

THE MODUS OPERANDI OF JESUS: A VITAL FOCUS

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Introduction

Jesus arrives in human history, past and present, as an enigma. Who exactly is he? In particular, what is his main purpose or goal? Anyone attentive to him will ask such questions. In case someone fails to ask, Jesus raises these questions: “Who do people say that I am? . . . Who do you say that I am?” (Mark 8:27, 29).¹ His questions matter, according to many interpreters, because he matters, given the status and role he exhibits in relation to God as his Father.

Ben F. Meyer has approached, with considerable illumination, the Jesus of history through “the goal informing his career.”² He explains:

The aim immediately commanding Jesus’ historic career was to win all Israel over to eschatological restoration; on this was to hinge the salvation of the nations. But the eschatological restoration of all Israel turned, itself, on a hinge, a *sine qua non* condition: the response of faith to proclamation of the reign of God and so its messianic proclaimer.³

We know that “all Israel” did not opt for the commanded response of faith, and the result was division with Israel.

The faith in question, according to Meyer, “is a stepping out of the mastered, familiar world into the darkness where one is a

1. All biblical translations come from the NRSVue unless otherwise noted.

2. Meyer, *Aims of Jesus*, 21.

3. Meyer, *Aims of Jesus*, 242.

child. The risk of faith is finally the risk of finding an identity in Christ by which ‘we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings’ (2 Cor 1:5).⁴ We may grant, if only for the sake of argument, that the faith commanded by Jesus calls for faith of this sort. Even so, this characterization does not specify *how* such a risk of faith, in terms of motives, is to be realized among humans. The talk of “stepping into the darkness where one is a child” and “sharing abundantly in Christ’s sufferings” thus falls short of an actionable, salient *modus operandi*. This talk does not specify *how in particular* we are to *do* such things in terms of our basic motives, and therefore it fails to capture the motivational *modus operandi* represented by Jesus. Faith can be motivated, for instance, by self-serving fear rather than by unselfish love; it therefore does not settle a concern about its basic motives.

We need to extend Meyer’s position to answer the important question of *how* people are, in their specific motives, to appropriate the faith relationship commanded by Jesus. We need to go beyond the *what* of Jesus’ command to have faith or trust to the *how*, that is, to the motivational *modus operandi* beyond what we have called “the *effectus operandi*.” The key, we shall see, is in his supreme love commands, in their demanding full *agapē* towards the God who shares divine *agapē* with humans.

Meyer fails to integrate in his account the key demand of the love commands (mentioned once only in passing),⁵ and thus he misses out on the crucial motivational *modus operandi* of Jesus. The aim or goal of Jesus is critically important for understanding him, but it relies on his supreme love commands and their basic motive in responsive *agapē* from and towards God. We shall see that these commands are at the center of the divine renewal of humans sought by Jesus.

This article’s following sections elucidate the *modus operandi* of Jesus. The first main section explains how Jesus offered the parable of the prodigal son to illustrate divine renewal of humans in love and to challenge critics of his message about God. The second main section contends that Jesus exercised his *modus*

4. Meyer, *Aims of Jesus*, 106.

5. Meyer, *Aims of Jesus*, 151.

operandi of divine love as unique Lord appointed by God and guided by the Spirit of God. The third main section argues that the power of Jesus' modus operandi of divine love does not require human understanding of God's purposes in allowing evil in human experience. Human shortcomings in understanding God do not curb or undermine divine love expressed to humans. The article's conclusion states the significance for humans of their valuing Jesus' modus operandi of divine love.

Parable of the Prodigal for Renewal

Jesus uses the parable of the prodigal son to characterize and to recommend how God as Father seeks human renewal, individual and social, on the basis of divine familial love.⁶ We thus get a portrait of the motivational modus operandi of Jesus and his divine Father. Rudolf Bultmann's remark on Jesus on love will be confirmed: "Love is . . . a 'how' of togetherness with others."⁷ Likewise for his comment: "The command to love shows that love is understood as an attitude of the will."⁸ It thus is not just an emotion; it is willing, as we shall see, a kind of togetherness in goodness.

Jesus tells a story of two sons, the younger of whom says to his father: "Father, give me the share of the wealth that will belong to me." The father complies, and "a few days later the son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant region" (Luke 15:12, 13). He thus abandoned his father and his family. While away, the younger son "squandered his wealth in dissolute living," and things went from bad to worse when a famine hit the land. The son's life away from his home became miserable and even unbearable for him.

