

“The Relevance of the Historical Jesus”

A reading and sermon by John Kennison

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The Reading:

(Excerpts from Marcus Borg’s book *Meeting Jesus again for the first time*)

(Marcus Borg writing about being a student in seminary)

There I learned that the image of Jesus from my childhood, the popular image of Jesus as the divine savior who knew himself to be the Son of God and who offered up his life for the sins of the world is not historically true. . . .I learned that Jesus as a human being –the historical Jesus –was quite different from all of that. For one thing he would not have known any of those things about himself

The gospels are neither divine documents nor straightforward historical records. . . . Nor are they eyewitness accounts written by people who had accompanied Jesus and simply sought to report what they had seen and heard. Rather, I learned, the gospels represent the developing tradition of the early Christian movement. . . . they contain not only the movement’s memories of the historical Jesus, but those memories added to and modified by the growing beliefs and changing circumstances of the movement

As a twenty-two-year-old seminarian, I found all of this very exciting, though it also seemed vaguely scandalous and something I shouldn’t tell my mother about.

(Later, Borg summarizes who Jesus was.)

Jesus was deeply Jewish. . . . His scripture was the Jewish Bible. He did not intend to establish a new religion, but saw himself as having a mission within Judaism.

We have no way of knowing whether Jesus thought of himself as the Messiah or as the Son of God in some special sense. According to the earliest layers of the developing gospel tradition, he said nothing about having such thoughts. They were not part of his message.

Jesus was a teacher of wisdom.

Jesus was a social prophet similar to the classical prophets of ancient Israel. Jesus was a movement founder who brought into being a Jewish renewal or revitalization movement . . . that eventually became the early Christian church.

The historical Jesus was a spirit person, one of those figures in human history with an experiential awareness of the reality of God.

(In the sermon, I will have to grapple with what Borg says here.)

The Sermon:

The search for the historical Jesus is based on the idea of applying historical methods to the study of Jesus. Since this sermon will challenge deeply held beliefs, I would like to remind all of us that, as Unitarian-Universalists, we are free to work out our own answers to religious questions. There are many people who believe that the story of Jesus is inherently miraculous. Since history tries to find out what probably happened and since miracles are, by definition, highly improbable, there is no way that a historical analysis can confirm, or, for that matter, refute, a miraculous explanation.

Regardless of what Jesus means to you, if you bear in mind the nature and limitations of historical methods, I think you will find the search interesting.

I will focus on the historical analysis of the four canonical gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John –or rather the four gospels attributed to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. There are other documents to consider, such as the histories of Josephus, the letters of Paul, the gospel of Thomas and reports by Roman officials, but the four canonical gospels are our most important source for what Jesus said and did. There are, however, obvious problems with them. They were written about 40 to 65 years after the crucifixion. Christians wrote them with religious rather than historical goals in mind and these gospels often seem to contain material that relates to issues of the early church rather than the historical Jesus. Also, they disagree with each other on many points. For example, it is very hard to reconcile the nativity stories in Matthew and Luke. (From Borg's book, page 23.)

In Matthew, the genealogy of Jesus goes back to Abraham . . .
and, from David onward is traced through the kings of Israel. In Luke,

the genealogy of Jesus goes back to Adam . . . and, from David onward is traced through the prophets of Israel

In Matthew, the family of Jesus lives in Bethlehem, where Jesus is born at home. . . . In Luke, the family of Jesus lives in Nazareth and travels to Bethlehem because of the census. So Jesus is born “on the road” in a stable.

In Matthew the people who come to the birth are the wise men following the star. In Luke there is neither star nor wise men; rather there are shepherds.

In Matthew, King Herod the great orders the slaughter of male infants in Bethlehem, which leads Jesus’ family to seek refuge in Egypt. In Luke there is no such slaughter and no flight into Egypt.

The stories cannot both be true and they each have problems. They may reflect how people felt about Jesus, but the details are almost certainly non-historical. I am reminded of this church’s very nice tradition started by John Agnew and continued by Kim Burdon of reading Rev Kring’s insightful commentary on the Christmas stories.

There are also numerous discrepancies in the accounts of the final days of Jesus’ life. The gospels even fail to agree on when Jesus was crucified (John has it happening a day earlier than Mark does.) More important is the discrepancy between the gospel portrayal of Pontius Pilate as an indecisive governor and the real life Pilate who ruled with an iron hand. Pilate would not have been swayed by the crowd to crucify a man he thought was innocent. What has happened is that while the original Christian church was

Jewish, we are hearing from the branch that Paul established for the gentiles. Now you need to know that Israel, in the year 70, tried to overthrow Roman rule by military force. It went very badly. The Romans destroyed the temple and eventually dispersed most of the people of Israel throughout the empire. After that, we no longer hear from the Jewish Christian church. The Christian church among the gentiles tried to dissociate itself from its Jewish past, and that, disastrously, led to the anti-semitic version we now have of the crucifixion.

