

Reflections on Nietzsche, Jesus, and Easter

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I happened across a movie just the other night that I decided to watch. It was a fictional retelling of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. I was surprised by my reaction to it. I found it vaguely disturbing, because I found myself unimpressed by the convictions of the Christians whom Paul was persecuting. Their trust and courage seemed somewhat disconnected from the substance of their beliefs and convictions.

On the one hand, the teaching of Jesus that they had embraced was almost exclusively focused on a handful of moral values: mercy, forgiveness, love, and the brotherhood of all mankind being foremost. This Jesus whom these persecuted followers were following was fundamentally and essentially the teacher and proponent of a distinctive ethical vision. They had committed their lives to putting his ethical vision of love, mercy, and forgiveness into practice. The movie portrayed them as so committed to Jesus and his teaching that they were willing to die for it. Now, certainly, the willingness of these early Christians to die rather than renounce their faith is historically accurate. But the movie highlighted for me the glaring inconsistency and nonsequitur of following Jesus as a revolutionary ethical teacher, on the one hand, while being willing to die for him, on the other hand. Let me explain.

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Why was Paul persecuting these early followers of Jesus? Because they believed that they should be merciful and loving toward each and every human being? Was that a huge threat to Judaism? Did Paul's Judaism staunchly reject mercy, forgiveness, and love? And even if it did, did this alternate teaching threaten to destroy Judaism itself? No, it was not the ethical teaching of Jesus that enraged Paul, provoking him to the point of murder. It was purely and simply the stubborn claim by these early Christians that Jesus was the promised *messiah*. That was provocative. Paul and his ilk knew that that was not true. Jesus was not the *messiah*. And to claim that he was an outrageous and blasphemous lie. That is why he was willing to hunt down, punish, and perhaps even kill these early followers of Jesus.

Now, in fairness, the messiahship of Jesus was there in the movie. The Jesus that his persecuted disciples followed was not merely an ethical teacher, he was also the *messiah*. But something about the movie put those two things together in a way that I had never seen before. The movie gave me the distinct impression that Jesus's messiahship was defined by his ethical teaching, and that Jesus's ethical teaching just was his messiahship. In other words, as God's *messiah*, Jesus was sent into the world by God to teach mankind to be merciful, to forgive one another, and to love one another. That was the *messiah*'s mission. That is why the *messiah* was important. So, when these early followers are portrayed as being willing to die for Jesus, they are—on the one hand—being portrayed as being willing to die for the claim that the title 'Messiah' rightly belongs to Jesus, but—on the other hand—that comes to one and the same thing as being willing to die for the moral values that Jesus taught.

But that makes no sense. That would make their courage and sacrifice a complete nonsequitur. Why would his followers go to their death rather than renounce the claim that Jesus is the *messiah*? Why would they make such a big deal out of his title? Would it really matter whether he was or he wasn't the *messiah*? They could spend the rest of their lives showing mercy, forgiving one another, and loving all of mankind, just as Jesus the Messiah had taught them. And they could do that whether they explicitly acknowledged Jesus to be the *messiah* or not. So if, in the end, Jesus is about nothing more than the ethical values he taught—and if one honors him as the *messiah* by upholding those ethical values—then why would any follower of Jesus need to

insist on respecting his title? Why would he need to go to his death for that? It doesn't make any sense. In this way, the movie presented a strangely incoherent and implausible picture of what the early Jesus-followers were all about.

On the one hand—because they were human beings who did not relish persecution—they were weak and scared. On the other hand, they were doggedly committed to proclaiming Jesus as the *messiah*. Yet, at the same time, there was nothing about Jesus's messiahship beyond his being the proponent of an ethic of love. Why then were they so persnickety about attaching the messianic title to him? Why could they not tell Paul, “Okay, if it means that much to you, I'll say it, ‘Jesus is not the *messiah*’”—and then go on to conduct their lives in faithful conformity to all that Jesus taught? Why would that not have been a reasonable compromise with Paul?