In misery, the younger son reconsiders his decision to abandon his father:

6. On the origin of the parable in Jesus, see Hultgren, *Parables of Jesus*, 82–86.

7. Bultmann, "To Love your Neighbor," 49.

8. Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, 118.

When he came to his senses (εἰς ἑαυτόν) he said, “How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’”⁹

The parable assumes that the younger son had left his senses (his mind) when he decided to abandon his father for the sake of a life in the distant region. Even so, the son returns to reality and recognizes his disastrous mistake, if with help from “dying of hunger.”

The younger son moves beyond mere reflection to a promise to himself to repent of his sin before his dishonored father: “I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’” The sin is against God as well as his abandoned father. He has violated the good gift of his father from God by disregarding his valuable filial relationship with him. He has discarded the right to be called a “son” of his father. As a result, he plans to request a changed status not of a son but of an employee who is willing now to obey his father.

The younger son begins to put his remedial plan in motion: “He set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion (ἐσπλαγγισθη); he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him” (Luke 15:20). This was not part of the son’s plan; he had no inclination or right to expect this response of compassionate love after abandoning his father. Even so, holding to his plan, “the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son’” (15:21).

The father persists in his disarming response of compassionate love and forgiveness:

The father said to his slaves, “Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his

9. Luke 15:17–19.

feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate, for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” And they began to celebrate.¹⁰

From the father’s perspective, “this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” Celebrating is therefore in order, according to the father, as an expression of familial love. Such love, however, was not expected by the younger son.

The parable concludes with a familial conflict arising from the father’s celebration for the repentant son:

Now his elder son was in the field, and as he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf because he has got him back safe and sound.” Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command, yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your assets with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!”¹¹

The father “pleads” with his older son but receives from him a scolding defense against “this son of yours.” The older son is not in the mood to celebrate his younger brother or his father. The family thus faces dysfunction, including a deficit of love, from the vindictive anger of the older son.

The older son must face the response of compassionate love from his father: “The father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found’” (Luke 15:31–32). This response reiterates the father’s basis for celebration: “this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.” The vindictive harshness of the older brother does not

10. Luke 15:22–24.

11. Luke 15:25–30.

prevail over the father's compassionate love and forgiveness towards his sons.

Jesus' parable of the prodigal son reveals a father whose familial love, despite facing resistance, endures towards members who have disowned the unity of love in the family. It endures, in particular, towards family members who resist the father's compassionate love and forgiveness towards them. The father seeks family unity and renewal in love that offers forgiveness and reconciliation. Such reconciling familial love calls for a homecoming to the father, and the latter depends on repentance towards a restored filial relationship of love, with children owning their "not being worthy" of such a filial gift. So, the father's goal is a renewed enduring relationship of love, and not just an episodic religious experience or event. His goal is deeper than even mere trust or obedience towards him.¹²

The father does not digress to a metaphysics, a philosophical ontology, of being a son or a child. Instead, he focuses on a *relational* status that exceeds narrow "self-identity." He is concerned about the relational self-status of a family member's relationship with him as father, rather than a member's self by itself, whatever non-relational metaphysics is proposed.

John R. Donahue rightly relates the matter of identity to a family relationship:

The father shatters the self-identity of both sons. Both define sonship in terms of servile obligations; each in his own way destroys the family. The parable does not allow this to happen but redefines the conditions under which "family" can happen. A relationship with the father worked out in terms of servility leads to destruction. The relationship as redefined by the father leads to life and joy . . . Both sons are jolted out of their self-understanding and invited to a celebration of life out of death.¹³

12. I dissent from the view of E. P. Sanders that Jesus did not demand repentance as typically understood (*Jesus and Judaism*, 206–8). For discussion, see Dunn, *Christianity*, 498–500, and Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 2:212n154. The dispute should be settled not by occurrence of the word "repent" but by occurrence of the idea in the teaching of Jesus.

13. Donahue, *Gospel in Parable*, 157–58.

The sons are “invited to a celebration of life out of death.” This invitation assumes voluntary participation by a son in renewal by the father, rather than a son being coerced or kidnapped by him, inwardly or outwardly. The “shattering” is by the father’s striking manifestation of compassionate love and forgiveness, not by force. The father’s aim for reconciliation need not have succeeded at all, as its success depends on voluntary repentance by the sons.

