

Restoring the image of God — Possession of a people

At the beginning of this series, I commented that we stand at the end of 2,000 years of doctrinal development. That we are highly influenced by the debates that occurred during the Protestant Reformation, and while those debates were geared to answer the questions relevant to the struggle the 16th century reformers faced, may not be the questions that were being asked in the 1st century, and so may not provide us the best perspective on reading the New Testament. We need to return to reading the bible through the eyes of the first century audience, if we are to understand its message to us in the 21st century. For the way in which the church reads the bible affects its understanding of itself, and of her relationship with God.

The struggle against Marcion

There was a major event early in the life of the church that greatly affected the way she read and understood scripture. This event began in Rome in 138 AD, just three years after the conclusion of the Second Jewish War, a time when Jews everywhere were anathema to the Romans.

In that year, a charismatic, wealthy bishop from Sinope, which is located on the Black Sea in today's Turkey, came to Rome. His name was Marcion. When he arrived in Rome, he gave the church a massive gift of money. He soon greatly impressed the local congregation with his oratory and teaching. As the ruling Roman bishop was either ailing or had just died, the Roman church felt this subtle pressure to appoint Marcion the next bishop.

But some of the Roman members detected that Marcion's message was quite different from the message they had received and taught.

For the Roman church had read scripture spiritually, allegorically, typically and saw the historical narrative of Israel as leading up to and being fulfilled in Christ. Whereas Marcion read scripture literally and woodenly. He refused to see metaphor, allegory or type. And he read the action of God in Jesus Christ to be a radical departure from the actions of YHWH.

In fact, Marcion taught that YHWH was not the Father of Jesus, the Lord of Light. He taught that YHWH was a demigod created by the Father. Marcion placed the blame for sin at the feet of YHWH, who he taught was the Creator, and entirely rigorously just with no mercy, but also evil. Whereas the Heavenly Father of Jesus was merciful and gracious and of an entirely different order.

When Christian apologists pointed out that scripture provided evidence against Marcion's view, Marcion took Luke and ten letters of Paul, and declared that these were the only inspired scriptures from the Father. When the apologists pointed out that there was still

evidence against his views in these writings, he severely edited them, to make them fit his view.

Eventually, it turned out that Marcion was teaching that YHWH was a vengeful, tyrannical tribal deity who had terrorised the Jews. Consequently, any laws of YHWH that were different from the laws of Jesus' Heavenly Father needed to be disobeyed.

Because Sabbath was a day of rest, celebration and delight, Marcion taught instead that Christians should turn it into a day of fasting. Because the annual festivals were named as YHWH's festivals (Leviticus 23), Marcion rejected them. Because YHWH had blessed marriage, and instructed humanity to multiply and fill the earth, Marcion taught that marriage should be banned, and all members church should be chaste.

The Christian apologists, led by a man named Justin Martyr, locked in vigorous debate against Marcion's views. But tragically, in defeating Marcion's views, their own view had changed.

Marcion had deprecated the Sabbath and emphasised worshiping the God of light, and Justin Martyr had countered with a sophisticated argument that linked worship on the day of the Sun with creation, in order to show that YHWH was linked with the worship of Jesus. And in so doing, he ceded the doctrine of worship on Sabbath to Marcion.

So too, the annual festivals Marcion despised, gave way to this new worship on Sun-day, sweeping aside all of YHWH's festivals.

Where Marcion drew a significant distinction between Hebrew scriptures and Christian ones, Justin Martyr agreed that God had acted differently in time. So, whereas the Roman church had previously drawn no distinction between, say, the scripture of Isaiah, and that of Luke, now Justin Martyr agreed that they belonged to a different order of God's revelation. And thus was born the distinction between "Old Testament scripture" and "New Testament scripture".

The church had always been led by the Spirit. But when Marcion emphasised the importance of secret personal revelation, the church countered by emphasising their obedience to the Apostolic Tradition.

So, in all these ways, the church locked into a significant and vigorous debate with Marcion. It felt at times a death match struggling for the soul of the church. Eventually, in 144 AD, the church expelled Marcion, rejecting his views. When he strongly implied that they were indebted to him because of the gift he had given them, they returned his gift.

