just that blood spattered Roman cross on that windy Judean hill, a place that looks like and was referred to by the macabre name of 'the skull'? Was it the story of his unique birth, clearly a Matthean myth, of which neither the Bible nor earliest Christian belief made anything significant? Or was it his heroic anti-establishment stand? Was it his special, courageous, but in the end pathetic notion about being commissioned by God to a special prophetic vocation? Did you ever think it might have been simply his stubbornness in the cause to which he committed himself, indeed, believed himself to be called by God? First St Paul, and then later some of his other followers saw something remarkably special about him and his vision for the future. That inspired them to change the world in his name, and redesign the Roman Empire.

Well, who was he? What can we say for sure about him? We can say a number of things, at least. We know that the Jesus whom we encounter on the pages of the New Testament is not the historical figure who walked out of Nazareth one day, set his face steadfastly to go to Jerusalem, and made his way steadily to the cross at Golgotha. We understand that the Jesus we know is instead simply a literary character in the Bible stories. Written histories are always narratives that are more or less true to what originally happened. The way the stories are used to interpret their own content, of course, are frequently truer than mere historical data would be. That is truth beyond the data, knowledge beyond the mere facts, and wisdom beyond understanding! In the well-crafted literary stories in the gospels he is a believable character, and we know that we, who believe in the nature, wisdom, and counsel of that literary character, as he appears in the story, find our lives constructively changed by our identification with him. That seems to have been true for everyone who has taken his story seriously for the last 2000 years.

The Historical Jesus question, examined with such care by biblical scholars for a couple of centuries now, is a genuinely intriguing quest, but in the end the constructive life-changing impact of Jesus does not seem to depend upon our achieving a final solution to that historical question. It seems to depend instead on words and images that persuasively present the literary character that comes alive, as it were, in the amazing stories about him.

## The psychological profile of Jesus as literary character

One type of interesting attempt to understand who Jesus was is available to us in four remarkable books published in the last two decades or so. The most imposing of the three is the work of the Princeton professor, Donald Capps (2000).

He perceives that to understand who Jesus was and why he behaved as he did, we must remember that he was born illegitimately in a rather small Galilean Jewish community. He further suggests that his father, Joseph, never adopted him or accepted him as his son. This would have resulted in the fact that Jesus' mother, Mary, would have been devalued in that community and Jesus would have been denigrated as a bastard; that is, a person under the curse of a sin of which he could not be cleansed, even though it was not his own. Thus, Jesus would have grown up nurturing a strong need to reassert his mother's status as a wholesome person, find a father in God whom he tended to call '*Abba*' [daddy], and assert himself as a heroic person with a genuine commitment to authentic spirituality, despite his socially demeaned and denigrated illegitimacy.

That attempt to rescue his mother and himself from painful disrepute, says Capps, was carried out by Jesus in his challenging the Mosaic regulations championed by the Pharisees and urging the embrace of the Abrahamic vision of God's radical forgiving grace for all humanity. The Rabbis of later Rabbinic Judaism claimed that the Pharisees thought the people of God could be renewed spiritually by following the Mosaic laws and perhaps the 613 subsequent elaborations of those laws. This externally imposed behaviour would bring inner spiritual change, restoring the godly authenticity of the Israelite nation.

Jesus is presented in the gospels as holding that such an external approach could never be internalised to produce authentic spiritual renewal. Instead, he thought that spiritual renewal for Israel had to start with an internal renovation that would then be expressed by godly behaviour. The Pharisees wanted to renew Israel from the outside in. The Jesus in the gospel narratives claimed it could only be done from the inside out. He proposed that could be accomplished by proclaiming God's absolute forgiveness and grace to every human being. Anyone who really got that message would authentically turn to God with the confession: 'If that is the way God feels about me, I want to be God's kind of person.' In John's Gospel Jesus is portrayed as the character who reveals that we cannot sin ourselves out of God's grace, nor squirm out of God's long embrace.

