

As minister of this church, I was asked by the Reverend Kevin Larson of the Karis Church here in Columbia to participate on a panel discussion about Jesus. Also on the panel was Dr. Tom Schreiner, Professor of New Testament Interpretation at Southern Seminary in Louisville, and Shakir Al-Ani, a local scholar connected with the Islamic Center of Mid-Missouri. We were each given 20 minutes of initial presentation describing our respective views about who Jesus was. My presentation is based upon biblical scholarship and not as a Christian confessional. My views are thoroughly Unitarian Universalist, that Jesus was a man and not God, that he lived and died just like every other human, and that his message has continued value in the way we conduct our lives with one another today.

JESUS . . . WHO?

Friday, 01 February 2008

My Unitarian Universalist tradition stems from the questioning side of the Christian experience. In reflecting upon past theological arguments in history, Arius is more compelling than Athanasius, Pelagius moreso than Augustine, Arminius moreso than Calvin. My tradition begins with the radical wing of the Protestant Reformation – the Anabaptists and the anti-Trinitarians. Within that radical Reformation context forward to this day, being a Christian is a matter of character and not doctrine or dogma. Being a Christian is how one acts, not what one believes. From that time, we have today Unitarian faith traditions in parts of Romania, Hungary and the Czech Republic, and in the British Isles. My American tradition of this questioning faith comes from the Puritans of New England. Beginning after the Great Awakening era in the mid-1700s, both Unitarian and Universalist theological questions were raised, and carried forward through the 19th-century. Such doctrines as original sin, pre-destination, vicarious atonement and virgin birth were questioned and found not to be in accord with the natural world and a loving and compassionate God acting within the world. To question, to doubt is a vital part of strengthening my faith and faith tradition. To question oppressive authority and popular belief in the way I believe as did Jesus and Paul is one of the marks of my faith tradition. My comments upon “Who . . . Jesus?” stems from the roots of my questioning faith tradition.

I believe the blank between “Who” and “Jesus” must be filled with both the verbs “was” and “is.” “Who was Jesus?” asks the historical question. “Who is Jesus?” asks the faith question. Since I believe I was selected to be on this panel to some extent to represent the Jesus Seminar quest, I will focus on the historical. I must say, however, I was never a participant of the Jesus Seminar proceedings, and do not agree with all of the results subsequently published. Nonetheless, I greatly appreciate the efforts of the biblical scholars in attempting to gain greater insight into the person who was Jesus.

All that we know about the historical Jesus, we find in the four Gospels. That he did live and was crucified is clear to me, even though there are those who aspire to various conspiracy theories in order to negate his existence. So the question for me then shifts from “Who was Jesus?” to how reliable are the Gospels? Those who read them carefully will find several contradictions between the four. If certainty is the basis of one’s faith, the veracity of the historical representations of Jesus will be questioned. This, of course, depends upon whether the Gospels are understood to be historical and biographical documents according to the cultural and literary standards of today. I do not believe our standards of factual historicity or biography can be applied to these revered ancient texts. In ancient times, biographies were concerned only with the time a person flourished. The name of the person gave an identity as to origins, and that was enough (e.g. Jesus of Nazareth, Paul of Tarsus, Mary of Magdala). The purpose of the biography was to instruct how to live. The concern was with edification, as to how this person's presence was life-giving in the then present context. The discrepancies that occur between the four Gospels is of no

concern to me, since the essential issue in the writings is edification for the ancient audience as to how to live better. From that perspective, the canonization of the four was consistent with the view that each gave a specific insight into the life and crucifixion of Jesus from which to learn. The so-called factual "historical" inconsistencies were of no matter, since the interest was not in history as we know it from the time of the Enlightenment. Actually, all the Gospels are hermeneutics or interpretations on the ministry of Jesus. They each see the life and works of the person, and the purpose of his ministry and crucifixion through lenses polished by their times and circumstances.

I read the Gospels as written by intelligent and devout persons at a specific historical moment. Each one is addressing pressing, even life-threatening issues descending upon groups of oppressed people. Each one is in my view a searching for meaning in the ministry and crucifixion of Jesus and a searching for a relationship with God through that ministry. Each is written in *koine* Greek, a vernacular widespread throughout the Roman Empire. Since I do not read Greek, I depend upon the New Revised Standard Version Bible. For me, this translation of the many available is an attempt to reach back to the original source with a minimum of bias. Of course, any and all biblical translations will have a bias, usually a theological one. The attempt to translate from a language that is now lost to us into a contemporary one has many hazards. Choices of words equivalent to some ancient words that are not that well understood are daunting. Often, that choice is based as much on the translator's theological stance as upon scholarship.

