

Jefferson Quick, Timely Reads

Jesus: Fulfilling the Mission of God

By: Reverend Charles Brock

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Jesus was not much of a mystic in the traditional sense. He didn't have theophanies like Moses, Isaiah, Elijah, or Paul and the author of the Book of Revelation. The one exception in the Synoptic Gospels is the story of the Transfiguration, told in the first three Gospels:

“After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ...

Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!” Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.” (Mark 9.2-8 excerpts NIV)

The story serves several purposes. It shows Jesus to the disciples as a chosen one, and it places Jesus over Moses and Elijah, two of the foremost Hebrews (Jesus is also called Son of David, Israel's greatest military leader).

Jesus' mysticism was not so much theophanous like Moses's three major experiences, but rather a merging of wills and accomplishing the mission that God sent him to do.

Merging of wills

“The Son can do nothing by himself; he does only what he sees the Father doing.” (John 5.19) “I cannot act by myself; I judge as I am bidden.” (John 5.30) “The Father and I are one.” (John 10.30) Christian tradition has often taken this verse to mean a physical likeness between God and Jesus, but it can be just as valid to use it as a merging of wills. We often say to one another “We are one on that.” That doesn't mean we are one physically, but we are mentally or spiritually together.

Doing the will of God

I would claim this to be the big point of the mysticism of Jesus. He walked with God and they were of the same mind. Most people think Jesus had much to do that was God's will – preach the gospel, heal the sick, feed the hungry, teach the disciples, challenge Pharisaical Judaism, etc. All these are true and there was much to do in the one to three years of his active ministry.

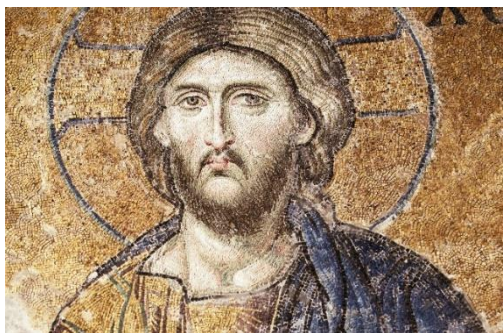
As stated in the Moses chapter, this, too, is a form of mysticism and perhaps is the most common one of them all. William James, the founder of the psychology of religion, wrote a major book still used in the universities, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. It is important because as a non-mystic, he attempts the first scientific appraisal of individuals who reported various types of religious experiences. And unless they are patently ridiculous, he gives credit to a wide variety of experiences, refusing to act as a judge on their veracity. On the matter of merging wills, when God is involved, the mystic “feels as if his own [will] were in abeyance.”[1]

The new Moses

But there was another major task – the one which led to his death. The opening of the oldest Gospel: “After John [the Baptist] had been arrested, Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God. ‘The time has arrived: the kingdom of God is upon you. Repent, and believe the good news.’” (Mark 1.14 - NEB). Debates on the meaning of “kingdom of God” are endless, but I propose that Jesus is the new Moses who emerges as the Messiah of Israel, the one sent to free the Jews from Roman occupation and restore the true faith of the Mosaic covenant.

These are related. “Repentance” means changing direction and coming back to the Covenant. Then, as in so much of the Hebrew Scriptures, God will act in freeing Israel from oppression by myriad means – war, plagues, and sickness for starters – and Israel will be free to serve God rightly again.

It is interesting that many theologians do not see this point. They state that the death of Christ was to fulfill other scriptures, that Jesus would be a sin offering such as Aaron's scapegoat who bears the sins of Israel. Jesus would bear them for the world. In that sense, Jesus follows the sin and forgiveness motif rather than the Moses freedom paradigm. But one can have both.



Perhaps it takes a politician to see the other point. Thomas Jefferson went against the usual church teaching about Jesus with an idea that is still a minority view among scholars and churches. Jefferson was not keen on any ideas of atonement but thought Jesus was not only a great moral leader but an insurrectionist who wanted the Romans out of the Holy Land. He said that Jesus was “an early victim to the jealousy and combination of the altar and the throne.” He also said Jesus was “punished capitally for sedition by being gibbeted according to the Roman law.”[2] Jesus was killed because of the problems

he posed for both the Romans and the Jewish religious establishment that favored Roman occupation.