We gain clarity by a distinction between a “lost self” and a “found self.” A lost self is lost in losing (by giving up) a reconciled relationship with the father, and a found self is found in finding (by voluntarily receiving) a reconciled relationship with the father. The sons decide either to lose or to find such a reconciled relationship. The father cannot decide for them, given their status as responsible voluntary agents. They can be found by the father, but this is not forced; they must allow him to find them as responsible personal agents rather than as pawns under outside control.

The father does not inject himself coercively or forcefully in the life of the younger son who abandoned him. He does not treat this son as if he is a pawn of his to be controlled by paternal force. At the same time, the father does not abandon his son. He knows that his influence remains with his son, however much he is resisted by him. The younger son shows traces of his father in his life, even in the distant region, when he recalls his father and the available benefits from his father. As noted, he reflects: “How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger.” The younger son’s father and his father’s goodness still echo in his troubled, miserable life, even after abandoning his father. This consideration figures importantly in his coming to repentance and reconciliation towards his father.

The parable does not indicate an outcome for the older brother, but it does portray the father to seek compassionate reconciliation rather than alienation in relation to him. This portrayal is important, because Jesus uses the parable to represent God in sharp contrast with his critics who oppose his compassionate love towards religious outcasts and “sinners.” Thus, “now all the

tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them’” (Luke 15:1–2). The critics of Jesus are represented by the older brother who responds with “grumbling,” whereas the younger brother represents “sinners” who respond positively, in repentance, towards Jesus and his divine Father. We know which response Jesus seeks.

In portraying God as akin to the sons’ father, Jesus invites some theological elaboration for his parable. His main theme is that people who resist God but then willingly enable themselves to be found by God, through their repentance, were dead and have come to life. According to the parable, they were lost and have been found by God. God’s finding them for renewal depends on their being willing to be influenced inwardly and outwardly by God’s unique character of perfect goodness in compassionate love. I thus prefer to think of the parable as the parable of *paternal influence for renewal*. We need to consider divine paternal influence as understood and manifested by Jesus. This is influence without coercive control but with the attractive power of paternal love.

The conflict of the prodigal son with his father is mainly about power: the moral power to live freely for what is good, in a good life. What exactly is this power, and how could the prodigal son go so wrong in relating to his father? According to the parable, the moral power is not an impersonal system of laws. It is personal and paternal rather than just physical or mechanical. After abandoning his father for a distant region, the prodigal son appears to have lost the power to live freely in a good life. He thus expresses desperation about his unhappy situation of “dying of hunger,” even though food is not the only thing, or even the main thing, he needs.

The son is not hopeless, despite his troubling predicament. The moral influence of his father provides a basis for some hope, as the son considers his option to return to his father in repentance. He senses needed power for a good life by renewing his relationship with his father. The moral power for him to live freely in a good life is, he considers, in his reconciled relation-

ship with his father. He thus plans, as noted: "I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" He may set the bar too low for the suitable relationship, but he sees that a renewed relationship with his father is needed for the power of a good life for him.

The father self-presents first to his younger son, before the son considers turning to him. This self-presenting by the father, including in memory, prompts the son to recall some of his father's goodness. A response from the son to the father is fitting, and it could be either indifferent, negative, or positive. Given his "compassion," the father expects, or at least hopes for, some kind of response and perhaps even a positive response in due time. The son responds, in effect, to the father's good "will," that is, to his intention to have the son return to a good relationship with him. This would be a return to a reconciled personal relationship where the son honors the father's good will and does not abandon it. Such a relationship will focus on the father's will, because this will is central to the father's good moral power, his power to be shared with his son. This consideration finds a parallel with Jesus in Gethsemane.

In Gethsemane, Jesus prays to his Father as follows: "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me, yet not what I want but what you want" (Mark 14:36). The center of his prayer is: Not what I want but what you [God] want. This corresponds to the younger son's response to his father: Treat me like one of your hired hands. This response suggests a willingness to undertake Gethsemane obedience, of the kind demonstrated by Jesus. As in the case of Jesus, the son is willing to yield to his good Father, in faithful obedience.

Jesus thinks of the son's repentance not as merely negative, but as a positive turning to his father in a relationship of filial obedience. Inward filial obedience was shown by Jesus himself to his Father in Gethsemane. It was inward obedience that included self-conformity to the will of God as his "Abba, Father." Such a filial relationship was central to his life and mission, and he expected the same of his followers. He thus commanded his

followers to “watch” for God’s coming to them with an expected response from them (Mark 13:33, 35, 37; 14:37–38).

