

Jesus Was a Tree Hugger

How Christianity's Namesake was Inspired by Nature

By

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After two millennium of deification, Jesus the man may be among the most obscure figures in human history. So much so that one of our own congregation's historical figures, M. M. Mangasarian, a minister here in the early 1900s, argued no such person ever existed all: that Jesus was a myth. In his controversial book, *The Truth About Jesus*, Mangasarian admits, "The majority of writers assume that a person answering to the description of Jesus lived some two thousand years ago."¹ Yet he points out, based simply on the facts, that there is no evidence whatsoever that such a person ever existed. He does a pretty good job of arguing his position, but I still agree with most scholars on the matter, that there was once a historical figure whom the Biblical Jesus and the Christ of faith are based upon, but there's little to nothing we know about the man with certainty.

Jesus is like one of those movies that claims to be based on "true events," which makes it sound legitimate even though it's entirely fiction. *Open Water*, for example, is a movie about what happens to a couple of divers after they are accidentally left out to sea. It's based on a brief newspaper report about some actual divers who were unintentionally left behind and never seen again. Based on this brief report alone, the screenwriter tells an entire story about what happened to them after they were never seen again, which is impossible to know. I think this is similar to what happened to the historical Jesus. There was a person who lived 2,000 years ago of whom we know little about, and the Gospels are like a movie script that claims to be based on "true events" even though it's entirely made up.

So there's a lot said about Jesus that we can be almost certain never happened, compared to what little we can consider plausible at best. Certainly any "miracles" regarding his birth, life, and death are impossible fictions. Well into the 21st century, this self-evident truth should not be a shocking or controversial thing for me to say. People do not walk on water or rise from the dead. What I do believe likely is that a historical figure lived in Judea around 2,000 years ago who has come to be called Jesus. He was Jewish, perhaps a rabbi, who became popular after he was unjustly executed by the Roman authorities for his subversive teachings. Some of those teachings were then transmitted orally among the populous and became altered in the process. These misremembered and inaccurate teachings became the basis for what was later written in the Gospels. Additionally, the Gospel writers enveloped these familiar sayings and parables with made up narratives that give them false contexts, which makes it difficult to know what Jesus may have originally meant by them, if he ever said them at all.

To try to figure this out, we have to do a couple of things. First, we have to determine, as best we can, which sayings attributed to Jesus in the Gospels might be authentic. This is hard. It's much easier to be sure of the things he did not do or say. Still, by comparing the Gospels to each other and finding what they share in common, scholars have pieced together an idea of which sayings attributed to Jesus might be authentic. Some of them are

worded so precisely that it is believed the Gospel writers were using another source from which they were copied: a source that no longer exists. This source, called “Q”, for short, is thought to have been no more than a list of familiar sayings and parables attributed to Jesus, without any context or additional narrative. Fortunately, there has been a lot of good scholarship to help us figure some of this out, although scholars don’t completely agree on the matter.

The other thing we have to do, in order to understand what Jesus may have meant by what we consider his authentic sayings, is the historical, political, cultural, and literary contexts in which they were said. This isn’t something we can understand from reading the Bible. It takes lots of study and lots of speculation. Here again, there has been a lot of good scholarship to help us figure some of this out, although scholars don’t completely agree on the matter.

As for me, I believe the historical Jesus was a member of the *anawim*, the poorest and most oppressed of his society, who had no rights and was considered untouchable by his own Jewish community. If he was considered a rabbi by some, it could not have been an official title since the religious authorities would not have recognized someone of his class as such. Yet, he had the singular fortitude to rise above the opinion of others, to insist he was both a son of God and a son of Man. In other words, whatever his circumstances, he belonged both to his Creator and to humanity and deserved to be treated as such. If he became popular, and controversial, it was because he said the same thing about everyone else, including the meekest and poorest and most downtrodden within his society. And this alone, teaching the oppressed that they deserve better, which threatened the system and could even lead to an uprising, was enough to get him killed—and did.

Yet a little-known quality of his teachings, at least many of those I consider authentic, is that they were inspired by his connection to nature. If this is so, then the historical Jesus should be considered among those whom scholars call Wisdom teachers.

Many of us consider Judaism a patriarchal religion since it worships a male deity, often referred to as Yahweh or Jehovah (according to which vowels are inserted between the four consonants in the tetragram representing the unnamable being it alludes to in the Hebrew scriptures). But this assumption may be based more on a Hellenistic and Western interpretation of these appropriated scriptures than on Judaism. It is true that Yahweh is treated as a masculine figure in the Hebrew scriptures, but it is also a being that is so incomprehensible and unknowable that it becomes a sin to even give it a name.