Thomas Paine agreed that not only did Jesus preach the equality of mankind; he also was an insurrectionist against slave-holding Rome. Paine wrote, “The accusation which those priests brought against him was that of sedition and conspiracy against the Roman government ...

neither is it improbable that Jesus Christ had in contemplation the delivery of the Jewish nation from the bondage of the Romans.”[3] This was not a popular or even a considered view in most of the Christian history, and it is quite remarkable that Jefferson and Paine independently put it forward. I do not hear many contemporary preachers stating this, but there is plenty of discussion in the seminaries on the political role of Jesus nowadays.

Maybe the parabolic nature of the gospels is to blame? Jesus did not like to spell things out without making his audience think: “With many parables he used to give them his message, so far as they were able to receive it. He never spoke to them except in parables; but privately to his disciples he explained everything.” (Mark 4.33-4) Whatever his means of teaching, the content had a normal Hebrew view of occupation by a foreign country – get rid of them.

Temptations and the Cross

Jesus had at least two major derelictions. The first was the temptations by Satan in the wilderness of Judea, close to the Jordan where he was baptized. According to the gospels, he spent 40 days and nights (as did Noah in the Flood) and suffered the same temptations as Israel detailed in Deuteronomy. “At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.” (Mark 1.11-13 – Matthew and Luke detail the temptations).

The second was the Cross. “And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46) He received no answer.

Resurrection

Then some astounding things happened. Jesus was resurrected and descended into Hell to free the captives. “He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. After being made alive, he went [to Hell] and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits – to those who were disobedient long ago.” (I Peter 3-18-20) According to Orthodox icons, Jesus leads Adam and Eve out first, who represent humanity.



Icon from the Khora Church complex in Istanbul (Kariye Camii), dating near the 14th century.

The resurrection has many other accounts, and Mary of Magdalen was the first to see Jesus alive. The disciples, the Marys, and others experienced Jesus physically and were invigorated by it. According to the last book of the Bible – *Revelation of St. John the Divine* – the final curtain on the Roman Empire is foreseen and prayed for. It didn't happen immediately, and it wasn't until Emperor Constantine in 313 that Christianity was proclaimed the official religion of Rome, and all the rest should flee for their lives.

Jesus as Mystic

Jesus was a mystic in the congruence of wills between himself and God. His main work was to bring in the Kingdom of God via repentance by the Jews. It didn't happen, and Jesus lost his life via the penalty for sedition – crucifixion. But according to Christians – mystics or not – Jesus lives on and is approachable by prayer and the techniques of mysticism, as well as a dedication to the overthrow of evil rulers and false political systems.

And when dereliction sets in as it always does from time to time, listen to Evelyn Underhill, a famous English 20th century mystic – “in spite of derelictions, in spite of darkness and suffering, your will is harmonized with the Will that informs the Whole.”

“The spiritual senses are strictly practical, too. These, when developed by suitable training, reveal to us a certain measure of Reality; not in order that we may gaze upon it, but in order that we may react to it, learn to live in, with, and for it, growing and stretching into more perfect harmony with the Eternal Order.”[4]

Michael Gerson, former President George W. Bush's chief speech writer and an evangelical Christian, sums up the political picture: “People of faith should apply a moral yardstick to any political coalition they join. They should strive to add some humanizing element to the political world. In Christian terms, the Kingdom of God is not some future blessed state. It becomes present when believers live by a different set of values in the here and now.”[5]

I found that in my 55 years of university religious teaching that I had to bring in politics at almost every level. And those who teach political science or public policy ought to learn that lesson as well. Jesus knew it from birth as he heard his mother sing:

My soul magnifies the Lord
And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior;
Because He has regarded the lowliness of His handmaid;
For behold, henceforth all generations shall call me blessed;
Because He who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is His name;
And His mercy is from generation to generation
on those who fear Him.
*He has shown might with His arm,
He has scattered the proud in the conceit of their heart.
He has put down the mighty from their thrones,*

and has exalted the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things,

and the rich He has sent away empty.

He has given help to Israel, his servant, mindful of His mercy

Even as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity forever.[6]

[1] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Barnes & Noble, 2004, p 330; first published as The Gifford Lectures 1901-2

[2] TJ to Peter Carr, Aug 10, 1787

[3] Thomas Paine *The Age of Reason Part First* from *Political Writings* op cit p 213

[4] Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism*, Pacific Publishing Studio, 2011, p 95-6

[5] Michael Gerson, *Disbelieving black victims is the default position of conservatives. It's shameful*, Washington Post, May 29, 2020

[6] Luke 1.46-55. Political bits in italics. This shows the agenda that cost him his life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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