

**SHIFTING THE PARADIGM:  
FROM “JESUS, SON OF DAVID”  
TO “JESUS, SON OF JESSE”\***

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Over my many years at the seminary, Eastern changed its logo and its letterhead a couple of times. In the 60’s and 70’s the seminary’s conservative circular blue logo with a cross in the center and the motto ‘Ολον το ευαγγελιον ‘ολω τω κοσμω was abandoned for a very modernistic fluid lower case *ebts* with a globe stuck in the belly of the “b” replacing the cross. The older logo was revived in the 80’s and survives! In the 90’s our motto has shifted from six words in Greek to ten words in English: “the whole Gospel for the whole world *through whole persons.*” And we still struggle with our nomenclature. Shall we call ourselves Eastern? Eastern Baptist? EBTS? or *The EBTS*? In this commencement sermon I am proposing a more profound shift than that of changing a logo, a motto, or the letterhead. I propose a paradigm shift in the way we talk about Jesus, a shift from naming him “Jesus, son of David” to affirming him as “Jesus, son of Jesse.”

Make no mistake about it, titles are important, otherwise we would not be conferring shortly your diplomas, degrees, and titles: Doctor of Ministry, Master of Divinity or Theology, and the Diploma for Ministry. When the degrees and diplomas are awarded we hope to get the nomenclature right. And I also hope that within this half-hour I can make you (the graduates of 1998 and your guests and fellow students, my faculty colleagues and the members of our board) ready to *claim* and *acclaim* the title: “Disciple of Jesus, son of Jesse.

First, I call your attention to Jesus’ “pop-quiz” to the Pharisees recorded in the Synoptics (as in Matthew 22:41): “Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question,

מָה יִרְאֶה לְכֶם הַמָּשִׁיחַ וּבֶן מִי יִהְיֶה

‘What do you think of the Christ? Whose son is he?’

They said to him, בֶּן דָּוִד ‘The son of David’.”

But Jesus, unsatisfied with their answer, replied, “How is it then that David . . . calls him *lord*, saying, ‘Jehovah said to my *lord*, “Sit at my right hand, till I put thy enemies under thy feet”?’ If David thus calls the messiah *lord*, how is the messiah David’s *son*?” (Shem Tob’ Hebrew text, with my paraphrase.)

This third question in the quiz (“how is the messiah David’s *son*?”) went unanswered, and the Pharisees earned here an “Incomplete,” if not an F. The Pharisees answered Jesus’s first two questions (“what?” and “who?”) simply with tradition and genealogy. But they didn’t go back far enough in the genealogy. Had they gone back just one more generation to *Jesse* — or even all the way back to *adam* — they may have passed the quiz and their dialogue with Jesus could well have continued.

Having just heard the Scripture lesson from Isaiah 11, you remember now what the Pharisees forgot or ignored: “There shall

come forth a shoot from *the stump of Jesse*, and a branch shall grow out of *his roots* . . . In that day *the root of Jesse* shall stand as an ensign to the peoples; *him* shall the nations seek, and *his dwellings* shall be glorious (11:1 and 10).” The messiah will be none other than the *son, shoot and root of Jesse!* Had these words shaped the answer of the Pharisees they surely would have received an A+ on their quiz.

And yet there is more than genealogy involved in Jesus’ question, “Whose son is the messiah?” There is *character* involved in the question. Not *a* character, but *character!* The Semitic words for “son” or “daughter” may be combined with nouns, rather than names, to indicate the quality, the character, and characteristics of a person, like *ben hayil* or *Ibn harbi* = “a warrior,” *ben ‘ulpan* = “a scholar,” *bar jonah* “son of a dove” for a peaceful person,” *benot hasšir* “singers” and *ben adam* which can mean “a human being” or “a man of peace, a reconciler who induces love and agreement.”

Therefore, Jesus’ question could have been “What do you think of the Messiah? What are his qualities? What is his nature?” But even with these questions, “David” would not have been the best answer. Contrary to old Judean traditions and contrary to popular acclamation, Jesus was obviously uncomfortable with the title “Son of David.” His discomfort alone is sufficient reason for our belatedly shifting the paradigm to “Jesus, son of Jesse.”

This brings us to our next question. Since David was called “a man after God’s own heart” (Acts 13:22, 1 Samuel 13:13, Psalm 89:20), and David was among Jesus’ ancestors, why was Jesus *as reluctant to appropriate* the name David as his contemporaries were *anxious to bestow* the name upon him? First, there is some uncertainty about the meaning of “David” since *d-w-d* could be “a worm, a lover, an uncle, a [seething] cooking pot” (and its derivatives “to seeth, to be a drunk or an agitator”).