Jesus fills out his desired relationship with God in the history captured by the synoptic gospels. We shall identify some key features, while acknowledging that Jesus expressed his *modus operandi* of divine love as the Lord approved by God.

Son, Spirit, and Lord

Our context for examining Jesus includes a vital issue from Helmut Thielicke: “How do I get to the point where I can believe that the father in the story [of the prodigal son] is God himself and that this God deals with me exactly the way the father did in the parable: that he lets me fall . . . and that he finally receives me with honor?”¹⁴ We can find a positive answer by attending to the *modus operandi* of Jesus.

Jesus began his ministry under a divine affirmation of his filial relationship to God as his Father. Mark’s Gospel puts his baptismal inauguration as follows:

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.¹⁵

God as the Father of Jesus affirms his filial love for Jesus, “the Beloved,” and his being “well-pleased” with him. Mark’s Gospel also mentions the Spirit of God as “descending” upon Jesus and leading him into the wilderness. This Spirit indicates a divine mission for Jesus, a mission guided by God in the face of conflict from evil.

Luke’s Gospel adds to the role of the Spirit of God in the life and mission of Jesus:

14. Thielicke, *How to Believe Again*, 28.

15. Mark 1:9–11.

He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:
 The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
 because he has anointed me
 to bring good news to the poor.
 He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
 and recovery of sight to the blind,
 to set free those who are oppressed,
 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.¹⁶

Jesus thus credits the Spirit of God with motivating or empowering his ministry of "good news" from "the Lord's favor."

The Spirit of God, according to Jesus, is not limited to him but is shared by his followers: "If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:13). This consideration is important, because it indicates what empowers the kind of obedience expected by Jesus and his Father for human renewal: inwardly motivated obedience from the "heart," empowered (but not coerced) by God's Spirit.

The inward expectation from Jesus and his Father shows up in the top love command given by Jesus: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength" (Mark 12:29–30; cf. Matt 22:37–38). The Sermon on the Mount affirms Jesus' love command: "I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Matt 5:44–45). The love commanded is thus reflective of God's character and contributes to being a child of God. It goes deeper than mere behavior, to the "heart," "soul," and "mind" of a person.¹⁷ It also is dependent love for humans, given its reliance on God's perfect character of unselfish love.

16. Luke 4:17–19.

17. For evidence of Jesus being the historical giver of these love commands, see Dunn, *Christianity*, 583–88, and Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 4:478–528.

Here we reach the motivational *modus operandi* of Jesus. Neglect of the love commanded and the resulting human defilement before God have a similar inward source, according to Jesus:

It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, debauchery, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.¹⁸

Jesus is thus concerned with matters deeper than mere behavior.

The Spirit of God empowers the needed inwardness of obedience, at the level of what Jesus calls “the heart”; hence the importance of the Spirit as God’s “gift” to his people. This theme echoes some of the Hebrew prophets who anticipated, if vaguely, some of Jesus’ message. For instance, Ezekiel portrays God to say to his people:

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you, and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.¹⁹

Jesus does not cite this passage, but its promise would have been known to him and his fellow Jewish teachers. To avoid misunderstanding, he hesitated to talk of God’s Spirit without qualification by his own unique revelation of his Father.

Jesus’ desired qualification has a basis in the following striking remark:

Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the

18. Mark 7:20–23.

19. Ezek 36:25–27; cf. Isa 44:3.

Father or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”²⁰

As “the Son” of God, Jesus here expresses the Spirit of God in saying that he, Jesus, is the only one who knows who his Father is and thus is the revealer of God appointed by God.²¹

The divine elusiveness (including divine hiding) identified by Jesus fits with his *modus operandi* of *agapē*, whereby the responsive attitudes of hearers matter. The “wise and the intelligent” suppose themselves to be “in the know” in a prideful way that disregards *agapē* in response to Jesus and his message from his Father. They thus are at odds with his motivational *modus operandi*. His cautious elusiveness, for the sake of his *modus operandi*, also figures in his stern advice: “Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you” (Matt 7:6). Given a serious concern for motive in response, Jesus issued such commands for the benefit of all concerned, in accordance with his *modus operandi*.

