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Forging an Incarnational Theology Two Score Years after *Nostra Aetate*

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Forging an Incarnational Theology Two Score Years after *Nostra Aetate*

Jesper Svartvik

Abstract

Surveying how Christology is formulated in the wake of *Nostra Aetate*, this paper concentrates on three models: (1) *The man became words, words, words*; the quest for the historical Jesus has often emphasised the — allegedly unique — teachings of the Nazarene. Its main problem, however, is that the contemporaries of Jesus are no longer presented as his historical context but as his theological contrast. (2) *The word became fleshwounds*; due to Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ* one single Greek word (Mk 15:15; *fragellosas*, i.e., "after having flogged") has been at the centre of the Christological discussion during 2004. His version of the medieval passion plays highlights its particular problems. Having first described the flaws of these two models, the paper will seek to explore how — two score years after the declaration *Nostra Aetate* — the Johannine statement that the Word became flesh could be helpfully articulated today.

KEYWORDS: incarnation, Jewish-Christian relations, salvation

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“Forging an Incarnational Theology Two Score Years after *Nostra Aetate*:

Reassessing Established Christological Models in the Presence of a Crucified and Resurrected People”

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I am convinced that – with all the implications involved for theology and church history – the crucifixion and resurrection of the Jewish people are the most important events for Christian history in centuries. - Franklin H. Littell ¹

Three score years after the liberation of Auschwitz and two score years after the promulgation of the *Nostra Aetate* declaration, the question of the relation between Christian theology and anti-Judaism is as topical as ever.² During the post-war period Christians have come to realise the breadth and depth of the Christian teaching of contempt *vis-à-vis* the Jewish people. Most churches have commenced to review, reassess and refute traditional teaching on Jews and Judaism.³ These soul-searching endeavors are both necessary and commendable – and their results are both promising and rejuvenating. What remains to be done, however, is to consider also those parts of traditional theology that do not explicitly relate to the Jewish people.

Nothing is more central to Christian faith than Christology, i.e., what Christians think, teach and preach about Jesus of Nazareth. Arguably, he is the most known person ever in history to be crucified, owing to his followers' belief that he was resurrected from the dead. Eventually Christians have

¹ Franklin H. Littell, *The Crucifixion of the Jews: The Failure of Christians to Understand the Jewish Experience* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1996 [1975]), 6.

² An earlier version of this article was read at a conference at the *Università Pontificia Gregoriana* in Rome, September 26, 2005. I am grateful for stimulating conversations during and after the session. Dr. Göran Larsson and Dr. Inger Nebel have both read and commented on the article. I greatly appreciate their suggestions and scholarship.

³ See e.g., Johannes Willebrands, "Christians and Jews: A New Vision," *Vatican II — By Those Who Were There* (London: Chapman, 1986), 229: "In other words, an attitude which repeats ancient stereotypes or prejudices, not to say one that is aggressive against Jews and Judaism, does not anymore have a right to legitimate existence in the Church."

come to realize, however, that his Jewishness is being affirmed also in this aspect. Franklin H. Littell has stated that, during the last two millennia, the entire Jewish people has been suffering in the Western world – and during the last half-century the world has seen how the very same people has been brought back to life. (See the opening quotation of this article.) The interpretation of this crucifixion and resurrection must also be part of Christian theology today. *The particular purpose in this article is to explore in what ways the Jewish-Christian dialogue can inform and transform Christology.*

The end of the Second World War sixty years ago has already been mentioned, as has the pioneering work of the Second Vatican Council forty years ago. Twenty years ago, in June 1985, the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews issued its *Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church*.⁴ In this series of recommendations it is stated that:

Jesus was and always remained a Jew; his ministry was deliberately limited to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt 15:24). Jesus is fully a man of his time, and of his environment – the Jewish Palestinian one of the first century, the anxieties and hopes of which he shared. This cannot but underline both the reality of the incarnation and the very meaning of the history of salvation, as it has been revealed in the Bible (cf. Rom 1:3-4; Gal 4:4-5).⁵

⁴ See Helga Croner, ed., *More Stepping Stones to Jewish-Christian Relations: An Unabridged Collection of Christian Documents 1975-1983* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist, 1985), 220-232.

⁵ See Croner, 226.

Two things in this crucial passage deserve comment: first, the Jewishness of Jesus is underlined with the broadest possible strokes of the brush. Second, this very Jewishness of his is both an expression and evidence of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. In other words, diminishing the Jewishness of Jesus is to relativize the importance of incarnational theology. His significance to Christians cannot be separated from his oneness with Jewish contemporaries.