In the literary narratives about Jesus' person and life, Capps believes, the defining crisis came when 'Jesus set his face steadfastly to go to Jerusalem', where he knew the authorities were waiting to kill him. When he arrived he went to the temple and created a great disturbance, presumably in the middle of a worship service. Jesus violently interrupted the prescribed operations in the temple. He turned over the tables and castigated the people who were helping the pilgrims from out of town procure the required sacrificial animals they needed to present to the priests. Then he claimed that God required the temple to be a worshipful place of prayer for all humans. He claimed that the Pharisaical system of Mosaic laws had turned it into an obscene commercial operation. Moreover, the temple was partitioned into spaces that made it accessible only to a small group of Jews. It excluded the world of humanity.

Capps asserts that this crisis popularly known as 'the cleansing of the temple' was a kind of psychological explosion and expurgation by which Jesus symbolically removed his bastard status, in the eyes of the Jewish community, by asserting his superior relationship with God, his father. He also, thereby, cleansed his mother's impurities and devalued status in the community, restoring her wholesomeness and holiness by demonstrating how badly wrong the Mosaic system was, and how badly it distorted the Abrahamic Covenant of radical grace.

John W. Miller is Professor Emeritus of Conrad Grebel College, University of Waterloo, in Ontario, Canada. Contrary to Capps's perspective, Miller believes that Jesus was adopted by Joseph as a beloved son and experienced a warmly affirming and appropriately intimate relationship with Joseph as father (Miller 1997). Miller sees this as born out in the close relationship with God, as his loving father, that Jesus expressed throughout his ministry. Miller also discerns, however, that in the intensity of Jesus' relationship to God as his father, we sense that something was lost between his cherished childhood and his emotionally deficient adulthood. Miller thinks that it is related to the death of Joseph whilst Jesus was an early adolescent, depriving him of sustained and sustaining fatherly love and obstructing the usual Jewish role of the father in selecting a wife for his son. Thus, Miller sees in Jesus' baptism, and in the voice he heard affirming his status of beloved son of God, a spiritual crisis that Jesus was at some pains to understand. In his wilderness retreat Jesus sorted out what that divine affirmation implied regarding his vocation and his relationship to God as his father. To be the authentic beloved Son of God, as Jesus is described as discerning it, meant being the Son of Man. In Second Temple Jewish tradition, the Son of Man was the revealer of the heavenly mysteries about God and God's relationship with the world. Those mysteries that he was to reveal, he realised, were the declaration of God's radical grace that had been previously revealed in the Abrahamic Covenant, but masked and eclipsed by the legalism of the Mosaic Covenant.

Miller acknowledges, however, that throughout the gospel story Jesus is very much less emotionally connected to his mother than to his sense of his father. The fact is that if we read the gospel narratives carefully, we must notice that Jesus is consistently abrupt, if not abusive, to his mother. In the temple at 12 years of age, at the wedding in Cana, and at Capernaum when his family comes for him, thinking him insane for calling himself the Messiah, Jesus is cryptically dismissive of his mother. Miller is sure this is a consequence of his having become the 'man of the house' whilst still a mere child, after Joseph's untimely death. That would have made him responsible for the financial, social, emotional, and spiritual survival of the family. In mid-adolescence he would have been required to set his own interests and goals aside, bereft of close cherishing support of his father, and burdened and confused by an increasingly co-dependent mother. This double bind, producing Jesus' diffidence regarding his mother, was then broken at his baptism by God's intervention in declaring him to be God's beloved son, not Joseph's or

Mary's. This empowered his sense of independence in his own vocation.