Divine hiding has its contrast in divine self-manifestation suited to Jesus’ *modus operandi* of divine love. God and the status of Jesus are concealed and revealed for humans in such love, given the differing moral characters of God and humans. God self-conceals at times in order to self-reveal aright, that is, effectively in the *modus operandi* of Jesus. Human cooperative participation in Jesus’ *modus operandi* enables humans to recognize and to receive the divine revelation of that love.²² Here we find an answer to Helmut Thielicke’s previous question of how we may come to recognize the divine Father of Jesus as akin to the compassionate father in the parable of the prodigal son. Finding the answer, however, will involve responding to Jesus as Lord of divine revelation to humans.

20. Luke 10:21–22; cf. Matt 11:25–27.

21. On the historical basis of this statement of Jesus, see Fitzmyer, *Gospel According to Luke*, 865–74, and Davies and Allison, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 278–82.

22. For elaboration on this important theme, see Moser, *God in Moral Experience*. See also Moser, *Divine Goodness of Jesus*, 57–90.

The special status of Jesus assumed in relation to his divine Father emerges in his talk of himself as “Lord.” For instance, Jesus suggests that he is Lord of the Mosaic law: “He said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath, so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath’” (Mark 2:27–28). In addition, he suggests that he is Lord over king David:

While Jesus was teaching in the temple, he said, “How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David? David himself, by the Holy Spirit, declared, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.”’ David himself calls him ‘Lord,’ so how can he be his son?”²³

Such talk of “Lord” has importance in relation to God, particularly to divine authority, and to Jesus as God’s authoritative Son, representative, and revealer.

C. K. Barrett explains the role of the talk of “Lord” in connection with Jesus:

(1) A lord questions me radically; he has the right to interrogate and does interrogate, not only what I have done but what I am. My whole existence comes under examination. (2) A lord directs me. I may rebel against his orders, but by definition he has the right to give them, and if I disobey them I not only expose myself to unpleasant consequences, but contradict the meaning of my existence. Thus the effect of a lord is to throw my life into radical existential disturbance, and to give it a new orientation. This happens, however, because positively the lord assumes responsibility for my existence and is therefore to be trusted as well as to be obeyed.²⁴

This approach to lordship fits with Matt 7:21–23:

Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?” Then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; go away from me, you who behave lawlessly.”

23. Mark 12:35–37.

24. Barrett, *Jesus and the Gospel Tradition*, 18.

Lordship calls for obedience and does not settle for mere talk of lordship.

Every audience of Jesus, even a scholarly audience, must decide on his claim to be Lord on behalf of God. We thus need to clarify what kind of Lord we are deciding on, since our decision will have important consequences. A significant factor is that in revealing his Father, Jesus as Son and Lord self-manifests and clarifies the character of God's Spirit, in a way that adds unique specificity to understandings of the Spirit of God in the Old Testament. This specificity is in the unique character and mission of Jesus, including in his inward and outward obedience to God in Gethsemane and on Calvary.

Jesus had no explicit, unambiguous Old Testament passages to portray his own unique role as God's Beloved "Son of Man" and Son of God who suffers and gives his life in obedience to God. This explains his minimal use of the Old Testament on the Spirit of God, just as it explains his avoiding a suggestion that he is a familiar Davidic Messiah or king. He needed an opportunity to express his unique self-image of God's Messiah and king, and this led to his hiding his messianic claim from people not ready to understand or receive it.²⁵

In his peaceful entry to Jerusalem on a donkey, Jesus enacted part of Zechariah (9:9) to manifest his understanding of kingship from God (Mark 11:1–10; Matt 21:1–9). In addition, he included suffering in his understanding of God's Messiah in his self-described role as the "Son of Man." Thus:

[Jesus] asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.' And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes and be killed and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly.²⁶

Peter's confession was a turning point for Jesus to speak more openly, but his message of suffering and death was difficult to

25. Such hiding is defended by Barrett (*Jesus and the Gospel Tradition*, 119, 143, 158–59).

26. Mark 8:29–32.

accept for his followers, given its conflict with some common expectations of God's awaited king and Messiah.

