

Who Is This Jesus?

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Date: April 13, 2014

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One of my favorite times of the year is finally here--it's baseball season! In the 90s, the Cleveland Indians were one of the best teams in baseball. The 1995 Indians got Cleveland back to the World Series for the first time since winning way back in 1954. The Indians went on to lose the World Series twice, and if you ask me for details you may still see me cry. But one of the best players at that time was left fielder Albert Belle. Belle had a combative personality and we found out later that he used to have corks in his bats, totally illegal. But the ultimate betrayal was Belle signing a large contract with the Chicago White Sox, leaving Cleveland in the lurch right after that tough first World Series loss.

When Belle came back to Jacob's Field with the White Sox for the first time, it got really nasty. People threw trash and even binoculars onto the field and the game was delayed twice. When one fan caught one of Belle's foul balls, he threw it back onto the field and almost hit him. But the kicker was people throwing wads of Monopoly money throughout the game--which is what stayed with me as a child--the Monopoly money floating in the air all over the ballpark. Honestly, here was this baseball player who was a hero for years, but once he defied our expectations, fans turned on him like you wouldn't believe. Maybe Clevelanders are just crazy and ruthless. Or maybe adoring fans can turn into an angry mob if their hero doesn't fulfill the expectations fans may have of them.[1]

What's fascinating as we begin Holy Week is how people react and respond to Jesus in the final days of his life and what various groups seemed to expect of him. First we'll discuss how people responded and end with expectations folks had of Jesus.

For starters, the notion of the unified angry mob present throughout holy week might not be historically accurate. At minimum, the angry mob is not always easy to identify. We need to contrast hostile, unified Cleveland Indians fans (using a modern example) with the crowds surrounding Jesus.

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan argue in *The Last Week* that the Temple authorities didn't represent the Jewish people as a whole since they were the local collaborators with the Romans and oppressed the people.[2] It's why Jesus is arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane and tried before the religious authorities at night, away from the crowds. Judas has to look for an opportune time to betray Jesus, a time when the crowds weren't there to possibly come to Jesus' defense. Those who arrest him are the small military police force of the religious authorities, not these hopeful people we heard today earnestly shouting their hosannas and laying their branches and cloaks at his feet!

The people who shouted crucify on Friday were likely a small crowd gathered by the chief priests and other religious authorities to decide the fate of Jesus and Barabbas, who both defied imperial authority. Jesus did so with symbolic actions and defied power nonviolently. Remember that Jesus clears out the Temple right after he enters Jerusalem in today's parade. For the Synoptic Gospels, all of these events are linked and align Jesus with the prophetic tradition.[3]

So we have the religious authorities, the chief priests, and their cronies going after Jesus in the Garden at night. Their hand-picked mob is likely the folks who shout crucify Friday morning. The Romans persecuted anyone who got out of line and disturbed the peace. They were all too happy to get rid of this Jesus of Nazareth who stirs up the people and causes trouble,

preaching love of neighbor and the realm of God. This crowd today shouting their hosannas and looking to Jesus with hope should be contrasted with the religious leaders and the Romans who didn't approve of Jesus' teachings and movement.

One of the worst parts of Holy Week is the desertion of Jesus' own disciples, that's one of the most painful responses. It all begins on such a joyful note to go get a donkey and then shouts of, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" and yet there's an ominous undertone. Matthew tells us that the whole city is in turmoil and people are asking, "Who is this?"[4] In the very next verse, Jesus enters the Temple complex and drives the moneychangers out, sealing his fate and giving those in power a plausible reason to destroy him and giving the disciples a reason to fear and all too soon a reason to flee into the night. Many of the women stay at the foot of the cross, but the disciples bail. Matthew simply states, "Then all the disciples deserted him and fled."[5]

Bottom line, we see so many responses and reactions to Jesus this week. We do have angry crowds of people, but this isn't like Indians fans throwing trash, foul balls, and Monopoly money at Albert Belle in the 90s. It wasn't so clear cut. The arrest and the first trial against Jesus happened at night because the crowds of your regular Jewish men, women, and children present for Passover would have probably rather heard from the humble teacher from Galilee than some religious official who worked with the Romans to oppress them in the first place! The disciples desert and flee, but many of the women followers stay. Holy Week has a varied and complicated cast of characters.