It is therefore no small predicament that in some of the best known and appreciated Christological models, Jesus is presented not according to this line of thinking but either in a strikingly non-Jewish fashion or in a way that is impossible for the Jewish tradition to appreciate or even comprehend. In fact, this observation constitutes the very foundation for one of the most-repeated statements in the Jewish-Christian dialogue, i.e., Shalom Ben-Chorin's two expressions "the faith of Jesus links us together" and "faith in Jesus separates us."⁶ This phrase both catches something important and points at a problem: it is true that the starting point for good Jewish-Christian relations is that Christians and Jews need to recognize that Jesus was firmly rooted in Second Temple Judaism. The problem, however, is that the relation between Jews and Christians often is described in terms of Jews stopping halfway, whereas Christians go all the way. Thus, Judaism is presented as a prologue and a religion of institutionalized reluctance. What is needed is Christological discourse that helps us overcome the misleading dichotomy "faith of Jesus" versus "faith in Jesus".

Two insights have been crucial in the writing of this article, the first being the remark by Paul van Buren in his *Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality* that "no single

⁶ See e.g. "Reflections on the Problem 'Church-Israel,'" issued by the Central Board of the Union of Evangelical Churches in Switzerland in 1977, quoted in Croner, 198-204, esp. 200f.

theory about his death became 'dogma.'"⁷ This means that those who simply hold onto a favorite formulation, claiming that their interpretation is *the* classical doctrine, simply have not done their homework. Early Christianity spent considerable time defining the *persona* of Christ – as can be seen in the creeds – but never took pains to carve out the ultimate meaning of his death on the cross.

The second statement that has helped to further the suggestions in this article can be found in John d'Arcy May's book *Transcendence and Violence*, in which he states that: "To continue thinking of Christ only in the traditional way is like sticking to the examples in a grammar book instead of using a language freely and creatively after having assimilated the rule systems of its 'generative grammar.'"⁸

John May points to the well-known fact that there is a wide spectrum of Christologies in the New Testament. To ask which single Christology is the only right one is neither "biblical" nor "classical." Thus, arguing that there is only one correct Christological model presupposes factual ignorance and borders on theological arrogance. Rather, Christians should start using the grammatical rule instead of simply repeating the example that seeks to illustrate the very rule.⁹

⁷ Paul van Buren, *A Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality. Part III: Christ in Context* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 19.

⁸ John D'Arcy May, *Transcendence and Violence: The Encounter of Buddhist, Christian and Primal Traditions* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 139.

⁹ In this discussion it also appropriate to refer to Jaroslav Pelikan's book, *Jesus through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), which masterfully presents a number of Christologies. From his presentation, no one can deny that there have been different ways to portray the message and mission of Jesus. Pelikan writes in his preface (p. xv): "I think I have always wanted to write this book." Paraphrasing Pelikan, the present writer would want everyone to read his book.

In this article three Christological models are presented: whereas the first accentuates the passion narrative, the second emphasizes the proclamation of Jesus. The very point of departure for the third approach is the numerous shortcomings of the first two models. Thus, the inherent weaknesses of the first two models suggest that what is needed is nothing less than a reassessment of much of traditional Christological thinking. A tentative suggestion is outlined in the third model below.

1. Reconciliation: The Word Became Flesh Wounds

Frederick C. Grant once wrote that “the Gospel grew backwards,” thereby indicating that the cross proclamation or *kerygma* preceded the narrative Gospels.¹⁰ Whereas the veracity of his statement need not be discussed, one should dwell upon two topics, both of which are related to the crucifixion of Jesus. First, is there a difference between the roles that the cross plays in different literary genres? The second question is whether and – if answered in the positive – to what extent and in what way suffering could be said to be redemptive *per se*? Since the release of Mel Gibson’s movie *The Passion of the Christ* it has become all the more urgent to ponder this question.

A. Similarities and Differences between the Marcan and Pauline Gospels

Both Paul (who wrote the oldest surviving Christian texts) and Mark (who authored the first account of the life and death of Jesus) emphasize the importance of the death of Jesus. Not only did they presuppose that the death of Jesus *had happened* but they also reasoned that it *had to happen*.

¹⁰ Frederick C. Grant, *The Earliest Gospel: Studies of the Evangelic Tradition at its Point of Crystallization in Writing* (New York/Nashville: Abingdon, 1943), 76.

Or, to put it differently, due to both historical necessity and theological preferences there is a strong emphasis on *causality* in their theologies – but this causality is expressed remarkably differently by the two theologians, probably because the two authors used two different genres. This difference is all the more striking when one considers that the writings of these two theologians have so many points in common that the Gospel of Mark may well be regarded as a narrative presentation of the Pauline Gospel: both Mark and Paul are characterized by distinct emphases on the cross event rather than on the teachings of Jesus, on the disbelief of the twelve disciples, and on Gentile mission.¹¹

Nevertheless, there are important differences in the way they present the cross event. Paul seems to be almost completely uninterested in reproaching any group for the death of Jesus. In fact, only two passages in the *corpus paulinum* seem to diverge from this pattern: 1 Th 2:14-16 and 1 Cor 11:23. Here these two passages can only be discussed very briefly.

