

JESUS IS YESHU

Notes on the historical Nazarene

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(Yeshu) said, "Let him who seeks continue seeking until he finds. When he finds, he will become troubled. When he becomes troubled, he will become astonished . . . "

– The Gospel of Thomas (2)

PRELUDE: THE NAME

Whom do men say that I am?

– Mark (8:27)

So many Jesuses, so many Jesuses. The glow-in-the-dark crucifix above my bed in a Brooklyn tenement . . . The Jesus who loves you on the bumper stickers . . . Jesus who is a curse in so many mouths (“*Jeez us!*” “*Jesus Christ!*” “*Jesus fucking Christ!*” “*Jesus H. Christ on a crutch!*”) . . . The Jesus who never heard of you, staring beyond you, as he does in those old paintings. . . The Jesus who will condemn you to everlasting fire, no matter how good a person you are, if you don’t accept him as your personal savior . . . The Jesus in a Catholic church called the Santuario, in the new Mexico town of Chimayo, who, on the cross, wears a blue dress and looks comfortable and appropriate in women’s clothes. . . The Jesus in my mother’s voice, saying softly, “‘Enter into life, -- he said, ‘Enter into life.’”

These are Jesuses in whose name so many have been squashed and thwarted, tortured and murdered; and in whose name so many have found freedom and beauty, and have entered into life.

He hovers on his cross above our history and our hearts, a hideous bleeding thing, the most seductive and invasive figure we know. He is penetrating, sweet, acrid – no matter what religious feelings you profess, Jesus is like an aroma you can never quite wash out of your curtains, your clothing, your hair, because you can never get him out of your history – neither your personal history, nor the history of your culture.

It is as Albert Schweitzer wrote: “. . . comes Jesus, and in the knowledge that He is the coming Son of Man lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on that last revolution, which is to bring all ordinary history to a close. It refuses to turn, and He throws Himself on it. Then it does turn; and crushes Him . . . The wheel rolls onward, and the mangled body of the one immeasurably great Man . . . is hanging upon it still. That is His victory and His reign.”

In America today there are few more urgent political questions than this: Exactly who do you think Jesus is? Not “was,” mind you, but is – because concepts rooted in visions of Jesus live in, and twist and turn, both major and minor political discussions on every level of our Government. Fundamentalism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Mormonism, and the reactions against these movements, in many ways, define the

political limits of this country. For this reason, it becomes more and more crucial to examine the historical Jesus.

The question is: How do we free ourselves from the mad history of Christendom? Through struggle, yes; through politics, yes – but may Jesus himself also be a way? Can Jesus the teacher help free us from a history made in the name of, and under the shadow of, Jesus the Christ?

But before that question can ever be entertained, Jesus the man must be searched for and found – an attempt must be made to tunnel through the conceptual and institutional mountain that has buried the man. Many have been making that attempt in recent decades. What follows is, in part, a summary of some of their finding; and, in part, my own attempt to encounter this figure that has troubled me, as he has troubled so many, all my life.

Meeting this man is terribly difficult because, to begin with, we don't even call him by his right name.

In fact, almost nobody has called him by his own name since he was executed. But we should make an attempt. A man deserves his own name.

That name was either *Yeshu* or *Yesu*, depending on how you spell and pronounce Aramaic. Aramaic is a dead language, but in that time it was the Palestinian tongue; scholars agree that this man conversed in Aramaic, although like most (male) Jewish peasants, he probably spoke some Greek and Hebrew as well. *Yeshu* or *Yesu* are what scholars call short forms (and what we might call nicknames) of *Yehosua*. In English that would be: Joshua. So calling him “*Yeshu*” or “*Yesu*” was a little like calling him “*Josh*” – though it probably wasn't that informal. The name simply indicates that this was a poor man, a peasant, unworthy of the more proper “*Yesua*.”

We get the name “*Jesus*” because that's how the Hebrew “*Yehosua*” (which wasn't his name in the first place) translates into Greek. Greek (not Latin) was the common language of the Roman Empire – it was, like English today, the basic language of commerce and education. In order to preach and write of *Yeshu* outside Palestine, his disciples and converts quickly started calling him *Jesus*. Paul's letters in the New Testament, written between 20 and 35 years after *Yeshu*'s death, make no attempt to be true to the man's original identity. “*Jesus*” it was, and “*Jesus*” it remained.

Here, in this writing, I will call him by his own name, in a small attempt to remedy what seems to have been the man's fate: that the harder people tried to remember him the more he was erased.

