

Some of My Favorite Jesus Stories

By

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The Jewish people are arguably the oldest group of people still in existence today, dating all the way back to 12,000 BCE. Given all that they've endured throughout their long history, this point alone is astonishing. But just as remarkable is that their ancient beliefs and writings remain central to the lives of billions of people, having become part of the sacred scriptures for three of the world's major religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In many ways, I find it incredibly disturbing that so many still follow these ancient and primitive writings based on myth and superstition, rather than depending upon the superior knowledge we've gained from reason and science during the past couple of centuries. Still, one cannot help but be in awe of such extraordinary endurance.

Of course, there are lots of ancient writings and stories that are of equal or greater benefit, but we regard them with less reverence that we do the Hebrew scriptures and its later spinoffs—Christianity's New Testament, Islam's Quran, and, most recently, the Book of Mormon. None of us, for example, worships Plato because of his writings, nor devote ourselves to the wisdom of Socrates, whom he wrote about. We haven't fashioned a religion based on either, nor carry about the *Apology* or the *Republic* and other such writings in leather bound, gold-leafed books. We may name planets after ancient gods—Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn—and some spacecrafts—Mercury, Apollo, Artemis—along with giving them to our pets, automobiles, and other things; but not because we worship them or believe any of them are real. When we hear one of Aesop's fables, like the one about a conversation between a mouse and a lion, or Greek myths, like the one about Zeus giving birth to Athena from his forehead, we don't take them literally, not any more than we do most ancient fables and myths.

Yet not taking these tales to be historically or literally true doesn't mean they aren't meaningful. Plato's philosophy and Aesop's fables provide much insight into our morals, and Greek mythology into human psychology, yet, again, we don't make religions out of them, even though they can be far more beneficial in helping us cope with reality than religion can. From my experience, it's only once these ancient writings and religious beliefs are liberated from their literal interpretations that they become truly meaningful. It's when they are allowed into the deep well of humanity's archetypal collective unconscious, along with our other myths and images, where we are free to play with their meaning, that they become worth paying serious attention to.

So it is with the stories and teachings attributed to Jesus. Like many, I consider them to be based on a historical person who lived in Judea approximately 2,000 years ago, whom we can know little more about with any confidence. All that has ever been written about him is questionable, and most of it is obviously untrue. The Jesus written of in the Christian scriptures is a fictional character. He is not the product of an immaculate conception or virgin birth, did not perform a single miracle, did not die for our sins, did not rise from the dead nor ascend to heaven, and he most certainly will not return one day with a double-edged sword in his mouth.

Even so, there are many in our modern world today who would be angry to hear me say such things, and many in the past who would have had my head or burned me alive for doing so. They think that I am diminishing their stories about Jesus. But, in my view, I am liberating them so that they can become truly relevant—as relevant as philosophy and the fables of Aesop remain. As a westerner and, more importantly, a former Christian and Southern Baptist minister, Christian mythology was central to my education and is more meaningful to me now than ever, especially because I no longer take any of it literally.

When working on my master's degree, my theology professor, Dr. Adeline Fehribach, 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." In recent years, the *Jesus Seminar*, comprised of hundreds of scholars who, after years of research, determined that less than 20 percent all that has been written about Jesus *may* be true, but even that much is questionable. They are far more certain that the other 80 percent never happened. By saying so, however, it is not my intention to diminish these writings, but to put them in proper perspective so that we can free our minds to find real value in them.

Our Unitarian and, therefore, humanistic interpretation of Jesus moves us only to admire, not worship, him, and, more importantly, to practice what he preached; that religion ought to be good for humanity, not humanity for religion, and that this principle is put into practice by treating others as we want to be treated, and by sharing our wealth and resources with one another, by feeding the hungry, healing the sick, caring for the poor, forgiving one another, welcoming the outcasts, the unclean, and the demonized among us, and avoiding violence. These are the teachings that Thomas Jefferson, a Unitarian, was referring to when he 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, those teaching about loving our neighbor, putting away our swords, and turning the other cheek, take no leap of the imagination to understand and value, whether Jesus ever actually said them or not. If we discovered evidence that he never said any of them, they would remain just as meaningful. Consider all the wisdom expressed by the fictional character Almustafa in Kahlil Gibran's book, *The Prophet*. We know at the outset the prophet is a fictional character, yet so many of the words attributed to him are rightly considered among the wisest and most practical ever written.

But what I want to focus on here are not the few literal truths attributed to Jesus, but some of the nonsense. For I disagree with Jefferson about the nonsense. The nonsense can be much more meaningful than the sense, so long as we don't take it literally. Taking nonsense literally is what robs it of any genuine meaning. Understanding that it is nonsense to begin with, frees us to play with it and find meaning in it for ourselves, which, it should be understood, is different from finding its "true" meaning or discovering what it must mean for everyone else. That would just be another way of trying to make it literally true.