We can identify some scriptural influence on Jesus regarding his self-image as the suffering Son of Man. C. F. D. Moule has remarked:

The fact remains that in Daniel 7:21, 25, the specially aggressive "horn" on the beast's head "made war with the saints and prevailed over them" and was destined to "wear out the saints of the Most High"; and it is precisely with these saints of the Most High that the Son of Man is identified. It is irrelevant that this interpretation of the Son of Man vision is a secondary interpretation: all that concerns the present investigation is that it was in Daniel 7 as Jesus and his disciples knew it—and I know of no evidence to the contrary. But, if so, the Son of Man, in the only document known to have been available then, stands for a loyal, martyr-group who are brought to glory and vindicated *through suffering*. There is no need to invoke Isaiah 53 (a questionable procedure anyway). The Danielic Son of Man is itself a sufficient symbol for martyrs who are to be vindicated.²⁷

In a similar vein, W. D. Davies comments, "The Son of Man in Daniel is a suffering figure—he represents the saints of the Most High who are persecuted; cf. Daniel 7:21, 25. The whole context points to a suffering Son of Man."²⁸

Jesus nowhere called himself, as the suffering Son of Man, "the suffering Servant" or "the Servant," even though he characterized himself as one who "serves" (Mark 10:45). Arguably, the title "(Suffering) Servant" was inadequate for his aim to capture the kind of divine exaltation associated with Daniel's Son of Man (Dan 7:13–14).²⁹

Isaiah 53, it is arguable, was too extreme for Jesus in its following claims:

We accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities. . . . Upon him was the punishment that made us whole, . . . and

27. Moule, Review, 174.

28. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, 280n1. See also Longenecker, "'Son of Man,'" 151–58.

29. See Manson, *Jesus the Messiah*, 111.

the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. . . . He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; . . . and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with affliction.³⁰

Jesus himself gives no indication that his Father was punishing him or crushing him with affliction as his beloved, innocent Son. In addition, his cry of dereliction in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew does not confirm his allegedly being “silent.” The theology of Isa 53 in these important areas seems to be at odds with the theology of Jesus regarding his passion. This explains, I submit, his preferring the theology of the Son of Man in Dan 7 over Isa 53.

Jesus offers an enacted parable of his not only suffering but also dying, in his last supper with his disciples:

He took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.”³¹

His dying, he suggests, is for a covenant (from God), and it is his sacrificial self-giving for others. His death, however, is not final for him, as he eventually will be alive again in the kingdom of God, drinking the fruit of the vine.³²

Barrett points in the right direction:

Instead of seeking, like Adam, to have life in and for himself, [Jesus] gave his life away in obedience to God; and in his death is our life, for with it there begins the possibility that we may live as he lived, in that obedience which reconstitutes man’s dominion, under God.³³

We can understand what it is to “reconstitute man’s dominion under God” in relation to the parable of the prodigal son, with its cooperative return of the son to his father. Jesus himself as beloved Son turns to his divine Father in full love and obedience,

30. Isa 53:4, 5, 7, 10.

31. Mark 14:23–25.

32. For discussion, see Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 2:302–9; Koenig, *Feast*.

33. Barrett, *History and Faith*, 33–34.

and he expects the same of his followers as like-minded children of God. Their desired renewal is in a filial relationship with inward human love and obedience towards God. Such is the motivational *modus operandi* prized by Jesus, in thought and in action.

A key issue becomes: How in practice do humans appropriate the renewing power to love and obey God inwardly as Jesus did in Gethsemane and on Calvary? We might begin an answer by saying: We must let Jesus be Lord of our lives. Even if this is a good start, a question arises: *How* do we let Jesus be Lord? Motivation matters, as noted previously. We thus might add: We must let Jesus be Lord through obedient faith where we receive the Spirit of God discharged by Jesus. This is an improvement, but a more precise motivational account is needed.

The Gospel writers acknowledged Jesus' unique relation to the Spirit of God. John the Baptist predicts of Jesus: "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (Mark 1:8; cf. Matt 3:11; Luke 3:16; cf. Luke 24:49). Humans have a voluntary role in receiving this baptism with the Spirit of God, by their turning to God in response to a divine call. Mark's Gospel presents the call proclaimed by Jesus, after the Spirit led him into the wilderness to face temptation: "After John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news'" (Mark 1:14–15).

The command to "repent" is a command to turn cooperatively to meet God firsthand in response to a divine call of good news offering humans renewal with God. In such repentance, humans turn to God in cooperation by letting God find and influence them through divine renewal and guidance. Being thus found and influenced by God, with their voluntary cooperation, humans undergo renewal in relationship with God. We should follow the parable of the prodigal son in thinking of a renewed filial relationship rather than an isolated episode or experience.

