

The Good News

Who Was Jesus and What Did He Really Have to Say?

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Although one of the world's largest and oldest religion is based on him, nobody knows much of anything about who Jesus really was. The four gospels, as well as other writings written about him, are full of contradictions, improbabilities, and impossibilities. There is a long and ever-widening number of Christian sects, none of which agree entirely about the meaning of his life and teachings. Some maintain what scholars call a "low Christology" and some a "high Christology," referring to the varying degrees to which Jesus the man is believed to be the divine Christ. Those sects that focus mostly on his death as the cosmic propitiation for our sins, his miraculous resurrection, and worship him as God incarnate, have a high Christology. Those that emphasize his teachings and their potential good for humanity, along with his own humanity, have a low Christology.

Most Christian sects do emphasize both his humanity and his divinity to some extent. Catholicism, among others, says he is both "fully human" and "fully God," although this is a logical contradiction, as is the Trinitarian explanation that attempt to resolve it with another contradiction, the claim that the Father and Son, along with the Holy Ghost, are one person. Still, in addition to worshipping Jesus as Christ—as God—modern Catholics also heavily engage in what is known as the "Social Gospel" by working to alleviate human suffering through many charitable acts and programs. Worshipping him doesn't negate the possibility of taking his humanitarian teachings seriously, nor, conversely, does emphasizing the Social Gospel negate the possibility of worshipping him as God.

Unitarianism, which is defined by its disbelief in his divinity and its emphasis on his humanity and humanitarian teachings, has an extremely low Christology, which explains why, historically, many other Christian sects don't consider Unitarianism a Christian religion at all. This is fair to say of western Unitarianism these days, which is no longer centered on Jesus or his teachings, although it began as a form of "liberal Christianity" and was considered as such well into the 20th century. But Eastern European Unitarianism, where it began, continues to identify as a Christian religion, and its worship services emphasize the Bible, the teachings of Jesus, and the worship of God. They are more similar to a Sunday service in any U.S. Christian church than to what western Unitarians experience in our services today, especially here in the western part of the West. Nevertheless, in Eastern Europe, where churches get some financial support from their governments, the mainstream religions (Catholics and Eastern Orthodox) have argued that Unitarians shouldn't receive such funding because they don't worship Jesus and, therefore, are not a real religion.

As for me, even as a Southern Baptist during my youth, human Jesus inspired me more than the idea of Christ. My favorite Christian hymn is "I Come to the Garden Alone," which is based on the story of Mary coming before the empty tomb and meeting resurrected Jesus. But, for me, it was about his humanity and being able to make a human connection with him. *And He walks with me, and He talks with me | And He tells me I am His own | And the joy we share as we tarry there | None other has ever known.* Like most western Unitarians, I still have a strong affection for human Jesus, particularly for some of his teachings, but, like John H. Deitrich, our minister here in Spokane at

the start of the 20th century and the father of Religious Humanism, I don't believe that he was the greatest human ever to have lived, nor, by any means, the most profound. In his 1924 sermon, "Liberal Religion at the Cross-Roads," Deitrich said, "I am too thorough-going an evolutionist to listen to any enthusiasm to the assertion of any unique virtue in Jesus, which places him 2,000 years ago at the top of human achievement. I believe that his moral excellence has been equaled many times, if not excelled, just as I am certain that his intellectual grasp of life and of nature, remarkable indeed for his day, has been very far surpassed by our general progress in intelligence since his time."

Unitarians do not worship Jesus, not anywhere, although some, especially our Eastern-European counterparts, have great reverence for him, but mostly for his teachings, which remain central to their faith. In the western hemisphere, Jesus has become increasingly less central and significant a figure for us and now stands on equal par with the central figures and teachers of many religions as a potential source of wisdom or inspiration. What we think of him, if anything at all, is up to us, as individuals, in our own search for truth and meaning. Our religion, as a whole, has no official or common opinion about him, except that he is not God.

Today I want to share my beliefs about him, about who I think he was and the significance of his life. Although I don't consider him the wisest or most knowledgeable man ever to have lived, I do consider him to have been a remarkable man who is worthy of our admiration and consideration. In short, Jesus still inspires me. I think he would have made a good Unitarian. Perhaps he was. As a Jew, theologically, he most certainly was.

