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THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUS

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Christians affirm that Jesus is fully divine and also fully human¹. He is fully divine as the eternal Son, who along with the Father and the Spirit, constitute from all eternity the Holy Trinity. Today in the sceptical West and in the Islamic world many hesitate to attribute deity to Jesus. In contrast, during the early Christian centuries, some of his followers found it difficult to convince others and sometimes even themselves that Jesus is truly human.

THE HUMANITY OF JESUS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In affirming the full divinity and the full humanity of Jesus, orthodox Christians follow the narrative of the incarnation as it is spelt out poetically by Paul in Philippians 2:6-11. 'Christ Jesus,' the apostle tells us is 'in very nature God' (v. 6). Yet in becoming incarnate, he was 'made in human likeness, and being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!' (vv. 7-8). In becoming human, he does not cease to be 'in very nature God'. But during his life on earth he consistently refused to use his equality with God to his own advantage, enabling him to take 'the very nature of a servant' (v. 7), thus fulfilling the role of the Servant of the Lord prophesied in Isaiah.² The mystery of the incarnation is that at one and the same time Jesus is 'in very nature God' while possessing 'the very nature of a servant'.

As a servant, Jesus was totally dependent on his Father. His life was motivated by faith and obedience. His faith and obedience were human expressions. Jesus lived a genuinely human life. As he faced the challenges of living in a fallen world he chose not to exercise his divine prerogatives or call upon the resources his divine attributes as the Son of God. Rather he lived as a believer in God. The writer to the Hebrews affirms that Jesus can 'empathise with our weaknesses' precisely because he 'has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin' (Heb. 4:15).

¹ This article is the revised text of a lecture given on 30 April, 2013, at Taylor University, IN, USA.

² Isaiah 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12.

The humanity of Jesus is fully acknowledged in the Gospels. Although miraculously conceived,³ his birth was natural. His childhood is not covered in detail. What we know is told us by Luke. He reports that when Jesus was a week old ('on the eighth day') he was circumcised, and roughly five weeks later his parents presented him to the Lord in the temple.⁴ Luke goes on to summarise Jesus' infancy and childhood as follows: 'And the child grew and became strong; he was full of wisdom and the grace [i.e. blessing] of God was upon him.'⁵ Like all healthy children, Jesus grew physically and psychologically. Luke's next reference to him is when he was twelve years of age, again visiting the temple with his parents, this time during Passover.⁶ During that visit to the Temple, Jesus fulfils the role of a learner, first hearing and then asking questions of the rabbis. It is clear that even at this early age he exhibited an unusually high degree of spirituality. Luke informs us that the rabbis were 'amazed' and his parents were 'astonished' at the depth and extent of his understanding. Jesus' response to his remonstrating parents—'Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house'—reveals an early consciousness of his unique calling. There is a subtle distinction in the narrative between 'your father' in Mary's query and 'my Father' in Jesus' reply.⁷ Luke concludes his account of that event marking Jesus' transition into adolescence in similar terms to those he used of his childhood development: 'And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.'⁸ Perhaps it is not surprising that Luke, a medical doctor, should pay special attention to the growth and development of Jesus as a child and teenager. Significantly in both references he stresses spiritual as well as physical growth.

Thereafter the four Gospels are silent until the baptism of Jesus at the age of thirty⁹ apart from incidentally informing us that he worked as a carpenter.¹⁰ But we can be certain that his spiritual growth and development continued during these eighteen years. The writer to the Hebrews assures us that in his life on earth, 'even though Jesus was God's Son'

³ Luke 1:35.

⁴ Luke 2:21-23; cf. Lev 12:3-4.

⁵ Luke 2:40.

⁶ Luke may be describing the ceremony in which Jewish boys in their early teens are recognised as responsible members of the religious community—i.e. they become a 'son of the commandment' (*Bar Mitzvah*).

⁷ Luke 2:41-50.

⁸ Luke 2:52; cf. 2:40.

⁹ Luke 3:23

¹⁰ Mark 6:3 / Matt. 13:55. Geza Vermes argues that 'carpenter' here is better understood as an honorific accorded to a local sage. (*Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* [London: SCM, 1983], pp. 20-2).

he prayed to God and was heard 'because he was humble and devoted.'¹¹ The anonymous writer reiterates Paul's stress in Philippians 2:8 on Jesus' obedience to God. While in both Philippians and Hebrews the specific context of his obedience is suffering and death, it is reasonable to believe that obedience to the will of God was a constant feature of Jesus' life both before and throughout his public ministry.