So he took his wealth, and toured the near east, raising up churches opposed to orthodox Christianity. He raised churches in Rome, Carthage, Nicomedia, Smyrna, Phrygia, Gartya, Antioch, and in Syria. Marcion's churches became a major competitor to Christianity. They lasted for 300 years in the West, and for more than 400 years in the East. Christianity had to struggle and compete against Marcion's powerful alternative way of reading scripture.

In the end, Marcion's churches died out due to lack of procreation. But in the struggle against Marcion, the very church that rejected him had been influenced by him. And were Marcion to visit a mainstream Christian church today, I think he would be largely satisfied. For the changes he advocated have influenced Christianity to this very day.

Reading scripture again

The questions and presuppositions we bring to scripture radically alter our interpretation and understanding of it. If we allow ourselves to be locked into post-Marcionite, post-Reformation debates, we will miss the force and vigour of scripture. If we can overcome doctrinal inertia, and reach back in time to understand how Jesus, John and Paul read and understood scripture, then the sectarian and denominational debates that rage today disappear.

In this series, we have been reviewing the scope of scripture from Genesis to Jesus in order to build a shared view of scriptural precepts. We've been working towards re-reading scripture the way Jesus did. So, this morning, let us explore what the People of the Way came to understand in light of the resurrection of the Lord, Jesus the Messiah.

Messiah

The People of the Way understood that Jesus is Israel's Messiah, Israel's representative, and the promised true King of Israel. For Jesus was the true son of David. For the angel Gabriel had announced to Mary:

“Mary, you have found favour with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:30–33).

And Jesus was the transcendent Messiah. In Jesus' trial (see Matthew 26:63–64) Jesus had applied the designation “Son of Man” to Himself (referencing Daniel 7:13, Psalm 110:1). And several of them had seen the truth of this claim when they saw Jesus radiant with the light of the glory of God (Matthew 17:2–6), and heard God's voice say:

“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him” (Matthew 17:5).

And this statement demonstrated that Jesus was the prophetic Messiah that Moses had foretold, for Peter, James and John had heard from the Voice of God the very same instruction Moses had given the people, advising them to “listen to him” (Deuteronomy 18:15–18, cf John 7:40).

Jesus was the miracle working Messiah. Jesus had demonstrated His connection with God through the outworking of his mighty works of healing (John 2:11, 23; 3:2; 6:2, 14; 7:31, etc.).

His believers realised that He was the priestly Messiah. This had been explicitly foretold in scripture (Hag:1:12-14; 2:2-4; 20-23; Zech:3:6-10;4:2-5,11-14). And His followers saw that He stood in the line of Melchizedek (Hebrews 7), mediating between God and humanity.

Finally, Jesus was the suffering Messiah (Isaiah 53), the Messiah who would bear the griefs and sorrows, the sins and transgressions of His people.

So, Jesus' followers realised He was the promised Messiah because He was the King, the Priest, the Prophet, the Miracle Worker, the transcendent Son, and because He bore the sins of the people.

Substitutionary atonement

Saving people from their sins was what the angel had announced to Joseph:

“Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife ... She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:20, 21).

So, Jesus was seen as Israel's representative, indeed, humanity's representative. Which is why Paul could write:

“The Son of God, loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

And,

“Messiah loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 5:2).

Peter read Isaiah saying,

“He bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors” (Isaiah 53:12).

And so wrote in response,

“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” (Peter 2:24).

So, Jesus bore your sins, my sins, indeed, the sins of the whole world, for the apostle John wrote:

“He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2).

The basis on which Jesus could bear our sins is that He was Israel's representative. Indeed, He was humanity's representative. He represented Israel and all humanity before God, doing for Israel, doing for mankind, what mankind and Israel could not do for itself.

This is what we call the substitutionary atonement. Jesus represented us, and God laid on Him our sins. Thus, Jesus is our substitute before God.

Jesus incorporates humanity

It was the fact that Jesus arose from the grave that triggered His followers' belief in Jesus' righteousness before God. When Jesus died, He died as Israel's and humanity's representative. When He arose, He arose as Israel's and humanity's new corporate head.