When it is said to have spoken to Moses, it does so in the form of a burning bush, as fire, which was the element Heraclitus used to symbolize constant change. When Moses asks the entity’s name, the burning bush tells him, “I am becoming.” And when he asks to see what the being looks like, the best the entity can do is reveal a tiny portion of his backside. To me, this is a beautiful, if not humorous, way of saying we can only see God by seeing what God leaves behind (God’s butt), we can only understand the Creator by looking to Creation. And in the Hebrew tradition, Creation is feminine. Yahweh, nebulous as it is, may be considered

a masculine force, just as the creative force in the *I Ching* is considered masculine, but this force is always balanced by and expressed as feminine, just as also true in the *I Ching*. The creative force may be a masculine archetype, but it can only be experienced as feminine. When this invisible force becomes manifest, when, that is, we can see what it leaves behind, its consequences, its backside, it is as a feminine archetype.

What we call Mother Nature and Mother Earth, the Hebrews called Shekinah and Hokmah, feminine terms that, respectively, refer to God's Glory and God's Wisdom. In the Hebrew tradition, wisdom doesn't refer only to good ideas, but to the manifestation of the Creator's wisdom through nature. Nature is sacred wisdom. Nature is sacred. Nature is divine. Nature is the Creator's handmaiden. Without her always at his side, nothing would exist. In *Proverbs* Wisdom herself says, "The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth."² And the Jewish *Book of Wisdom* says, "She is the breath and power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; therefore, nothing defiled gains entrance into her. For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness."³

Proverbs is among the Hebrew writings classified as Wisdom literature. Other Wisdom writings include the *Book of Job*, *Ecclesiastes*, *Song of Songs*, some of the *Psalms*, and the apocryphal works *Ecclesiasticus* and *The Wisdom of Solomon* found in all Orthodox and Catholic Bibles. Some of these are considered parables, like *Job* and *Song of Songs*, and others are collections of wise sayings, like *Proverbs* and *Psalms*.

That the historical Jesus appears to have used both of these rhetorical devices, proverbs and parables, is enough to count him as a Wisdom teacher, but the contents of his proverbs and parables are even more to the point. We'll consider some this content in a moment, but it will be helpful to understand that there are four kinds of Wisdom literature—practical wisdom, juridical wisdom, theological wisdom, and natural wisdom. Practical wisdom is reflected in those folksy cliches and simple rules to live by often expressed as proverbs by country folk, the *pagani* (pagans), those closest to the earth. Juridical wisdom discusses ethical living and social justice. Theological wisdom helps us consider the problem of God, namely, the existence of evil. The historical Jesus may have touched upon these matters, but the teachings that most make him a Wisdom teacher are those that have to do with nature, with Hokmah, with his experience of the Creator through creation. We might even say through empiricism. Jesus, as far as I'm concerned, was far more a realist than a spiritualist.

Proverbs 10:4 is a good example of Natural wisdom: "Go to the ant you lazybones; consider its ways."⁴ In other words, we can look to this most humble of God's creatures to learn about the nature of hard work. That's natural wisdom, looking to nature to find truths about the world and living in it. The saying from *Ecclesiastes*, made familiar by Pete Seegar, is another example of finding solace in the ways of nature: "To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven. A time to be born, and a time to die: a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which has been planted,"⁵ and so on.

In reading the Gospels, especially by understanding those proverbs and parables considered authentic, meaning something like them was probably said by historical Jesus, we see just how inspired he was by nature and steeped in the Wisdom tradition. There's a story in *Matthew* claiming that, near the start of his ministry, Jesus was led into the wilderness where he was tempted by the devil. No doubt this is an apocryphal story, meaning it's made up and never happened. But it may be based on the real Jesus' proclivity for retreating into the wilderness to find rest and inspiration. *Luke* says, "Jesus often withdrew to the wilderness for prayer."⁶ There are also several accounts in the Gospels of Jesus going into the wilderness, the mountains, or to the sea to get away from the crowds, to grieve, to contemplate, and to be alone.

Some people think Jesus went into the wilderness to face its hardships, as a form of discipline. But I think he went there for the same reasons most of us go there, to clear our heads, feel connected to the Earth, and get in touch with something larger than ourselves. Such a relationship with nature would explain the natural wisdom expressed in so many of his teachings. It also explains why, although himself an outcast among his own kind, living in an occupied land, witness to all manner of suffering and injustice, he remained an optimist, because Hokmah, the empirical world, the manifestation of the creative force in creation, showed him there is more than enough for everyone.

"Look at the birds of the air"⁷ and "consider the lilies of the field,"⁸ Jesus is reported to have said. For, the birds do not sow, harvest, or store away, yet they are fed. The flowers do not toil or spin, yet they are clothed. By observing the ways of nature, the birds and flowers, Jesus learned about nature's bounty and wondered why we strive so hard to get more than we need when there is already more than we need everywhere we turn. This is why he taught his followers to pray only for their daily bread and to take no more for a journey than the clothes on their backs. He was also perfectly content to be an itinerant preacher with no home of his own because, he said, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests."⁹

He's also reported to have said, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."¹⁰ Jesus did not have a scarcity mindset because he looked to the Wisdom of nature and saw more than enough for all, so why store more than we need in places where it can be stolen or decay or, worse, go to waste. Rather, by sharing what there is, everyone will have their fill, as is illustrated in the story of feeding the multitudes starting with only a few fish and loaves of his own. When everyone else pitches in what little they have, there is more than enough—or so Nature teaches us.