While the New Testament affirms the sinlessness of Jesus,¹² it also testifies to God sending his own Son 'in the likeness of sinful flesh,'¹³ i.e. 'in the likeness of sinful humanity' as the TNIV helpfully translates the phrase. Because Jesus 'came with a nature like our sinful nature,'¹⁴ during his ministry he exhibited the physical, psychological and cognitive limitations inflicted on our humanity by the Fall. There is reference in John 4 to Jesus tiring after physical exertion. He met the Samaritan woman when he was sitting by the village well in Sychar resting from the hot midday sun during his journey on foot from Judea to Galilee.¹⁵ Further, in John's Gospel there are instances of Jesus being subject to emotional distress. Facing the destructive power of death and the weeping of Mary of Bethany and her friends at the grave of Lazarus, we are told that Jesus 'was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.'¹⁶ In another context John tells us Jesus 'was troubled in spirit'¹⁷ as he announced to his disciples that one of them would betray him. In Gethsemane Jesus is afflicted with doubt and fear as he anticipates his horrific death as the sin-bearer.¹⁸

Even the social influence of Jesus and the extent of his conscious knowledge were limited during his 'state of humiliation'. Jesus chose to live within the limited powers of an ordinary human being rather than by divine omnipotence. When visiting Tyre we are told 'He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there'. 'But,' Mark goes on, 'he could not keep his presence a secret.'¹⁹ He was genuinely 'amazed' at the faith of the centurion and he also was at the unbelief of people in his home town of Nazareth.²⁰ He declared that he did not know the day or the hour when the Son of Man will come in the clouds with great power and glory. 'No one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the

¹¹ Heb 5:7, GNB.

¹² 1 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; John 8:46.

¹³ Rom. 8:3.

¹⁴ Rom. 8:3, GNB.

¹⁵ John 4:6.

¹⁶ John 11:34.

¹⁷ John 13:21.

¹⁸ Matt. 26:26-46; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:39-46

¹⁹ Mark 7:24.

²⁰ Luke 7:9; Mark 6:6; cf. Matt. 13:58.

Father.²¹ In the Gospels we are confronted by the mystery of the incarnation: that the One who is omnipotent and omniscient, consciously, and pre-meditatively opted not to exercise his divine attributes and prerogatives, but rather to live within the parameters of human experience without, in so doing, acting in any way morally inconsistent with his divine nature. Thus he chose to be born as a helpless, vulnerable baby, to experience normal human development of body and mind from childhood into adolescence into manhood. So that when the time came to enter his public ministry he already knew he would be able to fulfil that ministry only if he lived in total dependence on the Father and the Spirit.²²

This relationship with his Father and the Holy Spirit was the nerve centre of Jesus' spirituality. This becomes clear at his baptism in which all three persons of the Trinity were actively involved. The baptism of Jesus was both an act of identification and of dedication. In submitting to John's baptism of repentance 'when all the people were being baptised', Jesus identifies himself with us, numbering himself with the transgressors.²³ At the same time, in seeking the initiatory rite of baptism, Jesus was consecrating himself to the Messianic ministry which he had come into the world to fulfil. This spiritual dynamic of Father, Son and Spirit working together is manifested in the three key events that took place at the baptism of Jesus.

What are these three events? First, Jesus prays. Luke tells us it was 'as he was praying' that Jesus was baptised by John.²⁴ This is no surprise since the Gospels go on to highlight some seventeen references to Jesus' active prayer life.²⁵ Second, the Spirit descends. 'The Holy Spirit descended

²¹ Mark 13:32.

²² 'Whatever the Son of God wrought in, by, or upon human nature, he did it by the Holy Ghost, who is His Spirit, as he is the Spirit of the Father.' John Owen, 'Pneumatologia', in *The Works of John Owen* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2000 [1862]), vol. 3, p. 162.

²³ Luke 3:21; Isa. 53:12.

²⁴ Luke 3:21.

²⁵ J. G. S. Thomson (*The Praying Christ* [London: Tyndale, 1959], p. 35) groups these references under four heads. (1) Jesus' prayers at the great events of his life: (a) his baptism (Luke 3:21); (b) the choice of the Twelve (Luke 6:12-13); (c) the confession of his messiahship at Caesaria Philippi (Luke 9:18); (d) the Transfiguration (Luke 9:29); (e) in Gethsemane (Luke 22:39-46); (f) on the cross (Luke 23:46). (2) His prayers in the course of his ministry: (a) before the great conflict with the ecclesiastical authorities (Luke 5:16); (b) before giving the Lord's Prayer (Luke 11:1); (c) when the Greeks came to him (John 12:27-28); (d) the retreat after feeding the five thousand (Mark 6:46). (3) His prayers at his miracles: (a) healing the multitudes (Mark 1:35); (b)

on him in bodily form like a dove.²⁶ Conceived by the Spirit in Mary's womb,²⁷ Jesus in his baptism received a new anointing in which he was given the fullness of the Spirit and power in order to fulfil his public ministry.²⁸ Third, the Father speaks: 'And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."²⁹ It is highly significant that these words of the Father echo two OT scriptures. The first phrase: 'This is my Son' resonates directly with the words 'You are my Son' recorded in Psalm 2 with reference to the ideal King of Israel. The second phrase: 'whom I love and with whom I am well pleased' reflects the description of the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah 42:1: 'my chosen one in whom I delight'.³⁰ It is important to note and to reflect on the striking paradox expressed in the voice from heaven. The ideal of kingship would be manifested in servanthood!

