

### 3. Jesus of Nazareth and the Christ of History

I have become convinced that everyone who wants to practice a Next Christianity needs to have a relatively accurate historical portrait of Jesus of Nazareth. But the thing is, all historical knowledge is approximate and more improvement of it is always possible. This is especially true about Jesus, for whom so few uncontested historical facts are gleanable from the abundant reference to him we find in the New Testament. This is the first lesson we need to learn in order to read the four Gospels of the New Testament: **THEY ARE NOT FOUR RECONCILABLE BIOGRAPHIES OF JESUS.** Whatever our Sunday School teachers implied and our pastors lied about, the Gospels are works of theological insight employing an amazingly exaggerated sort of fiction. We have four pictures of Jesus not one, and these pictures are significantly different. Even the overlaps among the first three gospels are wild portraits of Jesus drawn still earlier. And each of these earlier portraits of Jesus are used differently by each Gospel writer. So to say that the historical Jesus gets lost in all the furor over him is an understatement. It has seemed plausible to some scholars to test the hypothesis that Jesus never existed at all, that he is pure fiction.

I reject this hypothesis; my grounds for doing so are not based on anything the historical scientist can prove or disprove. It is simply my view that this much furor cannot be made over nothing. Some sort of historical event happened that involved a real human being of Buddha-like stature, and this event deserves the attention of any serious student of the history of world religions.

#### **The Historical Jesus**

So, when the dust settles, the scholars, though differing, have provided me with a picture of Jesus that I can accept as approximate, but plausible. I am not going to attempt to paint that picture in its entirety, but here are some references that may help you create your own plausible picture. My first choice is Albert Nolan's *Jesus Before Christianity*. Nolan is excellent on using scanty facts like Jesus joining the John the Baptist movement to imply things about Jesus' thinking and passion. I also find many interesting factual discussions about the historical Jesus in John Dominic Crossan's *Jesus a Revolutionary Biography*. Both of these works reveal how Jesus was a response to his historical times and what a profound social revolutionary he was. I also treasure Rudolf Bultmann's original 1934 work *Jesus and the Word* in which the results of form criticism were first pushed to the raw edges of this ongoing research. Bultmann showed us something that recent scholars have sometimes neglected: that any picture of the historical Jesus is highly improbable if that "Jesus" did not understand the word "God" in the ancient Hebraic sense – as the God of history described in the last two chapters. Jesus did not invent a new God, a better God, a more loving God. Rather, Jesus showed us how to love that same old Hebraic God of history. And this was not something entirely new, for the old biblical books also spoke of loving God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind. Jesus showed us what loving God looks like in a fully radicalized form that illuminates not only his own life, but the lives of Moses and the prophets from a fresh angle of vision. Jesus showed us what loving God looks like in the living Now of experience, and he called forth that depth of love in others. He initiated a timeless or "eschatological" community that can witness relevantly in any time and place how to love God and how this love of the Eternal transforms the temporal. I realize that such statements need illustration, which I will attempt to provide the rest of this and following chapters.

#### **The Ethical Teaching of Jesus**

Almost all the teachings that have a high priority of being authentic teachings of the

historical Jesus are ethical teachings. Jesus lived in an ethics-emphasizing culture. He deeply subscribed to the Law of Moses and its radicalization by the prophets. His critique of the moral “experts” of his day was that they did not interpret the law deeply enough. On “Thou shalt not kill,” he pushed for his companions to see that our inner attitudes of fury with people are a form of murder. Implied here is that every person is a gift of God to us, a neighbor whom we are to love as we would love ourselves. His teaching about adultery is similar. The inner attitude of lust for love affairs that are not appropriate for us means indulging in a form of adultery. He is not implying here that sexual desire is evil or that we have absolute control over what we desire. But he is certainly implying an attitude similar to the one described in the Garden of Gethsemane story: “Not my will (my desire), but what the Almighty wills (desires of us)” is the overarching guideline for living. All Jesus ethical teachings are anchored in that first commandment: loving God totally. If we interpret loving Reality as a “desire” for truthfulness, we need to notice the tension between the desire for truth and many of our other desires.