So what disturbed me about the movie was the incoherent and implausible picture that it gave of the early disciples. If all I knew of Christianity was what I had just seen in the movie, I would not have found it very compelling. I would not have found it a particularly substantive belief system. In fact, worse than that, I would have looked upon his followers as misguided and confused to the point of being somewhat pathetic. They were far from being inherently weak individuals who had been strengthened and ennobled by their commitment to a substantial truth that they had come to understand and embrace. Rather, they were weak and helpless individuals who, as they were being persecuted and killed, were caught between their human instinct for self-preservation and their felt obligation to love and forgive. And, at the same time, they had no real understanding to guide them in and through this conflict in their souls. The overall effect of this portrayal was the impression that these men and women were particularly weak and helpless, not that they were noble and strong.

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As I tried to analyze my response to the movie, I couldn't help but think of the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche. At the risk of being sacrilegious, permit me to briefly expound on Nietzsche's views on Christianity and Jesus in order to provide some background to my response to the movie. I do not explore his views because I think Nietzsche has any important insight to offer us. While some are attracted to Nietzsche and his views, I am not. I have never given him much credence. He has always struck me as a psychologically imbalanced individual who—because he was emotionally and socially stunted—wrote annoyingly tedious screeds against the polite society that made no room for him. But watching the movie about Paul's conversion the other night, I did begin to realize to what it may have been that Nietzsche's critique of Christianity might actually have been a response. So permit me to briefly expound Nietzsche's views.

Nietzsche is famous for his total disdain for Jesus and Jesus's teaching. Where did that disdain come from? It came from his perception that Jesus taught his followers to be weak. Jesus taught mercy, forgiveness, and brotherly love. He taught them not to pursue violence or do harm to others. He taught them to do good to others instead of harm—including to their enemies. In Nietzsche's view, such things are a mark of weakness. Nietzsche preferred the moral values of the ancient Greeks. Virtue, according to the ancient Greeks, was being able to punish your enemies and do good to your friends. Nietzsche agreed with that sentiment. A truly excellent specimen of a human being, Nietzsche believed, would be one whose strength, power, and majesty is so great that he would be able to harm and punish anyone who had become his enemy, and

would be able to abundantly benefit anyone who had become his friend. You can't get any better than that, Nietzsche thought. That's what a really excellent human being—a superior human being, an *übermensch*—would look like.

Nietzsche looked upon humanity as a vast herd of weak, inferior human beings who must necessarily cringe in fear before the few strong, powerful, superior individuals who occasionally emerge from among them. These superior human beings—individuals who can harm their enemies and benefit their friends—are greatly to be feared. They could easily harm or destroy them. They are wolves among sheep, eagles around lambs. In order to prevent these superiors from doing any harm to the weak and helpless members of the herd, Jesus taught an ethic that put significant restraints on these superior individuals. In the ethic of love that Jesus taught, it was “evil” for the strong to prey on the weak. This put serious restraints on the natural impulses of these superior and excellent human beings. The various dangerous behaviors that would give full expression to the strength and excellence of these superior ones, Jesus declared to be wrong and evil. So, Jesus declared it evil even to be a superior human individual. His teaching imposed moral restraints that shackled excellent human beings and kept them from manifesting their true natural strength and power.