The same three features are also evident in the temptation of Jesus which immediately followed his baptism.³¹ The tempter came to Jesus after he had fasted for forty days in the wilderness.³² On several occasions in the NT, fasting is associated with prayer.³³ Although we are not explicitly told that Jesus was praying during his long fast, it is reasonable to assume that he spent much of the time in prayerful communion with his Father, reflecting on the commissioning he had just received in his baptism and anticipating the public ministry on which he was shortly to embark. As in the baptism, so in the temptation, the Holy Spirit is active.

feeding the five thousand (Mark 6:41); (c) healing a deaf-mute (Mark 7:34); (d) raising Lazarus (John 11:41). (3) His prayers for others: (a) for the Eleven (John 17:6-19) (b) for the whole church (John 17:20-26); (c) for those who nailed him to the cross (Luke 23:34); (d) for Peter (Luke 22:32).

²⁶ Luke 3:22; cf. Mark 1:10; Matt. 3:16.

²⁷ Luke 1:35.

²⁸ Acts 10:38-39; cf. John 3:34.

²⁹ Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22; cf. Matt. 3:17.

³⁰ James Denney reflects in the following way on this remarkable correlation between the heavenly voice and these two OT texts: 'Often He [Jesus] had steeped His thoughts in them [i.e. Psalm 2 and Isaiah 42], but at last, in this high hour of visitation by the living God, they spoke to Him with direct, identifying, appropriating power. It was His own figure, His own calling and destiny, that rose before Him in the ideal King of the Psalmist, and the lowly Servant of the Prophet; it was His inmost conviction and assurance from this hour that both ideals were to be fulfilled in Himself.' James Denney, *Jesus and the Gospel: Christianity Justified in the Mind of Christ*, (2nd edn; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1909), pp. 203-4.

³¹ Matt. 4:1; Mark 1:12; Luke 4:1

³² Matt. 4:2; Luke 4:2.

³³ Matt. 6:5-18; 17:21 (KJV); Acts 13:3; 14:23.

Luke tells us that ‘Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness’.³⁴ Then, having concluded his account of the temptation, Luke segues to his narrative covering the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry with these words: ‘Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit.’³⁵ The most marked difference in the divine assistance given to Jesus in his baptism from that given during his temptation is that in the latter there is no reference in the narrative to a voice coming from heaven. Nevertheless, it surely is significant that Jesus consistently counters the devil by quoting the Word of God. Furthermore, the devil’s strategy in the three temptations was to scramble the heavenly baptismal message by tempting Jesus to rely on the first part (‘You are my Son, whom I love’ — i.e. on being the King in and through whom God’s rule would be established and demonstrated on earth) to such an extent that he could avoid fulfilling the second part (‘with you I am well pleased’)—which, as we have seen, alludes to the Servant of the Lord on whom God puts his Spirit so that in faithfulness and meekness he may establish justice on earth. That is, Satan set out to persuade Jesus that he could be King without becoming a servant. In other words, his objective was to reverse the divine strategy and so negate it. But in all three temptations Jesus repulsed the devil’s offensive by strongly affirming his servanthood in submitting to the words of his Father, words on which he may well have been meditating during these forty days.

Both the voice heard at his baptism and the scripture texts he resorted to when under the intense pressure of temptation, highlight Jesus’ engagement with Scripture—an engagement which lay at the core of his spirituality while on earth, and an engagement that I wish to make the focus of this article. I do not intend to neglect Jesus’ practice of prayer and his infilling with the Holy Spirit for, as we have seen, they also were key factors in his spirituality and, indeed, as we shall see, both greatly facilitated his engagement with the Word of God.

JESUS AND THE SCRIPTURES

Jesus, as we have noted, opted to live his human life on earth within the parameters set by his humanity rather than drawing upon his divine resources as the Son of God. During the covenant renewal ceremony on the Plains of Moab with the Israelites about to enter the promised land, Moses makes a basic distinction between the divine and human. ‘The secret things belong to the Lord our God,’ he tells the people, ‘but the

³⁴ Luke 4:1.

³⁵ Luke 4:14.

things revealed belong to us.³⁶ This dissimilarity helps us to understand the spiritual dynamic of the earthly life of Jesus. Because he was genuinely human he shut out the secret knowledge belonging to his divine existence within the Trinity, instead choosing to live by revelation. Furthermore, because he was living as our representative, his task was to ‘fully obey the Lord’.³⁷ Not only was he called to fulfil his mission without recourse to his own divine resources as the Son of God, but as a human being he was committing himself to the highest standard of human motivation and conduct. In other words, in his humanity he was called to be as morally perfect as he was in his deity from all eternity, along with the Father and with the Spirit,

This dependence of Jesus on revelation rather than on omniscience helps us to understand his attachment to the Scriptures both in terms of articulating his message and of understanding his mission. I will now explore in more detail, insofar as the Gospels make this possible, the role of the Scriptures in the experience of Jesus with regard to both the articulation of his message and his understanding of his mission. In other words, we will first look at Jesus as proclaimer, and then go on to explore Jesus as believer.