For example, there are several stories about Jesus casting out demons that we know can't be true because there are no such things as demons or demon possession—despite *The Exorcist* film having scared the hell out of me! So, what do such stories mean? What did their authors mean by them? Maybe they meant them as metaphors. Maybe they believed they were true. Maybe they were referring to a serious disease they didn't understand, like schizophrenia or epilepsy. We'll never know. But I can tell you what they mean to me; they mean that we ought to accept those who have been demonized, especially those who have been demonized by some authority, be it our government, society, or some self-righteous organization (like the Unitarian Universalist Association has become).

There's a story in the *Gospel of Luke*, for example, where Jesus encounters a man said to be possessed who had often been "chained hand and foot and kept under guard," indicating he had been confined by the authorities. "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?" the demonized man says. "I beg you, do not torment me"—for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man."

"What is your name," Jesus asks.

"Legion," he replies, "for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them back into the abyss." For me, the name Legion means this poor fellow had many concerns that tormented him, concerns he wanted to discuss, for which he was ostracized and punished, making his existence among others abysmal.

Demonizing those with whom we disagree is, in my view, the most common way most people attempt to win arguments these days. This is always done with the intention of silencing their opponents by discrediting them, a tactic used no matter which side of the issues they are on. Texas Governor Greg Abbot recently referred to those who questioned the state's poor response to the last week's deadly flood as "losers."² And when a reporter asked President Trump about warnings and alerts not arriving in time to save hundreds of lives there, he responded that, "Only a bad person would ask a question like that ... only a very evil person would ask a question like that,"³ comments that kill the messenger to avoid the message. When such behavior occurs on the extreme left nowadays, we call it "cancel culture," which includes disinviting and dis-platforming speakers they don't want to hear, nor allow others to hear.

No matter the ideology behind it, the intent is always to silence opponents by discrediting them, even if it means ruining their reputations and livelihoods. This is usually because the arguments of those condemning them are as indefensible as they are irrational and can't withstand rational discourse. In his book, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, theologian William Herzog says the same was true in Jesus' day, that demonizing others "was a form of social control. In effect, this labeling degrades the possessed 'by destroying their selfhood' and denying what they have experienced and expressed in their fits of possession."⁴

So, the stories of Jesus' encounters with those who had been demonized are among my very favorites because they remind the rest of us not fall for it and to protect the speech and voices of

those who have been demonized, canceled, disinvited, or otherwise silenced. But this takes some courage because “cancel cooties,” as I have come to call them, are considered extremely contagious. Nobody wants to catch the dreaded disease of “guilt by association” and end up like those who have already been made examples of. There’s even a story of Jesus himself being demonized for liberating those who had been demonized by, effectively, declaring them perfectly sane and legitimizing what they had to say. “It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons,” the religious authorities declared, “that this fellow drives out demons.”⁵

But Jesus didn’t care about cancel cooties. He even healed those with leprosy, a highly contagious and horrific disease, by touching them. In his society the lepers were considered both physically and spiritually unclean and were, therefore, untouchable. Yet Jesus wasn’t afraid to touch them, along with those declared untouchable for other reasons. That’s the metaphor here, that we heal the untouchable simply by touching them, caring for them, treating them with the dignity and compassion they, like all human beings, deserve. I’m reminded of the AIDS epidemic in our own time, during the worst of which people feared coming into contact with the infected. Until effective medications came along, those with the illness would die horribly, no matter how they were treated. But the real suffering for many of them was being alone and despised when they most needed to be held and loved. And that’s the miracle, just like Jesus, each of us has the power within the palm of our hands and the tips of our fingers to touch the lives of those who most need a hand out, a hand up, or just a simple handshake letting them know they belong and are not alone.

Jesus, the stories say, was often criticized for publicly associating with the demonized, unclean, and other untouchables of his day, including women, whom men were not to openly engage with, an offense that could get both condemned. Yet, there are many stories of him doing so, including having women among his disciples; coming into physical contact with a woman who was menstruating, which made her especially unclean in the eyes of others; speaking with non-Jewish women; and associating with those considered prostitutes. One of my very favorites is the story of a woman described as “bent over and unable to stand up straight”⁶ who abruptly approaches Jesus while he’s “teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath,”⁷ an all-male meeting. Although her actions were forbidden and scandalous, Jesus takes her by the hands and says, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.”⁸

Afterward, the other men criticize him doing so, but Jesus defends his behavior by referring to the woman as a “daughter of Abraham,” a play on a term that was used exclusively for males, “sons of Abraham.” But the real miracle isn’t performed by Jesus, but by the woman herself who has finally gotten so “bent out of shape,” as Theologian Walter Wink says, that she finally finds the fortitude to “stand erect in a male religious space.”⁹ In short, the miracle was standing up for herself, against misogyny and inequality, proving she was a worthy and capable of entering the synagogue, or anywhere else, as any man.