A majority of New Testament scholars argue that Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians is the oldest surviving Christian text, probably written in 49-50 C.E. What is remarkable in 2:14-16 is that the author accuses “the Jews” (*hoi Ioudaioi*) for having killed the Lord Jesus as they have killed the prophets (*tôn kai ton kyrion apokteinantôn Iêsoun kai tous profêtas*). Thus, in this particular passage, Paul does seem to blame a group of people, *hoi Ioudaioi*, for the death of “the Lord Jesus”. However, there are a number of good arguments which suggest that it is highly improbable that the historical Paul actually wrote this passage: no

¹¹ For a more extensive discussion of the similarities between Mark and Paul, see Jesper Svartvik, *Mark and Mission: Mk 7:1-23 in its Narrative and Historical Contexts* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2000), 344-347.

manuscripts before the fourth century include 2:13-16; the choice of words indicates that the fall of the Second Temple is presupposed; Paul himself elsewhere calls himself “Jew” and “Israelite.” In addition, we know of no more fierce foe of the first Christians than Paul himself. He describes his behavior in Gal 1:13f: “I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it.” All this suggests that this passage is a deutero-Pauline gloss inserted into the text after the fall of the temple.¹² Thus, in the original version of this epistle the historical Paul does not blame any group of people for the death of Jesus.

1 Cor 11:23 is a text often recited at the Eucharist. The text in the NRSV (“... the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed”) suggests that Paul here does emphasize the betrayal of Judas. However, it is reasonable to argue that the Greek word *paredideto* behind the “betrayed” of NRSV should not be understood as “when he was betrayed [by Judas],” but rather “when he was handed over [according to the divine plan].” This would be much more consistent with the general trend in the *corpus paulinum*. Nowhere else do we find an emphasis on Judas’ treachery in the Pauline writings. If the translators of the New Testament do not wish to state explicitly that Paul is here talking about God’s providential plan, they should at least allow the translation to be so transparent that the ambiguity of the Greek original shines through. It therefore seems better to use expressions such as “handed over” or “delivered up.”¹³

To sum up, the emphasis in Paul’s letters is not on the horizontal level (Judas betraying his master) but on the vertical line (the death of Jesus being part of a divine plan).

¹² For a fuller treatment of all the arguments, see Birger A. Pearson, *The Emergence of the Christian Religion: Essays on Early Christianity* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 1997), 58-74.

¹³ David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 545f.

The question is to what extent this is due to the genre which Paul chose, i.e., letter writing. Paul certainly concentrates on the death of Jesus, but he seems to be almost indifferent to the circumstances which led up to it.

Turning now to the Gospel of Mark, most probably the very first narrative presentation of the life and works of Jesus of Nazareth, there is a noticeable stress on the death of Jesus. Although Mark sometimes mentions that Jesus taught, he seldom gives an account of his teaching. Strictly speaking, it is only in chapters four and thirteen that the author allows the readers of his text to encounter not only the teacher but also his teaching. Instead, the author prepares the readers for what will come towards the end of his narrative. One finds an emphasis not only on the death of the protagonist, but also on the circumstances which led to his gruesome death. In other words, the Marcan plot is to a high degree also, to use the French word, a *complot*, a conspiracy.¹⁴

Summing up, both Paul and Mark accentuate the importance of the death of Jesus, but Paul is considerably less interested in the guilt question than is Mark. This difference should be ascribed to the genre: it is the narrative genre, emphasizing the *complot*, which promotes the blame discourse. To use a Kierkegaardian phrase, one could say that, when reading the Marcan Gospel forward, one must remember that the Christian Gospel grew backwards.

It might be relevant to consider what is arguably the most important theme in Jewish tradition: the liberation of the enslaved people in Egypt: “The paradigmatic *magnalium Dei*

¹⁴ One of the most useful definitions of “plot” has been forwarded by Kieren Egan, “What is Plot?” *New Literary History* 9 (1978), 470: “Plots, then, determine and provide rules for the sequencing of narrative units —thereby creating a *sense of causality*” (italics added).

in the Bible is the liberation of slaves.”¹⁵ Few would question that the book of Exodus is far more Pharaoh-centered than is the theocentric Passover *Haggadah*. Whereas the latter stresses what the Lord has done in order to help his people, the former describes at some length what the ruler of Egypt did in order to prevent Israel from leaving his country. It is tempting to ponder what difference it makes that Jews read the *Haggadah* at Passover, which is a *non-narrative* compilation of prayers and Psalms, whereas Christians often recite the *narrative* Gospels in their services during Holy Week. In other words, is there something perilous in the act of simply reading narrative presentations without interpreting them because it implies that narratives need no interpretation since they only recount what *really* happened?