This is what Paul explicitly states in 1 Corinthians 15.

“The first man Adam became a living being; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit” (1 Corinthians 15:21, 22).

Jesus is the second Adam, the second corporate head of humanity. And here’s the implication of that.

“For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:21, 22)

And in Romans, Paul writes something similar,

“By the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous” (Romans 5:19).

In Adam, you were made a sinner. You were born into Adam, you were born into sin. So, we must die to Adam, and be reborn into Jesus, in order to take part in His life.

Jesus is now the head of humanity, but He’s of a different order of humanity to that of Adam. Jesus is the head of a humanity controlled by the Spirit of God. A spiritual humanity. There is only one way into this class of humanity, we must pass from the death of Adam to the life of Christ. We must lose our lives in Adam, die to our lives in Adam, and be reborn into Christ. There is only one source of life, and that is the life in Christ (1 John 5:12). There is only one quality of this life, the quality in which the Spirit of God lives and reigns in the life (Romans 8:10).

Jesus is the seed of the woman

I trust you’ll remember that this triumphant declaration about Jesus being the second head of corporate humanity is but a fulfilment of the prophecy God made to the serpent in Eden, when he said,

“I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your seed and her seed;
he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel” (Genesis 3:15).

So, Jesus is the hero that God had prophesied, the seed of humanity, now broken forth from the grave, filled with eternal life.

Jesus is the seed of Abraham

Jesus is not just the seed of humanity, but Paul makes clear that He is the seed of Abraham (Galatians 3:16). According to Paul, the promises made to Abraham were directed to and fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah, the true son of Abraham. So, according to Paul,

“In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ ... If you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s family*, heirs according to promise” (Galatians 3:26, 27, 29; ESV excepting * translation suggested by NT Wright).

So, Jesus is the son of the promise. The final fulfilment of the promises God made to Abraham. Jesus is the child born of the spirit, on whom the promises rest.

Who is Israel

So, who is Israel? Jesus is Israel.

In Jesus, the family of God has its fulfilment. A family in whom life springs eternal. A family in whom the Spirit dwells.

Thus, Jesus is the descendant of Abraham to whom the promise was made,

“In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:3).

So, who belongs to this family? At the very core of Romans 9–11, Paul answers this question:

“If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that Jesus raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9).

According to Paul, this is the governing factor as to whether or not you belong to this family of the Messiah.

“For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but ‘Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.’ This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring” (Romans 9:6b–8).

So, who is Israel? Jesus is Israel, and all who belong to His family. The promises of Israel are fulfilled in Jesus, and flow to everyone who confess his Lordship, and believe in His resurrection; and therefore, everyone who lives according to the Spirit, obeying Jesus’ commands.

This identity in Christ is the fulfilment of many scriptures, scriptures that said Israel would be reduced to a minuscule remnant (Isaiah 10:19), scriptures that said the Messiah would be a light to the Gentiles,

“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isaiah 49:6 *cf* 42:6; 60:3).

Scriptures that said God would make a people who are not a people to be a people (Romans 9:25, 26 quoting Hosea 2:23; 1:10).

So, Jesus is the root of the olive tree from which Israel shoots forth, the root of Jesse. And the physical descendants of Abraham are its natural branches, who belong to this tree when they “confess with their mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in their heart that Jesus raised him from the dead.” And the Gentiles are miraculously grafted into this tree when they “confess with their mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in their heart that Jesus raised him from the dead.” So in Christ, in the family of Israel, everyone is equal before God.

Possession by the Spirit

The sign of membership in this family of God is possession by the Spirit of God. Now we often say that possession of the Spirit is our guarantee. But the principle stated in the Bible is that a life governed according to the Spirit of God, is the life receiving the guarantee (see Romans 8), which sounds a whole lot more like the Spirit of God possessing us than us possessing the Spirit.

The principle sign of Jesus’ Lordship, of the commencement of His reign, was the outpouring of the Spirit (Acts 2). Throughout New Testament scriptures, possession by the Spirit is the key marker as to whether someone belongs to this new family of God. It was because of the Spirit’s guidance that Jesus’ followers realised that Gentiles did in fact have a part and a place in this family of God (Acts 10:45).