To begin, like all Unitarians, I believe in Jesus' humanity. I don't mean I believe, as the Catholics and others say that he was "fully human," but that he was *only* human, nothing more, and nothing less. My college philosophy professor, Dr. Wallace Roark, who was also a Southern Baptist professor, used to say that the one thing we can be sure of about Jesus, no matter what else is said about it, is that he was human. That was his starting place, as it is mine when talking about Jesus, although it's also my end point. Jesus was only human.

Unfortunately, human Jesus, or "historical Jesus," as the scholars refer to him, is far more difficult to uncover than any of the absurd fictions he's associated with. As Thomas Jefferson said, "The doctrines which flowed from the lips of Jesus himself are within the comprehension of a child; but thousands of volumes have not yet explained the Platonisms engrafted on them; and for this obvious reason that nonsense can never be explained."¹ It's true, the meaning of some of his most memorable sayings are easy to understand, though difficult to practice. "Turn the other cheek." "Love your neighbor as yourself." "Those who live by the sword, die by the sword." But he likely didn't say most of what has been attributed to him, and much of what he did say needs to be understood within the historical context of its day, if, that is, we want to potentially get at its intended meaning.

When working on my master's degree, my theology professor, Dr. Adeline Fehribach, who is also a Catholic nun and an accomplished Bible scholar, used to tell her first year Bible students, "If it's written in the Bible, you can pretty much rest assured it never happened." Dr. Fehribach's startling declaration is in line with what many other such scholars have to say. During the 1980s and 90s,

the Jesus Seminar was comprised of hundreds of scholars who, after years of research, voted to determine the historical reliability of the many claims about him. Through this process, they determined that less than 20 percent of everything Jesus is claimed to have said or done *may* have happened. But even this much is uncertain. They are far surer of the more than 80 percent they say never happened than they are of the less than 20 percent they believe there *may* be some truth to. To paraphrase Dr. Fehribach, if it says it in the Gospels, you can pretty much rest assured it never happened.

All of this leads to my two starting points when considering the historical Jesus: First, that it is impossible to know much about who he really was with any certainty. Second, just about the only thing we can be sure of is that he was a human being, if he existed at all. There are some arguments suggesting he may be a complete work of fiction, but I do believe there is a higher probability that an itinerant teacher called Jesus, who was Jewish and lived in Israel, lived around 2,000 years ago and was crucified by the Roman authorities. Whatever else has ever been said about him is probably closer to fiction than reality.

It is also obvious that the fictions written about him became increasingly absurd over time. Between the writing of *Mark*, the earliest Gospel, written around 65 CE, and of *John*, the last Gospel, written sometime after 100 CE, we see an evolution from him being human to becoming the divine Christ. In *Mark*, for example, there is no birth narrative. Human Jesus, rather, emerges from the baptismal waters and experiences an epiphany. “And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’”² Next came *Matthew*, between 80 and 90 CE, followed shortly by *Luke*, both of which add and immaculate conception and virgin birth to the account, indicating Jesus was by then considered to be of divine origin. By the time *John* is written sometime in the next century, he is completely divine, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God ... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”³ An eternal, divine, nonhuman entity, who dressed up as a human.

It's the same with resurrection story. In *Mark*, the earliest gospel, three of his female disciples bring spices to anoint Jesus' dead body but find the tomb open and empty. A young man, presumably an angel since he begins by saying, “Be not afraid,” explains that Jesus has risen and will meet them in Galilee. “Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb,” *Mark* concludes, “They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.”⁴ It's a remarkable literary tactic, to leave the reader wondering if somehow crucified Jesus might live on, but there is no resurrection appearance, no “Jesus-sightings,” in the original story. The empty tomb is but an image of hope and a positive way to end a story that concludes with his execution.

Matthew has a post-resurrection sighting in which Jesus meets with his disciples and tells them, “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”⁵ Perhaps, rather than metaphor, his resurrection by this time was considered a spiritual event that allowed Jesus to remain with his followers in an unseen, but meaningful way, wherever two or more are gathered in his name. If it were a literal resurrection, after all, it would leave us all wondering where on Earth he is? But then *Luke* comes along to let us know that we can't see him, not because he is a spirit, but because he has ascended, like the Olympian gods, to be with his Father. “While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up to heaven.”⁶ Finally comes *John*, which has risen Jesus eating with his disciples and the story of doubting Thomas who feels the scares left by his

crucifixion, as if to prove his resurrection was physical. So, again, over time the story goes from a moving metaphor to being considered literally true, first as a spiritual event, and finally as a physical reality.