Miller (1997) says:

It is clear now why the words 'from heaven' immediately after the baptism, 'You are my beloved son, with you I am well pleased,' reached him at the depths. Jesus had found God and his father again. Simultaneously he found himself. The claim of his mother upon him had been broken by renewed contact with his 'Father in heaven' (Matt 11:25-27 // Luke 10:21f.). (p. 54)

Andries van Aarde's work, *Fatherless in Galilee* (2001), also presents a startling set of insights into the person of Jesus as the literary figure in the narratives of the gospels. Van Aarde (2001) assumes that Jesus grew up fatherless in 1st-century Galilee and did not know who his biological father might have been. This status was both painful and shameful in his judgemental and unforgiving ethnic society, which would have denigrated him as a bastard. Such a state of affairs explains for Van Aarde why Jesus adopted God as his cherishing father and oriented his ministry on children, upon the disenfranchised, and upon the marginalised in society. He points out that Joseph is never mentioned in the earliest Christian literature such as *The Sayings Gospel Q*, *The Gospel of Thomas*, *the Epistle of James*, and *the Epistles of Paul*. Moreover, in Mark Joseph has no role with regard to Jesus. There Jesus is referred to as the 'son of Mary' (Mk 3:32; 6:2-3), a practice in the Jewish community employed only when one has no father.

Van Aarde thinks that Jesus had something of a father-son relationship with his cousin, John the Baptist. He thinks this explains Jesus' desire to be baptised by John and thus cleansed of the feelings of defilement and shame imposed upon him by the denigrating community. By his baptism his marginalised position and his perceived epistemic sin, stemming from his illegitimacy, was removed. This was immediately certified by the voice of God declaring him God's beloved son. With this new sense of having found his true father and his true forgiven self, Jesus took up his vocation to proclaim the reign of God, the invitation to trust in God, and the message of the forgiveness of sins. He gave this a practical application by continually pleading the cause of the fatherless and the widow, an injunction repeatedly set forth in the Mosaic literature of Exodus and Deuteronomy, but largely ignored in Israel, according to the Minor Prophets (Am 2:6).

The strength of these three psychological studies lies in the light they shine upon the psychodynamic strains that quite obviously arise in the character development of Jesus, as literary personage, in the gospel stories. That character's behaviour and message reflect psychological drivers in personality formation that shape how we should think of him. They shed light on how we should take his abuse of his mother, his friendship with the marginalised in his society such as thieves and whores, his frequent chiding of the wealthy and powerful during his visits with them, and his guerrilla war with the religious authorities. It also explains



his chronic denigration of the Mosaic Covenant of law and his desire to move Israel back to its roots in the Abrahamic covenant of grace.

## Growing up in Galilee

The net effect of the six typical studies we have so far reviewed presents us with a character who displays a number of distinctly identifiable qualities. He operates from a conflicted emotional and social life. He finds his consolation in a unique and intense perception of his relation with God. He has an ambivalent sense of himself. He is persistently anti-establishment and critical of the father-figures of the authorities. He stands for those who are marginalised in society, but is not preoccupied with them. He keeps company with twelve close male followers. He seems to be sought out by women for his general intimate sensitivity toward them. He has an idealised image of God's intended destiny for the world and for his own vocation and destiny in that model. He is capable of surprising expressions of humour, antipathy, and rage. He is stubbornly committed to the path on which he has set his course. He never backs down, even in the face of his own pitiful demise.

It is of great interest that this is the picture the psychological and biblical scholars present for us compared with the picture generally painted by contemporary preaching in the churches. It is quite a different image of that man from Nazareth than fills the imagination of Christians around the world today, and that has been predominant throughout the centuries since the rise of the Imperial Church in the 4th century.

At Christmas time the entire Christian world celebrates Jesus as the 'sweet little Jesus boy'. That image is enshrined in our hymns, popular songs, and our individual and communal memory. It is a romantic cultural notion largely oriented toward children but never really transcended in adult believers. Of course, Jesus was once little. Otherwise he would not have managed his progress down the birth canal of an adolescent mother. There is no evidence in any scripture, nor testimony in the extracanonical literature of the 1st and 2nd centuries, that Jesus was ever sweet. We suppose he was, of course, because we project on him our notion of young children being sweet little creatures. That is mostly our imagination, rather than anything inherent to the character of that person or any person in childhood. In any case, the image is not a real characterisation of the Jesus that we know from the stories the Bible presents about him.