So, the Spirit is our guarantee that what is mortal about us will be swallowed up by life (2 Corinthians 5:5 cf 5:4). And “all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God” (Romans 8:14).

“The Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Romans 8:27–29).

Recipients of the new covenant promise

The key promise of the prophecy of Moses is that God would circumcise His people’s hearts, “so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deuteronomy 30:6).

Here we must listen to the observation made by the author of the book of Hebrews closely. Firstly, he quotes from Psalm 40 (vs 6–8),

“Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,
but a body have you prepared for me;
in burnt offerings and sin offerings
you have taken no pleasure.
Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come to do your will, O God,
as it is written of me in the scroll of the book’” (Hebrews 10:5–7).

When we read his interpretation, we have to bear in mind that Moses told Pharaoh that Israel needed to go into the wilderness in order to sacrifice to God (Exodus 5:3). But later, the prophets realised that God’s purpose was not sacrifice, but obedience, mercy and justice (1 Samuel 15:22; Hosea 6:6).

So, the author of Hebrews recalls this, while adding that although the law requires sacrifice, it is not God's purpose (Hebrews 10:8). But here is His purpose,

“Behold, I have come to do your will” (Hebrews 10:9; quoting Psalm 40:8).

And the author of Hebrews draws from this the lesson,

“He does away with the first [sacrifices, offerings] in order to establish the second [God's will]. And by that will we have been set apart through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Hebrews 10:9, 10).

So the law that is placed in a reborn, renewed, regenerated, circumcised in the heart member of the family of God is in fact the will of God. These regenerated hearts of flesh are recipients of the will of God, communicated through the Spirit who strengthens our hearts, that Christ may live within us (Ephesians 3:16, 17).

It is not the letter of the law that is placed within our hearts, but the spirituality of the law (2 Corinthians 3:6). The spirituality of the law is the will of God, which exists in our hearts because of the possession of the Spirit and the in-dwelling of Jesus.

For this is what Paul shares with the Corinthians when he writes,

“The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:17, 18).

Restoring the image of God

So here we are. We arrive at the fulfilment of the goal to which all scripture points.

God made this world so that He could set up His kingdom, His base of operations, His rule, and live with humanity. Humanity rebelled this rule, ceding rule of the earth to the serpent, and defaced the image of God. God could no longer dwell with humanity.

And it has been God's express purpose to dwell with humanity, and restore His image in His people, and to resume rule of this world, directly, and through His people.

God sought out the principle of sin and brought it to a head in the body of Jesus. By representing Israel and all of humanity, Jesus became our substitute, atoning for our sins and thus making peace with God. By being raised, Jesus became the source of life for all who believe. It is by being reborn into this life that we enter into the family of God, reaping all the blessings and favour bestowed on that family by God Himself. By being a member of the family of God, we acknowledge His supremacy and His rule, we willingly and lovingly obey Him with all that we are. We are possessed and strengthened by the Spirit, so that the Word of God—the living Spirit of Jesus—lives within us. And so the image of God is restored in mankind, and God dwells with His people.

Conclusion

There's no need to read scripture the way Marcion did, when we can read it the way Jesus, John and Paul did. For Jesus, John and Paul read scripture as testifying of Jesus, the entire narrative history of humanity and of Israel comes to a focus in the life of Jesus, the Word of God.

Marcion taught that the church was separate from Israel, whereas all of Jesus' followers to that time had taught that Jesus was the fulfilment of Israel's history, and that through Jesus they had a part in that people. So, there's no need to postulate two families of God, when the New Testament declares that there is one family of God, flowing from the new, Spirit-controlled humanity, founded in Jesus Christ.

So too, Marcion abandoned the creational precepts of marriage, Sabbath, annual festivals and the food laws, declaring that these were but the proclamations of a tribal deity.

Yet we find that there's no reason to abandon these precepts of God's will for us, because they are all founded in creation ordinances, in the very Will of God, in the very Word of God, who became flesh, died, rose, and now lives within our hearts, ruling in our lives, if indeed, we belong to Christ. If we belong to Christ, we will obey Him. If we belong to Christ, then the image of God is being restored in you, and God dwells with you.