This is why, imperfect as it is, I prefer to base my notion of the historical Jesus mostly on *Mark*, which begins with his baptism and ends with his death, with lots of human interaction in between.

So, at last, here is what I believe is true about the historical Jesus. I believe that he was a man. I believe that he was a Jewish man. I believe that he lived around 2,000 years ago and was executed by the Romans for his subversive teachings. I believe that his mother became pregnant and birthed him out of wedlock, a situation that would have made both of them anathema in their society. I believe this is so because the Gospel writers would never have mentioned his illegitimate birth if this inconvenient truth wasn't already well known and undeniable. Since they couldn't ignore it, they had no choice but to transform it into a miraculous event as further proof of his divinity. I believe, as a fatherless child, Jesus was discriminated against and despised his entire life; considered unclean and unworthy of the slightest kindness or dignity. I believe a radical and rebellious wilderness prophet named John was willing to baptize him despite his ignoble birth. I believe this may have been the first meaningful bit of acceptance Jesus had ever experienced. For the first time in his life, he felt he belonged, that he was both a child of God and a human being—a son of God and a son of Man—who deserved to be treated as such. I believe this experience was the basis of his teaching. It was the good news, the gospel, that he wanted to share, that everyone, not just him, but each of us is a child of God and child of humanity, and we all deserve to be treated as such.

I attended a Jesus Seminar many years ago, in Cincinnati, Ohio, led by two Bible scholars. After their presentations I was able to ask what they thought of my favorite interpreter of Jesus' life, Stephen Mitchell. One of them shrugged and said, "I've never heard of him." The other said, "I know Stephen. We were college roommates. Stephen has managed to figure out on his own what it has taken hundreds of scholars and several years for the Jesus Seminar to conclude about Jesus."

You may know Mitchell for his excellent translation of the *Tao te Ching*, but I consider his book *The Gospel According to Jesus* just as good. In it, he suggests that being born out of wedlock must have profoundly impacted him and his early sense of self-worth, especially in his strict Jewish society. According to Jewish law, "No bastard shall enter the assembly of YHVH, even to the tenth generation."⁷ (Imagine being a little Jewish boy who isn't to go to the Temple because you don't have a daddy.)

Imagine how low one must feel when considered an outcast among outcasts. In *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification*, sociologist Gerhard Lenski describes the people at the bottom of the social totem pole as those who "had only their bodies and animal energies to sell and who were forced to accept occupations which quickly destroyed them."⁸ Because they were considered "obnoxious and offensive,"⁹ they were "either herded into urban ghettos or segregated from the population."¹⁰ Mitchell believes, as a bastard child, Jesus must have been a member of this class, also known as "the expendables."¹¹ Mitchell says *mamzer*, the Hebrew word for "bastard," was considered among the worst of insults; "*Mamzerim* were among those called the 'excrement of the community,'"¹² he says, and, therefore, had few rights or opportunities, other than to engage in menial labor.

To me, few interpretations better explain Jesus' extraordinary compassion and devotion to those

who have been marginalized by society, coming into physical contact with the outcasts and sinners, the sick and unclean, women who weren't supposed to interact publicly with men, Samaritans who weren't supposed to interact at all with Jews, the poor, the demonized. That was the good news, that all of them were acceptable and loveable and that they didn't deserve to be outcasts, or called unclean, or considered unworthy, or to be demonized. In all these cases, Jesus heals their wounds and diseases simply by touching them—touching the untouchables—connecting with them in the most human of ways.

We might consider such thinking rather innocuous, but it would have been considered subversive by the ruling elite of his day and is likely what got Jesus executed by the authorities. The last thing authoritarian societies want is people believing that we're all equals, which is what Jesus' good news was really about, as was later articulated beautifully by the Apostle Paul who wrote, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."¹³

The problem with taking everything written about him as literal and historical proof of his divinity is that we miss the practical and what I believe is the original meaning of these accounts. As such, Christianity becomes a religion that's merely about God's only son, rather than Jesus' actual good news that we are all God's children and ought to be cared for and treated with dignity, which means being good to each other. It means, as a society, we ought to treat others the way we want to be treated. It means we ought to heal the sick, feed the poor, welcome the outcasts, share our resources, forgive one another, put away our swords, set our captives free, and love one another by recognizing that we are all worthy of dignity and respect.