PART I: SOMETHING TO LIE ABOUT, SOMETHING TO AVOID

*The disciples said to [Yeshu], “Tell us how our end will be?”
[Yeshu] said, “Have you discovered, then, the beginning, that you
look for the end?”*

– The Gospel of Thomas (18)

Some Skeptics wonder if such a man ever existed, but we know that he did, and that he was crucified in Jerusalem by authority of Pontius Pilate. This is confirmed by

two noteworthy non-Christians: the Jewish politician and historian Josephus, and the Roman writer Tacitus. Neither had anything to gain or lose as he mentioned Yeshu parenthetically while writing of what he considered to be weightier matters. Josephus' writing dates from sometime around the year 90 A.D., Tacitus around the year 115. (The best estimate of Yeshu's death is the year 30.) Both Tacitus and Josephus also mention that a sect worshipped Yeshu as a god, and we learn from Tacitus that by the year 65, when Nero blamed the great fire in Rome on Christians, the Yeshu sect was large enough to be noticed by the upper crust of Mediterranean society. We don't have to depend on the Bible for this knowledge.

When we begin depending on the Bible, things get sticky. The Gospel that opens the New Testament is Matthew, and Matthew gets no farther than Chapter 2 before he tells a major historical lie: that Herod the Great ordered the massacre of all infant male children in and around Bethlehem.

Understand that this was not an era when peasants did as they were told. From the reign of Herod the Great through the entire first and second centuries in Judea, there were many peasant uprisings, protests, demonstrations, impromptu wars against local rulers, and even several disastrous attempts to war against Rome itself. For example, when the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, in the year 27, tried merely to install busts of the Emperor Tiberius in Jerusalem, the peasant population rose in a non-violent protest. When Pilate threatened to kill them all, men, women and children alike, they told Pilate they'd choose death rather than be forced to live with the offending statues – and they meant it, for this was their holy city, and their religion permitted no graven images. Pilate backed off, let the peasants live and took the statues down.

Does this sound like a people who would stand for having all their small males slaughtered at the whim of a king? Besides, the Herod massacre is found *only* in Matthew, Chapter 2. Most scholars are convinced it never happened. This is important, because if this never happened, it calls into question the rest of Chapter 2. That's the section that involves Mary giving birth to Yeshu in Bethlehem while remaining a virgin, and Joseph being so understanding, and the two of them fleeing the massacre into Egypt. And since the massacre probably never happened, it's likely that the flight into Egypt never happened either. That, and the birth in Bethlehem, were just Matthew's attempts to convince his readers that Old Testament prophecy had been fulfilled: that the Messiah had been born in Bethlehem, the city of David.

Today even conservative Catholic scholars such as John P. Meier, a practicing priest and the author of *A Marginal Jew – Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, no longer believe that Yeshu was born in Bethlehem. It's thought that after Matthew invented the Bethlehem birth, the fiction was taken up by Luke when he wrote his own version in about the year 85 (10 years after Matthew), again trying to qualify Yeshu as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. It's sad to let go of Matthew's Magi and his guiding star, or Luke's manger and his shepherds – sad to relinquish the tender and artful poetry of their inventions. But these touches were the literary equivalent of special effects in a film: they merely enhanced the fabrication of Bethlehem.

If Luke himself had believed Matthew's story of the Herod massacre, he would certainly have repeated it. Instead, he dispenses with it. He starts with Mary in Nazareth, but gets her to Bethlehem by inventing a worldwide census decreed by the Emperor Augustus.

That census never happened either. Then, as now, a census was an important government event conducted in order to determine the distribution of resources. And

while many other administrative goings-on and censuses *are* recorded, the one Luke mentions is not. Luke says that people were required by his census to register at the place of their birth, and that this drew the Joseph-and-Mary family back to Bethlehem. But John Dominic Crossan, in his brilliant book *The Historical Jesus – The Life of a Jewish Mediterranean Peasant*, points out that a census, then as now, was taken where people lived and worked, not where they were born.

Here Luke adds a detail worthy of Cecil B. DeMille: that Mary's cousin Elizabeth is the mother of John the Baptist. Keeping it in the family like that is pure hokum, yet it is an honorable invention: the highly intelligent conversation between Mary and Elizabeth (Luke 1:41-56) is unique, even revolutionary, in the literature of its time. Jews, Greeks, Romans and by Luke's day, many Christians would have been appalled at women having the temerity to philosophize about God. Luke tried to counter such prejudice. But, honorable or not, the Elizabeth-Mary passage is good fiction. The Baptist's origins were obscure, even to earlier writers who could have known eyewitnesses to his ministry.

The fact is, Luke and Matthew are the only ones who mention the virgin birth. Even Paul doesn't – and if Paul didn't know Mary (and he may have), he certainly knew people, like Peter, who did. Matthew and Luke are also the only ones who claim to know anything about Yeshu's father. Mark, who wrote the earliest and most straightforward Gospel, in about the year 65; John, who wrote the latest in about the year 100; Paul, whose letters were written circa 55-65; and the Gospel of Thomas, discovered in Egypt in 1945 and which most scholars believe to be contemporaneous with Mark's and Paul's – none of them mention a Joseph in *any* context associated with Mary or Yeshu, and they never mention Yeshu's birth.