As suggested in the introduction, there is a second portrait enshrined in our hymns and hearts that is a dominant presence controlling our notions and emotions about the nature and character of Jesus. That is the line from the popular song, 'Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild.' Ironically, Jesus was none of those. He was kind to children and the marginalised. He was ambivalent about women and occasionally abusive to them, particularly his mother. He was aggressively hard on adult males, particularly men in authority or prominence.

When his Jewish mother nagged him about having disturbed her trip from Jerusalem to Galilee and made her anxious and uncomfortable, he shot back sharply at her asking why she was worried, given that she should have known that he would be about his heavenly father's business. When she jostled him at the wedding in Cana about performing a miracle to help the host who had run out of wine, he castigated her with the peremptory denigration: 'What is that to you and me. This is not the time to mention that kind of stuff!'

When she and his siblings, having heard him claim that he was the Messiah, thought him deranged and came to Capernaum to take him home to care for him, he ignored her. Indeed, he publicly put her down and shamed her by rhetorically asking the crowd who they thought his mother and brothers were. Then he declared that his true family was made up of his followers who listened to his preaching and were devoted to his ways! Only at the cross, in his last gasping moments, did he seem briefly to speak gently to her and acknowledge her as a person. There he charged his disciple to care for her. Of course, if we read his expression to her from the cross through the lenses offered us by Capps, Miller, and Van Aarde, we cannot be certain even then if he is saying to the disciple, '[b]ehold your mother, you poor guy, I hope you can get on with her better than I could,' (Jn 19:26-27) or whether it is a moment of tenderness. We can only assume that he is being kind and gentle at that point. What does the story teller really intend here? He does not tell us how to take this moment in the story. Remember that the next thing Jesus is reported to have said is:

I am (it is) finished. My whole project is a bust! I was obviously wrong about my apocalyptic vision of history and God's intention to rescue me. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me! (Jn 19:30)

Some scholars and preachers claim that he had a preferential option for the poor and needy. That is not true. The truth is that he could be very cavalier about his consideration for the poor and needy. Judas remarked that the woman who bathed Jesus' feet in expensive ointment or perfume would have done better to have sold the alabaster jar and its costly contents, for it was undoubtedly of significant value, and given the money to the poor. Jesus shut him up abruptly by declaring that we can minister to the poor any time, given that we will have them with us forever (Mt 26:11). They are always around looking for handouts, he implies. Jesus affirmed the woman who was behaving rather intimately with him. He seems to have been gratified by her attention and love. From Jesus' story it is clear that he was equally preferential to the up and out and the down and out. He cared very much for those for whom others cared very little. He had a preferential option for everyone in need or pain.

Moreover, think of the healing of the blind man in John 9. Generally, people react to that narrative with awe and emotional admiration for that healing. Read the story more carefully. It is a story of Jesus abusing that poor fellow in order to score a political point against the Pharisees, Scribes, and Sadducees. Jesus undoubtedly knew the blind

man as a fixture in the town, as did everybody else, of course. There he sat like a fire hydrant, greeted by some who noticed him, loved by some who cared for him, joking and discussing theology with those who stood around the local drug store on a lazy Saturday afternoon. He had been a fixture in the society for 40 years, loved by most, ignored by many.

Along came Jesus on a Sabbath morning and asked him if he would like to change his rather well established status in his family, the city, the community, and the synagogue by being cured of his blindness. Well, who would not make that surprising exchange? So Jesus cured him. Then the wholly predictable action began. If Jesus' motive was to cure the poor fellow he would have done it on Tuesday, in which case everybody, including the religious authorities, would have honoured Jesus and rejoiced with the healed man. No, Jesus just had to pick the Sabbath to heal him. This demonstrates that he did not care so much about the blind man's comfort. He cared mainly about the political point he wanted to make about the erroneous perspective of the religious authorities regarding the Torah, the ten laws of Moses and the 613 additional laws of the Pharisees.