Although the Gospel tradition grew backwards, it is essential to remember that Mark chose not to present only the passion in his narrative. Therefore, Christians would do well not to stress only the cross in isolation from the life and teachings of Jesus. We shall return below to the consequences of a restricted focus on only the teachings of Jesus.

B. Is Suffering Redemptive *per se*?

In the oldest Gospel the author makes use of only one word to describe what the Roman soldiers did to Jesus before crucifying him: *fragellosas* (“having flogged,” Mark 15:15). In Mel Gibson’s movie, *The Passion of the Christ* this word became “flesh wounds.” Whereas Christian tradition has used the stock phrase “the passion narrative” as a reference to the entire story from his prayer in the garden of

Gethsemane to his death at Golgotha, Gibson understands “passion” to mean “torment due to torture.” It is true that this is precisely the range of his movie, but he – and also the comments from the cinema audience – emphasized the scenes in which Jesus is being tortured.¹⁶ Nevertheless, his movie comprises the scenes which usually together form the traditional passion plays. If nothing else, his movie has revealed the inherent weaknesses of the passion play genre. As James Rudin asks in an interview about the Oberammergau plays: “... the strategic question [is]: Can you do a good Passion play?”¹⁷

The suffering of Jesus is referred to in a number of ways in Christian texts, prayers, hymns and liturgies. It is therefore absolutely necessary for theologians to reflect on how his suffering can be said to be beneficial – and also to state whether human suffering is beneficial or detrimental. In a word, how do Christians interpret human suffering in the light of Jesus’ suffering?

A good starting point for this discussion is a passage in Hans Küng’s monumental study *On Being a Christian*.¹⁸ When discussing how the cross should be understood he presents three useful statements: (1) *Not seeking, but bearing suffering*: a sound Christian interpretation and application of the suffering of Jesus is not that Christians should long for or seek suffering and pain. To be a Christian is not to reconstruct Christ’s cross. Rather, Christian faith

¹⁵ Allen Dwight Callahan, Richard A. Horsley & Abraham Smith, “Introduction: The Slavery of New Testament Studies,” in *Slavery in Text and Interpretation*, eds. Callahan, Horsley & Smith [*Semeia* 83/84] (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1998), 1.

¹⁶ Gibson made a second version of his film six minutes shorter in order to soften the movie so that “Aunt Martha, Uncle Harry or your grandmother or some of your older kids” might enjoy the movie.” See Manohla Dargis, “‘The Passion’ Reopens, 6 Whole Minutes Shorter,” *International Herald Tribune* (March 16, 2005): 11.

¹⁷ James Shapiro, *Oberammergau: The Troubling Story of the World’s Most Famous Passion Play* (New York: Vintage, 2000), 37.

¹⁸ Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian* (London: Collins, 1977 [German: 1974]), 576-579.

may give them strength to take upon themselves their own crosses. (2) *Not only bearing, but fighting suffering*. Christians should not adopt the Stoic ideal of apathy towards suffering. Rather, they should “fight against suffering, poverty, hunger, social grievances, sickness and death.”¹⁹ When all this is said, then – and only then – one can approach his third statement: (3) *Not only fighting, but utilizing suffering*. This must also be said, but not too quickly, since sometimes it has been the only message people have heard. Pain is and remains pain, but it can be transformed in order to help a person to become “more mature, more experienced, more modest, more genuinely humble, more open for others – in a word, more human.”²⁰ This is certainly not to say that suffering promotes maturity *ex opere operato*, but that, in some cases, it is possible to *use* it in such a way.

Hans Küng’s three statements lead us to suggest an additional assertion: the cross may have something to teach us. By and large theology has so emphasized that the message of the cross is being sent to heaven that it seems to have forgotten totally that it might convey a message to humankind as well. Understood in this way, the gospel of the cross is *revelation*; it reveals something important.

Going back to the question of whether suffering *per se* is redemptive, it must be remembered that sacrificial discourse was the mother tongue of earliest Christianity. It is therefore to the world of atonement through animal sacrifices that we must turn to answer this question. It would be exceedingly difficult to argue that it is the *suffering* of the sacrificial animals that should have in some way been redemptive.

¹⁹ Küng, 578. He continues: “The modern world has produced a great deal of fresh suffering, but has also created immense opportunities for mastering suffering, as the successes of medicine, hygiene, technology, social welfare demonstrate.”

²⁰ Küng, 579.

Thus, if the passion narrative is interpreted in the light of sacrificial discourse – the mother tongue of earliest Christianity – it cannot be Jesus’ *suffering* that is redemptive. If Jesus is described as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29), it is his *death* that is being interpreted, not his suffering. Otherwise, the analogy is inapt. But even if it is the death of Jesus which is being analyzed, a number of questions remain; suffice it to mention four of them:

First, how is the language of Jesus as “the second person” (*ho deuterios anthrōpos*; 1 Cor 15:47) translated into the vernacular of post-Darwinians who do not believe that the texts about Adam (“the first person”, *ho prōtos anthrōpos*), Eve, Cain and Abel are to be understood as historical in the sense that these persons ever existed? How does one explain that Jesus came to make void the *culpa* of these persons? To ignore this question is to invite the accusation of a naïve Biblicism.

