

Just Jesus: My Struggle to Become Human

By Walter Wink, Steven Berry

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Wink shows us that inspiration and insight can come from any source: a Pentecostal Church in Oklahoma, dreams, Buddhist meditation centers, childhood traumas, an empty forest, illness, and the Gospels. Wink's work in social justice and his life as a theologian are inextricably entwined, finding evidence for nonviolent resistance in the Bible and seeing the need for Jesus in daily struggles.

"An autobiography of my interest in Jesus, perhaps that is too ambitious," writes Wink. "What I have done here is far less grand. I have simply written down vignettes, or excerpts of my life's story that I find interesting. These autobiographical reflections are in no way exceptional. Everyone has a life story. My story may, at the very least, show why I theologically think the way that I do."

Just Jesus is the jubilant autobiography of the man who sought justice in all walks of life, including his own.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Theologian, scholar, and peace activist Wink (*Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way*), who died in 2012, chronicles his lifetime faith journey in his last book. The reader accompanies him as he expounds his personal faith perspective in a series of short essays, and excerpts from previous works. Jesus, he believes, need no longer be worshipped, but should be emulated. It is Jesus's mission to confront the dominant powers and to liberate people to become fully human. Beginning with a loveless childhood, Wink has a conversion experience as a young adult, then goes to Selma where he is trained in the practice of nonviolent resistance to social and political injustice. With his wife, June, he goes on to teach and to protest worldwide. Although at times a bit disjointed, this offers insight into the trajectory of the author's life as he tries to follow the path of the human Jesus by hearing the oppressed into healing and unmasking the dominant powers." -*Publishers Weekly*

“For those who knew Walter Wink, this book is a treasure. For those who didn’t know him, *Just Jesus* provides a rich encounter with one of the most important New Testament scholars of the past half-century. *Just Jesus* is in part a memoir, but it takes the striking form of brief memories of his early life with snapshots of his last years and months, and all of that integrated with essays on some of the most important matters that he wrote about. *Just Jesus* is memory and testimony.” –Marcus Borg, author of *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*

"For many of us, it is hard to overstate the importance of the work of Walter Wink, and the very direct influence his scholarship had on our understanding of central Biblical themes. But here we see the very human Walter meeting 'the Human One' Jesus in ways that touch our heart as much as our minds. We will miss him just a little bit less--and also a little bit more--because of this final gift of his love and his wisdom." -Richard Rohr, O.F.M., Founder of Center for Action and Contemplation and author of *Falling Upward*

"Walter Wink touched scores of thousands of lives through his writing and his collaborative work with June, his beloved spouse. His willingness to put his life lovingly on the line in places of conflict, including South Africa, gave his theology of nonviolence credibility beyond the pages of his books. Prophetic words became prophetic action. Walter’s last work is an eclectic collection of autobiographical and theological vignettes, threaded together by his ruthlessly honest search for God and meaning in a wounded world and a compromised church. In the end, only the Jesus he knew and loved makes sense of it all. This is an important read." -Peter Storey, former South African anti-apartheid Church leader and Professor *Emeritus,* Duke Divinity School

"This moving valedictory book will help those whose faith and thought have been shaped by Walter Wink’s ground-breaking work to understand the deep relationship between the man and his influential ideas. For others, this collection of reflections, written by Wink at the end of his life, provides an introduction to his extraordinary writing on non-violence, power, justice and Jesus." -Barbara G. Wheeler, Former President, Auburn Theological Seminary

About the Author
DR. WALTER WINK (1935-2012) was an influential American biblical scholar, theologian, and activist,

and was an important figure in progressive Christianity. He was well known for his advocacy of, and work related to, nonviolent resistance. Wink earned his Ph.D. at The Union Theological Seminary where he taught for nine years, and in 2010 was honored with the Unitas Distinguished Alumni Award. He went on to spend much of his career teaching at Auburn Theological Seminary in New York City. Wink wrote more than sixteen books as well as hundreds of scholarly articles, and is recognized for coining the phrase “the myth of redemptive violence.” With his wife, June Keener Wink, he held workshops around the world that combined religious-themed pottery, dancing, and Biblical interpretation. Wink died in 2012 from complications of dementia.