It's unlikely that, in a verbal culture, these stories would have escaped the notice of everyone but Matthew and Luke, especially as they wrote decades *after* Mark, Paul and Thomas. The likely explanation, both for the absence of comment in most accounts and the historical lies in Matthew and Luke, is that no one had a clue about Yeshu's father and nobody at all thought his birth unusual. Even Matthew and Luke never mention Joseph again after the birth story. Did Yeshu's father die when he was young? Was Yeshu illegitimate?

Stephen Mitchell, in *The Gospel According to Jesus*, believes Yeshu was a bastard. We know that, in Mark, someone at the synagogue in Nazareth calls Yeshu "the son of Mary." At that time all men were linked in name to their fathers. "Yeshu ben Joseph" would have been proper, if he has had a father named Joseph. Mitchell notes that the phrase "Yeshu ben Mirjam," Jesus son of Mary, would have been considered "an unbearable insult." And it's unlikely that Mark, who believed in Yeshu, would have included such an insult unless he felt that honesty demanded it. Morton Smith adds that "the common explanation, that Mark wrote 'son of Mary' because he believed in the virgin birth, is contradicted by the fact that Mark says nothing of the virgin birth."

What is certain is that Yeshu never speaks about his earthly father and that he is often cruel to his mother. No American politician or preacher prating of "family values" can quote Yeshu. Mark, Matthew and Luke record how, when his mother and brothers came to see him, he wouldn't even say hello, instead dismissed them with "Who is my mother, or my brethren?" (Mark, 3:33) Even the gospel-writer John, who often softens the relationship between Yeshu and his mother, begins by presenting it harshly. She asks Yeshu a question, and you can feel a deep and sullen anger in his reply: "Woman, what have I to do with thee?" (John, 2:4)

Yeshu sets himself not only against his own family, but against the very institution of family: “For I am come to set a man at variance with his father, and daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a man’s foes shall be they of his own household.” (Matthew, 10:35-36) Notice he doesn’t say *why* they’re “at variance,” of whether it’s the father or the son, the daughter or the mother who believes or doesn’t believe in Yeshu’s teaching – or even whether believing in his teaching has anything to do with it. Yeshu simply says (verily, he emphasizes) that his presence and his teaching are *meant* to disrupt families.

Talk about “at variance,” Yeshu goes further yet: “If any man come to me and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.” (14:26) The Gospel of Thomas (which can be read in a collection of early texts titled *The Nag Hammadi Library*, a Harper Collins paperback) puts this thought both more strongly and more paradoxically – which feels to me more genuine, because over and over Yeshu proves that he loves paradox: “Whoever does not hate his father and his mother as I do cannot become a disciple to me.” (101) Here Yeshu is demanding a love that admits its hate.

But the Gospel of Thomas also includes a startling statement that is hard to take as anything other than autobiography” “[Yeshu] said, ‘He who knows the father and the mother will be called the son of a harlot.’” (105)

Scholars trying to determine the authenticity of a given Yeshu saying have a rule of thumb they often follow that could be called “the embarrassment rule.” Yeshu’s words were written down and then copied over by *believers*. It’s highly unlikely that sayings that were troublesome and embarrassing to believers would have survived all that copying unless they were thought to be Yeshu’s own. There are too many anti-family sayings, from too many sources, to pass over or explain away.

Stephen Mitchell makes the strong case that if the “son of a harlot” saying in Thomas sums up Yeshu’s experience, it would do much toward explaining the resentment that keeps surfacing against his mother and father and against family life in general. It certainly helps account for the cruel answer he gives to the man who wants to follow him, but first needs to bury his father: “Let the dead bury their dead.” A deeply shocking response, calculated to appall anyone, in any culture, at any time.

Of course, there is another explanation for all this that may have nothing to do with Yeshu’s childhood, though the churches that call themselves Christian won’t like it any better: that Yeshu thought normal family life was destructive to the spirit, and that he tried, with all his verbal power, to crack the very *form* of family so that new kinds of relationships might occur. This is consistent with his ministry, for everywhere, again and again, he calls for every level of human relationship to be reconstituted on vastly different terms from anything seen before *or* since.

This is typical of him. Yeshu delighted in demanding the impossible. That was and is his strength. “Love one another.” “Judge not, that ye be not judged.” “Turn the other cheek.” “If a man would sue thee at the law, and take away thy cloak, let him have thy coat also.” And, perhaps even more to the point in our society, “If you have money, do not lend it at interest, but give it to one from whom you will not get it back.” It can’t be overemphasized that if you do not attempt these things, then, according to Yeshu, you are not of his circle.

As he said, often, “He who hath ears, let him hear.” (Or, in Crossan’s translations, “You have ears, use them!”) What’s insidious about the fabrications that muddy the New Testament (and I’ve noted only a few) is that, piled one atop the other, they cushion and obscure a vision that, when stripped of its packaging, has lost none of its thrill and challenge.