An undeniable tragedy is that some people do not want to be found or influenced by God, sometimes for fear of losing their autonomy or their own projects. They are thus unwilling to follow Jesus in his aforementioned prayer to God: "Abba, Father,

for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me, yet not what I want but what you want" (Mark 14:36). They thus do not let God be their God or let Jesus be their Lord. The divine renewal of humans, then, is not magical or irrational. It depends instead on divine power appropriated through a relationship of interpersonal human coordination with God's self-manifested Christlike character. We need to consider an objection that motivates many people to ignore or to resist divine renewal for themselves, including the *modus operandi* of Jesus.

Understanding and Repentance

Many critics hold that receiving an offer of God's Spirit for renewal may be good, but that it is not good *enough* if God is perfectly good. It leaves humans with too much that is clearly not good, including all kinds of evils in their lives. This raises a serious question: How good must the divine goodness on offer be in our lives? There is, in addition, a prior question: *Who* rightly decides the suitable answer to this question? A perfectly good God or, instead, a morally and cognitively imperfect human? Asked this way, our question seems to have a plausible answer.

All inquirers face the longstanding issue of why suffering is allowed by God to wreak havoc in the ways it does, including in the passion of Jesus. Jesus offers an important consideration about his divine Father in his parable of the prodigal son. He suggests that his Father is "filled with compassion" when he welcomes back his younger son (Luke 15:20). This suggestion sheds light on God's role in the human debacle of suffering and evil. We should start there, with God and divine love.

The Father of compassionate love acknowledged by Jesus is willing to suffer for humans and for what is good for them. Jürgen Moltmann comments on God's own suffering:

If God were in every respect incapable of suffering, he would also be incapable of love. He would at most be able to love himself, but not anything other than himself. But if he is capable of loving something other than himself, then he opens himself for the suffering which love

for the other brings him, while still remaining master of the pain which is the consequence of his love.³⁴

Jesus commanded his followers to have the same kind of merciful or compassionate love that his Father has: “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36). In addition, he expected them to manifest such merciful suffering love, as he did, beyond merely having it inwardly (Mark 8:34–35; Matt 5:16). God’s people thus must present their faithful obedience to God in the face of suffering and death (as illustrated in Job and Ezekiel, for instance). In doing so, they become faithful witnesses who show their God to be worthy of obedience and even love in the presence of human suffering and death.

We do not have a full theodicy here. Many questions about why God allows extreme suffering to remain unanswered for inquirers. Jesus testified to this fact with his cry of dereliction on the cross: “At three o’clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?’ which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” (Mark 15:34; cf. Matt 27:46). Jesus did not get an answer to his “why-question,” at least an answer he revealed to other inquirers. Even so, he maintained his faithful commitment to God, as indicated in his language “My God, my God.” His unanswered question and corresponding lack of explanation did not lead him to despair about God or God’s goodness.³⁵

Jesus offered a response to the reality of evil upon raising a question about it:

At that very time there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you, but unless you repent you will all perish as they did.”³⁶

34. Moltmann, *Jesus Christ*, 44–45. See also Moltmann, *Way of Jesus Christ*, 170–81.

35. For discussion, see Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, 1043–66.

36. Luke 13:1–3.

This response illuminates Jesus' perspective on responding to evil allowed by God.

Jesus directs people away from a mere search for an explanation of evil. He directs them instead towards their relationship with God, beginning with their repentance before God. He, like Job, does not hold out for humans now gaining a full explanation of God's purposes in allowing evil. Instead, he puts his focus on what can be had now: a repentant relationship with God. This focus reveals his priority for an interpersonal relationship of love with God for his followers. In addition, he refuses to blame God for evil; one of his parables thus puts the blame on "an enemy" (Matt 13:28). We know from his instructional prayer (i.e., the Lord's Prayer) and Gethsemane that his core response to his Father in the face of evil was: Thy will be done. This response is a suitable filial reply, and we have no better reply.

The teaching of Jesus on evil leads us to an important distinction between: (a) repentant explaining of evil and God's ways and (b) unrepentant explaining of evil and God's ways. Repentant explaining stems from a repentant relationship with God that gives *God* priority in the area of explaining or not explaining. Such priority can leave humans, agreeably, without an adequate explanation of God's purposes in allowing some evils. Repentant explainers do not despair of God's goodness when they lack such an adequate explanation. Unrepentant explaining is different. It does not come from a repentant relationship that gives God priority in explaining or not explaining evil in relation to God. It thus often leads to despair of God's goodness when an adequate explanation of evil is unavailable to humans. The distinction between options (a) and (b) protects the *modus operandi* of Jesus from easy dismissal, by securing its compatibility with shortcomings in human understanding of God's good purposes.