Jesus constantly argued with the Pharisees that their teachings were absurd. He was intent upon establishing his claim that God's intentions for us were really not about laws as the way of spiritual renewal but about forgiveness and grace that awakens a new spirit in the soul of a person. He always insisted that God did not intend to 'shape us up' but to 'cheer us up' with his free grace. Jesus' point was consistently that we cannot get away from God's forgiving grace or find any other faith system that makes any sense.

Well, as Jesus certainly intended, healing the man on the Sabbath stirred up the religious authorities, because the law forbade Jesus' kind of action regarding the laws the Pharisees held so dear. So the authorities hauled the blind man into court and asked him who the culprit was who had healed him on the Sabbath. We all know the funny but sad story that follows. The blind man declared that he did not know who did it but surely everyone must know that whoever it was had come from God. Never had any one in all of history opened the eyes of a blind man, except he had God's healing power. The authorities declared that it was blasphemous for him to say that, given that whoever the healer was he had broken the Sabbath law. So he could not be from God.

The blind man's response was ingenious. 'This is truly amazing', he said, and continued:

You are the teachers in Israel, the professors of theology who know all the things of God, and you cannot figure this out. I am just an uneducated blind man, who has sat on the curb like a fire hydrant for forty years, and it seems perfectly plain to me. *I do not know who he might be, but this much I know, once I was blind and now I can see.* He must be from God. (Jn 9:25)

So the authorities threw him out of the synagogue, expelled him from his entire ethnic community, and severed his relationship with his family. Although, in the end he came to

know Jesus, he was, under Mosaic law a despised vagabond in Judaism. His latter state was worse than the first in the most important ways. Jesus used him to make a political point, and then left him isolated from his loved ones and friends, who were now forbidden by the authorities from consorting with him. Jesus could be fairly ruthless to others, not just to his mother.

He was ruthless to the fig tree he cursed. He was ruthless to the religious leaders whom he called serpents, corrupted tombs, and filthy cups. In Mark 8:31ff. he was ruthless to Peter, cursing him, turning his back on him, and calling him a devil, just because Peter had not yet gotten straight in his head Jesus' unique concept of the messianic Son of Man. Nobody else understood it either. Jesus seems to have been the only one at that point who understood the esoteric and poorly explained notion of the Messiah that Jesus was playing around with at the time, calling himself the suffering Son of Man. All these graphically portrayed moments in the Jesus story are usually overlooked and repressed, whilst we raise up the false notions of the gentle Jesus, meek, and mild and thus miss the point of Jesus and those gospel narratives.

In the gospels, Jesus is not gentle, meek, or mild. He is robust, aggressive, uncompromising, incapable of negotiating his perspective on God's ways with humans, argumentative in the uttermost, abusive with people he did not like and with ideas he thought were erroneous or simply false. He was immensely tough minded, and uncompromisingly courageous in what he stood for, without the slightest willingness to back down or compromise.

What was the point Jesus was trying to nail down once and for all? It seems clear that the character the authors of the gospels intended to craft in their stories was a rather red blooded, down on the ground, demanding genius, who had a radically innovative vision in his head. That vision contained a very specific notion of what God was up to in this world, what humans should be up to in God's world, and what he was up to in his vocation to repair God's world. That vision was expressed through his very human personality, which in turn was shaped by what he had undergone in the developmental experiences of his childhood, youth, and adult life. These scarring events shaped his character for better or for worse. Both strengths and weaknesses in his life and relationship style derived from those developmental experiences. The Epistle of the Hebrews is certainly aware of this when it declares that his character development was made complete though suffering, and hence he was able to carry out his redemptive task in the world (Heb 5:7-9).

Our notion of Jesus as gentle surely arises from his treatment of children. Even in those instances in which he used children as his example in making a teaching point, however, the narrative seems to be pointing out that the emphasis in the story was on Jesus confronting his disciples about their wrong-headedness, rather than on a special perspective on children.