PART II: THE “MANY” OF LUKE

Since many have undertaken to compose an account of those things which have been fulfilled among us, as those who saw for themselves from the beginning . . . handed it down to us, it seemed good for me also, since I have followed everything closely from the first, to write it out . . .

– Luke (1:13)

That sentence, which begins the Gospel According to Luke, is one of the most revealing in the New Testament. Until fairly recently, the word “many” was a puzzle. Scholars had long thought that Luke had read Mark, and that maybe he’d read Matthew. But two is not “many.” Luke was a precise writer. If he meant two, why not say two? New archeological discoveries, combined with textual research by scholars like Helmut Koester and John Dominic Crossan, have led to a new understanding of Luke’s “many” and how we came to hear of Yeshu at all.

It seems that after Yeshu’s death, and possibly even before, some who’d seen and heard him wrote down many of his sayings and parables. Indeed, it would be unreasonable and unnatural to assume that this *didn’t* happen. Writing was widespread throughout the Mediterranean – there were plenty of witnesses to Yeshu who could write. Nothing would be more natural than for some of them to make collections of his sayings, for themselves and their friends. Many scholars assume that at least several such collections were made, and they call them “sayings gospels.” Koester writes that these collections of sayings “were known in the church in Corinth as early as its foundation by the apostle Paul.”

The sayings gospels had no narrative, told no story, but simply collected, in no special sequence, what Yeshu said and what others said he said. They were compiled, copied and passed around, serving a crucial function in the early churches – as attested to by the touching note toward the end of Paul’s Second Letter to Timothy: “The cloak that I left at Troas with Carpas, when thou comest, bring with thee, *and the books, but especially the parchments.*” (2 Timothy, 4:13, my italics)

Except for some hints in Paul, the sayings gospels would be pure theory if, in 1945, some Arab peasants in Upper Egypt hadn’t discovered a large jar that had been buried for 1,600 years. It contained more than 40 ancient Christian manuscripts. One of them, the Gospel of Thomas, was a sayings gospel – it told no story, had no narrative, but simply collected 114 sayings.

Matthew, Mark and Luke organized their knowledge of Yeshu into coherent stories, but you can see the influence of the sayings gospels. Passages like the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, and many sections of Luke, are simply one saying after another, usually in no special sequence, as though the writer were copying from a source.

The sayings that survived were probably pithier parts, or punch lines, of longer dialogues. That's certainly how a collection like the Sermon on the Mount reads: one conclusion after another, with no build-up – the New Testament's version of soundbites.

So we have many layers going into the New Testament gospels, from many sources – Luke's "many books." Much of Yeshu is left out of the process, for the gospel writers probably didn't use all the original sayings; they just used what particularly struck *them*. And after all this copying and selection had been done, later generations that copied the New Testament by hand added and subtracted, too. We will never know how much. And after they were done, *their* copyists had a turn.

For instance, the earliest copies of Mark end at 16:8, when Mary Magdalene goes to Yeshu's tomb and finds a young man who tells her Yeshu is risen. It's clear in the narrative that the young man is not Yeshu. Many researchers now agree that the last 12 verses now in Mark, the verses about witnessing Yeshu's resurrection, were added on long after the original book was written. Or take Luke: Stephen Mitchell notes that "the famous words of Luke 23:24 ('Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do') are missing from many of the most ancient manuscripts and are almost certainly a later addition." It may be in the spirit of Yeshu, but he didn't say it.

And few scholars believe John's Gospel *at all*. Even among the church fathers, there was hot disagreement over whether it should be included in the Bible. Written three generations after Yeshu's death, it's not a narrative but a long, extemporaneous rant, sometimes marvelous and sometimes mad, with the whole punctuated by a few brilliantly told stories. At least one of those stories, the woman taken in adultery, was inserted long after the original writing. Some manuscripts have it in one chapter, some in another, and in some the story isn't even *in* John, it's in Luke, suggesting that the adulterous woman drifted within the New Testament until the invention of the printing press pinned her down to one place.

So where *can* we go to find the man? The Gospel of Mark, written only one generation after Yeshu's death, has no major historical gaffs, and it keeps the extraneous to a minimum. Mark clearly didn't have the benefit of the same sayings gospels that Matthew did – there is nothing like the Sermon on the Mount in Mark – but Mark's clarity is unrivaled in the New Testament. The sayings in the other gospels supplement Mark's account. Mark is the closest we ever get to Yeshu in a single work.

PART III: A POSSIBLE LIFE – THE YESHU OF MARK

His disciples said, "When will the kingdom come?" [Yeshu] said, "It will not come by waiting for it . . . Rather, the kingdom of the Father is spread out upon the earth, and men do not see it."

– The Gospel of Thomas (113)

"And it happened in those days that [Yeshu] came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John." (Mark, 1:9) That is how Yeshu enters his own story in the earliest gospel. No need to fabricate or inflate. Simply the force of: *it happened*.