Idolatry towards explanation is a real threat for unrepentant explaining and explainers. It easily seeks to put humans aiming for explanation above the supremacy of God, by their opposing God's option of withholding explanation from humans. Jesus avoids such idolatry. He discourages search for a full theodicy now, by turning his focus to a living filial relationship with his Father who cares for humans even when he does not fully ex-

plain to them. We have seen that Jesus put his focus on repentance as integral to a positive, cooperative relationship with his Father. He thus answers the question of what has priority, as he endorses repentance for a reconciled relationship instead of mere explanation for increased understanding. This amounts to a difference between *welcoming* God as good rather than *merely explaining* God and God's purposes with theoretical hypotheses.

We can understand the perspective of Jesus towards suffering and evil in relation to his aforementioned primary love command: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30). A human mind's understanding is expected to be a *means* to loving God. Jesus, however, does not portray love of God as a means to a full understanding of God or God's purposes. Human love of God is his primary goal, his top purpose, in comparison with human understanding regarding God. In this respect, human love of God is superior to human understanding and explaining of God. It can transcend the latter two by enduring soundly despite the limits of human understanding and explaining. Jesus showed as much and taught as much.

God can have and show love for humans without their fully understanding God and God's purposes. It would be unexplainable for us if God could not do this. Analogously, humans can have and show love for God without their fully understanding God and God's purposes. The first love command from Jesus is, as suggested, not to understand God completely; instead, it is to love God completely. God's love seeks to create goodness in humans, and it can do so without their full understanding of God. An intellectualist approach to God that implies otherwise distorts the order of things here and diminishes the power of divine goodness and love. It also neglects the motivational *modus operandi* of Jesus.

The divine renewal of humans, as portrayed by Jesus, can proceed with their limited understanding of God. It can do so because it can benefit them with goodness inwardly, in their moral character in relation to God, even when their understanding of God is limited by unanswered questions. Humans still can welcome and cooperate with God's goodness, including divine love,

and thereby undergo renewal in relationship with God. The prodigal son was able to return to his father and cooperate with him despite lacking a full understanding of him. Jesus suggests the same for people undergoing divine renewal, courtesy of God's compassionate love for them. This love can become increasingly salient for humans in their incomplete understanding, and it may be up to them and their cooperation how expansive the increase in salience is. They thus should attend to their own role in this vital interpersonal relationship.

Conclusion

The motivational *modus operandi* of Jesus enables us to illuminate his ministry among humans. It points us to his central concern with basic human motives in responding to him, his message, and his Father. Humans thus have a key motivational role in (response to) the kind of divine human renewal announced and manifested by Jesus. The parable of the prodigal son, we have seen, shows the compassionate love of God at work in inviting people to renewal in familial reconciliation with God. Jesus, as we noted, clarifies the desired human response in his supreme love commands regarding God and humans.

The manifested love from God is to be reciprocated by humans in their motivation of full love towards God and, on that basis, their love towards other humans. Without this motivational *modus operandi* of *agapē*, the central purpose of Jesus and his Father falls short of what Jesus commanded. In restoring this motivational center, in contrast, we restore the main goal or purpose of Jesus and his Father. In Gethsemane, we have suggested, Jesus manifests this goal in life-or-death practice, and he sets the same standard for his followers.

Neglect or rejection of the *modus operandi* of Jesus would entail, in his perspective, neglect or rejection of Jesus and his Father. It would do so because the supreme divine command at work, according to Jesus, characterizes God and his obedient people with a motivation of Christlike love at their center. Inward human obedience to this divine command depends on conformity to a divine gift of the Spirit of God as represented in the

moral character of Jesus. Such conformity rises to the standard set by Jesus only by returning, or reciprocating, a gift of divine love with obedient human love, even if the returning is marked by human imperfection. This returning is, in any case, interpersonal and voluntary rather than mechanical and coercive. As the *modus operandi* of Jesus renews human life, the kingdom of God comes to earth and endures against final death and evil. In that case, Jesus can be seen for who he actually is, the Son of Man and Son of God who suffers with a *modus operandi* of divine familial love. We then can let Jesus be Jesus, and perhaps even follow suit.³⁷

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