However complex, one must also address another issue; namely, how does the death of Jesus atone for the sins of humankind? This question has been answered in different ways in history: Athanasius of Alexandria represents those who argue that God in Christ paid a ransom to the devil in order to free humankind from spiritual slavery. Another answer was given by Anselm of Canterbury, who insisted that Christian theology should not give the devil such a central position and so argued that theology must be more theocentric. Thus, the ransom was paid to God, since it was God who needed *satisfactio*. (It may be mentioned in passing that the movie *The Passion of the Christ* in this respect seems to give vent to a pre-Anselm atonement theology, since the devil plays an active role throughout the movie, up until the moment when (s)he realises that (s)he

has been defeated.²¹) More than one theologian has argued that the Anselmean understanding amounts to cosmic child abuse. It does seem to accentuate the importance of violence rather than neutralize it: "... satisfaction atonement is based on divinely sanctioned, retributive violence."²² Indeed, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Anselm's theory fails to represent a loving God.

The third question is related to the previous: serious and soul-searching theologians ask themselves why Holy Week in history has been a time of horror for Jews living in the Christian world. Why is it that Jews have been blamed for the death of Jesus, since (a) it was the Romans who actually killed him; and (b) his death was said to be for the benefit of all humankind? A growing number of Christians realize that the answer to this question is not only that Christians have misunderstood what their religious leaders sought to convey, but rather that the problem actually lies in the explicitly violent discourse of Christian soteriology. If one isolates the death of Jesus from the rest of his life, the entirety is distorted; if one accentuates that the aim of his life was that it brutally ended, his mission is misrepresented. In other words, what is needed is a holistic perspective.

A fourth question must also be raised, even if it cannot be answered in a way that satisfies every reader. A central thought in many a Christian handbook is that God changes in the New Testament: the tribal God of Israel in the Old Testament suddenly decides to embrace universalism and impartiality in the New Testament; the heavenly avenger in the Hebrew Bible, so quick to take offence, becomes a loving and tender Father when he begins to communicate in Greek instead; the sexist deity of the old covenant in the new

covenant becomes aware of the importance of human rights etc. It does not take a Sherlock Holmes to identify the triumphalistic hidden agenda behind this binary discourse.

Still, the question remains: need it be central to Christian teaching that God actually changes in the New Testament? Would it not be better Christian theology to stress that God remains the same yesterday, today and tomorrow, but that human images and metaphors are insufficient, and therefore constantly need to be reviewed, refined and sometimes even refuted? If yes, do not Christians need to reassess those parts of the cross discourse which suggest that God is changed because of what happened at Golgotha?

These four questions highlight the array of problems which arise if the death of Jesus is secluded from his life. The foremost conclusion is that it would be misguided to pass over in silence Jesus' teaching and ministry.

2. Revelation: The Man Became Words, Words, Words

The last two centuries have witnessed a wide variety of various quests for the historical Jesus: the first, liberal quest exemplified by Adolf von Harnack's influential series of lectures *Das Wesen des Christentums*; the new, neo-conservative quest, the starting point of which was Ernst Käsemann's renowned lecture in Jugenheim at the reunion of Marburg old students on October 20, 1953; and the ongoing, third quest exemplified by the Jesus Seminar.²³ It is pivotal to note that all these three disparate quests have two things in common: first, they all concentrate on the proclamation of Jesus. It is always his teaching which scholars seek to restore. There is of course a hidden agenda

²¹ N.B. Gibson chose a *female* actress for the role of the devil!

²² J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2001), 225.

²³ For an exhaustive discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the various quests for the historical Jesus, see e.g., Svartvik, *Mark and Mission*, 13-108.

here: Jesus is best understood as the sum of his teaching. The second commonality is that Jesus is defined in negative terms: he was what Judaism was not; Judaism was what Jesus is not. It is noteworthy that this dissimilarity of Jesus is seldom argued for; it is simply assumed.

The reason for this stress on this distinctiveness of Jesus' proclamation is most probably that the ontological uniqueness of Christ (his *persona*, i.e., his "nature(s)" and the implications of his life, death and resurrection) in traditional theology has been transferred to a *historical* uniqueness of the historical Jesus, specifically, the radical incomparability of his *proclamation*. Previous generations stated that Jesus was unique since he was the "Son of God" and "the Incarnated Word" etc.; the scholars who take part in the quest for the historical Jesus disregard such ontological claims, but still postulate a uniqueness!²⁴

Although it might seem, at first sight, that such claims for historical uniqueness are straightforward, they are not really very helpful, since they tend to draw our attention to details rather than to the overarching paradigm of the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth. In the words of E.P. Sanders:

...it is very bad theology to hang a confession on a verbal detail. This little detail and that are unique. They prove that Jesus was the Son of God. [...] The claim of

Christianity historically has not been that Jesus said six things which no one else said.²⁵

It is a sad irony that a model that seeks to emphasize the revelatory significance of the teaching of Jesus in the end reduces his contribution to few alleged "unique" statements. The reason, of course, is that in the early rabbinic literature one finds numerous parallels to the teachings of Jesus. A hard-core supporter of the uniqueness school of thought must either ignore these parallels or seek comfort in the behavior which by Samuel Sandmel has been labelled *parallelomania* (the tendency to be interested in parallels between the New Testament and contemporary sources, but always and only in order to state that the Christian sources are "better" or "more unique" [sic! How could anything be *more* unique?]).²⁶

If the importance of Christianity only consisted in the fact that Jesus said some unique things, he is ultimately reduced to a phrasemaker. Two problems need to be mentioned: first, this reduction is methodologically complicated since uniqueness is not some odd point of pride – there are a number of phenomena in our world which in different ways are unique without being of any ultimate importance. Secondly, when the concept of uniqueness is applied in this categorical way, Second Temple Judaism falls victim to Christian teaching. Anything that looks or sounds "Jewish" reduces his uniqueness; it is therefore necessary to disparage and dismantle parallels between Jesus and his contemporaries. This is why contemporary ideologies are

²⁴ For aspects on the role of "uniqueness" in modern theologies of religions, see Jesper Svartvik, "The Quest of the Unique Jesus and Its Implications for Global Dialogue," in *The Concept of God in Global Dialogue*, eds. Werner Jeanrond & Aasulu Lande (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2005), 126-144.

²⁵ E.P. Sanders, *The Question of Uniqueness on the Teaching of Jesus: The Ethel M. Wood Lecture 15 February 1990* (London: University of London, 1990), 26.

²⁶ Samuel Sandmel, "Parallelomania," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81 (1962), 1.

belittled to such a degree that these misrepresentations sometimes amount to *l'enseignement du mépris*.²⁷

To sum up, apart from constituting a methodological nightmare, the Christological understanding which emphasizes the “unique” teachings of the Nazarene will eventually present the contemporaries of Jesus – i.e., the people he knew as his own – no longer as his historical context but as his theological contrast.

In a word, a Christology that accentuates *revelation* risks becoming not only disinterested in understanding “the anxieties and hopes” of Jesus’ contemporaries; it also fails to take his theological context seriously. Such a triumphalistic Christology should be avoided. It is true that the Fourth Gospel proclaims that “the truth shall set you free” (Jn 8:32), but it is equally true that Paul reminds the first Christians that they should “[d]o nothing from selfish ambition or conceit” (Phil 2:3). Revelation must not be isolated. The revelatory aspect must not be isolated from the other features of Christology. Hence, a third model will now be suggested.

3. Reflection: “... and the Word Became Flesh”

First of all, it is important to stress that attempts to find new ways to express Christology should not be subject to “heresy hunting.” One is perfectly free, of course, to stick to the examples in the grammar book by repeating traditional *formulae*, but the danger is that people will at best become indifferent or disheartened or at worst that theology will call forth disgust. Thus, the rationale for renewing Christological language is certainly not a wish to please people, but to

²⁷ Jules Isaac’s influential phrase is originally the title of one of his books, published in French in 1962. The English translation was in print two years later: *The Teaching of Contempt: Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Holt, 1964).

reach out to them. Proclaiming good, old truths to deaf ears is no more a noble deed than seeking to express them in new ways. The remainder of this article will suggest a language that enables us to express Christology anew. Before the model is presented, however, it is necessary to reflect on the language of “images” in the Bible and the Judaeo-Christian tradition.²⁸

(1) First, the Judaeo-Christian tradition (and later, to an even higher degree, also the Muslim tradition) has always emphasized that, since no human beings can comprehend God, there should be *no images*, or at least that images do not reflect the divine reality *in toto*. The biblical master story is, of course, the account in Ex 32 of how the people asked Aaron to make a golden calf to which the people could direct their prayers. But not only images can become idols; also texts, music, words and formulae can achieve a reputation that may become problematic in the long run.