Scholars believe in Yeshu's encounter with John the Baptist because the church was so embarrassed by the event. If Yeshu was perfect, why did he need to be baptized by John? The church invented all sorts of explanations, but Mark doesn't. His account

rings true: that Yeshu was attracted to John's teachings, baptized by John and in the process had a stunning revelatory experience. "He saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon him." (1:10) That may very well be how Yeshu described it to friends later. This vision changed him from the peasant he had been to the teacher and healer he would be. But drastic spiritual transformation can be terrifying. Yeshu almost went mad: "immediately the Spirit driveth him into the wilderness" (1:12), where he stayed alone with the wild beasts and the angels (of his heart?) for 40 days.

Again Mark refrains from invention. "Tempted by Satan" is all Mark says. (1:13) In the usage of the time that would mean simply: Yeshu went crazy. But he endured and confronted the ordeal in such a way that he walked out of the wilderness radiating new power and saying, "The time is fulfilled." (1:15) Quickly others were drawn to him. Four fishermen (a profession the Roman poet Cicero included in a list of "the least respectable of all trades") left their work and their families to be near Yeshu.

They went to Capernaum, to the synagogue, where the people were "astonished . . . for he taught them as one who had authority and not as the scribes." (1:22) Impressive, but it was just teaching until "a man possessed by an unclean spirit" (1:23) had a fit. Yeshu healed him. Then the people were *really* astonished.

Afterward, Yeshu and his little band went to Simon's house, where he healed Simon's mother-in-law of a fever. Now word went out all around the town: ". . . after the sun set, they brought to him all those who were ill, and those afflicted with demons, and the whole city was assembled before his door. And he healed many who were ill with various diseases, and cast out many demons . . ." (1:32-34)

Which brings up the subject of Yeshu's powers of healing.

I see no reason to believe that Yeshu did not have such powers. The witnessing of them is too consistent, from too many sources – although we may not know how deep his dealings went, or whether (as with some psychic healers) they were short term. There is ample documentation, from his time to ours, that such healers have existed, and that their healings have been real and often lasting. Finally, if Yeshu didn't have these powers, why all the excitement about this man in his day? As John Dominic Crossan, the most rigorous of scholars, writes, "[Yeshu] was a born exorcist and a healer . . . His vision of the Kingdom was but an ecstatic dream without immediate social consequences were it not for those exorcisms and healings."

Crossan quotes David Aune's insight: "While [Yeshu's] exorcistic and healing technique does not follow a rigid or invariable pattern, at least two generalizations can be made about it: 1) [Yeshu] never touched demon-possessed individuals; on the other hand, the technique of touching was the characteristic way in which he healed the sick and infirm. 2) [Yeshu's] own use of the authoritative word of command was perhaps the most characteristic technique which he used to effect both exorcisms and healings."

In other words, the man had a technique. That means his powers were governed by rules which he himself had to obey. Which means he was not all-powerful. This, more than anything, makes his powers convincing. (It is a sobering thought that to touch the possessed would have been too dangerous even for Yeshu.) What's also convincing is that while sometimes he could heal with a command from afar, there were other times when he had to work hard. In healing the man with the speech impediment, "He took him aside from the multitude, and put his fingers in his ears, and he spit, and touched his tongue." (7:33)

Sometimes, too, he couldn't do it. When he went back to Nazareth, his home village, they were so used to the Yeshu they'd known that they couldn't see him as he'd

become. “Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary?” (6:3) Their insults and disbelief drained him. Richmond Lattimore reads the Greek as: “And they made it difficult for him.”

There is another quality about Yeshu’s healing that the preachers tend to ignore: throughout the Gospels, Yeshu healed whomever was brought before him, Jew or Gentile or Roman, leper or possessed, even dead or alive, without ever asking whether they *deserved* to be healed. We have no clue whether the people he healed were devout or sinful, because it wasn’t an issue with him. His healing was not a reward; it was a gift.

Yeshu asked only one thing of those who came to him for healing: belief. *Not*, it must be emphasized, belief in himself as a god. He never coerced others through his healing. He simply asked whether they believed that he *could* heal, that such healing could happen. If they did, he could; if they didn’t, as in Nazareth, his powers were impeded.

In Mark, more often than any other Gospel, Yeshu often goes off alone to pray. He is a man in need of solitude, a man asking for guidance. For the first half of Mark, Yeshu thinks himself neither a profit nor a savior – not until he becomes what we would call a star does he begin to take on those roles. For the first eight chapters, Yeshu is a healer, an exorcist and a teacher, in that order.

The morning after the first healings in Capernaum, Simon Peter and others went to find where Yeshu had gone. They found him alone and praying, a man restless to leave. “Let us go elsewhere, to the neighboring communities, so that I might preach there also; for that is what I set out to do.” (1:38)

Before Mark quotes any verbal teaching, he emphasizes Yeshu’s acceptance of every manner of person. This is Mark’s way of telling us that what Yeshu did was more important than what Yeshu said. Here Yeshu’s pattern becomes clear. He has no intention of setting up shop as healer and teacher in any particular place; for the rest of his short life he will never stop moving. Judaism’s center was the temple in Jerusalem, and the synagogues in every town; John the Baptist had stationed himself at the Jordan River. But unlike John and his priests, Yeshu didn’t wait for the people to come to him; he went to the people. “That is what I set out to do.”