By the time of Nietzsche, Jesus's teaching had come to dominate within Western Civilization. As a result, it had turned mankind into a vast herd of weak, helpless, inferior human beings who had convinced the strong, powerful, and excellent human beings among them to curb their strength and excellence and to act weak and powerless like all the rest of them. Jesus was a genius. His conception of good and evil was an ingenious strategy for protecting the miserable mass of humankind from the few excellent specimens of humanity that emerged from among them. But there was a real downside to his strategy. The safety of the herd that was secured by Jesus's invention of morality came at a significant cost. Under the restraints of good and evil, superior and powerful human beings became muted and stunted. Jesus's moral vision did not allow for an excellent human being to give full expression to his excellence. He had to stifle his superior impulses and sink invisibly back into the herd. And, as a result, mankind became weak and sick—reduced to nothing of any significance. And Western Civilization, under the thrall of Christianity, became infected by the wasting disease of Jesus's ethical teaching put into practice. Humanity itself had become unhealthy and unable to thrive. Its greatest specimen were shackled, held back, and not permitted to be who, by nature, they really were. Nietzsche despised Jesus for this outcome. He hated human beings who meekly submitted, forgave, served, and were restrained by love. He considered them an embarrassment to the human race. They were a deformed, diseased version of a human being. But this was the very sort of human being that Jesus taught his followers to be. Or was it?

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There are two very different ways that one person can forgive another. He can forgive the other person out of weakness, or he can forgive the other person out of strength. For many different reasons, weakness can bring me to “let go” of an evil done to me. We tend to call it “forgiveness”—that letting go of an evil done to me—but, in reality, when it arises out of weakness, it is not true forgiveness. It is not an act of moral virtue born of a strong commitment to the good, it is more some sort of cowering resignation.

Out of weakness, a person might forgive another person because he feels he has no real choice.

Out of weakness, a person might forgive because he wants to avoid conflict; he does not want a confrontation.

Out of weakness, a person might forgive because he does not want to face into the pain and offense of the injustice that was done to him. The weak person might prefer to delude himself—choosing to believe that he wasn't really harmed—rather than face the fact that real harm—real evil—was done to him, and that he must choose to allow mercy to prevail.

Out of weakness, we think that deceiving ourselves into passive acceptance of what has happened to us is easier than actively extending real forgiveness and mercy. So, we “let it go,” because it would be too difficult, too uncomfortable, or too raw to actually extend mercy to a real evil that has been done to me.

Out of weakness, a person might forgive because he knows that he would not be strong enough to exact revenge, even if we wanted to. Exacting revenge is unthinkable, so it would be better just to let it go.

Out of weakness, a person might forgive because he is not sufficiently committed to justice in the first place. He would never actually insist on justice, for he is not that morally strong. But if you are not going to insist on justice, then you have to “let it go.”

When Jesus taught his followers to forgive one another, which of the sorts of forgiveness described above did Jesus have in mind? Did he want his followers to forgive out of weakness? Or out of strength? When he instructed us to “forgive” those who sin against us, did he want us to be the sort of people who were too weak and cowering to do otherwise? Or did he want us to actively choose good over evil because we had a clear, strong vision of what sort of human being a person ought to be?

I will not take the time here to explore these ideas, but exactly the same things could be said about submission to others, or about giving preference to others, or about being subordinate to others, or about being kind and loving to others, or about being humble, or about many other virtues that Jesus taught and exemplified. All of these things can be done out of weakness, or they can be done out of strength. What is it that God wants of us? What is it that Jesus wants of us? Does God want me to act in these various ways out of fear, weakness, doubt, and resignation? Or, does God want me to act in these ways out of an active, strong, confident commitment to goodness and righteousness, along with an active, strong trust in the power and faithfulness of God? Surely God wants the latter. He wants us to exhibit the requisite virtues out of strength; not to offer a counterfeit of them out of weakness. When Jesus was humble, he was self-confident in his humility. We cannot exhibit self-doubt and self-deprecation and tell ourselves that we are emulating the humility of Jesus. They are not the same thing at all. Jesus practiced a humility rooted in strength, while we would be practicing a humility rooted in weakness.

When Nietzsche developed his disdain for Jesus's ethical teaching, could it be that he greatly misunderstood what Jesus intended? Did Nietzsche think that Jesus wanted his followers to manifest forgiveness, love, mercy, and humility rooted in weakness? Did he fail to recognize that all of those same things could reflect strength and nobility? That they did not have to be a mark of weakness? Perhaps, taking his cues from actual Christians that he knew, he mistook the virtues

that Jesus actually taught for certain counterfeit virtues that excused and accommodated weakness and did not manifest real strength.