The total love of God was not something Jesus’ society had never heard of, but Jesus pushed it to places people were reluctant to go. Here is a good example:

*Then one of the experts in the Law stood up to test him and asked, “Master, what must I do to be sure of eternal life?”*

*What does the Law say and what has your reading taught you?” said Jesus.*

*“The Law says, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy strength and with all thy mind – and thy neighbor as thyself.” he replied.*

*“Quite right,” said Jesus, “Do that and you will live.”*

*But the man wanting to justify himself, continued.*

*“But who is my ‘neighbor’?”*

Jesus tells expert in the law the story about the Samaritan man who helped a man in need.<sup>1</sup> The Samaritan was a member of a group of “next-door” persons disrespected in a manner similar to the Texas nativist’s attitude toward undocumented Mexicans. So here is a modernization of this bit of Jesus’ educational fiction:

A man ran out of gas and waved down another vehicle that turns out to be thieves who stole his money, took his car, beat him up, and left him by the road dying. A Baptist Clergyman in his Cadillac drove on by. A Catholic priest in his Mercedes drove on by. Then an undocumented Mexican in his Chevy stopped, gave the man first aid, put his bloody body in the back seat of this car, drove him to a Motel, paid for a room, left him in their care, and promised to pay for any additional expenses on his way back.

*Jesus concludes his story by asking, “Which of these three seems to you to have been a neighbor to the bandits’ victim?”*

*“The man who gave him practical sympathy,” he replied.*

*“Then you go and give the same.” returned Jesus.*

This story implies that any person in need who enters into our scope of action is a neighbor, given to us by God and making a claim upon us for “practical sympathy.” Jesus is convicting his whole society of estrangement from the elemental instruction of their traditional ethical teachings. Jesus is also convicting our society and each of us personally of estrangement from the God of history, our neighbors, and our own true selves.

The full impact of Jesus’ teachings becomes more clear when we know more about the society in which he lived. About 85 percent of that society were literally destitute: that is, they struggled each day for food and other needs. Many of them were sick,

<sup>1</sup> Luke 10: 25-37 – Scholars tend to agree that this story dates back to Jesus. The words surrounding it are likely somewhat elaborated by the Gospel writer, but even these words reflect the setting in which Jesus taught.

blind beggars, lame, deaf, and perhaps stricken with leprosy an illness so feared that no one wanted even to touch them. These are the people Jesus hung out with. He ate meals with them. He rescued them from the disrespect in which they were held by the more established parts of their society. "Blessed are the destitute, Jesus said, for they are open to the arriving 'new deal' of the Kingdom of God." "Blessed are the vulnerable (i.e. open to everything), for the entire Earth will be given to them."

The more "respectable" people took offense at Jesus' associations with these "riffraff;" they expected a real prophet to hang out with the "better" people.

In that culture there were many groups of "better" people. (1) The wealthy elite: the Kings, royalty, and Temple leaders called "Sadducees." These people had made their peace with the Romans, secured their wealth and status by doing so, and were perhaps shrewd in realizing that the Roman power was invincible in their day. (2) Deeply opposed to these "compromisers" were the Zealots who were the nationalists of that day. They wanted to throw off the Roman yoke by violent means and make Israel an independent and righteous society. They tried this, unsuccessfully, several times, and they keep on trying until Roman strength wiped out the nation entirely in about 70 CE. (3) The scribes and Pharisees were a third group who opposed the Sadducees for their compromises and the Zealots for their political naivety. They set about to preserve the treasured heritage through forms of ethical practice that Jesus found to be less than fully serious. (4) Then there were the Essenes who found the entire social situation intolerable and left it for an ascetic and mystical existence removed from participation in this dismal state of affairs. They hoped for a Messiah of a more cosmic quality to come in some all-powerful way and rescue them from this whole mess.