Mark stresses Yeshu’s healing, and his free association with every manner of person, before any verbal teaching. Mark focuses always on Yeshu’s *enactment* of his beliefs, and on how Yeshu is unafraid of what is supposed to be unclean. In Mark, Yeshu doesn’t say one word of teaching until he’s dining in the house of the tax collector Levi, whom he’s asked to be his disciple. As William K. Klingaman writes in *The First Century*:

“By accepting Levi – a traitor to his own people [as a tax collector for the Romans] – into his inner circle, [Yeshu] made two points perfectly clear: first, he would not reject any Jew who chose to seek salvation by accepting his message . . . and second, that [Yeshu] called for nothing less than a cataclysmic revolution in human behavior, and he demanded it *right away*, in the present moment of spiritual crisis.” It’s as revolutionary now as it was then to accept anyone and not to shrink from what society labels unclean. Mark demonstrates this by not giving one word of Yeshu’s teaching until he sits having dinner with the tax-collector Levi – a shocking act for any devout Jew, especially a holy man.

“And when the scribes and Pharisees saw him eat with the publicans and the sinners, they said unto his disciples, How is it that he eateth and drinketh with publicans

and sinners? When [Yeshu] heard it, he saith unto them, They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick.” (2:16-17)

That sentence would sound as upsetting today in a Catholic, Protestant or fundamentalist church, as it did long ago in Judea.

For the first half of his Gospel, Mark is careful to tell a human, not a divine, story. Healing by the lake shore, Yeshu asks his disciples for a “small ship” to stay by him, “lest [the multitude] should throng him [and the implication is, drown or at least dunk him].” (3:9-10) Does this sound like an omnipotent god? Also, Yeshu’s need for a small ship contradicts the famous and much less likely walking on the water three chapters later.

His friends come “to lay hold on him” (3:21) because they think he’s gone mad. And his family tries to see him, perhaps for the same reason. He’s confronted, in other words, with the push and pull of relationships. When, in a crowd, a woman touches his hem and heals herself, he doesn’t know who did it. He feels the power leave him, but he has to ask, “Who touched my clothes?” His disciples, humorously, get a little exasperated with him: “Thou seest the multitude thronging thee, and sayest thou, Who touched me?” (5:30-31) The woman has to come forth herself and admit it. This is a human and fallible Yeshu, a man who can be touched, hidden from and joked with.

A man who can be confronted. And Yeshu’s first encounter with a Gentile – and a woman, at that – is the only time in the New Testament when someone bests him in an argument. She wants a devil cast out of her daughter. He answers her haughtily: “It is not meet to take the children’s [the Jews’] bread, and to cast it unto the dogs [the Gentiles].” She replies, “Yes, Lord: yet the dogs under the tables eat of the children’s crumbs.” He’s impressed, and humbled. “For this saying, go thy way; the devil is gone out of thy daughter.” (7:26-29) He heals the daughter not because the mother is good, but because the mother is smart.

Taking women seriously, as he does throughout the New Testament, also sets Yeshu against the legal and social apparatus of his time. Klingaman writes, “This is why [Yeshu] spoke so strongly against divorce, because a Jewish woman who had been cast aside by her husband was virtually bereft of protection or independent financial sources in Jewish society.” The adventure of the first eight chapters of Mark is the adventure of a man testing and extending his own powers, growing by leaps and bounds, and having the time of his life. In a decisive move (in Chapter 3), he somehow transmits some of his powers to his disciples and sends them out on their own to heal. Matthew and Luke, with access to other sayings gospels, let us know the instructions that describe Yeshu’s own actions. Here they are, as translated by Crossan: “Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals, nor two tunics. Whatever house you enter, eat what is set before you; heal the sick in it and say to them, ‘The Kingdom of God is come upon you.’” Crossan then writes:

The deliberate conjunction of magic and meal, miracle and table, free compassion and open commensality, was a challenge launched not just at Judaism’s strictest purity regulations . . . but at civilization’s eternal to draw lines, invoke boundaries, establish hierarchies and maintain discriminations. It did not invite a political revolution, but envisaged a social one at the imagination’s most dangerous depths. No importance was given to the distinctions of Gentile and Jew, female and male, slave and free, poor and rich. These distinctions were hardly even attacked in theory. They were simply ignored in practice . . . The missionaries do not

carry a bag because they do not beg for alms or food or clothing or anything else. They share a miracle and a kingdom, and they receive in turn a table and a house. Here, I think, is the heart of the original [Yeshu] movement, a shared egalitarianism of spiritual and material resources . . . Yet [his mission] concerns the longest journey in the Greco-Roman world, maybe in any world, the step across the threshold of a peasant stranger's home.

