

YESHUA, A PROFILE

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By way of introduction and credentials—as most of you know, but may have forgotten, I came to you via Grace Church—also known to some as the Cathedral of Kilmarnock. Despite a fortuitous beginning in Sunday School at the Mother Church of Christ Scientist in Boston, where at the age of four I experienced a vision of a non-anthropomorphic god as Supreme Intelligence—I was confirmed an Episcopalian, then married as one in St. Martin's Chapel of St. John's Cathedral in Denver. From my mid-20's to late 30's, I spent with Andy six years in Moslem countries, followed by four in Theravada Buddhist Thailand. While I found Islam to hold in high regard the sanctity of the family and important of children, Buddhism interested me far more, and I made a study of it in my time there as a young mother—finding nothing in the precepts to be in conflict with those of Christianity as I understood it—but rather a complement and enrichment.

Today, it seems to me that Christianity is finding itself in conflict with itself—on many fronts i.e. whether to accept or resist changes in mores—in scientific knowledge—over what authority is supreme—The Bible, Church Doctrine? and such matters as the right route to Salvation and whose are the forces of Good and Evil.

I am taking a hard look at the basis in a human personality, purported to be living amongst us or coming back soon—on which much of our American culture, and in some case, policy, is based. Once before I posed the question here—How important is the historical Jesus? And, I ask again. Clearly what we need to know is significant in view of the role of religion in our nation's current entanglement in the affairs of the Middle East.

Profiles are popular these days. There is the drug runner—my young friend Tracy with her long black hair, and leather jacket was subjected to a full body search at Dulles long before 9-11; the terrorist, any Middle Eastern type since then, and after a crime, the abductor, murderer, arsonist, usually pictured with a stocking cap or beard.

How familiar does this one sound?

- A Mediterranean male.
- A member of the lower class of artisans
- A penniless itinerant with a message
- A creative, engaging speaker
- A wisdom teacher, in the tradition of the peripatetic Greek Cynic philosophers
- A pariah, who kept company with social outcasts and sinners, i.e., tax collectors and prostitutes
- A breaker of the laws of purity, sharing meals with the unclean
- Perhaps a shaman, exorcist, or healer of ills (as opposed to diseases)
- A prodigal, alienated from his family, who underwent psychological change
- One enlightened by an ecstatic experience

- A social visionary with egalitarian and anti-establishment views

Fits the profile of an individual presenting a danger to the society?

Add hometown Nazareth, milieu mostly Galilee circa 30 CE

This profile is a composite taken from Profiles of Jesus, essays from members of the Jesus Seminar edited by Roy Hoover published last year (2002).

And so, what message did the messenger bring? An ideal religious vision? Or one with social implications?

The message is unfinished. Does this sound familiar? The Matrix is the Message. Meaning, it comes clear only when reconstructed by an audience.

Then, in public discourse on the hills and shores of Galilee, in towns and homes, and finally in special places in Jerusalem in Judea, in the use of aphorisms with ironic juxtapositions and parables with open endings. This was the nature of the oral culture of 30-50 CE. None of it would have been written down at the time. An artisan, in fact, would be an illiterate, and would not have received education. The words, contrary to the belief of many, are not advice or theological symbols. In all the words and the stories the words were veiled as they ran counter to the Rules, to the culture of a Roman Empire, a society characterized by patronage, a brokered society, in which many individuals were not linked to the power structure and thus treated as expendables.

Here, on the other hand, the messenger offered a vision of imperial rule of God, in the process of reversing human values, turning all that seems to be one way upside down, a vision of a human community grounded in the inclusive compassion of God. The original, contemporary and early, Jesus movement was of shared egalitarianism of spiritual and material resources.

What today might parallel the Imperium? The UN, Global Economy, a Super Power and how should we then interpret the unfinished message: Not, I should like to emphasize, as our religious Fundamentalists, the Literalists, do. Here, I follow on Sibley Towner's talk about the Millennialists among them.

The story of Yeshua in the Voice Print I am about to play out is separate from the later post-Easter story focusing on resurrection. And from the gospel of John written about one hundred years after. And from the Apocalypse of the other John as described in the Book of Revelation.

