

January 31, 2016

Holy and Wonderworking Unmercenaries Cyrus and John

### Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

I am normally the author of these weekly meditations to the parish, but today I want to try something else. The substance of this message will come from another writer.

Let me begin by confessing that my book *The Jesus We Missed*, published in 2012, has been a source of some personal and professional disquiet. Although many friends and others have spoken encouraging words about the book, its reception among published book reviewers has been, on the whole, more than slightly disappointing. Some of them, even those who expressed satisfaction with the work, seemed to have only a slight idea what the book was intended to do.

Indeed, the writer who commented on the book most extensively---an Orthodox priest---even accused me of heresy! When I questioned him privately on this rather serious charge, he responded that I had made Jesus "too human."

Since my new book (*Recovering the Atonement*) further pursues lines of reflection earlier indicated in *The Jesus We Missed*, I have been apprehensive that this more recent effort might suffer the same fate as the other.

This past week, however, there has appeared another and more encouraging review of *The Jesus We Missed*---unusually late, the reviewer admits---on the website of Gospel Coalition: <<http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/book-reviews-the-jesus-we-missed>>

What I most appreciate in this review, written by Dr. Louis Markos, is the reviewer's better understanding of the task of writing about the person of Jesus in a modern and contemporary setting. I share this review with you here in the Pastoral Ponderings, less for what Dr. Markos says about my own book than for what he says about the interpretive task itself.

Here is his review, for which I am extremely grateful:

*The Jesus We Missed: The Surprising Truth About the Humanity of Christ*  
by Patrick Henry Reardon  
Thomas Nelson, 2012  
256 pages, paper, \$15.99

As a graduate student in literature in the 1980s, I was first introduced to the critical school of new historicism. Initially, I thought that I would be an advocate of this theoretical approach to literature. "After all," I reasoned with myself, "the more I know about the

historical period that nurtured Sophocles or Virgil or Dante or Chaucer or Shakespeare, the better I will be able to analyze and appreciate their poetry."

My hero and role model, C. S. Lewis, had taken just such an approach in writing his A Preface to Paradise Lost, a seminal study that helped modern readers to understand Milton and his great epic in terms of Milton's own beliefs and the beliefs of his age. Surely, Lewis's approach would help open up new vistas as I dug into the great poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge, Tennyson and Browning.

As it turned out, my enthusiasm was utterly misplaced. The new historicists did not share Lewis's humble desire to understand Milton on his own terms. To the contrary, they taught that we are all---even and especially the great poets, artists, and prophets---products of our socioeconomic milieu. From their ultimately anti-humanistic point of view, Shakespeare was not an inspired genius who rose above his spatiotemporal moment to touch on transcendent truth and beauty, but a product of Elizabethan power politics.

In the same way that Marxist-inspired feminism has reduced masculinity and femininity to social constructs rather than essential God-given natures, Marxist-inspired new historicism has reduced poets to mouthpieces of the social-political-economic zeitgeist. Sadly, this deterministic reductionism has also found its way into seminary, where the Bible is treated, not as the eternal Word of God, but as a cultural artifact, not as a revelation of God's wisdom, but as the impersonal product of textual evolution.

What is the true believer to do in the face of this subtle but insidious attack, not only on the integrity of the scriptures, but on human agency as well? The proper solution is not to abandon history and the very real influence it exerts upon people. Rather, the way out of this dilemma is to balance human dignity and volition with an acceptance of the fact that we are incarnate beings who are situated historically, geographically, and culturally.

Of course, if this is true of us, then it must also be true of the One who, Christian orthodoxy tells us, was fully God and fully man. Christ did not merely appear to be flesh, as the gnostic docetists believed; he became flesh and dwelt among us. He was as situated as any man who ever lived in a specific time and place.

That much is obvious, but how can one pursue such a line of thought without reducing Christ himself, new historicist style, to a product of first century Roman-Jewish power politics? Until I read Patrick Henry Reardon's *The Jesus We Missed: The Surprising Truth About the Humanity of Christ*, I thought that such a project could not be done. If tried, it would only rob both Christ and the gospels of their power and truth.

Indeed, I read Reardon's introduction with considerable trepidation. How could someone who wrote these words not fall into the black hole of new historicism: "God's eternal Word took unto himself not only certain human qualities but the concrete, historical circumstances of an individual human life. He made himself a subjective participant in human history, someone whose existence and

experience were circumscribed by the limiting conditions of time and space and organic particularity" (xxii). Surely, such an approach would reduce Jesus from God the Son in human flesh to an itinerant first century Jewish preacher with a God-consciousness.

My discovery of the truth about new historicism came as an unpleasant shock; my discovery that Reardon escaped from, if not soared beyond, the prison of new historicist reductionism came as a most pleasant and welcome surprise. Reardon, Pastor of All Saints Antiochian Orthodox Church in Chicago and a Senior Editor of Touchstone, brings to his analysis both a thorough and nuanced understanding of Greek and Hebrew---the translations he uses in the book are his own---and a mind, heart, and spirit steeped in the theological and pastoral writings of the fathers of the church. Everything he says about Jesus' humanity is not only firmly biblical and orthodox but draws us closer to the Incarnate Word.

Devoting four chapters (one third of his book) to the pre-ministry Jesus, Reardon carefully presents Christ as having a real human consciousness that developed as he grew. We must not, Reardon warns us, "'objectify' Jesus' self-awareness and then try to determine at what point---'when?'---he acquired the knowledge of his identity. Self-knowledge is intrinsic to, and an extension of, self-being. His consciousness of his identity came from his identity." Self-knowledge, he goes on to explain, takes place "in a process of growth. It is historical, like all components of human consciousness. Human self-knowledge is an ongoing 'event'" (14).