This is the kingdom that is spread out upon the earth, but people don't see it. *This* is the Kingdom that is so accessible that you don't need priests or laws or Bibles, for you have but to ask and it shall be given you; seek, and you shall find it; knock, and it shall be open unto you. *This* is the Kingdom of which Yeshu says in a verse that subverts the very need for gospels: it "comes not with observation. Neither shall they say, Lo here! Or, lo there! For behold, the kingdom of God is within you." (Luke, 17:20-21)

And if it within you, it is within everyone, and if it is within everyone, then you needn't go to church. Yeshu didn't instruct people to go to church – but you can, as Yeshu *did* instruct, simply go through another human being's door and find it and share it.

But even Yeshu can't keep this up. Then, exactly halfway through the Gospel of Mark, there is a change in Yeshu. Mark would no doubt disapprove of my interpretation, but it's his own honesty that makes it possible. It's as though things have been going too fast for Yeshu. He has astounded even himself with his capacity to make miracles. At this point, in a troubled and quiet sentence, he asks his circle: "Whom do men say that I am?" They answer that some say he is John the Baptist resurrected, others say that he is Elias, others say a prophet. "But whom say ye that I am." Peter says, "Thou art the Christ," the Messiah, the Savior. Yeshu charges them to tell no one of this. (8:27-30)

Now everything changes. There are still the human touches and the poignant meetings. For instance, in Mark 9:24, a man speaks one of the most humble, touching and telling lines in all of Western tradition: "Lord, I believe: help thou mine unbelief." But a new element also enters, now that Yeshu and his people think he is the Christ: visions of Moses and Elijah on the mountain juxtapose with petty bickering among the disciples about who is going to sit on the right hand of God.

Even here Yeshu himself carefully maintains a distinction between being Christ and being God. When someone calls him good, he says, "Why callest thou me good?" There is none good but one, that is, God." (10:18) He is saying he is *not* God. But how can he be the Messiah, the Christ, if he's not God? Clearly he's confused. It's as though the consensus that Yeshu is Christ has disrupted his mission. For if Yeshu is the Messiah, this is no longer his original invention: his free and egalitarian mission. If he is the Messiah, he is, by definition, the arbiter and ruler of all. In the Gospel of Mark, this doesn't sit well with Yeshu.

He heads toward Jerusalem, for no apparent reason. He sees the fabulously rich temple. In Mark it's clear that Yeshu's seeing it for the first time by the tentative way he enters, looks "round about upon all things" (11:11) and leaves by evening. He doesn't teach, doesn't heal, doesn't turn over tables. It's as though he's wondering what to do. But on the way out of Jerusalem, he does his first irrational, unreasonable act. Hungry, he seeks the fruit of a fig tree, but he finds "nothing but leaves" (11:13) because as the

gospel makes clear, figs are not in season. He curses the poor tree and it withers in a day. Yeshu is in a *bad mood*.

Before Yeshu asked “Whom do people say I am?” he acted with surety and kindness always (except toward his family). After he accepts his disciples’ belief that he is the Christ, he gets uncertain, preachy, and goes around killing trees.

And, after he kills the tree, he goes back to the temple, casts the people out, overturns the tables of the money-changers and does not “suffer that any man should carry a vessel through the temple.” (11:16) In one burst he has killed himself. Gone against every ritual and law of his time. As Crossan notes, “Such an act, if performed in the volatile atmosphere of Passover . . . would have been quite enough to entail crucifixion by religiopolitical agreement. And it is impossible now for us to imagine the offhand brutality, anonymity and indifference with which a peasant nobody like [Yeshu] would have been disposed of.”

Leaving Jerusalem after this – quite literally, getting out of town – he passes the withered tree. When Peter calls attention to it, Yeshu says (sarcastically?), “Have faith in God.” (11:22) And in the next verse he cautions them that when they pray they must forgive anyone they have anything against. “If you do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive you . . .” (11:26) An odd thing for a man who is so wrought up that he couldn’t forgive a tree. It’s as though he’s calming himself, telling himself to cool down.

Yeshu continues to hang out at the temple, as though he can’t tear himself away from it, sitting “over against the treasury” (12:41), watching the goings on, preaching a little and dodging attempts to entrap him verbally. Why dodge the attempts so adroitly unless he still thought there was chance of not being crucified? He also makes a lot of dark prophecies, uncharacteristic of the early part of his ministry – which makes me think that these prophecies were added later. In the middle of them is a telltale, very un-Mark-like parenthesis inserted by some copyist: “(let him that readeth understand).” (13:14)

It is the Passover. Yeshu’s movements take on a secretive air. Though crowds still follow him everywhere, he is careful to keep quiet about where he and his disciples will take the Passover meal. Most scholars doubt that Yeshu and his circle knew this would be their last supper together, arguing that the disciples naturally later romanticized the last evening they had spent with their teacher. I am not so sure. Trouble was in the air, and Yeshu clearly knew it. But at this point even Mark begins indulging in some fiction.