Jesus also addressed some of life's perennial problems, like epistemology, by turning to nature. How, for example, are we to know the difference between false and true teachers? "You will know them by their fruits," he said. "Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but every bad tree bears bad fruit."¹¹ Observing nature seems to have turned him into a pragmatist. If something doesn't produce positive results, it's useless and false. Thorns and thistles don't nourish us. Grapes

and figs do. Trust the things that nourish us, that we can use for our own good, that fill us and result in our health. That's how you know the difference between what's true and what isn't.

In light of such teachings, it would appear Jesus knew a lot about plants and their cultivation. In his *Parable of the Sower*, for instance, he tells of a man who scatters seed, some of which falls on the path and is eaten by birds; some of which fall on rocky ground where there isn't much soil and grows quickly, but is easily scorched by the sun when it grows; some of which fall among thorns and are choked out when they grow; and some that fall upon good soil and bring forth lots of grain. Whatever else this might mean, it's clear he understood the necessity of healthy soil for the growth and sustenance of life.

Perhaps this explains his empiricism, his appreciation for and trust in nature's physical realm, the only means, again, by which the Creator can be experienced, through its creation, Hokmah, Wisdom. Many are familiar with Jesus' saying, "The Kingdom of God is within you."¹² It's found only in *Luke*, one of the later gospels, and may not be authentic. The context in which Luke inserts it, regarding the end of days, is certainly a made-up narrative. But I believe this single sentence, which is usually the only part that stays with us, may have been something Jesus really said, or at least that had been attributed to him and passed along through oral tradition. The author of *Luke* later inserted it into his fictional account.

I believe it to be authentic because it expresses the same reverence for our earthly existence as what I believe are Jesus' other authentic sayings and teachings, and because it is so revolutionary. Too often religion teaches us that this world is an evil place filled with misery and suffering, that if there is a better place, it is yet to come. But this statement, which has lasting power precisely because it is contrary to what religion usually teaches us, contradicts the negativity by telling us we're already in Heaven. The Greek particle used here, *en*, usually translated to mean, "within," can also mean, "among." So, we don't know, if he said it, if Jesus meant the kingdom of God is "within" you or "among" you. Did he mean, that is, heaven is in each one of us as individuals? Or is it something we establish "among" ourselves through our relationships? Or is it simply something that's all around us all the time waiting for us to notice? The *Gnostic Gospel of Thomas* eliminates this quandary by having the statement say both, "the kingdom is in you and all around you,"¹³ like the air we breathe.

Regardless, if this statement is rooted in something that historical Jesus actually said, it is further proof of his rightful place among the Wisdom teachers. The Creative force is not something beyond our reach, up there or out there or over there, or something we must die to know. The creative force, rather, can be experienced right here, right now, within us, among us, and all around us, in the Creation, Hokmah, Lady Wisdom, Mother Nature, the tangible, dark, moist mother Earth that gives and nourishes all life. Remember, "matter" and "mother" come from the same word.

Like the Christian mystics who followed after him, Jesus understood, as Meister Eckhart said, "Every creature is a word of God and a book about God,"¹⁴ and Hildegard of Bingen, who said, "This Word manifests itself in every creature,"¹⁵ and Mechtild of Magdeburg who

said, “The truly wise person kneels at the feet of all creatures,”¹⁶ and the old Rabbinic saying that says, “Creation is the infinite in the garb of the finite. To attend to Creation is to attend to God.”¹⁷

“For the mystic,” as Evelyn Underhill says in her classic book on the subject, “The Uncreated light manifests Itself through created things.”¹⁸ This seems to also have been true of historical Jesus. So, whether we a Christians or not, theists or atheists, prefer to say Creator, Lifeforce, or Evolution, we can all look to the example of historical Jesus by turning to nature to see the wisdom of the Universe, right here, right now, on this beautiful blue speck of space dust we call home, the only home we have. May we all learn to love her and treat her with the reverence she deserves.

¹ M. M. Mangasarian. *The Truth About Jesus: is He a Myth?* (M. M. Mangasarian Collection) (p. 23). Dodo Collections. Kindle Edition.

² Proverbs 8:22-23

³ Book of Wisdom 7:25-26

⁴ Proverbs 6:6

⁵ Ecclesiastes 3:1-2

⁶ Luke 5:16

⁷ Matthew 6:26

⁸ Matthew 6:28-29

⁹ Matthew 8:20

¹⁰ John 10:10

¹¹ Matthew 7:16-17

¹² Luke 17:21

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¹⁴ Fox, Matthew, *Original Blessing*, Bear & Company, Santa Fe, NM, 1983, p. 35.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 69.

¹⁷ Fox, Matthew, *One River, Many Wells*, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York, NY, 2000p. 36.

¹⁸ Underhill, Evelyn, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*, Dover Publications, New York, NY, 1930, 12th edition, 2002, p. 191.