

Humility of Hindsight

John 1:29-42

It goes without saying that biographies are written in hindsight, not foresight. Regardless of the potential parents, grandparents, siblings, teachers, peers, or anyone else see in a young person, time is the only way to witness what actually holds true. If a person of historic significance emerges, then those around him or her in earlier years attach great meaning to their memories of the person they once knew.

Such was the case of a friend of mine, the Rev. Dr. Jesse Brown, who was a seminary classmate of Martin Luther King, Jr. at Crozer Seminary, back when it was located outside of Philadelphia. Jesse passed away a couple of years ago, but I recall him reminiscing about a young M. L. King who lived in the room across the hall. The seminary class that entered in 1948 only numbered 32, so for three years, life was close and personal.

As you might expect, Jesse remembered his friend, Martin, as an outstanding student, even graduating at the top of his class and a chapel preacher to be admired. Pulpit rhetoric came to Martin naturally, as he was the son of the prominent African-American preacher, Michael King (who later changed both he and his son's name to Martin Luther King in honor of the German reformer). "Daddy" King, along with Gardner Taylor, were the giants of the National Baptist Convention 60 years ago—the nation's largest African-American denomination—King at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta and Taylor at the Concord Baptist Church in Brooklyn.

However, “M.L.” as he was called by his family, pushed back against the expectations of his father, who was grooming him as his protégé. Jesse recalled Martin trying to chart his own course, acting out at times as a bit of a maverick, constantly debating his classmates on philosophy and politics, smoking cigarettes while beating them at pool in the student lounge (rather rebellious activities for old-line Baptists!), and frequently engineering practical jokes on his friends and peers. He and Martin were among the shortest men in the class at 5’6” and 5’7” respectively, only towering over, Kenneth “Snuffy” Smith, their diminutive professor of Social Ethics, who I also knew in his later years—a Virginian Baptist liberal who introduced them to the writings of Reinhold Niebuhr who, along with Gandhi, became a major influence on King.

I would watch Jesse chuckle when he thought about the Martin he knew and the man he turned out to be. “History has a strange way of changing your impressions of what a person is meant to be,” he would muse. Since I was only a kid when King was assassinated, I imagined him from a distance as some larger-than-life historic figure; hence, I was duly impressed and fascinated that Jesse knew him so personally in his formative years. Though he never phrased it in this way, I could tell that Jesse was also somewhat taken back and humbled by the memory of a friend who would eventually change the world. It wasn’t what Jesse would have necessarily expected at the time, but looking back in hindsight, a lot of things made sense. In the normal course of life, unbeknownst to him, he could later see he was in the company of a remarkably great man.

I share this remembrance today, not only due to the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday weekend, but because I have to believe a similar humility in hindsight occurred for those who may have encountered Jesus at a formative stage in his life when, perhaps, the most noteworthy descriptor about him was that he was a woodworker from Nazareth—a seemingly average man from a small village in Galilee. It would be presumptuous, quite honestly, to think otherwise, in spite of the way the Gospels tell their stories and the manner in which we've learned them. Instead of the pious impressions people have of Jesus' life where he glows with divine light or acts so serenely removed from the mundane realities of human experience, it's likely that Jesus' contemporaries viewed him at the time as they would anyone else and really didn't know who they were encountering or what he would come to mean to the world, somewhat akin to what Martin Luther King's friends, like Jesse, would have thought about him.

That's the way it is with great people before they become "great people." They aren't distinguished from the rest of us at birth; they often live normal lives up until history grants them significance. As much as we might think differently of Jesus, that he was explicitly distinct from those around him (with a halo and supernatural powers) because God was uniquely within him, it would be fairer to assume that early on this was not the case and that he was appreciated more in hindsight, than in the moment.

That's one of the things we need to keep in mind whenever we explore the Gospel narratives. John, more than the other Gospel writers, plays liberally with the Jesus stories, artfully embellishing

them by adding later theological significance to experiences that were likely far more pedestrian at the time. This is noticeably true at the beginning in the record of Jesus' baptism and relationship with John the Baptist. Comparatively speaking, Mark and Luke made little mention of the baptism of Jesus, with no dialogue or apparent relationship between the baptizer and the baptized. Matthew, as we noted last week, tried to address the disconnect between the Jesus they came to believe in with the man who underwent the baptism of repentance administered by John the Baptist. He made it more about Jesus requesting John to baptize him, with the latter recognizing the significance of who he was.

But in the Gospel of John, John the Baptist virtually bows down and pays homage to Jesus with a remarkable devotional reverence: "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" Frankly, you have to wonder if this is the Gospel writer expressing adoration and not John the Baptist; it's quite unlikely before Jesus began his ministry, prior to his public witness, that anyone (especially from Judea) would have expressed this type of reverence toward a common laborer from Galilee! Jesus' significance to the world was unknown. This makes John's text read more like piety than prophecy.

Yet to be fair, this is what all the Gospel writers did in their own ways—reading back into the story of Jesus what he eventually came to mean. They weren't being literarily deceptive; it was common in antiquity to convey the meaning and significance of people in this manner. Their past lives were viewed through the events and meaning that were yet to unfold.

What is interesting to me, though, is not the debate over whether these words were actually proclaimed at the time by the characters in these stories, but why these things were said about Jesus in hindsight. What did it mean, in particular, when he was referred to the “Lamb of God” here in this passage—clearly meant to be a reverential reflection inspiring awe and humility?