John Macdonald (in an article in 1978 in *Abr Nahrain* dealing with the Mari letters *da-WI-du-um*) has convinced me that *d-w-d = david* is the term for “champion,” as in the David and Goliath episode (an appropriate meaning were Jesus planning to slay the neo-Philistines or corporate giants?)

Moreover, there is ambiguity in the Bible about the Davidic messianic mission, which I can best illustrate by calling your attention to Amos 9:11, and its reference to the *booth of David*: “In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old; *that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name,*” says the LORD.” This is unmistakably an imperial, expansionistic, ethnocentric, nationalistic mission statement.

But when this text was translated into the Greek (c. 200 B.C.) it was rendered: “In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and will rebuild the ruins of it, and will set up the parts thereof that have been broken down, and will build it up as in the ancient days: *that the remnant of men — and all the Gentiles upon whom my name is called — may earnestly seek me,* saith the Lord.” And this meaning, *not* the Hebrew meaning, was picked up by Luke in Acts 15:14 ff. “. . . Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, as it is written, ‘After this I will return,

and I will rebuild the booth of David, which has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up, *that the rest of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name,* says the Lord.” It is obvious that Luke is quoting Amos according to the LXX, which raises two questions: (1) why are the Hebrew and the Greek so different, and (2) why did Luke go with the Greek text rather than the Hebrew tradition? Both questions have easy answers — if you know a little Hebrew.

The answer to the first question comes by recognizing, first, that the name *Edom* and the noun *adam* (“man, people”) are spelled the same way in Hebrew, and recognizing, next, that there is a simple confusion of שרש = *darash* “to seek” and שרש = *yarash* “to possess, to dispossess.” (Whether to read a ך (y) or a ד (d) may depend on one’s *eyesight* or theological *insight*.) For question two, the answer is simply that Luke was controlled by historical reality. Edom had not been subservient to Judah for 600 years. Rather Judah in 39 B.C. came under the rule of an Edomite, Herod the Great, “King of the Jews,” who was half Idumean and half Jew. Luke lived long enough, well after Herod the Great and Herod Antipas, and long enough after the resurrection of Jesus, to comprehend better than most of his disciples the inclusiveness of Jesus’ ministry, affirming in his own way what John declared, “God so loves the world.”

After 600 long years of oppression by Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans, Jews were longing to sing their own spiritual, “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God, free at last!” From the sectarian “son of light” appearing in the Dead Sea Scrolls to the Zealots and Judas Iscariot types mentioned in the New Testament, there were high hopes for a messianic “son of David” who would fight for Israel’s liberty.

When Jesus was greeted by the crowds on that first Palm Sunday, shouting הושיע־נא בן דוד “Please save us, O Son of David” (Matthew 21:9), they were not requesting one more pretty poem to add to their psalter. When Jesus talked with his own despondent disciples on the road to Emmaus, after his resurrection, the disciples were not dejected because a pious poet-friend had been unjustly crucified. No, they had so hoped that “Jesus, son of David” (like the Champion David of yore) would have been the one finally to redeem Israel from foreigners and pagans. On the Mount of Ascension, after Jesus had knowingly conquered death itself, his disciples desperately ask again at the last minute, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6).

Understandably, Jesus’s disciples wanted him to be more than just another rabbi, a pretty poet, or pious psalmist. They wanted a *champion* who, like David—taking on Goliath—would personally, one-on-one, confront Pilate and destroy Herod. And if the famed David of yore could slay his 10,000’s, surely the messianic “son of David” could wipe out Rome’s legions. But, alas, instead of “the Son of David” for *Israel*, Jesus proved to be “the son of Jesse” for *all*, just as Isaiah envisioned: *the shoot of Jesse will become the glorious ensign of God to all peoples and nations!*

The paradigm shift I propose from, “Jesus, son of David” to “Jesus, son of Jesse,” is not rooted in Jesus’ ancestor, Jesse the son of Obed. We know so little about him, for while “David” appears 1,100 times in the Bible, “Jesse” appears less than fifty times, and

only five times in the New Testament (four times in genealogies and once in Romans 15:12, which paraphrases Isaiah 11:1,

“. . . and further Isaiah says, ‘The root of Jesse shall come, he who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him shall the Gentiles hope’”).

The shift I propose is grounded in the meaning of “Jesse.” Were it not for 1 Chronicles 2: 13–14, I would have been preaching a different sermon today, for the Hebrew lexicons tell us simply that the etymology of “Jesse” is dubious. That’s because Jesse is listed in the dictionaries as it is spelled in 1 Chronicles 2:12 (יֵשׁוּ = *yishai* = Jesse) instead of being listed as it is spelled in 2:13, יֵשׁוּׁ (ʾ*ishai* = Esse) [and I kid you not, the name is repeated twice in a row but spelled differently, like “Tom-Thom” or “Right-Wright”]. In English this variation in the Hebrew spelling can be expressed by “Jesse” and “Esse” — which, as most of you graduating in Biblical Studies recognize, is like the “Esse” of the “Essenes” and Philo’s *Ossaioi* (in *Hypothetica* 11:1-18, from *Eusebius, P.E.* 8.5.11ff), rather than the *esse* of Latin..