It is clear, upon careful reflection upon the gospel narratives, that this literary character, Jesus, as we have him in the story, was a really tough guy from Nazareth. Apparently, early in his life he had discovered the mainstream of theology in the Sacred Scriptures that he had memorised extensively. The gospel writers put into his mouth frequent references to the Hebrew Bible. Particularly Matthew implies that throughout his ministry he had spent much of his young life digesting the weighty contents of the Hebrew Bible. Moreover, the gospel authors intend to indicate that quite obviously he had identified with those passages that referred to the promised Messiah, and he saw them as his mandate in his personal life's ministry and destiny. Remember that he read the *messianic* passage from Isaiah 61 when he preached in the Synagogue at Nazareth, and then declared regarding himself: 'Today this is fulfilled in your presence' (Lk 4:21).

So we know what Jesus stood for, given that he only read the first part of that passage from Isaiah 61, which speaks of God's unconditional grace. He did not read the section that describes how the Israelites will abuse and subdue the gentiles. The congregation was angry about that and about his implied claim that the messianic passage referred to him and his own messianic vocation. In keeping with his claim, he continually reminded the Israelites that God's real purposes with them were described in Genesis 12 and 17, where God's covenant promises to Abraham are an arbitrary declaration of God's unconditional and universal grace to all human kind.

The descendants of Abraham were called to be a 'healing to the nations' (Gn 45:7) and not a community for and unto themselves. They were to be spiritual healers for all humanity by conveying the good news of the radical nature of divine grace to all humankind. God declared to Abraham:

I will make a covenant with you and with your descendants for an everlasting covenant. I will be a God to you and to your progeny forever. They shall be my people and I will be their God, and the nations of the earth shall be blessed through you. (Gn 12:3)

There were no strings attached to this arbitrary covenant of universal grace. It was arbitrarily imposed upon the Israelites. God obviously intended to get across to all of us that we cannot sin ourselves out of God's grace and we cannot squirm out of God's long embrace.

That posture placed Jesus in opposition with the Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and other authorities in the Israelite community. They were intent upon following the Covenant of Moses that required simply the adherence to the laws of the Torah as the authorities articulated it. The Pharisees wanted to reform Israelites from the outside in. They thought that controlling a person's behaviour would produce an inner spiritual renewal. Jesus knew that spiritual conversion must start with a change of heart. That is accomplished by the infusion of the human spirit with the good news of God's radical grace. Jesus knew that anyone who really gets that message, of universal and unconditional forgiveness by God,

will turn to God in abject gratitude and devotion, desiring to be God's kind of person. From that conversion a radical shift in behaviour is inevitable. Real change comes from the inside out. That is the position from which Jesus refused to back down, right to the end of his life.

The honest and accurate image of Jesus in our hearts and minds must no longer be the romantic notions of the sweet little Jesus boy, or the gentle Jesus, meek and mild. Such notions sell him far short and miss the transcendent vision and heroic courage of this beloved Son of God who was the transcendent Son of Man. Popular notions of the sweet little Jesus boy and the gentle Jesus, meek and mild, romanticise God's intentions in and for this world. Such views trivialise Christianity with programmes of superficial niceness instead of tough love, with conditional grace, which is no grace at all, and with pagan notions that this is a *quid pro quo* world, as the Pharisees thought. Jesus declared himself as one who stood against the Torah with its mechanical proposals for legalistic spirituality. He stood for God's universal grace and the ultimate salvation of every human being, as Micah 7:18–20 makes clear. Micah declares doxologically:

Who is a God like our God,  
He pardons iniquity.  
He passes over transgression.  
He will not keep his anger forever.  
He delights in steadfast love.  
He will have compassion upon us.  
He tramples our iniquities under his feet.  
He casts all our sins into the depths of the sea.  
He guaranteed this to us from ancient times,  
In his faithful and steadfast love!

Every eye shall see him, says St. Paul, and every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall confess as Thomas did: 'My Lord and My God' (Rm 14:11; Phlp 2:10–11). Jesus refused to cave in to the powers of this world, so they killed him, but he was the one who had seen God's truth.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

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