JESUS AS PROCLAIMER

‘What I have heard from him I tell the world’³⁸ is Jesus’ own summary of the origin of the teaching that both astonished and unsettled his contemporaries and has also fascinated and captivated millions of his followers down through two millennia. Yet the Gospels record only three examples of what the Father specifically said in the presence of Jesus. In the first two of these—the heavenly voice at Jesus’ baptism and the voice from the cloud at his transfiguration—the message is, in effect, more or less directly taken from the Scriptures.³⁹ The third occasion, which is recorded in John 12, took place early in Jesus’ final week and follows his triumphant entry into Jerusalem. Jesus is anticipating his death, now only hours away, and is deeply apprehensive. He momentarily recoils in horror from the prospect: ‘Now is my heart troubled—and what shall I say? Shall I say, “Father, do not let this hour come upon me? But that is why I came—so that I may go through this hour of suffering. Father, bring glory to your name!”’ The evangelist continues the narrative: ‘Then a voice spoke from heaven, “I have brought glory to it, and I will do so again.”’ The crowd standing there

³⁶ Deut. 29:29.

³⁷ Deut. 28:1.

³⁸ John 8:26.

³⁹ Matt. 3:17; Luke 3:22; Matt. 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35.

heard the voice, and some of them said it was thunder, while others said, "An angel spoke to him!" But Jesus said to them, "It was not for my sake that this voice spoke, but for yours."⁴⁰ As at the baptism, the divine words are spoken by 'a voice from heaven.' It is surely significant that on this occasion there is again an allusion to a key Old Testament theme which is articulated in texts such as the following:

- 'I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army' (Exod. 14:4 (cf vv. 17, 18) recording Yahweh's victory over Egypt).
- 'You have gained glory for yourself' ('You are glorified', NRSV), says the prophet.' (Isa. 26:15, part of a song celebrating God's ultimate victory over the forces of evil).
- 'Thus says the Lord God: I am against you, O Sidon, and I will gain glory in your midst.' (Ezek. 28:21, NRSV; cf. Ezek. 39:13; Hag. 1:8; 1 Sam. 2:30; Ps. 22:23, etc.).

Thus, in all three instances in the Gospels where God literally speaks to Jesus the words spoken are readily identifiable with texts from the OT. This substantial identification between the voice of God and the Scriptures ought not to surprise us. For, as Kevin Vanhoozer claims, writing serves as a medium of communication every bit as much as speaking.⁴¹ This would have been particularly so in the case of Jesus who was given without limit the Spirit who had originally inspired the ancient writers and who animates their texts for later readers and hearers.⁴² Telford Work contends that much of what Jesus speaks is Scripture, in the form of direct quotations and allusions.⁴³ Obviously Jesus does more than recite ancient texts. He also fulfils and radicalises them.⁴⁴ He renders the rituals of the Jerusalem temple operationally obsolete along with the extensive Scrip-

⁴⁰ John 12:27-30, GNB.

⁴¹ 'Triune Discourse: Theological Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks (Part 2)', in *Trinitarian Theology for the Church: Scripture, Community, Worship*, ed. by D. J. Treier and D. Lauber (Downers Grove, IL / Nottingham, UK: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p. 70.

⁴² John 3:34; Heb. 3:7.

⁴³ *Living and Active: Scripture in the Economy of Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 85.

⁴⁴ 'Jesus commonly speaks biblical language as his own words. Where he reinterprets these words, he does so to intensify rather than dilute them' (op. cit., p. 85).

ture materials relating to their use.⁴⁵ Further, in fulfilling the OT Scriptures Jesus radicalises them. This is very clear in the ‘six antitheses’ which form part of the Sermon on the Mount.⁴⁶ In the case of the first antithesis relating to the commandment ‘You shall not murder,’ Jesus fulfils it by radically deepening it (v. 22a), widening it (v. 22b) and positivizing it (vv. 23-24).

The substantial identification between the *ipsissima verba* of the Father in the three cases noted and specific OT Scriptures may suggest that behind the various assertions of Jesus that he hears from the Father, recorded in the Fourth Gospel, lies Jesus’ intimate and prayerful engagement with Scripture.⁴⁷ Of course, some or all of these ‘hearings’ on the part of Jesus may have been received by direct revelation. But the consistency of three hearings of the Father’s *ipsissima verba* echoing OT Scripture indicate the possibility that the hearings recorded in John might also have been mediated through Scripture. I suggest that the reality of the self-emptying of Christ Jesus affirmed in Philippians 2:6-8 transforms this possibility into a probability.

Jesus’ meditation on, and interpretation of, the Scriptures is surely a model for us. What he heard from the Father he told the world.⁴⁸ We too hear from the Father as we engage with the Scriptures. And often the message we receive from him is given to be shared with others as well as received by ourselves. Like Jesus we are called to engage with Scripture for communication as well as for consumption. To this call many Chris-

⁴⁵ Jesus also declared obsolete the OT food laws (Mark 7:19). The church has continued to value the memory of many of these obsolete ceremonies as teaching models of what was to come.

⁴⁶ Matt. 5:21-48.