Jesus identified with none of these groups. He joined instead the John the Baptist movement. John engaged the then existing society head on. He embodied a strong message of judgment and a warning that this people, so deeply estranged from their heritage, were headed for total ruin. Jesus was baptized by John. Whether Jesus began his own ministry immediately after Baptism or later after John's death may not be clear, but what is clear is that he abandoned John's ascetic style and ate and drank and celebrated an arriving "Divine Kingdom" with a joy that John had yet to experience. Jesus revered John, but moved beyond him. Like John, his core message included the estrangement and doom of the nation, but in addition he announced the arrival, in the here and now, of the Kingdom of Eternity that was overcoming Satan's kingdom of estrangement from Reality. Forgiveness, a fresh start, and a new life were his themes. People responded and experienced that new life.

Jesus was not a mild suburban moralist: he was a revolutionary within his society. From his first sermon to his last "march" to Jerusalem, he was challenging everyone in his society with precisely those truths about themselves and their world that they were denying.

In conclusion, in spite of the limitations of our raw data about the historical Jesus, we can tease out a plausible picture. Our historical scholarship will surely get more fine tuned, and we can be relaxed about this or that detail, for it does not infinitely matter. What does matter is seeing Jesus within his times operating not with universal principles, but living day-by-day before what he was encountering from the God of history. His teachings are time and space specific, not easily transferred rationally to the next or the next age. But what is applicable to any age is his underlying attitude toward life. We can glimpse this partly through our hard-won historical facts, but also through the further imaginings about him by those who viewed themselves as his resurrected body.

## Interpreting Jesus

Whatever we conclude to be true about the historical Jesus of Nazareth, we are still faced with interpreting this raw historical data for a meaning that can make sense of interpreting him as the Christ (The Messiah). We also need to interpret the raw data about Jesus in a way that illuminates the flourishing community that emerged after his death, the furiously effective ministry of Paul, and the elaborate soul-addressing fictions of the Gospel writers.

Christianity is born out of a furious response to Jesus and the interpretations of him that expressed that response. I accept the conclusions of many historians that the historical Jesus never heard of Christianity and probably did not even claim to be the Christ. Everything about his being "the Christ" can be true about his real significance without assuming that Jesus himself was doing anything more amazing than living his life fully in obedience to the Reality that he faced. He did not have to believe that he was the Christ to be qualified for this exalted interpretation. He demonstrated what "saved" from "estrangement" looks like, and was therefore seen as the Christ by those who had eyes to see this.

For we Christian theologians of the 21st century, it is of foremost importance that we grasp the following understanding: seeing Jesus as the Christ and sharing in his resurrection mean the same thing. The disciple-composed-flesh-and-blood Body-of-Christ was the resurrection, not some magical appearance of the corpse of Jesus that the grand poetry of the Gospel writers seems to depict to our literalistic minds. The resurrected Body of Christ is simply the flesh-and-blood bodies of those who saw Jesus as the Christ. They became "in Christ" by seeing Jesus for what he was. They looked into the eyes of one another and they saw Jesus-the-Christ living right there in the bodies of each other. This was a revolutionary event so deep that it could not be told about in everyday scientifically literal, factual language.

The wonder of this event had to be told about with Virgin Births, walking on Water, and rising from the dead. We 21st Century followers and potential followers of Jesus need to be clear about both these literal facts and these deep interior realizations that required such extreme means of communication. Take the Virgin Birth as an example. There are two different stories about this, one in Matthew about kingly visitors and one in Luke about surprised shepherds who were tending their flocks by night. Mark has no Virgin Birth story unless you count Jesus' baptism in which God speaks from a cloud saying "this is my Beloved Son." And in John's gospel the imagery of Virgin Birth is applied not to Jesus but to those of us who receive him. What we need to learn from this weird literature is that we do not understand Jesus' Virgin Birth unless we understand how we ourselves may have the same Virgin Birth. The fact that a literal virgin birth is impossible is part of the point of this poetry. This radical second-level birth is impossible for humans to accomplish through human means. Nevertheless, all things are possible for God: including our Virgin Birth, our own walking-on-the-water of our own wind-blown, stormy lives, and our own resurrection from the dead of eating our own egoism rather than eating the food that Jesus gave us, his own body and blood that proclaimed loud and clear both (1) our hopeless estrangement and (2) our forgiveness and acceptance for a fresh start with the realistic living our true lives.