This may sound at first like psycho-babble, a ploy of the Jesus seminar to subjectify Jesus' divinity, but it is not. Reardon is simply drawing out for us the full implications of the incarnation, of God's assumption of our humanity. Though Jesus, as fully God, was connected to the Father, his human brain and consciousness grew and developed; and, as it did so, it was shaped by the scripture-soaked community of his synagogue and the pious influence of his parents. Commenting on the similarity between Mary's response to the Annunciation (Luke 1:38) and Jesus' prayer at Gethsemane (Luke 22:42), Reardon argues that Jesus learned obedience to God ("thy will be done") from his mother.

But that learning was not always smooth. Reardon points out two places (the twelve-year-old Jesus at the Temple; the wedding at Cana of Galilee) where Jesus and his mother are at counter-purposes. In the first instance, Mary backs off from Jesus' mild rebuke (Luke 2:41-50); in the second, she presses him to perform his first miracle: the changing of water into wine (John 2:1-11). Some readers may balk at the idea of the Son of God being "pressed," but they should not. "The organic particularity of Jesus' life," Reardon comments, "included a bit of overt pressure from his mother" (27). Summing up the Christological and soteriological insight of such key theologians as Athanasius and Augustine, Reardon reminds us that the redemption of mankind did not happen solely at the Cross. "Human redemption 'happened' in the humanity of the eternal Word as he passed through, transformed, and deified our existence" (27).

Jesus' solidarity with man was total. He can sympathize with us, for he faced the same fatigue, hunger, and temptation that we all face. Like us, his closeness to God and his spiritual strength demanded long hours of prayer and meditation on the scriptures. More than that, it demanded that Jesus identify himself with the Old Testament in a total way.

Through close analysis of the original Hebrew and Greek, Reardon shows how Jesus, in his baptism, temptations in the wilderness, and preaching at Nazareth, would have slowly, but willingly come to identify himself with Isaac (at the baptism, God refers to Jesus as his beloved son, the same language used when God called Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son), the Israelites of the Exodus (who spent forty years, as Jesus does forty days, being tested in the wilderness after they were baptized by passing through the Red Sea), Job (a man with whom God was well pleased but whom he allowed to be sifted by Satan), and, uniquely, the Messiah prophesied by Isaiah (when Jesus reads Isaiah 61 to his townsmen and declares that it has been fulfilled in their hearing, he "takes personal possession of the prophecy and assumes the full, immediate burden of its message" (62)).

But didn't Jesus know all these things before he experienced them? "No," Reardon boldly declares. Luke 2:52 clearly states that Jesus increased in wisdom, and an increase "implies the making up of a deficiency, the overcoming of a limitation. Logically prior to learning certain things, Jesus was ignorant of them. In short, the limits of the Incarnation included Jesus' experience of ignorance" (79). According to the creeds of the church, Jesus was one person with two natures. He possessed "a single center of subjectivity . . . [he] did not sometimes think as human and sometimes as divine. Everything he knew, he knew through human experience" (86).

Guided by this wholly orthodox, but often overlooked, perspective on Christ's humanity, Reardon opens up passage after passage in the gospels. Here are a few choice samples:

"Man is the thinking part of the cosmos" (94). By testifying that Jesus prayed through the sunrise and the sunset, "the two daily transitions of light and darkness," the gospels present the Son of Man as "sanctifying the structure of time" (96).

A major part of Jesus' psychological make-up is the intense compassion he feels for the poor and the outcasts; he sees them in a direct way that others do not. "In the Gospels we find not a single example of someone criticizing a woman in Jesus' presence and getting away with it" (125).

"Jesus' intense psychological experience of weakness and turmoil [at the Garden of Gethsemane] was followed by a determined resolution" (150). Throughout his arrest and trials, Jesus "maintained a demeanor both calm and self-possessed, even as he endured indignities and unbelievable suffering. . . . From the perspective of psychology, Jesus was a truly different person after this spiritual struggle" (151).

Jesus' cry of dereliction from the cross (Mark 15:34) does not attest to God's actual abandonment of the Son, but to Jesus' experience of that alienation: "it was existential: it pertained to Jesus' existence, not his being, or essence" (184). While remaining God the Son, he identified completely "with every human being who has ever felt alienated from God, abandoned by God, estranged from God" (185).

Reardon offers many more insights into Christ and the gospels---and he does so in a way that balances perfectly a high view of the complete authority and reliability of the gospel accounts with a rich understanding of the different literary approaches taken by the

four evangelists---but I hope these will suffice to whet the appetites of prospective readers. I missed *The Jesus We Missed* when it came out in 2012, just as I missed many essential dimensions of Jesus' full humanity. I'm glad my eyes have now been opened by Reardon's seminal, path-breaking book to those vital dimensions of the One who was and is the God-Man.

Louis Markos ([www.Loumarkos.com](http://www.Loumarkos.com)), Professor in English and Scholar in Residence at Houston Baptist University, holds the Robert H. Ray Chair in Humanities; his books include *Apologetics for the 21st Century*, *From Achilles to Christ: Why Christians Should Read the Pagan Classics*, and *On the Shoulders of Hobbits: The Road to Virtue with Tolkien and Lewis*.