Now let's move onto expectations. The new Captain America movie is out and it's the number one movie in America, so of course I've seen it. The movie brings up fascinating ethical questions. Captain America (real name Steve Rogers in the Marvel universe) was a super soldier from World War II and he gets frozen after a plane crash in the midst of saving the world, which of course he does. But all of a sudden, he's back in modern times and the world has really changed. The Captain struggles with relating to people when social mores and our American culture is so different than the 1940s. We see him wrestle with the morality of surveillance and spying and modern warfare and how governments function today and if it's okay to sacrifice some people for the protection of the greater good. Even though Captain America is a super hero, he laments that he's just a soldier, not a spy. The Captain doesn't always feel capable of dealing with all the ethical decisions he's facing and the expectations of leadership constantly placed on his shoulders.

Remember, one of the expectations that people had of the Messiah was that he would be the ancient version of a superhero, a supernatural figure who would come to secure the victory of the Jewish nation over its oppressors, it would be a miraculous event and end in all-out war and victory for the righteous. Others thought the Messiah would be a powerful spokesperson from God, almost like Moses but even greater. The Messiah would tell the people the will of God. Some thought the Messiah would be a priestly leader who could provide authoritative interpretation of God's law. Finally, there was the belief that the Messiah would be a David-like King--a political leader who would once again establish Israel as a sovereign state. But no one thought the Messiah would suffer and die on a Roman cross. Jesus rewrote the role of Messiah.[6]

Jesus is rewriting peoples' expectations, which is why Palm Sunday is like a planned political demonstration. According to the Prophet Zechariah--the king is supposed to cut off the chariot and the war horse and the battle-bow. The king will come in, riding on a donkey and will command peace to the nations. This is what Jesus is trying to do today.[7]

You see, on the other side of Jerusalem, Pilate and his troops are in town for Passover. Passover is when Jews celebrate their liberation from another empire that oppressed them.

Pilate and his troops are there to keep the peace and demonstrate who is really in charge here. They might as well be having a full-on Roman Triumph throughout Jerusalem. So we have two processions--Pilate's military procession all about Roman power and might and Jesus' peaceful political parade with palms waving in the air.[8] The king riding on a donkey, commanding peace to the nations and a vision of God's realm where the first will be last and the last will be first and love of neighbor and God will rule. Those who are not part of the peaceful demonstration can't help but turn to their neighbor and ask, "Who is this?"[9]

I know that you know this story. We hear it every year and we'll keep hearing it every year, the seasons of the church year are funny that way. But every year it's worth turning to each other and asking, "Who is this?" "Who is this Jesus?" When you put your children to bed at night or if you recall when you may have gone to bed with a book in your hand, maybe you asked a loved one to read that story again, just one more time, please? Palm Sunday is one of these stories we get to hear again, every year. It's such a good story of varied reactions and responses, an introduction to a complicated cast of characters, and expectations being turned upside down.

Jesus riding on a donkey, palm branches waving in the air, a parade of peace, rewriting who the Messiah is for everyone to see. It's a story of hope, of the way the world could be. Knowing that soon, just on the horizon, there will be pain and sorrow. But then love will be reborn. And thanks be to God for that, Amen.

[1] Ken Berger, "Cleveland Fans Forget Baseball is a Business," Sarasota Herald-Tribune, June 5, 1997, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1755&dat=19970605&id=xykhAAAAIBAJ&...>

[2] Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem*, 128.

[3] Borg and Crossan, *The Last Week*, 144.

[4] Matthew 21:11, NRSV.

[5] Matthew 26:56, NRSV.

[6] Dr. Benjamin Valentine, *Systematic Theology II*, Andover Newton Theological School, Spring 2008

[7] Zechariah 9:9-10, NRSV.

[8] Borg and Crossan, *The Last Week*, 2-4.

[9] Matthew 21:10, NRSV.