When I looked up the usual spelling of “Jesse,” I found nothing helpful; but when I looked up the rare Hebrew spelling “Esse” in 1 Chronicles 2:14 (which happens to be the normal spelling in Syriac and Arabic), I hit pay dirt — a gold mine! It was a moment of the holy for me, with the Spirit speaking, of all things, through Arabic, Syriac, and Hebrew dictionaries. This *full* discovery, made only within recent months, became another step in my spiritual formation and in my theological integration. I discovered that “Jesse,” spelled “Esse,” has five meanings, all of which have great Christological significance. יֵשׁוּ / יֵשׁוּׁ “Jesse / Esse” means:

- (1) a peace maker and an agent of reconciliation,
- (2) a healer, a therapist,
- (3) one who shares out of abundance (of food or possessions) to lift up another to become one’s equal,
- (4) a person who so lives that others imitate him-or-her as their example of a godly lifestyle, and
- (5) a person who has experienced grief and sorrow, who knows what mourning is all about.

Notice, now, how each of these definitions fits our messiah:

Jesus-son-of-Jesse, the a peace maker,  
Jesus-son-of-Jesse, the reconciler;  
Jesus-son-of-Jesse, the healer; the great physician,  
the balm of Gilead,  
Jesus-son-of-Jesse, the one whom we seek to emulate and imitate, (note Thomas à Kempis’ classic)  
Jesus-son-of-Jesse, who shared all, even life itself, to raise up the children of God,  
Jesus-son-of-Jesse, who taught his disciples to lay down their lives, to share and to live in equality  
Jesus-son-of-Jesse, the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, . . . “crucified under Pontius Pilate.”

Every time I recite this litany of lexical entries my mind races with biblical texts about peace, reconciliation, healing, sharing, our being imitators of Christ, our becoming worthy of being imitated,

sharing ourselves and what we have, and even those texts of grief, sorrow, and suffering. Paul's affirmation in Ephesians 2: 14 sums up most of these "Jesse" elements:

*"For he (the Christ) is our peace, who has made all of us (Jew and Gentiles — Red, Yellow, Black, and White) one people, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the laws, commandments, ordinances, and traditions of racial and ethnic superiority that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the many alienated people, so making peace, and might reconcile us all to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing human hostilities to an end!"* (paraphrased).

Knowing now what we know about "Esse" and "Jesse," dare we *not* make the paradigm shift from "Jesus, son of David," "son of the Champ"—with all of its overtones of war, violence, genocide, ethnic cleansing, and the killing of all who are deemed to be our Philistines — to "Jesus, son of Jesse"? As you, the graduates of 1998, leave this sanctuary and the scattered classrooms of the seminary, with new titles of your own requiring a shift from Mr. or Mrs. or Ms. or Miss to Doctor, Master, Reverend, Professor, Elder, Deacon, Bishop — will you also make the shift about Jesse and Jesus?

When I graduated from Eastern in 1955 I went to Japan as an educational missionary for eight years. There I learned of the renown Japanese Christian, Kanzo Uchimura, who established the *mukyokai* "non-church" movement in Japan. Uchimura had studied at Hartford Theological Seminary (1884–1888), but while here in the States he became disenchanted with American denominationalism which he experienced as a denial of Christian unity. When he returned to Japan he evangelized outside the denomination churches. His boldness in refusing to acknowledge the divinity of the emperor and his *mukyokai* "non-church" movement attracted the attention of many Japanese intellectuals. (Whereas post-World War II intellectuals turned to Marxism, pre-war intellectuals turned to the Christian faith, thanks to Uchimura's ministry.) Uchimura was very nationalistic and boldly proclaimed his love for his "two J's" — Jesus and Japan! And I, too, came to love both of Uchimura's "two J's." With no less love for Japan (I still dream of going back), I now express my love for three J's: *Jahweh, Jesus, the son of Jesse.*

As you leave the seminary, Eastern's graduates of 1998, becoming peace-makers, ministers of reconciliation and healing, preaching love, justice, and equality—sharing who you are and what is yours—I trust you will join me and make the shift to "Jesus, son of Jesse" and affirm your own love for these three J's — for *Jahweh* (Jehovah) was in *Jahweh-shua* (Jesus), the son of *Jesse*, reconciling the world to Himself."

שלם וברכות ואמן "Peace and Blessings. Amen!"

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