What I mean here is that we have no understanding of Jesus' resurrection until we understand our own resurrection. We have no understanding of Jesus walking on water until we, with Peter, also walk on water. We have no understanding of these joined words "Jesus Christ" until we understand what it means for us to be "in Jesus Christ." The very term "Jesus Christ" became in Christian practice a symbol for the perfection of life. Theologians from Paul forward were clear that we were all hopelessly estranged from this perfection, but that we could be reconciled to it, participate in it, and move toward the full stature of it. "Jesus Christ" means our true

nature. Indeed, it means everyone's true nature, no matter what religion they practice or what religious formations they disbelieve. "Jesus Christ" means the essential human, our profound humanness.

"Jesus Christ" also means the *event* through which we move from our estranged condition into this perfection. "Be ye perfect even as God is perfect" is not a meaningless phrase. I like to put it all this way: The Awesome Perfection has come to us rendering us the perfect Awed Ones who live in an Awe not of our own making. This Awe given through the events of Reality crashing into our unreality is the Spirit of Christ which is also the Holy Spirit of the Almightyness that had created and is "creating" the cosmos. I will explore the meaning of this further as we proceed through the historical unfoldment of this historical Body of Christ that has also been called the "communion of saints." Also I will point out that this communion of saints is not synonymous with the practitioners of a Christian religion but is a dynamic in history, namely a called-out portion of the human species that is leading all humanity toward their true profoundness.

### **The Meaning of "Christ" in the Culture of Jesus and Paul**

The common understanding of the expected Messiah in the culture in which Jesus lived did not square with Jesus, a man who was crucified as a common criminal. Most people at that time hoped for a leader who would do something remarkable like delivering them from the Roman oppression. Some pictured this in more general terms like the defeat of the world of evil and the coming of a world of good. In terms of such expectations, Jesus was a flop, a failure to be the long-expected Messiah.

Joe Mathews in his helpful essay "The Christ of History" makes the point that we all have expectations that are similar to those of Jesus' contemporaries. Mathews calls these expectations the "Everyman Christ," a term he distinguished from the "Jesus Christ." In the 21st Century we must no longer use "man" to mean both men and women, but I will quote Mathews as he originally wrote it.

This Messianic hope of EVERYMAN is born out of his experience of the limitations of existence. His encounter with the unknowns, ambiguities, sufferings, and deaths of this world discloses his insecurity. This primordial anxiety breeds the Messiah image. Watch him, as he is thrown up against his finitude, become a seeker after some truth which will overcome the unbearable incomprehensibles of life. Watch him search, however subtly, for the justification which will alleviate his sense of insignificance. Watch him relentlessly strive for a peace which will somehow blot out this lucid awareness of the tragic dimension of life. One senses in the spectacle a creature vainly striving to rise above his creaturely limits. Finding his givenness burdensome beyond bearing, he dreams of discovering some other kind of a world. Indeed he already has a different world, for he literally exists in his present hopes about the future. Thereby he escapes his actual life in the Now. His very meaning is his anticipation that some tomorrow will render his situation quite different. On that day the ultimate key will come clear: the final excuse for his existence will emerge and true contentment will bathe his being. Then shall he truly live, so he imagines, delivered from this present world of uncertainty, unfulfillment, and anxiety. Such a life-quest is an experience, I submit, that all of us are quite privy to. People dwell sometimes very explicitly, most times quite vaguely, in great expectations of what will relieve them of the necessity of living their given life in the present situation. This great hope, whatever its form, is the CHRIST OF EVERYMAN.<sup>2</sup>