My reading of the Gospels places each one in a different historical context. Each one is looking backward to the ministry, message and person of Jesus as a re-presentation. With the Gospels we move from an original and perhaps biographical representation of Jesus, his ministry and crucifixion, to a re-presentation: meaning a presentation of a new view based upon what was originally understood by the previous generation(s) and modified by the subsequent generation(s). This re-presentation is to be held in the context of the number of disparate groups of "house churches" following the teachings of Jesus in the Roman Empire. We can see in the letters of Paul the attempt to tame variations or opposite interpretations of the good news represented to these "house churches." At the later time of the writing of the Gospels, there was no centralized "church" authority upholding a principal doctrine or collection of acceptable writings. The community in Jerusalem led by Peter and James was held in high esteem, but as seen in Paul's letters and the Acts of the Apostles, it really had no centralized power. Prior to the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, many "house churches" were apparently connected to a local synagogue. References in the pre-destruction epistles by Paul strongly indicate this connection. After the destruction of the Temple and banishment of Judeans from Jerusalem by the Romans, a crisis developed within the communities following the teachings of Jesus and with each one's relationship with the local synagogue. This double bind meant an assessment of the purpose of the ministry of Jesus, what his crucifixion meant in regard to the various traditional views of the Messiah, and how each community would conduct itself in the strife with the local synagogue. At the same time the various communities were attempting to come to terms with the major social and political upheaval following the fall of the Temple. The Pharisees regrouped at Jamnia/Yevnah to map out how to maintain the Jewish tradition without the Temple – a repeat of the Exile some 600 years earlier and the beginning of the rabbinic tradition. Both sides of the complex and tenuous relationship between "house church" and synagogue were in the throes of major transition, creating considerable anxiety and conflict. Not only that, but also more importantly, many were asking why Jesus did not return during the Judean uprising against the Romans. The return of Jesus, which Paul initially believed would be in his own lifetime, was

a crisis of faith. I believe each Gospel was written to address an understanding of Jesus and his role in one's relationship to God.

The Gospel of Mark is the first narrative composed. It was probably written around the time following the fall of the Temple in Jerusalem, between 70 and 73 CE. Mark begins truly in the tradition of the ancient biography with the time that Jesus flourished, not his birth. At that beginning Jesus is ratified as God's agent on earth. The miracles demonstrated the authority and power of Jesus as an agent of God. The crucifixion of Jesus is the ending. I hold to the evidence that the original text ends at 16:8 and the subsequent passages are later harmonizing additions. The community or groups of "house churches" Mark was probably addressing saw Jesus as confronting the powers, a rebel on behalf of the oppressed. Mark's re-presentation of Jesus is as one who makes the clear distinction between the ways of God and the ways of what we would call today materialism. Mark presents God as acting *through* Jesus. Jesus in Mark is very human: he gets angry, depressed and frustrated.

The Gospel of Matthew is the second text in chronological order, probably written sometime between 80 to 90 CE. Matthew used Mark's Gospel as a basis, following it very closely, expanding the narrative. Matthew's text indicates the community or groups of "house churches" were rooted in the Judean/Israelite tradition. But in the decade that intervened between the probable times of writing them, much happened. It was a decade of severe disruption between what was emerging as the church and the synagogues. By this time, the split was underway and very painfully so. Matthew has an overt interest in using Isaiah to substantiate the ministry of Jesus in the context of the struggles with rabbinic interpretations. This is to indicate that the resurrection of Jesus was part of God's plan. Matthew saw Jesus as the new Moses, a reformer. Matthew's insistence upon relating Jesus to the prophecies clearly ties this community to the Judean tradition. Matthew used formula methods and discourses to show how Jesus' ministry fulfilled prophecy. Matthew sees Jesus as an authority on Torah, being rabbinic, a teacher. Matthew believed God's presence *resides* in Jesus.