⁴⁷ To the question of the Jewish authorities: ‘How did this man get such learning without having been taught?’ Jesus responded: ‘My teaching is not my own. It comes from the one who sent me’ (John 7:16). When the Pharisees accuse him of bearing an invalid testimony, Jesus replies that ‘he who sent me is trustworthy, and what I have heard from him I tell the world.’ He goes on: ‘When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he and that I do nothing on my own, but speak just what the Father has taught me’ (John 8:26, 28). As a rejoinder to the scepticism of these religious leaders Jesus declares: ‘All I have ever done is to tell you the truth I have heard from God’ (John 8:40, GNB). During his final Passover in Jerusalem Jesus warns the crowd listening to him in the temple that rejecting his message will incur judgment on the last day because he had received that message from God. ‘I did not speak on my own, but the Father who sent me commanded me to say all that I have spoken.... Whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say’ (John 12:49-50).

⁴⁸ John 8:26.

tians in the global south respond more readily than we do, and leave us an example to follow. It is now time to segue into exploring Scripture engagement in Jesus' life as a believer.

JESUS AS BELIEVER

We have already interpreted the main thrust of Jesus' temptations as a Satanic attempt to persuade him to deny his life calling as the long awaited Messiah. Matthew and Luke make clear that Scripture is Jesus' only defence. While Martin Luther is remembered for throwing his inkwell at the devil, Jesus used what Paul was later to call the sword of the Spirit.⁴⁹ Of course, it's important to recognise that Jesus was doing more than throwing these three texts at his tempter. He was doing more than, as if he were, saying on each occasion, 'This is one in the eye for you, Satan!' Jesus was engaging with these scriptures for himself. They acted as a compass to keep him on the course his Father had set for him. Let's look at how he engaged with each of these texts in turn.

Satan's first attempt came at the end of a forty-day fast in the loneliness of the Judean wilderness, traditionally sited above the city of Jericho. Not surprisingly both Matthew and Luke record that Jesus was 'hungry' ('famished', NRSV).⁵⁰ So the devil's challenge that Jesus exercise the resources of his divine Sonship by turning stones into bread sought to exploit his undoubted physical weakness at that time. Perhaps as he spoke, the devil was picking up a handful of stones and offering them to Jesus. Jesus' reply, quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, reveals his acute awareness of the need for spiritual sustenance from the Word of God if he was to fulfil his mission: 'Man [i.e. humanity] shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'⁵¹ While the Deuteronomic text refers to humanity, Jesus assumes it to be autobiographical. In his baptism he had consecrated himself to be the Servant-King whose task it would be to represent and to redeem a new humanity. Now he quotes the Deuteronomic text to confirm his commitment to the redemption of the world. He *internalises* Deuteronomy 8:3 and makes it his own. He embraces this text as the expression of his own calling, his own story. In doing so he creates a precedent for the followers of the Servant-King. As

⁴⁹ Eph. 6:17. 'In the Bible God's own word is also a sword in His hand, a sword that lays bare, separating the false and the true (Heb. iv. 12), bringing judgment (Is. xi. 4; Ho.vi. 5), but also bringing salvation.' (F. Foulkes, *The Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary*, [London: Tynedale, 1963], p. 177.)

⁵⁰ Matt. 4:2; Luke 4:2.

⁵¹ Matt. 4:4; cf. Luke 4:4.

we engage with a passage of Scripture our task also is to allow the text to become autobiographical. For God's story is also our story!

The next temptation takes place in a very different context.⁵² The devil takes Jesus to Jerusalem and has him stand on the highest point of the temple. Again he seeks to sow doubt in Jesus' mind by beginning with the words: 'If you are the Son of God.' 'If you are the Son of God,' he says, 'throw yourself down.' Satan subtly attempts to exploit Jesus' affection for the Scriptures by backing up his challenge with a quotation from one of the most loved of all the Psalms. No doubt the opening stanza of Psalm 91 had often attracted the attention of Jesus as it was later also to appeal to millions of his followers: 'Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.' For obvious reasons Satan does not quote this verse to Jesus. Rather, he cites verses 11 and 12: 'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'⁵³ The devil responds to Jesus' submission to Scripture in the first temptation by himself quoting Scripture to him in the second. In other words, he is trying to turn Jesus' key defence into a boomerang.

Jesus' response demonstrates that there is much more to Scripture engagement than the slick mouthing of texts. His approach to Scripture is discriminating. He doesn't assume that because Psalm 91:11-12 says: 'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone' that the Lord is promising to do this in any and every situation. So he replies, quoting Deut 6:16: 'It is also written: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."⁵⁴ In this instance Jesus is not so much internalising Scripture as *analysing* it. Whereas in the first temptation he opens his heart to the Word of God, here he uses his reason to analyse what the text the Devil is quoting really means. He recognises that the Devil's text is figurative, and declares that it is improper for the tempter to understand it literally. It was obvious to Jesus that Satan was confusing metaphor with plain speech.

Jesus' response indicates that there is a place for analysis and comparison when engaging with any text of Scripture. In other words, *studying*

⁵² I am following Matthew's order here rather than Luke's. The different order of the temptations in these two Gospels may be accounted for if Matthew is following the chronological order while Luke may have changed the sequence in order to climax the temptations in the temple at Jerusalem (E. E. Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke* [New Century Bible; London / Camden NJ: Nelson, 1966], p. 93).