Not only did naming Jesus as the Christ contradict this Everyperson expectation, it also included the offense that becoming a follower of Jesus Christ meant being rejected by a world still trapped in the Everyperson expectations. This awareness gives concrete

<sup>2</sup> See *Bending History: Talks of Joseph Wesley Mathews* (General Editor: John L. Epps; Resurgence publishing: 2005) page 43

meaning to the phrase “Take up your cross and follow me.” What is the value of following such a Jesus-Christ style of living? It is the truth. Every other life walk, though it may seem true, is a falsification of some sort or another. And in being the Truth, the Jesus walk is a powerful and contagious sort of living. It is indeed Messianic in the sense that the evil world of lies is overcome and a new life of truthfulness has begun. Such a transformation is indeed a resurrection from the dead.

### **A Closer Look at Biblical Resurrection**

Many people have had difficulty believing that the Biblical stories about resurrection have anything to do with our being resurrected, so the following story that Luke tells in chapter 24 is most helpful in revealing the personal nature of the resurrection. We read here of two disciples who have a resurrection experience. After the crucifixion they leave Jerusalem on a seven-mile walk to the village of Emmaus. Jesus is walking with them, but they do not recognize him. Here is my interpretation of this line of fiction: Our profound humanness is always walking with all of us, even though we do not recognize it. Jesus (profound humanness) speaks to them:

*“What is all this discussion that you are having on your walk?” They stopped, their faces drawn with misery, and the one called Cleopas replied, “You must be the only stranger in Jerusalem who hasn’t heard all the things that have happened there recently.” “What things?” asked Jesus. “Oh, all about Jesus, from Nazareth. There was a man – a prophet strong in what he did and what he said, in God’s eyes as well as the people’s. Haven’t you heard how our chief priests and rulers handed him over for execution, and had him crucified? But we were hoping he was the one who was to come and set Israel free. (24:17-21)*

That last sentence is surely one of the strongest expressions of despair in the whole of human literature. The story does not say exactly what these two disciples were expecting, but clearly the crucifixion of Jesus was not it. They were fleeing the city of death in which their hopes had been totally dashed. If we wish to personally feel this part of the story we might try to remember times in which our hopeful expectations turned out to be completely out of touch with reality. Then in Luke’s story Jesus provides some theological education:

*“Aren’t you failing to understand, and slow to believe in all that the prophets have said? Was it not inevitable that Christ should suffer like that and so find his glory.” (24:26)*

I take this to mean that all prophetic persons suffer the rejection and hostility of the deluded. When they arrived at Emmaus, these two disciples sit down to eat supper with Jesus, but they still do not recognize who he is.

*Then it happened! While he was sitting at table with them he took the loaf, gave thanks, broke it and passed it to them. Their eyes opened wide and they knew him! But he vanished from their sight. (24:30-31)*

So what happened? They got a new view of how Jesus was the Messiah. The horrific event of losing their mentor in such a cruel, stupid, and tragic way was as it should be. This is what a Messiah looks like. This is what happens to authentic persons under the conditions of our actual world. Was it not always so? Understanding the Christ in that way proved to be a transformative vision. They had just walked seven miles before supper, and before they even finished eating, they rose from the table and walked seven miles back to the city of death, to the tomb that Jerusalem had become for them. The despairing events they had fled became the glory they returned to live. This transformation is the resurrection!

Until this sort of thing happens in your or my internal life, we have not experienced the resurrection. It remains an enigma at best, and more likely a superstition that we have to dismiss. So here is the next personal question: “Have I experienced

resurrection in a manner that it is not just accepting a belief that someone told me to believe, but an event that has actually happened to me, an event that has affected my whole body, including my legs and feet so that they could walk seven miles back to the “worst” experiences of my life and find them good?” Is that word “good” too much? Yes, it is certainly extremely much, for this transformation is an Infinite shift. So let us face that question in all its radicality: When has some truly grim, delusion-smashing Friday become Good Friday for you or me?