Watching the aforementioned movie the other night, I realized that Nietzsche's critique might be more understandable than I had ever given it credit for. The movie reminded me that the view of Jesus that is held by the general populace today (and that was likely held by the European culture of Nietzsche's day) is that Jesus was an ethical teacher. He came into history to deliver a particular set of ethical values. Was his moral vision as an ethical teacher an impressive one? Or was it an unimpressive one? It depends. It depends upon whether he was teaching his followers to be weak, or to be strong. Nietzsche believed (perhaps due to the example of real Christians within his own experience) that Jesus taught his disciples to be weak. If that were the case—if Jesus did teach his disciples to be weak—then Nietzsche's critique of Jesus was right. He did not have a very impressive moral vision at the foundation of his ethical teaching—for it simply offered excuses for weakness. But I don't believe Nietzsche was right. Jesus never intended for his disciples to be weak.

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Perhaps I should show more understanding of Christians who have badly misunderstood who Jesus was—like, for example, those who produced the movie about Paul's conversion that I have been referencing. During his first coming (his first *parousia*), Jesus's strength and authority were cloaked and hidden. He did not reveal himself as the powerful, mighty King that he actually is. Rather, he came as a humble itinerant teacher. He knew that he was more than that, and sometimes he spoke of it. But generally he was content to take on the persona of an ordinary Galilean villager who wandered about the countryside teaching people. The one notable exception was when, for a brief moment on a high mountain, God gave three of his disciples a dazzling vision of Jesus's true majesty.

In general, Jesus did not come into history to be acknowledged, exalted, and praised. He came into history to humbly serve. For this reason, it has been quite easy to adopt the mistaken view that he was nothing other than an ethical teacher. Intentionally or not, that is how the movie I watched the other night portrayed him. Even if the producers of the movie did not intend it, that was the net effect of how the persecuted Jesus-followers were portrayed as thinking about their teacher.

His followers spoke of two things: (1) his instructions regarding how we are to live—in particular, how our lives are to be marked by love; and (2) the fact that Jesus was raised from the dead. But how did these two things connect in their minds? How was his exhortation to love one another connected to his resurrection? Not very tightly. I was struck by the tremendous disconnect between these two things that seemed to exist in the minds of Jesus's persecuted followers. If and when they attempted to connect these two things at all, the basic idea seemed to be this: Jesus arose out of his grave; therefore, we must live in accordance with love, just as he instructed us.

What an odd connection that is. If I had been compelled by Jesus's teaching and had been convinced that I must live a life marked by love, would it matter to me whether Jesus rose out of his grave? Wouldn't I have sought to live a life marked by love anyway—whether he was raised from the dead or not? The Buddhist does not believe in and follow the teachings of the Buddha because the Buddha came back from the dead. He follows the Buddha's teachings because he

finds them compelling. Wouldn't the followers of Jesus have followed Jesus's teachings in the same way? They would have kept his teachings whether Jesus was raised from the dead or not? And, surely, the purpose of Jesus's resurrection was not to ensure our allegiance to his teaching. Its purpose was something else—something much more significant than that. What was it then? What was the significance of Jesus's resurrection?

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Jesus's resurrection was so much more than a revivification of his body. Jesus was not merely restored to the same state he had existed in previously. That is what had happened to his friend Lazarus. (And many of Jesus's recently deceased followers also experienced such a revivification in the days following Jesus's resurrection [*Matthew* 27:52–53]). But those events were different from what happened to Jesus. Two distinctive things happened to Jesus at his resurrection: (1) he was transformed, and (2) he was exalted.