After the Passover meal, in the Garden of Gethsemane, if his disciples fell asleep while he prayed, then how do we know what he prayed? And yet the prayer is convincing, “Abba, Father, all things are possible to thee; take away this cup from me: nevertheless, not what I will, but what thou wilt.” (14:36)

I am not convinced this is a prayer about being crucified, or at least *only* about being crucified. I think the moment of the fig tree indicates, powerfully, that it had all become too much for Yeshu. I think in Gethsemane he was praying not to go mad.

In all the Gospels, when Judas comes with the temple soldiers to arrest him, Yeshu doesn’t seem so much resigned or accepting as exhausted. You can almost see the weariness in his eyes in Lattimore’s translation of Matthew, when Yeshu says to Judas, “My friend, why are you here?” (26:50)

Few scholars believe what happens next, either in Mark or any other Gospel. The Jews come off too hard, the Romans get off too easy. The truth is that no Roman in the Gospels, at least no Roman with a speaking part, is portrayed badly. From the soldier at the cross to Pilate himself, Romans are on their best behavior with Yeshu. This is, to put

it mildly, suspicious. Probably the beleaguered Christian communities of the First Century, persecuted on all sides, wanted no more trouble than necessary with all-powerful Rome. They certainly didn't want seditious material written down that would condemn them at tribunals. Simultaneously, the new Christian sect was being bitterly disputed by its parent religion, Judaism. Hence the anti-Semitic propaganda regarding Yeshu's last days.

But as Crossan says, Yeshu had made too much trouble already, defied too many laws, and had been fatally attracted to the place where laws were made, administered and enforced. John the Baptist, who hadn't nearly been as revolutionary as Yeshu, managed to get himself killed without setting foot in Jerusalem. No one, neither Jew nor Roman, needed the machinations of the gospels to kill Yeshu. He had killed himself.

Did he rise from the dead? Many credible people through the ages (and in my own life, frankly) have experienced visitations, or "ghosts," especially just after the death of a loved one. The resurrection stories in the Gospels jibe with such visitations – though in several instances the disciples don't even know they've been speaking to the risen Yeshu until after he disappears again.

As Crossan points out, you'd think with something as spectacular as a return from the dead of the Gospels would pretty much agree on the same event. Yet no two Gospels tell of the same resurrection. This doesn't mean that the dead Yeshu didn't visit his disciples. But it might mean that his visitations were experienced so individually, and there was such confusion about them, that they are more ghost stories than resurrection stories. As ghost stories, they are similar to the experiences of countless people. As resurrection stories – that is, the claim that this wasn't a ghost but an actual *embodied* return – it becomes a matter of whether or not you believe.

At this point the life of Yeshu ends, and there begins something he never predicted, envisioned, talked about or wanted – something we call Christianity.

POSTLUDE: NOT PEACE BUT A SWORD

*[Yeshu] said, "Become passers-by."
– The Gospel of Thomas (42)*

One of the fundamental experiences available to a person in Western civilization is to expose oneself full force, and insofar as is possible, to the presence and teachings of Yeshu. It is a psychoactive experience. He hasn't calmed down any. Looked at freshly and closely, away from the safety of churches and cleansed of the banality with which constant repetition has disguised his most radical sayings, Yeshu is as disruptive and mind-altering as ever. For better or worse, he won't let society alone, and he won't let you alone. He is not a man with whom one can be made to come to terms. Make peace with him today and he will be back another day with something awfully unpeaceful – some reminder that you are letting the Kingdom of Heaven within you rot.

No, he is not able to be made peace with, or not for very long – which may be what he meant when he said, "I come not to bring peace but a sword." For myself, I don't believe that Yeshu was the son of any god, or that he rose bodily from the dead, or that he said even half the things they say he said, or that he waits to judge me and everyone on

some apocalyptic day. And I think he would be appalled at literally every religion that has been founded in his name, from Paul's first church at Corinth till today – appalled and, paradoxically (as was his way), bemused.

For Yeshu would remember his own fate – how even he lost sight of the way his ministry had begun; how toward the end, the Gospels agree, he had virtually stopped healing; how even his energy and wisdom were not enough to prevail. But he also knew his mission and his worth and that, as he said, the law of his time would pass away before his words passed away.

Now the laws of our time are passing away, transforming themselves for better and worse into a future that's beyond our power to imagine or control – an (as always) freshly dangerous age that has yet has no name. The era that has been called “Christendom” is ending forever. But it is highly likely that in some form, perhaps finally freed from the shackles of his churches, Yeshu's ministry will participate in and haunt the coming era. For it is, as he said in the Gospel of Thomas (77): “Split a piece of wood, and I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there.”

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