The Gospel of Luke is the next chronologically, written sometime between 85 to 90 CE. It is the most "accomplished" in a literary sense than any of the others. The flow of the text is far more seamless than in the previous Gospels, a clue to the education level of the author. The use of the Greek language is polished, with a wider range of vocabulary. The text was seemingly written for a general audience and not necessarily for a specific community of believers, as was the case with Mark and Matthew – something like *USA Today* as opposed to the *Columbia Daily Tribune*. Luke's narrative is very clear, and holds no mysteries or secrets. The text points to events clearly and forthrightly. Luke relied upon the narrative of individuals to show the fulfillment of prophecy. The essential theological position of the author rests upon Jesus as Savior, the only Gospel that uses this term. The crucifixion of Jesus as "ransom" (as in Mark) or as relinquishing sins through his blood (as with Matthew) is less important than his life for Luke. This text is somewhat removed from the martyrdom tradition of the movement, given the relative shortness of the crucifixion scene. People are "saved" in the present time, not at the end time. Much of the discourse in the text relies upon a person's behavior within the immediate context. Faith in Jesus as the Christ with accompanying behavior modification borne out of that faith is one's reward in life lived more fully. One is saved from a living death in the here and now. This "salvation" continues after the physical presence of Jesus through the emerging church. This is a universal dimension to the narrative and theology, which reinforces the view this text is open to a general audience. In a sense, the Gospel of Luke, along with the Acts of the Apostles, is aimed at directing the emerging church toward a universal worldview. The more favorable view of the disciples and the Pharisees revealed in the narrative than

depicted in Mark and Matthew supports this universal aspect. The author of Luke is linked by some to the ministry of Paul.

In the Gospel of John the community stands outside the trajectory of the Synoptic (“seen together”) Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke. Even as each of the previous Gospels has its own understanding of the ministry, crucifixion and salvific purpose of Jesus, John has a unique treatment to those concerns. This Gospel is chronologically the last written assumed to be set down in the period of 90-100 CE. Because of its lateness the theology inherent in the text is considerably more sophisticated than the previous Gospels. Mark focused upon the actions of Jesus, Matthew upon Torah interpretation by Jesus, and Luke upon Jesus as Savior for all now. John's Gospel is a theological meditation, full of symbolism, while the Synoptics are biographical and teaching re-presentations. The difference occurs in the narrative at the core of the Synoptics, wrapped with a theological perspective for each respective Gospel. For John, the theology is at the core, wrapped with a narrative. For John, Jesus is God incarnate.

Who was Jesus? Some of the clues that I get from the Gospels are only that. Who he was historically is not the purpose of the Gospels. From my point of view his ministry was a subversive liberating of God in Torah. He was within the prophetic traditions of Judaism, and yet outside its popular practice. He did not reject Torah, but what it had become through popular interpretations of those in control of the redemptive media, which in his day was the Temple cult. He was a reformer, not a founder of a new religion. He spoke of every day conditions and circumstances. The most prevalent method of communicating was through the parable. Some of the parables were verbal codifications, where Jesus was seeking to disclose the nature of society, and where in the midst of society, one can find the presence of God. His goal was consistently to humanize the poor, and the use of the image of "neighbor" was a link in that humanizing effort. His healing miracles were not acts of medical curing but rather causing folks to reclaim their wholeness, their holiness, with God in a new relationship not otherwise available to them. These are my understandings of who Jesus was by reading each Gospel as a separate theological position. For me, to take a snippet of a passage from one Gospel and tie it to other snippets from other Gospels denies the integrity and honesty of each Gospel. This means, as each Gospel represents it, I am more interested in the religion of Jesus, not a religion about Jesus.

Who was Jesus? Albert Schweitzer a hundred years ago, after extensive searching and research, admitted we will never know the historical Jesus. The Jesus Seminar attempted to parse out the original sayings uttered by Jesus. That effort was more a statistical attempt to ascertain probabilities as a way of approaching the historical Jesus. As much as I admire the efforts and questions of the Jesus Seminar, I agree with Schweitzer. The historical Jesus eludes us because after his crucifixion, no one really needed to document his history. There were astounding stories about him passed on from mouth to mouth, word to word, and that was enough. That there was a Jesus is certain in my mind. Who is Jesus? That is a question of faith, not history. That there is a Jesus today is a matter of sustaining faith. What he means to each individual is truly a matter for each one's faith and faith tradition. For that, I cannot speak for anyone else's experience of faith.

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