It’s probably worth noting that only John’s Gospel refers to Jesus as the Lamb of God; you won’t find this designation in Matthew, Mark, or Luke. In fact, you won’t find it anywhere else in the New Testament except in Revelation, where a different Greek word for lamb is used. However, since John’s Gospel and Revelation were some of the latest writings contained in the New Testament canon, what this does tell us is this reference to Jesus was fairly late in coming to the New Testament literature—a meaning attached to Jesus that took time to develop and did so once the early churches emerged in the Greco-Roman world. The community to which this Gospel was addressed was likely located in Asia Minor, or the area of modern day Turkey.

We can well imagine in the cultural crossroads of Asia Minor, there were many religious ideas, as well as mythological stories and symbols borrowed between people who interacted on a daily basis. In John’s Gospel, the influences would have come from both Jewish and Greco-Roman sources, if not more, as common symbols in various cultures brought with them their associated meanings, adding depth and meaning to each one. This likely was the case when Jesus was referred to the “Lamb of God.”

For those with roots in Judaism, the meaning of the lamb was significant, as we already know. What's interesting, though, is the Aramaic word for lamb, *tel'a*, was also used in reference to "young boy" and "servant." What does that tell us? For an early church community reflecting on the meaning of Jesus' crucifixion, it could be read into the Suffering Servant motif of Isaiah where, as a play on words, the Servant of God is likened to a lamb being led to slaughter, taking away the sin of the world. Viewing Jesus, then, as a Suffering Servant or as a sacrificial lamb allowed Christians to find divine purpose and meaning in his death on the cross. Instead of a stumbling block to belief, his death became a meaningful path to understanding God's intent. The play on words between "lamb" and "servant" allowed for that.

In addition to this, of course, was that Jesus' death took place during the festival of Passover, so the association of Jesus' death with that of the Paschal lamb, slaughtered on the eve of Passover in commemoration of when God delivered the Israelites from Egypt, magnified its meaning. The blood of the lamb that served as a sign on the doorpost to protect Israelites from God's judgment when the angel of death passed over their houses was part of the annual Passover ritual, with the Paschal Lamb's blood sprinkled on the altar of the temple. Jesus' death came to be symbolically shaped and characterized by both the meaning of the Suffering Servant and Paschal Lamb.

This symbolism of Jesus as the Lamb of God came to be a favored way of interpreting the purpose of Christ to the point it has

been the standard way within western Christianity of interpreting the Gospel and, more specifically, this reference in John's Gospel.

But aside from Judaism, there were other layers of meaning that likely would have influenced the Johannine community. To Greeks or Romans, the most natural manner for them to view the Lamb of God was through the astrological signs of the zodiac and their cultural mythology. The lamb would be in reference to Aries the Ram, which was the constellation that would be rising very meaningfully in the Spring, around the time of the Jewish Passover. Thus, the association of Aries within Greco-Roman culture was easily tied into the early Christian interpretation of who Jesus was.

To explain this, let me quote at length biblical scholars, Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, who have written extensively on the social context of the New Testament world:

It is important to note that Aries is the first created cosmic being, the first constellation in the zodiac, the center and head of the cosmos, as the astronomers say.

...In the most ancient representations of the sky, Aries was always pictured as a male lamb with a "reverted" head—that is, as facing directly over its back to Taurus. ...Only a being with a broken neck could have its head turned directly backward as the celestial Aries does; and yet it remains standing in spite of the broken neck. Aries was an obvious choice to be perceived in terms of the Messiah-Jesus group's story according to which God's Lamb was slaughtered yet continues to stand.

...A final point: this Lamb of God takes away the sin of the world (v.29). How is this done? Once more, it was common ancient lore that when the vault of the sky returns to the position it had at the very time of creation, it will be with the Lamb at the point of preeminence, the head of the cosmos. And such a return to beginnings was expected...By ushering in a new created order, with a new sky and a new land, the cosmic Lamb of God does away with everything that preceded. All previous accounts are set aside; it is a new beginning. The sin of the world, ways of living that disgrace or dishonor God, ceases to be. The Lamb of God thus takes away

the sin of the world just as light does away with darkness, just as life does away with death.¹

As you can imagine, with symbolism in Judaism and in Greco-Roman culture, for first-century Christians, the Lamb of God was a profound mythical symbol and religious representation of what God was accomplishing in the life, death, and mission of Jesus Christ. In my opinion, that is how we should read these texts, reflecting on the rich metaphors imbedded in the names, illuminating the meaning of what early Christians believed about Jesus.

All of this later reflection guided those who told the stories of Jesus and brought remarkable significance to a man, who at the time, would have appeared to be a mere mortal. How thought-provoking and meaningful it must have been when the earliest disciples and apostles looked back on the one they once knew and came to realize was so much greater than they would and could have known at the time! That's why the Gospels are written as they are, with stories that present Jesus far more than a mere mortal, with rich symbolism and meaning, even at a time when no one could have known what he would come to be or the significance he would have for the future of the world. In time and in hindsight they discovered the true and unimaginable presence of God in him.

To a lesser extent, that's the humility of hindsight whenever a larger-than-life person is a part of our everyday world, whether it's Martin Luther King, Jr. or any of the great figures of history. They are human beings whose stories their legacies shape in hindsight.

¹ Bruce Malina & Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Fortress, 1998, pp. 50-52.

You never see them in quite the same way as you did before. That's not only a mystery to behold, it's a blessing to us all in time.

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