⁵³ Matt. 4:6; Luke 4:10. Note that in effect Jesus is equating the Word of God with what 'is written' — i.e. with the Scriptures.

⁵⁴ Matt. 4:7; Luke 4:12.

the Scriptures is important. The importance of using the mind in engaging with Scripture is further stressed by Jesus when he upbraided the two disciples he met on the road to Emmaus for being ‘foolish’ in the sense of being mentally lazy⁵⁵ which resulted in their being ‘slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken’ concerning the Messiah.⁵⁶ Those disciples, like so many of their contemporaries, were focusing on only part of the biblical evidence for the Messiah. The stress in Jesus’ words on ‘all’ the Scriptures, like his response to Satan — ‘It is *also* written’ — underline how important it is to compare scripture with scripture.

The third temptation in Matthew’s account finds the devil taking Jesus to the summit of ‘a very high mountain’ to show him ‘all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour.’ “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.”⁵⁷ The Bible, going back to Genesis 3, accords significant powers to Satan. Jesus himself would later refer to him as ‘the prince of this world,’⁵⁸ and it is this role that the devil assumes here. He is offering to delegate or transfer to Jesus his authority over the world. In effect, he was saying to Jesus, ‘You can be king of kings without having to become the Servant of the Lord. You can have the crown without the cross!’ The Gospel accounts suggest that Jesus’ response was emphatic. “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’”⁵⁹

In this retort Jesus is again internalising the Scripture quoted. He is rejecting the overture of Satan and recommitting himself to serve the Lord alone. But here, Jesus is also directing the Scripture at Satan. He is applying the text when he says: ‘Away from me, Satan!’ Jesus applies the Scripture to his immediate situation by driving Satan away. E. P. Sanders’ comment on the temptation is worth noting: ‘It is noteworthy that in answering the tempter, he [Jesus] did not speak in the first person. He did not say, “That’s not the way I do things,” but rather in effect “That is not according to God’s will as revealed in Scripture.”’⁶⁰ Luke’s conclusion of the temptation narrative suggests that Satan retired totally unsuccessful

⁵⁵ The Greek *anoētoi* is an ‘unwillingness to use one’s mental faculties in order to understand’, J.P. Louw and E.A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains* (New York: UBS, 1988) vol. 1, 32:50.

⁵⁶ Luke 24:25.

⁵⁷ Matt. 4:8-9; cf. Luke 4:5-7.

⁵⁸ John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11. Paul also recognises that an intelligent system of evil is at work in and through the principalities and powers of this world order (Eph 6:12; Col. 2:15), and James in his epistle (4:7) urges his readers to resist the devil.

⁵⁹ Matt. 4:10; cf. Luke 4:12; cf. Deut 6:12.

⁶⁰ E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York: Penguin, 1993), p. 117.

from the confrontation. He notes that ‘When the Devil finished tempting Jesus in every way, he left him for a while,’⁶¹ G. Campbell Morgan makes the point that he devil had ‘exhausted himself’. He had no other line of attack.⁶²

Having investigated Jesus’ engagement with the Scriptures both as proclaimer and as believer, we might summarise this engagement by affirming Jesus as *par excellence* the proclaimer of the Word and the believer in the Word. We now turn to explore how Jesus’ engagement with Scripture was facilitated by prayer.

JESUS AND PRAYER

We have already noted that the Gospels portray Jesus as someone who spent many hours in prayer by identifying him at prayer on seventeen occasions. The writer to the Hebrews makes the remarkable statement that Jesus, although God’s Son, was learning obedience right up to the time of his death, and that praying was one of the means through which this ongoing learning experience and spiritual development were taking place.⁶³

His prayers must have contributed greatly to Jesus’ remarkable consciousness of the Father’s presence. When the Pharisees accused him of lacking a corroborative witness to attest his remarkable claim to be the light of the world, he responded: ‘I am not alone. I stand with the Father who sent me’ (John 8:16). Such close communion with the Father would not have been possible without constant prayer.

Jesus prayed for his disciples.⁶⁴ Jesus prayed before performing miracles. This was certainly the case before he raised Lazarus from the dead. John records how the friends of Lazarus’ family removed the stone at the mouth of the grave in which his body had been laid four days previously. Then John goes on: ‘Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me”.’⁶⁵ The term ‘always’ implies that Jesus was in the habit of praying before working a miracle.

Jesus also prayed for himself. The limited examples available to us of Jesus’ personal prayers suggest that these were offered in response to the

⁶¹ Luke 4:13, GNB.

⁶² G. Campbell Morgan, *The Crises of the Christ*, (5th edn; London: Hodder and Stoughton, n.d. [1908?]), p. 178.

⁶³ Heb. 5:7-10.

⁶⁴ Luke 6:12-13; 22:31-32; John 17:6-19.