At his resurrection, Jesus took on immortality. He became a permanent, eternal human being who would never die again. He did not emerge from the tomb the same man who three days earlier had gone to his death. He was a new and different being now. (In all likelihood, that is why, after his resurrection, his disciples often did not immediately recognize him when he appeared to them.) We who belong to him will one day follow him into immortality. But Jesus became the first immortal human being. He became the Adam of a new version of humanity.

But there was a second thing that was happening on the day of Jesus's resurrection. Resurrection day was the day when Jesus was inaugurated into his true destiny. On the day of his resurrection, he was unveiled. Most of mankind would not yet see the powerful, noble, glorious, and exalted creature that he became on that day. But that is what he became, nevertheless. Because of his obedience to God—an obedience that led him to voluntarily go to this death on the cross—God exalted him. About forty days after he left his tomb, Jesus's exaltation to “the right hand of God on high” would be made visible to his disciples when he was raised up into the sky and disappeared from sight among the clouds.

Jesus is going to return once again into history. When he does so, the cloak will be off completely. No longer will his power and glory and authority be masked. It will be unveiled and plain for all to see. He will reenter history with a shout, calling all who belong to him to meet him in the air. All that are his will obey, even rising out of their graves to greet him. Like a ferocious, untame lion, he will lead armies against the enemies of God to destroy them in his fury. He who taught us to forgive one another will show no forgiveness to those who committed the unforgivable sin. He will come in wrath and violence. (He most certainly will not be the weak and pathetically helpless Jesus of Nietzsche's imagination.) He who taught us to love will deny, reject, and hate those who denied and hated him. There is no contradiction here. “There is a time for every event under heaven... a time to tear down and a time to build up... *a time to love and a time to hate.*” (*Ecclesiastes* 3:1–11, emphasis mine.) To love was not the only thing that Jesus taught his disciples. He also taught them to hate. He taught them to hate evil. Love of one's neighbor was to be pursued under the larger truth that, to emulate the goodness of God, we must hate evil the same way God hates evil. At the end of history—in keeping with his pre-existent purposes—God intends to destroy all evildoers.

And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and he who sat on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and wages war. His eyes are flames of fire, and on his head

are many diadems; and he has a name written on him which no one knows except himself. He is clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and his name is called the Logos of God. And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it he may strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; and he treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty. And on his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, "King of kings, and Lord of lords." (*Revelation* 19:11–16, NASV, modified by me)

So why is Jesus's resurrection significant? Why will his followers go to their death rather than deny the messiahship of this man who rose from the dead? Not because he was a good ethical teacher. No, rather, because he is destined to be Lord of lords and King of kings, the most important creature in all of created reality. Because he will be the conquering hero, and the one who will reign with the authority of God himself for all eternity, over all of humanity. And because he is the judge of all mankind, the one who will decide whether I get life or destruction.

Without a doubt, this conquering hero, when he returns, will be meek and humble. He will not be cocky, arrogant, and superior. He will be loving and kind, not ruthless and uncaring. But his love and humility will not be rooted in weakness. Far from it. They will be rooted in his strength. Loving, humble, and ready to serve though he will certainly be, he will not lack for nobility, power, impressiveness, awesomeness, and glory—the sort of awesomeness that Nietzsche could only dream about. Jesus is not a wimpy *messiah*.

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So what does the resurrection of Jesus mean for us today? It means that we must make sure that we are on the right side of Jesus. One day soon, Jesus will judge the world. Those who have embraced him and forged a relationship with him will be okay. But those who have ignored him and viewed him as irrelevant, they will be judged and destroyed. Don't be a fool! Take the time to figure Jesus out. Don't be like the myriads of clueless individuals who are destined for destruction. Repent of your resistance to or indifference toward Jesus and face squarely into the truth about him. And then embrace him as your Lord, so that all might be well with you. Nothing that this world has to offer is worth going to your destruction for. Be wise. Prepare yourself to be judged by Jesus. Flip that switch in your deep inner being and turn your attitude toward God, and toward Jesus, 180 degrees. Then you can live in eager anticipation of his return. *Maranatha!*