In his book, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, William R. Herzog says, "The parables of Jesus have long been revered as earthly stories with heavenly meanings. They have been viewed in this way because Jesus was thought to be a teacher of spiritual truth and divine wisdom. However, this view of Jesus stands in some tension with the account of his final trial and execution."³ Again, he wouldn't have been killed unless he was considered dangerous by the powers-that-be and a threat to the status quo. His parables usually depict unlikely encounters between the rich and the poor, between the ruling elite and those they exploit, like the Rich Man who, in death, must beg Lazarus for a drink, the same man who's suffering the rich man had ignored in life. The parable of the prodigal son is a story of treating the second born, the second class, as equal to the firstborn and first class. There are parables of widows forced to bribe judges before receiving justice, of servants who rebel against their absentee landlords, and of a businessman who exploits his destitute day laborers. It is difficult to accept that Jesus would have so habitually alluded to earthly examples of corruption, greed, exploitation, and injustice as allusions to his own nonearthly greatness. "Matters of justice were not peripheral to a spiritual gospel but were at the heart of his proclamation and practice,"⁴ Herzog says. Theologian Walter Wink similarly says, "Almost every sentence Jesus uttered was an indictment of the Domination System or the disclosure of an alternative to it."⁵

Jesus died because he was convinced that he had the same value as anyone else and because he tried to help others believe the same thing about themselves. There are so many stories in the gospels that suggest this is so, but my favorite is from the *Gospel of John*, which means we can be certain it never happened. Yet, to me, it is a brilliant metaphor that gets at the heart of Jesus's teachings and what Christianity ought to be about. It is the story of a woman accused of adultery who is about to be stoned to death. The murderous mob, perhaps wishing to make themselves feel

just a little more righteous than the lowest of the lows. But Jesus interrupts, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” This is his way of reminding them that we are all equals. Nobody is inherently better than anyone else.

But, for me, the most remarkable part of this story occurs once Jesus is left alone with the frightened, traumatized, and humiliated woman. Do you remember the first thing he says to her? Most people respond, “Go and sin no more.” But these are the last words. The first thing he says is, “Where are your accusers?” To me, asking this question is his way of setting her at ease, by implying that all her accusers are gone; that, between the two of them, there is no one left to judge her. But the author of this story probably meant it more for the majority of us who too often do judge others just to make ourselves feel good, right, and righteous, forgetting how we would feel if the tables were turned and if we were called to account for our mistakes. There’s plenty of guilt and shame and blame to go around in the world. Let’s forgive one another and move forward. Let’s go and sin no more. Let’s treat others the way we want to be treated. Judge not. Forgive. Love one another.

Was Jesus God? Of course not. Was he the wisest man who ever lived? Far from it. But as Christmas approaches and nativity scenes abound proclaiming that Christ the savior is born, it is worth remembering Jesus’ actual good news, that each one of us is a child of God and a part of the human family. We don’t need one magical savior. We can save ourselves by being kind and welcoming and forgiving and helpful to one another. To do so, we need only recognize the humanity and dignity of every person and all peoples. This is the only salvation there is, the only salvation we need, and it is up to us, not God or Jesus.

¹ Brodie, Fawn M, *Thomas Jefferson, an Intimate History*, Norton and Co., Inc., New York, NY 1974, p. 453.

² Mark 1:10-11.

³ John 1:1-2, 14.

⁴ Mark 16:8.

⁵ Matthew 28:20.

⁶ Luke 24:51.

⁷ Deuteronomy 23:3.

⁸ Lenski, Gerhard E., *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification*, McGraw-Hill, New York, NY, 1966, p. 281.

⁹ Ibid. p. 280.

¹⁰ Herzog, William R., *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1994, p. 65.

¹¹ Deuteronomy 23:3.

¹² Mitchell, Stephen, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, HarperCollins, New York, NY, 1991, p. 25.

¹³ Galatians 3:28.