(2) The second fact that should be pointed out is that there is a need for *many images* as all discourse is an approximation. Everyone who has translated from one language to another knows this. Theological discourse is no exception. Augustine said that “we talk about three ‘persons,’ not because it says everything, but in order to have something to say” (a paraphrase of his pregnant statement

²⁸ For an exploratory presentation in Swedish, see Jesper Svartvik, “Och Ordet blev köttfärs—om gudabilder, gudsbilder och Guds bilder,” *Svensk kyrkotidning* 100 (2004), 693-695. For a full and fair study which analyses the construction of the role the image-of-God discourse has and can play in modern Trinitarian theology, see B. Sandahl, “Person, relation och Gud: Konstruktionen av ett relationellt personbegrepp i nutida trinitarisk teologi” (unpubl. diss. Lund University, 2004). An important article on anthropology is Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “The Image: Religious Anthropology in Judaism and Christianity,” in *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, eds. Frymer-Kensky et al. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000), 321-337.

in *De Trinitate* 5.9 [CC]: *Dictum est tamen tres personae non ut illud diceretur sed ne taceretur.*) In other words, the only alternative to theological speechlessness is to use words and images in order to give speech to what we want to describe – and to be aware of their limitations. Lord Alfred Tennyson knew this: “For words, like Nature, half reveal / And half conceal the Soul within.”²⁹ God can and must be described in multiple ways – and one, single metaphor cannot be canonized as if it exhausts the subject.

(3) Thirdly, in the religious tradition there is an influential legacy that describes *each human being as the image of God*. Now, it was not unusual to call the political and/or religious leaders in antiquity “the image of God” (e.g., Tutankhamon was the living image of Amon), but what is so striking when one reads the Hebrew Bible is that *each and every human being* is said to be created *be-tselem Elohim* (“in the image of the Lord”). This perspective is remarkably egalitarian: there are no conditions, no restrictions: be it a man or a woman, be it a poor or rich person, be it a Jew or a Gentile: all are created *be-tselem Elohim*.³⁰

What, then, does it mean to be created *be-tselem*? There are of course many answers to that question. The most remarkable of all answers may be a daring *midrash* which can be found in both *Tanchuma* and the *Midrash Rabbah*. The midrashist suggests that when a person walks down the street, angels go before him or her, crying out: “Make way! Make way for the image of the Holy One, Blessed be He!”³¹

This text is interesting for two reasons: first, it is obvious that the midrashist is aware of the fact that *be-tselem*, so to

²⁹ Lord Alfred Tennyson, “In Memoriam A.H.H.” in *Selected Poems* (London: Phoenix, 2002), 51.

³⁰ Frymer-Kensky, 322f.

³¹ *Tanchuma* ‘Egev 4, and also *Deut.R.* 4.4.

speak, actually was intended for royals. In other words, since every human being is created by God *be-tselem* he or she is as if he or she were a king or a queen. Royal blood runs in their veins: “... every person can be the viceregent of God, manifesting some of the qualities of the divine. [...] An inherent dignity results which is humanity’s heritage and destiny.”³²

The second observation is that the midrashist here uses a Greek loanword for “image”; behind the Hebrew word *iqonin* one easily identifies the Greek word *eikonion*, which is also the origin of the English word “icon”. What this *midrash* seeks to convey is that every human being is like a wandering icon. Those who revere such an icon see something of who, what and where God is, which takes us to the fourth point.

(4) It has already been suggested that each human being is a reflection of the divine realm. It is only in this context that the set phrase of *Jesus as the image of God* makes sense. When the New Testament authors state that Jesus is “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15) and “the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being” (Heb 1:3), *this should not be understood in opposition to but as an intensification of his humanity*. This belief confirms the thought that each and every human being is the reflection – although through a glass, dimly – of the divine reality. In the words of James Carroll: “Christ did not die on the cross to change the mind of God, but to reveal the love of God to us. The crucifixion is a word spoken not to heaven, as Anselm has it, but to earth.”³³

³² John F. O’Grady, *Models of Jesus Revisited* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist, 1994), 177.

³³ James Carroll, *Constantine’s Sword: The Church and the Jews. A History* (Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 293.

Rather than conveying *revelation* in his teaching and bringing about *reconciliation* in his death, Jesus is the *reflection* of the divine will. In other words, what is suggested here is that contemporary Christology should emphasize that *Jesus in his teaching conveyed reconciliation*. His teaching reminds us that words can both hurt and heal. In this context it is interesting to note that Paul, when discussing reconciliation, states that God has committed unto Christians “the word of reconciliation” (*ton logon tês katallagês*; 2 Cor 5:19). This could, of course, be understood as the teaching *about* reconciliation, but it would be unwise to refute that it should also be a teaching that *promotes* reconciliation. In other words, the contents of the message cannot be isolated from the reactions that the message provokes.

In a similar way, contemporary Christology should seek to explore whether *the death of Jesus could be described in terms of revelation*. What does it mean that the image of God is being found among people being executed? This makes one think of a well-known graffito from the first century, discovered in 1857, scratched on a wall on Palatine Hill in Rome. It shows a person standing in front of a cross upon which a person wearing an ass head is bound. Under the image is written *ALEXAMENOS SEBETE THEON* (“Alexamenos worships [his] God”).³⁴ This Alexamenos, obviously a Christian, is being mocked by the graffitist for finding his God in a place of execution. Although



³⁴ It is not obvious why the verb (*sebeta*) is in the plural. One (less likely) explanation is that Alexamenos represents a whole group, i.e., all Christians. The more likely explanation is that it is a misspelling due to the *itacism*, i.e., the tendency to pronounce *ai* (and other letters or combinations of letters) as [e]. Thus, the sentence should be translated “Alexamenos worships [his] God.”