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Chapter 1

Just Jesus

When did I first begin to want to become more human, and when did I realize that Jesus was the key to my becoming? My faith was quite simple and direct. It was just Jesus. I wanted to know who this Jesus really is. The church was my refuge; I learned about Jesus and, by his example, I saw how to live. His example of how to live opened up a new freedom that was felt, if not articulated. For those who identify themselves as Christians, as I do, Jesus is the author of our humanity, and the goal of this book is the humanization of Jesus. I feel like I am in a rhetorical fistfight to humanize religion through Jesus’s pragmatism. I can offer the reader no definition of what humanizing entails. Each person’s journey is unique, an act of creation.

The Bible as Punishment

My first vivid encounter with Jesus took place in the fourth grade, when I was expelled from Sunday school for rowdiness. My parents punished me by making me skip Sunday dinner and stay in my room. For my comfort, my mother handed me the Revised Standard Version (RSV) of the New Testament, which had just been published. I began at the beginning, with the long list of somebody who was the father of somebody, and somebody who was the father of somebody else, and on and on. The further I read, the more fascinated I became. Here is the most important book in the world, I thought, and yet it doesn’t make any sense. Why begin a book with this long list of ancestors? Thus my curiosity about Scripture was first piqued. Imagine, punishment by reading a Bible! My mother may not have been seeking to punish me after all, but to guide me to deeper life meanings through Scripture. Yet there are people who use the Bible to bludgeon others on a daily basis.

Health

It is said that “It’s a good life—if you’ve got your health.” But it snuck up on me: first, twenty years of restless leg syndrome (RLS), then prostate cancer (in remission), then pneumonia (healed), then dementia (fatal). I had always thought that a life-threatening illness or accident would force me to attend to my relationship with God in the absence of real commitment. In fact, the deeper I slipped into the darkness, the less I cared about God. Prayer was out of the question. In my journal, I once scribbled: “If I have a soul, it’s silent. I don’t know what the point of this book is anymore. If God won’t heal me, God can go hang.” My helpers tried everything to bring me back to my relationship with God.

In my early twenties, my personal demand for perfection escalated infinitely. If my father could demand perfection to the extent of inspecting every blade of grass on the fresh-mowed lawn, then how much more could God expect? There was always this possibility of not living up to what God wanted of me. It led to a massive denial because I couldn’t own up to who I really was. And to tell the truth about myself would be to

divulge my innermost self, leading to rejection by God and others. For that reason, I couldn't make eye contact with people lest they see into my true heart. You can imagine what a relief it was to discover that the "wrath of God" was not divine retribution for our sins, but rather divine forbearance, whereby God "gives us up" to the consequences of our folly (Rom. 1:18–32), of which global warming is only one of many.

My deepest fear, however, was that I could no longer address this global mess that surrounds us every day. I had felt so strongly that God had called me to help others find meaning in life, but now the best I could do was to give whatever my leftover self could offer. I felt like I was letting God down when I didn't use the gifts given me. And so I was afraid that I was a fraud. I had a hard time being aware of the reality of God.

I was afraid that restless leg syndrome and all the medications blindly thrown at it had permanently damaged my brain. And memory loss led to acute daily failures in speaking and writing, which prevented me from believing in myself. I had to cancel all workshops, which felt like amputation without anesthesia. And so I spiraled down into depression and a night I had never known before, experiencing nearly all the side effects announced on the pharmacists' disclaimers. This was more than RLS, though it was that too. Finally a doctor recognized the symptoms: it was a form of dementia, an acute memory disorder that eventually proves fatal but can, with proper care, be delayed. And now, thank God, medications have been developed that are effective for the relief of RLS symptoms and for dementia. I was told that I would never lecture or lead workshops again, but I can write, and even have recently lectured in a limited way.