According to his own sayings, Yeshua believed that God was in control of the natural world, would not perpetrate cosmic catastrophe. And he did not expect to be resurrected.

Fittingly, last Easter on Martha's Vineyard at the UUSMV (the S is for Society), I heard the sermon featured as the Universal message in the Easter Story, subtitled by Reverend Judy, "Don't Throw Jesus Out with the Bath Water". Like a good pagan, to use Andy's words, she dwelt on the beauties of spring, the return of life to the earth, and eggs. And instead of rabbits, puppets participated, two skunks named Pansy and Cabbage who learned wisdom from The Ancient Turtle. She rightly pointed out that UU's, coming as most of us do from other backgrounds, tend to avoid the idea of Jesus. And she effectively combined ancient lore with early Christian theology.

My sources for this talk, the scholars of the Jesus Seminar, claim that the resurrection concept changed the message from that of "the Kingdom", which we'll talk more of, to the person of Jesus...then the iconoclast became the Icon. Yeshua became divine. And they state that the results of their years of research convinced them that a literal reading of the Gospels was dangerous in the modern world, particularly when applied historically and politically. They counter critics who accuse them of "debunking" Christianity in saying that their interest now is in countering fundamentalism with a "valid" reading of the gospels to better understand what is there which is authentic.

Perhaps you will remember that a few years ago I spoke with you about the Seminar group. We began with a sermon by the Rev. Ann Buehler, formerly of the UUCOB, and her "Jesus, the Man and the Message" in which she introduced the work of the Jesus Seminar. The UU World recently carried her obit. May she be honored. I followed her paper with The Sayings of Jesus, based on the seminar's report, The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus. Today is an update.

To quickly summarize the work of twelve years, the words and deeds of Jesus were examined, beginning in 1987, by a group of theological scholars eventually numbering seventy-four. For five years they focused on the Sayings, 1500 versions of five hundred items in the gospels. The findings were published in 1993. They had found eighteen percent of the words attributed to Jesus to be Authentic—the remainder of the words were of early Christians. This we have already covered, but I will review their criteria.

In the next five years they worked on the Acts and Deeds, which they found more difficult to verify, partly because the miracles and deeds are recorded in stylized patterns typical of the earlier oral tradition. From 1996-1998 they worked individually on essays published as the Profiles in 2002. And it is here I want to pass the time today.

Their point, and mine, is to separate, or distinguish, Yeshua's viewpoint from later writers, to clarify the logic that motivated him. First, they abandoned the narrative control of synoptic chronology, AND the post crucifixion story. Accepting that the descriptions in the gospels are literary constructs, and thus subject to deconstruction and creative reconstruction, (that's postmodern literary critical theory), they called their process "re-imagining", an even more up-to-date term, and one interwoven with re-imagining.

This is far from heresy. In the Jewish tradition is found the concept of Midrash, also called Hagada, imaginative development of thoughts suggested by the text. The gospel writers supplied their own individual interpretations.

While Paul, for example, writing ten to fifteen years after the death of Jesus had no eyewitness contact with Jesus, and no knowledge of the Kingdom Message, Mark writing seventy years later revives that message. Luke and Matthew are revisions of Mark and rely also on a source known as Q. Material from the gospel of Thomas, rejected for inclusion in the New Testament, is found equally valid and provides additions.

The question is posed: Who does Jesus say he is? Not a messiah, not a hero, not a prophet. He used the term “son-of-man” to identify with common humans and the term Abba, Aramaic equivalent of papa, one used by children, but when he refers to children, he means little people, the unimportant, including slaves. New insights arose for the theological scholars, apart from the “plot of the post-crucifixion creed”.

The Gospel of John is set apart. Herein lies the language of the trinity, the Post-Easter viewpoint, little of the life and ministry, almost none of the words of Jesus. It gets a rating of .0 for historical and .0 for authentic language and furthermore, no parables. And little better on Acts and Deeds. John records the miracles to show divinity—not performed out of human need—and the itinerary from Galilee to Jerusalem and the Last Supper appear in a metaphoric form.