Another such story, which is most certainly a work of fiction, is found in the *Gospel of John*, about a woman who is about to be stoned to death for the crime of adultery. As Jesus approaches, he is immediately put to the test; “Our law says she must be put to death. What do you say Holy man?”

Jesus responds brilliantly, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”¹⁰ After the appropriately chastened mob disperses, Jesus is left alone with the frightened and embarrassed women. He then utters what to me are the most remarkable and moving words in the entire story, “Where are your accusers?” This simple question implies that, between the two of them, there is no one left to judge her. So it’s another example of radical acceptance; in this case, of not judging others, especially those our society tells us we must condemn and exclude.

I especially enjoy a line at the beginning of the *Gospel of Mark*, which introduces Jesus to us as he’s being baptized. “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.’” In this moment Jesus has a religious epiphany by realizing that, no matter what anyone else says, he too is a child of god, which means he deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. That is the essence of his good news, that all of us are both “a son of god” and a “son of man;” that we are all God’s children and all human beings who deserve to be treated as such.

I’m reminded of the entire point of William James’s classic book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. He begins this monumental work about religion by saying, “I speak not now of your ordinary religious believer who follows the conventional observances of his country, whether it be Buddhist, Christian, or Mohammedan. His religion has been made for him by others, communicated to him by tradition, determined to fixed forms by imitation, and retained by habit,”¹¹ which he calls a “second-hand religious life” that “it would profit us little to study.”¹² This is an astonishing statement given that his book, published in 1902, is still considered one of the most seminal works on religion ever written. Yet right from the start James says it won’t benefit us to consider any of the world’s major religions, which he doesn’t mention except for this one line in his introduction.

This is so because James believed that only individuals have authentic religious experiences. Religions, on the other hand, are invented when people try to emulate the authentic religious experiences of others, which they cannot experience for themselves, as much as they may try. Jesus’ religious epiphany came in realizing his own worth and humanity, an insight, according to the stories, he simply wanted to help other realize about themselves, mostly by just hanging out with and touching them. But to truly get it, they’d have to experience something like it for themselves. They’d have to become true believers in themselves. But instead of being a religion based on the good news that every person has worth and dignity, as Jesus taught, his experience was turned into a religion that worshipped him and his experience. Instead of teaching us that we are all God’s children and equals among men, Christianity became a religion about the only son of God and the only son of Man. That’s secondhand religion, not an authentic religious experience. The result has often been that, rather than emulating Jesus’ radical acceptance of and care for outcasts, Christianity has been used to justify condemning those who think and behave in unorthodox ways. Perhaps this is why Nietzsche once lamented that the only person who may have actually practiced what Jesus preached, died on the cross.

But just because these stories are not historically or literally true, and that Jesus, as he is portrayed in the scriptures, is a complete work of fiction, doesn't mean there's no value in contemplating them, so long as we don't depend on others to tell us what they mean or expect others to accept what we say they mean. It is precisely because they cannot be taken as historically or literally true that we are free to peer more deeply into them and discover what they might mean to us that enables us to have our own authentic religious experiences.

Here, I have focused on those stories that emphasize welcoming the outcasts among us. You might see something entirely different, like how Jesus seemed to be inspired by nature, or how he confronted systems of economic and social injustice, or something of his spirituality, and so forth. You may even see and discover something nobody else ever has. As I've already said, as Unitarians, we value those teachings attributed to Jesus that remind us to care for one another by sharing our resources, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, caring for the poor, and welcoming the outcasts. But we don't need a story to realize these things are true. We already know they are true and, if anything, project such meaning onto the story. But there are many such truths within us, not so obvious, waiting to rise to the surface of our awareness. Sometimes, the best way to get at them is to contemplate the images and myths and fables that have persisted throughout time, including those tall tales about a fictional man named Jesus. So, feel free to go out and play with Jesus, metaphorically speaking, of course.

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

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/08/us/abbott-blame-floods-losers-football.html>

³ <https://www.thedailybeast.com/trump-insults-evil-reporter-who-dares-to-ask-about-floods/>

⁴ Herzog, William R., *Jesus, Justice and the Reign of God*, Westminster Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2000, p. 209.

⁵ Matthew 12:24.

⁶ Luke 13:12.

⁷ Luke 13:10.

⁸ Luke 13:12.

⁹ Wink, Walter, *The Powers that Be*, A Galilee Book, Doubleday, New York, NY 1998, p. 71.

¹⁰ John 8:7.

¹¹ James, William, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, forward by Jacques Barzun, A Mentor Book, New American Library, New York, NY, 1958, p. 24.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 24.