Then this bombshell: I had not turned my back on God. I hadn't lost my faith. I was being poisoned to death. On July 21, 2007, the makers of OxyContin (Oxycodone hydrochloride) were assessed a $634.5 million fine for failing to warn the public about the painkiller's risk of addiction and death. OxyContin had already caused 146 deaths and had contributed to another 318 deaths—with the full knowledge of the pharmaceutical executives. I feel certain that I would soon have died had my family not gotten me off the drug immediately. So I hadn't lost my faith. It was stolen from me. It was a new form of unbelief: "chemical atheism."

In the meantime, I do jigsaw puzzles and other memory exercises, walk forty minutes a day, work out with a trainer at a gym, do stretching and weights daily, receive neurofeedback on an experimental basis, and ride an elliptical machine before bed. I enjoy life, sleep better, and have even accepted an invitation to give a lecture in the spring.

The Brig

The defining event of my childhood took place when I was nine years old. When I was a child, I lied quite often out of fear of my father's wrath. One day when he came home from work, he asked me if I had put my bike in the garage. I answered yes, and ran out to the front yard to put it away. It was gone. I ran into the house shouting that my bike had been stolen. "Where was it?" Dad asked. "In the front yard," I naïvely replied. "I thought you said it was in the garage," he said. It was entrapment; he had hidden it himself.

After dinner that night, he and my mother convened a trial at the kitchen table where I stood before the bar of justice, being judged. They found me guilty of being a liar, and gave me two choices: to leave home for good, or to spend the night in the "brig" (a garage storeroom). Sensing that my life in my family was over, I opted to leave. They asked me to whom I planned to go. I said I would go live with my Aunt Sue and Uncle Dave. "Oh no, they wouldn't want a liar living with them." Then I suggested the preacher's son, who was my best friend. But every suggestion met with the same refrain: "Oh, no, they wouldn't want a liar living with them." There appeared to be no alternative to the brig. It must have been fall. I can still remember the sound of the pecan tree being lashed by the wind.

After a while Dad came to the door and told me it was time to turn off the light. I was terrified. Now I was in total darkness, inside and out. Whatever hope I still had disappeared. Only years later, after my parents had died, my sister told me that she had been at her bedroom window, keeping watch, unable to do anything about it. My mother must have been devastated. She had to have known this was all wrong. She was Phi Beta Kappa, a prolific reader, and a person of compassion. But she had been taught to obey her husband. She must have finally been unable to take it any longer. Somehow she must have persuaded him to release me from their "jail." It seemed like hours. It could as well have been eternity.

That night in a very profound sense I "died" emotionally.

The next afternoon I met Dad in the yard. "Do you still love me?" he asked.

"No," I answered.

"Will you obey me?"

"Yes," I replied. And I did.

Boy Scouts

I was inducted into the Order of the Arrow as a child, a society of Boy Scouts who were trained in ecological awareness and survival skills that was premised on the love of nature. The climax of the ritual was an all-night silent vigil in the woods, with only a dull sheath knife and a canteen of water. I was directed to keep a fire going all night long and not sleep. There was no fear; I was alone in a place I loved to be the most. Turtle doves serenaded me the live-long night. That experience stands as emblematic of many times in my life when solitude and nature provided emotional comfort.

Together, my liberal Methodist church and the Boy Scouts formed a surrogate family that compensated, at least in part, for the alienation I felt from my natural family. Every summer, my experience of God in nature went deeper.

Prayer for Writing

On this beautiful end of summer day, Lord, I bring my whole self, including my ambivalence to you, and offer myself to be used by you in the writing of this book. Deliver me from egocentric plots. Give me courage to rewrite to perfection. I do commit myself to you, O God, in life, in death. I commit myself to the truth. I will not be cowed by pain or use it as an excuse for resistance. I will try to hold myself open to the depths. I ask for images and metaphors to flow when I write. I ask for help in revising my book, to make it really readable. I ask for patience to do it right.

