

The Hebrew Heritage of Jesus of Nazareth

Jesus' life and mission did not take place in a vacuum. His teaching and actions had their source in and were most often congruent with his Hebrew heritage. Although he often acted and taught as "one who has authority and not as the Scribes," his intent was to interpret and fulfill the Torah, not to reject it. What are the aspects of his Jewish heritage that formed the foundation for his life and teaching and animated his daily life? What can we learn from Hebrew and Aramaic words from the first-century that help us understand the canonical gospels more accurately?

- Israel's identity was based on its ancient Hebrew relationship with God established in the Sinai Covenant. The covenant was established through God's initiative and Israel's fulfillment was based on the commandments given to Moses. The focus of fulfilling the covenant was on the life of the community, not on individuals. "*O children of Abraham, God's servant, O descendants of Jacob the chosen one, it is the Lord who is our God, whose judgments are in all the earth. The Lord remembers the covenant forever: the promise ordained for a thousand generations...*" (Ps 105:1-2) The people of Israel shared a corporate personality. They saw themselves as "God's people", not through merit, but because of God's initiative: "*It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all people.*" (Deut 7:7) The relationship of individuals with God was through the life of the corporate community and God's interaction with individuals is "mediated through the corporate personality of the nation."¹ In the Hebrew scriptures God is often referred to as the "Father" of the nation, whose care is faithful and just. At the same time, individuals' loyalty to the covenant is based on participation in the life of the nation where justice, righteousness and mercy must prevail. In other words, life with God is a corporate, family affair. "*It will be said on that day, Lo this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.*" (Isa 25:9)
- The Hebrews were earthy folks. They were not philosophers or systematic theologians. Their knowledge of God was based on God's interaction with them in their daily lives and the history of their nation. Therefore God is most often described in human terms and having human emotions and behavior. At the same time, God is all powerful over all nations and other gods. Yet God's desire and love for the Hebrew community is often expressed through the image of "God's heart" yearning for his community. In words addressed to Solomon, God says, *Now and for the future I have chosen and consecrated this house for my name to be there forever; my eyes and my heart will be there forever.*" (2 Chr7:16) At the same time, it is through the desires of individual "hearts" that the

¹ See Bernard J. Lee. *Jesus and the Metaphors of God*. New York: Paulist Press, 1993, 62.

covenant is fulfilled. In a moving prayer King David addresses God: *“Knowing my God how you search the heart, I know, and how you delight in honesty of heart I have willingly given you all this [offerings of the people to build a temple]; ...Yahweh, God of Abraham, Issac, and Israel our ancestors, watch over this forever, shape the purpose of your people’s heart, and direct their hearts to you, and give an undivided heart to Solomon my son to keep your commandments...”* (1 Chr 29: 9-19) For the Hebrews the heart is center of human consciousness and volitional desire. Therefore a rigid or “hard heart” is the cause of unfaithfulness to the covenant and harm of other people and the community.

- Justice is the primary manifestation of God’s presence in human life and society. In Jesus’ spiritual heritage, justice is the most fundamental aspect of God’s nature and God’s primary desire for human life. *“Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show mercy to you. For the Lord is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him.”* (Isa 30:18) Justice is the incarnation of God’s holiness and goodness. *“In the paths of your judgements, O Lord, we wait for you; your name and your renown are the soul’s delight.”* (Isa 26:8) Justice and mercy tell us what God is like. *“The Lord reigns, let the earth rejoice; let the many islands be glad. Cloud and darkness surround the Lord, whose throne is founded on justice and right.”* (Ps 97:1) Jesus said, “There is only one who is good.” In the Hebrew scriptures God says, “You shall be holy, because I am holy.” In other words, the vocation of the nation of Israel– and therefore for each person–is to manifest justice and live according to what God desires. Justice is not simply one aspect of human life it is the basis for human life.²
- All the writing and witness of the Hebrew prophets is rooted in God’s desire for justice made tangible in Jesus’ life. The conscience of Jesus was incubated in Jewish history, its spiritual heritage, and especially in the Hebrew prophetic tradition. As he began his mission of incarnating God’s presence in the lives of people around him, he spoke these words from Isaiah 42 in the synagogue in Nazareth: *“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 let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the years of the Lord’s favor.”* (Luke 4:18-19) When Jesus was criticized for being with tax collectors and sinners, he refers the Pharisees to the Hebrew prophets Hosea and Micah: *“Those who are well have no need for a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice. For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.’”* (Mt 9:12-13)

² see Lee, 73-74.

Some essential words familiar to a first-century Jew

TORAH (HALAKHAH): The Hebrew word *halakhah* is usually translated “Law” in English bibles. Modern readers may be inclined to give a legalistic interpretation to this meaning, based on twenty-first century experience of legal matters. Although Torah does refer to God’s desires for human behavior it is not a “juridical document.” Jacob Neusner, one of the most respected modern Jewish scholars, comments that “...*halakhah* derives from the root *halakh*, which means ‘go’, and a better translation would be ‘way.’” The *halakhah* is ‘the way’ a person lives to fulfill God’s intent for sanctity. (“You shall be holy because I am holy.”) Torah, halakhah, law, and “the way” in their first-century meanings refer to a path or way to fulfilling the intent of the covenant the Hebrews made with God at Sinai. *Halakhah* is a path to making God’s desires (God’s will) tangible in daily life. When Jesus proclaimed “I am *the way*, the truth and the life” he was telling those around him that his life is an example of what *halakhah* looks like. Jesus did not repudiate Torah, he interpreted its intent according to God’s desires for human life.

SHEKHINA means the presence and closeness of God to a human being or group of human beings in a specific time and place. God is experienced and known through what God does in the lives of human beings.³ Jesus said, “Whenever two or three are gathered in my name I am with them.”

MAQOM: *Maqom* refers to “place.” It is linked in human experience to *shekhina*. A human being experiences God in a specific location, a place. But place also means “nearness” and proclaims that God is always near because we are always in a place!

SHAMAYIM, literally means *heaven*. This does not mean that *maqom* and *shamayim* describe a two-layered creation. In Hebrew thinking, heaven and earth are dimensions of one reality. *Shamayim* refers to the “otherness” of God, not God’s distance from human life. As Bernard Lee points out, “Every time I think I have hold of God in God’s nearness, I am quickly reminded that God is always more than *Maqom*.”⁴ Psalm 150 invites us to praise God in God’s “surpassing greatness.”

GEVURA, literally means *power*. Some translations call *gevura* “omnipotent” or “all powerful.” But these translations misrepresent the Hebrew meaning. *Gevura* refers to God’s abundant gift of creation and its continuing creation. Bernard Lee points out that God’s power is always redemptive and life-giving.⁵ The purpose of God’s power, even when entrusted to human beings, is to bring forth and sustain life.

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³ see Lee, 84-85

⁴ Lee, 85

⁵ Lee, 85