Christianity has shaped the minds and provided the words of a substantial part of the world for two millennia, the Alexamenos Graffito is still disturbing in its bluntness. It is indeed outrageous to proclaim that one’s God is bound to a cross at a place of execution. However much the cross as a symbol has been domesticated in history, this will remain so preposterous that it is either absurd or a deeply significant event. To the Christian mind it is the latter. In a Swedish hymn by Olov Hartman, inspired by the second chapter in Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians, it is stated that because of Christ’s emptying himself Christians know *who, what* and *where* God is.³⁵ In a word, the cross is a *revelatory* event. It is a matter of more than lofty words, more than mighty deeds, more than sole suffering and more than just death: what is being argued is that Jesus is the human face of God.

One need not choose between the *proclamation* and the *passion* of Jesus (*mê genoito!*)—but the relation between them should perhaps be reinterpreted. *It is suggested here that it is in his teaching that Jesus conveys reconciliation and that his suffering and death should be interpreted as a revelatory manifestation – not the other way around*. Thus, what is needed is a Christology which is based upon the entire life of Jesus: not only his teaching, his wonders, his suffering, his death, his resurrection. The gospel, in its kerygmatic sense, has much in common with the literary genre “Gospel”, i.e., a narrative about his entire life – not a compendium of his teaching or a minute-by-minute account of his preaching or passion. It is the totality which constitutes the image of God.³⁶ If only one aspect is emphasized, the image is distorted, often beyond repair.

³⁵ Psalm 38 in the Swedish Hymnal Book.

³⁶ Weaver proposes a *narrative Christus Victor* theology, which “encompasses the full story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus” (p. 227).

The first model accentuates the *reconciliation* on the cross so much that it ceases to be the way his life ended – and becomes the end of his life, i.e., the goal, sole purpose of his life. He came to die. The second model emphasizes *revelation* to such an extent that it distorts the obvious starting point of Christology, i.e., that Jesus was a Jew and that most of his teaching was consistent with the teachings of his contemporaries.

This section of the article, suggesting that Jesus should be described as the *reflection* of the divine, comes from the Johannine statement that “the Word became flesh” (Jn 1:14). The doctrine of the Incarnation is often presented as perhaps the largest obstacle in Jewish-Christian relations. What this article seeks to explore is how the Johannine language could be articulated so that, rather than being an obstacle, it may be a starting point for interreligious dialogue. Understood in this way, *incarnational language is not different from, but an intensification of what it means to be human.*³⁷

Once again, what has been suggested here is that Christology should isolate neither Jesus’ *proclamation* nor his *passion*. Rather, it should emphasise the totality of his life and works: in Jesus of Nazareth Christians perceive a *portrait*. It is the totality of the portrait which makes it iconic: “It emphasizes the totality of Jesus of Nazareth as the

³⁷ For an article suggesting that incarnational theology helps Christians to see (a) that theology should begin in wonder (cf. Abraham Joshua Heschel’s neo-Platonic statement that “Philosophy begins in wonder,” *Man is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* [New York: Noonday, 1951], 13); (b) that the Incarnation could be understood as a celebration of particularity; and (c) that incarnational theology should promote a non-apologetic theology, see Jesper Svartvik, “Christological and Soteriological Reflections in the Wake of Half a Century of Intense and Improved Jewish-Christian Relations,” *Current Dialog* 44 (2004): 54-60.

expression and revelation of God. There is no aspect of his life forgotten or unimportant.”³⁸ Now, it is essential to remember that this portrayal is partial: it is a first-century portrait from the Middle East painted with paintbrushes dipped in the apocalyptic range of colors. That final remark could be the starting point for another article: how should the apocalyptic portraits of the Galilean preacher be introduced and interpreted in our days?

Conclusion

In this article three Christological models have been discussed. Whereas the first two presentations are bound up with a number of methodological, historical, and theological shortcomings, the third is all the more worthy of our attention and theological reflection. Jews and Christians will always look upon Jesus of Nazareth in different ways, but it is probable that the third model is a better starting point for discussions when they meet. The third model argues that Christian incarnational language may be both an expression for and evidence of Jesus’ Jewishness. In this respect the third model differs greatly from the two previous models – and that will make all the difference.

The endeavor to reassess triumphalistic Christologies belongs to the more important tasks for Christians today, since the Christologies of earlier times have to such a high degree contributed to distorted and dangerous presentations of “the Jews” in the Christian imagination. It is for this reason that the recognition of both the crucifixion and the resurrection of the Jewish people are the most important events for contemporary Christian theology.

³⁸ O’Grady, 192.