I woke up this morning so happy because I had slept all night. I feel like I ought to be writing, but I don't have the energy. June urges me to enjoy whatever I am doing, whether grocery shopping or a workout—that too is living. I don't have to write this book. All these mundane tasks are just as important as writing this book. And I should be so grateful for these moments. When I want to write, that will the right time.

The Son of the Man

We have plundered the ecosystem as if there were no end to its fecundity. It is far from clear that human beings will survive. Already millions have died, many at the hands of fellow humans. Our leaders have failed

to act while they could. The apocalyptic scenarios in which the biblical “son of man” appears to judge the nations are terrifyingly vivid. But there is another alternative, in which the Human Being will reveal itself to us as nonviolent, and by some miracle we will awaken to the crisis and act. Against all hope, apartheid and the Berlin Wall fell. Quite literally, our task today is to save this crippled and crying world.

There are few mysteries in biblical studies as unfathomable as the expression “the son of the man.” Scarcely any topic in all research has received more attention with less result. Here are the few facts that define the problem. “Son of man” (without definite articles) appears one hundred and eight times in the Hebrew Bible Scriptures, ninety-three of them in Ezekiel. Curiously, God refuses to call Ezekiel by his given name, but addresses him only as “son of man.” No one else calls Ezekiel “son of man,” only God. A similar expression appears in the New Testament some eighty-seven times, all but three in the Gospels, and curiously, eighty-four times on the lips of Jesus and no one else.

“The son of the man” is so awkward that virtually all translators omit the second definite article. You may be wondering why I use the Greek expression in the Gospels, “the son of the man.” Quite simply, I do so because that is what the Greek phrase says, and it should be translated that way, despite a conspiracy of translators to render it with only one definite article, “the son of man.” To add insult to injury, they also add caps where there are none. I will translate the expression literally, with both articles, to underscore its oddness and crudity. I apologize on behalf of the New Testament for the double sexism in this expression. I will do everything in my power to counteract it.

Herein lies the puzzle: Jesus apparently avoided designation as messiah, son of God, or God, though these titles were given to him after his death and resurrection by his disciples. But Jesus is repeatedly depicted as using the obscure expression “the son of the man” as virtually his only form of self-reference. Yet, his disciples, after his death, almost completely ignored the expression. Paul never once used it, nor any of the writers of the other epistles. It appears only a few times in the writing of the Apostolic Fathers. So far as we know, no one worshipped “the son of the man” or made that figure the one addressed in prayer. Insofar as the expression was used by the later church, it was merely fused with the other Christological titles, or treated as an expression indicating Jesus’s human nature, as opposed to his divine nature. “The son of the man” was never made the basis of any church confession, never appeared in any of the church’s creeds, and, in time, virtually disappeared from usage except in Gnostic circles.

It is at least clear that Jesus did not use “the son of the man” as a self-deprecating expression of humility. If there is anything Jesus was not, it was modest. Few people ever spoke with such unmediated authority, or made a higher claim, than Jesus that he was ushering the Reign of God into the world. “Son of” is simply a Semitic idiom meaning “pertaining to the following genus or species.” Thus “son of the quiver” is an arrow (Lam. 3:13), a “son of the herd” is a calf (Gen. 18:7), and a “son of the night” refers to something one night old (Jon. 4:10). Joshua and Zerubbabel are “sons of oil,” that is, anointed ones (Zech. 4:14), and a “son of wisdom” is a wise person (Isa. 19:11). Hence “son of man” simply means “man,” or “human being.” This idiom is used in scores of ways in the Hebrew Bible, and it is never translated literally (“son of”), but it is always rendered into an equivalent English expression.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Anthony Russell:

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