

## JESUS

Among Hebrew people there was a vast messianic expectation that took many forms, but Jesus did not fit any of them. The image of a crucified messiah, hanging limp and dead from a wooden cross, violated Hebrew messianic expectations. Spong describes:

Only a man who had committed a crime punishable by death was to be hanged on a tree, said the Torah, and "you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is accursed by God" (Deut. 21:22-23). Not only was he executed in a public place, but soldiers rolled dice for his only garment, hurled a spear into his side, and gave him to a petitioning group to be buried in a borrowed tomb. It was not a king-like portrait. His closest friends certainly did not understand him as a messiah. One of them betrayed him, another denied him, and all forsook him and fled. This ignoble group of disciples had acted in an ignoble manner. Would a real messiah have chosen so benign and lowbrow a group of disciples? When his words were remembered, he fit neither the mythic hero image nor the messianic image. He claimed no power. Rather he said things like: "Unless you become like little children [powerless children], you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:3).<sup>1</sup> He said the "last shall be first" (Mark 10:31). He washed the feet of the disciples (John 13:1-11). "I am among you as one who serves," he stated (Luke 22:27). He exhorted them to decline power images, not to lord it over people as the kings of the Gentiles did (Luke 22:25). He identified his cause with finding the sheep that were lost (Luke 15:4) and welcoming home the prodigal who wasted his father's wealth in a life of debauchery (Luke 14:11ff). His teaching found him using Lazarus, a poor beggar whose sores were licked by the dogs of the street, as the sign of his kingdom rather than Dives, the rich man who dined sumptuously (Luke 16:20ff). He identified his cause with the half-breed Samaritan who went out of his way to alleviate suffering, not with the priest or the Levite who passed by on the other side (Luke 10:29ff). He said his disciples were to turn the other cheek (Matt. 5:39), to go the second mile (Matt. 5:4), and to love their enemies (Matt. 5:44). He placed his cause on the side of the "woman of the city" who washed his feet with her tears and dried them with her hair, not on the side of the morally righteous Simon the Pharisee, in whose home he was guest when that woman arrived (Luke 7:36ff). He was not willing to fight for his rights or his life, to use compulsive power to achieve his objectives. He suggested that his disciples must forgive not once or twice but up to and beyond seventy times seven occasions (Matt. 18:22). His strength, strangely enough, lay in his willingness to sacrifice himself to his enemies. His life was a call to reverse the standards of the world. In that world, importance was achieved by having power over others; serving others was thought to be demeaning. When this self-giving Jesus was crucified, he refused to defend himself. He accepted the whips and nails of his tormentors, and he died praying for them (Luke 23:34). His life was too vivid to be forgotten, too real to be ignored.<sup>2</sup>

He fit neither the messianic role of the Hebrews nor the mythic hero role of the Greeks. Hence Paul called him "folly" to those who are perishing" (1 Cor. 1:18) and suggested that Jesus represented a scandal. How does one take that life and fit it into the expectations of either the Greeks or the Hebrews? Yet how could they deny the power of the experience men and women had with this Jesus? His love was real. His sense of presence was vivid. His magnetic appeal to others was immense. Self-giving, suffering, powerlessness, and self-sacrifice were the marks of his human life. There was an undeniable beauty about this Jesus, who was in fact "a man for others. Conflict between experience and expectation reached a climax on Good Friday. Jesus died.

God was not to be perceived after the analogy of a distant deity, who was both superhuman and isolated, but; rather as a divine essence not separate from and not identical with but incarnate within humanity, emerging from the heart of life in self-giving love and freely offered being. That was the revelation that lay behind the alleluias of that first Easter. That was the meaning of God disclosed in the person of Jesus that somehow challenged the regal images of the past. That essence, consequently, had to be lifted theologically into being the essence and definition of God. The experience of those who perceived demanded it.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 37.

<sup>2</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 38-39.

<sup>3</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 40.