So, we return to the Words as opposed to the Word. These were delivered in public places in discourse and dialog with listeners. The aphorisms and parables provide the most authentic voice for our Profile.

Take the aphorisms first. The aphoristic sage is a common figure in both the Hellenistic and Jewish wisdom traditions. Those credited to Yeshua are clever and quirky. They are frequently oral cartoons. Visualize—

Take the timber out of your own eye
 Turn the other cheek
 Let the dead bury their dead
 The blind leading the blind
 A camel going through the eye of a needle
 Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's or Pay the Emperor

And some odd bits of irony—
 Love your enemies
 Give to everyone who begs from you
 Trust God—like the lilies of the field, etc.

The parables are well-known stories. I am assuming you have some familiarity with the best known:

- The Prodigal Son
- The Good Samaritan
- The Corrupt Estate manager, audited and terminated
- The Feast (to which no one of the invited came)
- The Vineyard owner who pays all the workers the same
- The woman who hid leaven in the flour
- The mustard seed, which grows to a plant and shelters the birds

For the most part, they have an odd twist, and are not what they seem. More than anything the parables show the perspective of the man. Closely examined, they appear to be retorts to questions or challenges proposed by an opponent. The details certainly come from situations the story teller has personally encountered. They use ironic repartee, quips, like the blind leading the blind. Their plots deal with creative debt management, the problem child (prodigal), master-slave relations, the suspect savior (Samaritan). Now, Samaria lay between and totally separating Galilee and Judea. Note here that the Samaritans were anathema, considered unclean to the Judean Jews. In this story it is the Samaritan who saves the mugged and robbed victim—what to make of that? The characters in the leading roles are disreputable—they escape discipline. The audience will not identify with them, will most likely take the role of bystander. These are not stories of advice or theological symbolism, but rather metaphor, or allegory for God’s Imperium. We can gather that there is no social justice in that Roman society. There are dialectics here, in Yeshua’s teaching, verbal dialog, transactional analysis at work.

Divine providence, according to the parables, is impartial and morally blind. Yeshua’s experience bears out the view. He had experienced alienation first hand. In Judea he was a stranger. He was regarded there as an agent of the chief of demons—after all, he showed familiarity with them, sufficient to succeed in casting out evil spirits from the ill. One dissenter found Yeshua to fit the sage, or wisdom teacher, profile, which in those times was not compatible with that of the shaman or healer; he believed the healing incidents may have been added later to provide authority for early Christians, even the apostles, who did attempt healings.

The significance of Yeshua taking meals with outcasts is that wandering teachers were asked to speak at gatherings, and schools grew up in that way. Gathered were sinners, a social as well as moral category, the disabled, lepers and the deaf and blind, even slaves. In this movement, the conventions of family, religion, the marketplace, dietary laws, and codes of purity and honor and shame were challenged. In the teachings about the Basilea or Imperium, Yeshua parodies the empire of Rome.

The belief in the parallel of Kingship or Reigning with control of the Self is promoted, and Shame is dispelled. As honor and shame have to do with the expectations of peers and culture, honor and shame are equated with self worth or the lack thereof. The message is for these expendable persons. The guides relating to

behavior i.e., “If someone takes your coat, let them take your shirt along with it” contain hyperbole, exaggeration for comic effect. If applied, in an unfair world, self-control is maintained and the character of the opponent exposed. Good tactics!

In the use of the puzzling parables we see no description of a future holocaust but a gateway to God, a god who is a King, the symbol of domination, derived from an ancient Near Eastern creation myth. There is no imminent Last Judgment or end of the world. Yeshua believed in a God in control, and he was in control, too, of his own destiny. His death might be considered as his own deed. In his words he sealed his fate. They were dangerous words which could account for the execution.

In conclusion, after immersing myself in this material, I find that rather than the three part Trinity, there are Two to look at—Yeshua and Christ Jesus—depending on before or after resurrection. The historical Jesus and the Jesus of Christianity are not a new paradox, but don't we now see a Yeshua of imagination vs. a literal, fundamental creation. If the message is unfinished, and may always be coming true whenever there is an audience to listen and hear, how then can the reading offered by these profiles be communicated? And who wants to?