⁶⁵ John 11:41-42; cf. Mark 9:29.

promises of Scripture and as expressions of a deep desire to glorify his Father. One such prayer offered by Jesus on his own behalf is found in John 12:27-28: “Now is my soul troubled,” and what shall I say? “Father, save me from this hour? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!”⁶⁶ What prompted this deeply moving prayer? It was the request of some Greek proselytes for an audience. Their plea seems to have awakened in Jesus’ mind scriptural prophecies that assigned a place to the Gentiles in the kingdom of God.⁶⁶ Perhaps the words of Yahweh to his Servant in the final verse of the second ‘Servant Song’ of Isaiah became particularly prominent in Jesus’ consciousness at that moment: ‘I will make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.’⁶⁷ But Jesus does not burst into a hymn of praise. Rather, the request of the Greeks ‘is like an exploding fuse in the mind of Jesus’.⁶⁸ He offers to his Father, not a song of joy, but an anguished lament. For he would have known from the final ‘Servant Song’ that this great culmination of the kingdom in which salvation will reach the ends of the earth, would be achieved through the Servant of the Lord being ‘despised and rejected’ and being ‘led like a lamb to the slaughter’.⁶⁹

Jesus’ most poignant prayer for himself was uttered in the anguish of Gethsemane. Mark tell us that Jesus ‘began to be deeply distressed and troubled. “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,” he said to them.’⁷⁰ Then we are then told that ‘Going a little further, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. “Abba, Father,” he said, ‘everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.’⁷¹ Matthew records a second Gethsemane prayer of Jesus: “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.”⁷² The reference to the ‘cup’ in both prayers is another resonance with the Old Testament.⁷³ Jesus’ primary concern in Gethsemane is expressed in his words spoken to those who came to arrest him: ‘The Scriptures must be fulfilled’.⁷⁴ Here again, Jesus’ obedience to the Father takes the concrete shape of obedi-

⁶⁶ E.g. Isa. 11:10; 42:6; 65:6; Mal. 1:11.

⁶⁷ Isa. 49:6.

⁶⁸ B. Milne, *The Message of John* (The Bible Speaks Today; Leicester: IVP, 1993), p. 184.

⁶⁹ Isa. 53:3, 7.

⁷⁰ Mark 14:34; Jesus’ words to his disciples echo those of Ps. 42:5-6.

⁷¹ Mark 14:35-36; cf. Matt. 26:39; Luke 22:41-42.

⁷² Matt. 26:42.

⁷³ See Isa. 51:17; Jer. 25:15, 17; Ps. 75:8

⁷⁴ Mark 10:49.

ence to Scripture.⁷⁵ Jesus came, not to do his own will, but to do the will of him who sent him.⁷⁶ So we are not surprised to find Jesus engaging with Scripture through prayers uttered as he hung in agony on the cross. In his sense of abandonment he recites the dramatic opening words of Psalm 22: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'⁷⁷ Shortly afterwards as death claims Jesus he expresses his final prayer in the words of Psalm 31:5: 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.'⁷⁸

These prayers uttered in the closing hours of Jesus' life demonstrate that for him prayer was a key component of engaging with Scripture. In them, Jesus prays the Scriptures back to God.⁷⁹ God speaks to Jesus and Jesus speaks to God. Quite remarkably the Scriptures are the medium which Father and Son utilise in speaking to each other. If prayer was important for Jesus in engaging with Scripture, how much more important it must be for us! When God speaks to us through Scripture he invites us to respond to him in prayer.

In Jesus' case prayer clearly facilitated Scripture engagement. But there was also another factor—the Holy Spirit, and to the role of the Holy Spirit I now turn.

JESUS AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

We noted earlier that after his baptism Jesus, 'full of the Spirit' and 'led by the Spirit', went into the wilderness, from where, after his period of testing, he returned to Galilee 'in the power of the Spirit' to begin his public ministry.⁸⁰ Later in his ministry he affirms to the Pharisees that, far from casting out demons by Beelzebul, he exorcises them by the Spirit of God.⁸¹ The Gospels also suggest that the Spirit empowers the preaching and

⁷⁵ Work, *Living and Active*, p. 170.

⁷⁶ John 6:38.

⁷⁷ Mark 15:34; Matt. 27:46; cf. Ps. 22:1.

⁷⁸ Luke 23:46; cf. Ps. 31:5

⁷⁹ This is particularly the case with the Psalms. 'David bore witness to Jesus Christ in his kingly office, his life and his words. The New Testament goes even further. It says that the One who speaks in the Psalms is already the promised Christ himself (Heb 2:12; 10:5) or, indeed, the Holy Spirit (Heb 3:7). So the very words uttered by David were at the same time being uttered in him by the Messiah who was to come. The prayers of David were also the prayers of Christ, or rather, Christ himself offered them in the person of his ancestor David.' Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Psalms: Prayer Book of the Bible*, Tr. Sister Isabel Mary (Oxford: SLG Press, 1994), p. 5.

⁸⁰ Luke 4:14; Matt. 4:1; Luke 4:14.

⁸¹ Matt. 12:28; Luke 11:20; cf. Acts 10:37-38.

teaching of Jesus. Several times they tell us that the people were amazed at the authority with which Jesus spoke.⁸² The Fourth Gospel's commentary on the work of the Son of God reveals the source of such great authority: "The one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit."⁸³ If, in fact, Jesus' teaching was revealed by the Father as he engaged with the Scriptures, as we are claiming, then surely the Spirit would have played a role in that process of engagement and revelation. In this regard Telford Work stresses that 'Jesus' own words preserved in these New Testament texts ... are truly God's speech, truly the word of God in human words.... This is not simply because Jesus is divine in an abstract sense, but because he is the Spirit-anointed Son: "For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for it is not by measure that he gives the Spirit" (John 3:34).⁸⁴ The activity of the Spirit in and through Jesus may also help to explain those texts which inform us that Jesus knew the thoughts of others.⁸⁵ This supernatural knowledge may have come directly from the omniscience of the Son, but in light of the evidence already considered that the Son chose not to exercise his divine attributes during his state of humiliation, this is unlikely. More probably this knowledge of what others were thinking was communicated to Jesus by the Spirit as a gift such as a 'word of knowledge' and like similar gifts later granted by the Spirit to members of the church in Corinth.⁸⁶

If the Spirit played a key role in Jesus' engagement with the Scriptures, how much greater is our need of the Spirit's ministry as we read and meditate on the Word of God! The writer to the Hebrews highlights this ministry of the Spirit when he quotes from Psalm 95 as a text through which the Spirit speaks. That Psalm was, of course, composed and written centuries earlier, which is acknowledged by Hebrews when the writer introduces its eleventh verse with a phrase using the past tense: 'just as God has said'. But the writer also introduces the same psalm with words utilising the present tense: 'as the Holy Spirit says'. In fact he quotes Psalm 95:7-8 twice, with varying introductory tenses, so that these verses are the Word of God spoken and the Word of God speaking.⁸⁷ It is important for us to realise when we are engaging with a text of Scripture that the relationship of the Holy Spirit and Scripture did not end when the Spirit

⁸² Matt. 7:28-29; Mark 1:22, 27; Luke 4:36-37; 7:8.

⁸³ John 3:34; cf. Luke 4:16-21.

⁸⁴ Work, *Living and Active*, p. 88.

⁸⁵ Matt. 9:4 / Mark 2:8 / Luke 5:22; Matt. 12:25 / Luke 6:8; Luke 9:47; John 2:25; 4:39.

⁸⁶ 1 Cor. 12:8.

⁸⁷ Heb. 3:7-8 cf. 4:7.

‘carried along’ the original authors.⁸⁸ The same Spirit who inspired the text of Scripture then⁸⁹, can animate it now so that we hear God speaking to us today through the sacred page.⁹⁰

POSTSCRIPT

In summary we have discovered that the spirituality of Jesus was Word-mediated; it was prayer-orientated; and it was Spirit-led. Since I have focused more on this third feature, it might be appropriate in concluding to return to the temptation narratives paying attention to how Jesus engaged with these texts from Deuteronomy. I suggest that a certain progression in his manner of engaging with Scripture can be discerned in the Matthean order of the temptations. In the first encounter with the Devil Jesus *internalises* Scripture. In the second, he *analyses* Scripture. And in the third, he *actualises* Scripture. Of course, it can be argued that all three responses are present in each of the encounters. While this is true, I think the verbs: ‘internalise’, ‘analyse’, and ‘actualise’ respectively capture the primary mode of Jesus’ engagement with Scripture in each of the three confrontations.

Popular psychology distinguishes between the right and left hemispheres of the human brain. The right hemisphere coordinates our emotions, intuition, imagination and volition. The left hemisphere manages the analytical, logical, and rational side of our thinking. Adapting this psychological insight, we might say that Jesus responds to the first temptation primarily with his right brain—his emotions and his will. He internalises the text. We might then go on to say that Jesus deals with the second temptation primarily with his left brain—his reason, for he questions Satan’s snatching Psalm 91 and tearing it out of the wider context of Scripture. Finally, in the third temptation, as in the first, Jesus reacts primarily with his right brain as he volitionally rejects Satan’s exchange and emotionally re-consecrates himself to his divine destiny. So as Jesus internalised Scripture, as he analysed Scripture and as he actualised Scripture his whole being was involved. In this surely he provides us with a helpful template for our engagement with Scripture. By way of example he calls us to internalise, analyse and actualise a passage of Scripture utilising both hemispheres of our brain: the imaginative and intuitive as well as the analytical and rational.

⁸⁸ 2 Pet. 1:21.

⁸⁹ 2 Tim. 3:16.

⁹⁰ As we read and meditate on Scripture we are also dependent on the Spirit to enlighten our minds and to quicken our hearts.

Jesus by way of example is surely warning us against engaging with the Bible in a mode that is left-brained from start to finish. True, Scripture texts need to be analysed. We need to get behind the text and understand its original meaning. But we must also sit in front of the text and listen to the message it has for us in the moment of engagement and at the specific juncture we have come to in our lives.

Most of the world's armies march by the left. The Lord's army marches by the right!