Another issue concerns Jesus' view of how we get into heaven. Matthew 25:31-46 gives the following verses as Jesus' words, as translated in *The Five Gospels* based on the work of the Jesus Seminar.

“When the son of Adam comes in his glory, accompanied by all his messengers, then he will occupy his glorious throne. Then all peoples will be assembled before him, and he will separate them into groups, much as a shepherd segregates sheep from goats. He'll place the sheep to his right and the goats to his left. Then the king will bless those on his right, ‘Come, you who have the blessing of my Father, inherit the domain prepared for you from the foundation of the world. You may remember, I was hungry and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a foreigner and you showed me hospitality; I was naked and you clothed me; I was ill and you visited me; I was in prison and you came to see me.’

Then the virtuous will say to him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you or thirsty and give you a drink? When did we notice

that you were a foreigner and extend hospitality to you? Or naked and clothe you? When did we find you ill or in prison and come to visit you?’

“And the king will respond to them: ‘I swear to you, whatever you did for the most inconspicuous members of my family, you did for me as well.’

“Next, he will say to those at his left, ‘You, condemned to the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his messengers, get away from me! You too may remember, I was hungry and you didn’t give me anything to eat; I was thirsty and you refused me a drink; I was a foreigner and you failed to extend hospitality to me; naked and you didn’t clothe me; I was ill and in prison and you didn’t visit me.’

“Then they will give him a similar reply: ‘Lord, when did we notice that you were hungry or thirsty or a foreigner or naked or weak or in prison and did not attempt to help you?’

“He will then respond: ‘I swear to you, whatever you didn’t do for the most inconspicuous members of my family, you didn’t do for me.’

“The second group will then head for everlasting punishment, but the virtuous for everlasting life.”

As an experiment, I did a Google search on “getting into heaven”. In less than one second, I had free advice from nearly 75,000. people. The advice was generally Christian and based on the Bible but all of it, or as much as I read, seemed to contradict what was plainly stated in Matthew. I was told that good works wouldn’t count for much unless I

personally accepted Jesus. But in Matthew, you don't have to accept Jesus; you don't even have to know who He is. The advice I got from the Internet reflects the theology of the early Christian church which somehow found its way into the gospel of John. The passage from Matthew has its own problems, but scholars find it closer, much closer, to Jesus' own ideas.

In general, Jesus scholars find the "synoptic" gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke more historically reliable than the very different gospel of John. (The word "synoptic" indicates that the first three gospels usually see eye-to-eye.) In the synoptic gospels, Jesus is preaching about the Kingdom of God. Sometimes people seem to enter the Kingdom individually. At other times, the Kingdom is described as the violent coming of God's rule in the near future. Scholars disagree about which interpretation is more likely to go back to the historical Jesus. (The Jesus Seminar favors the less apocalyptic version.) Scholars agree that the Kingdom of God was central to Jesus' message and represented a revitalization of the ties between the Jewish people and God. It is deeply Jewish, deeply compassionate and emphasizes acts of love over formal ritual. The gospel of John portrays Jesus as the sacrificial lamb who died for our sins, a description that scholars feel the historical Jesus would not have recognized.

What then might the historical study of Jesus accomplish? If Jesus did not intend to start a new religion and would not have recognized Christian theology, then what is left to us? What would Christianity have to offer? What would Jesus have to offer? Marcus Borg answers these critical questions powerfully and eloquently and this is why I chose his book for the course I will be giving next month. The key to Borg's answer starts with his assertion that:

The historical Jesus was a spirit person, one of those figures in human history with an experiential awareness of the reality of God.

I have to admit I have trouble here because I tend to favor a symbolic rather than a literal belief in God. Borg observes that concept of a spirit person “presupposes an understanding of reality very different from the dominant image of reality in the Western world.”. Well, I am very much a product of Western worldview. I tend to see reality in scientific terms. I admire the scientific method and, if I were not all thumbs in the lab, I might have gone into science instead of mathematics. But when I read a book such as Borg’s I do get a feeling that people have deep spiritual needs and I do get a glimpse of a reality beyond what can be readily investigated scientifically. The great value of the quest for the historical Jesus is that it helps us get beyond the divisive issue of what we should believe about Jesus. Jesus is not the subject of a final exam question designed to see how devout or, depending on how you see things, how gullible we might be.

Jesus is important because he speaks to people’s spiritual needs.

I think we often have to rely on metaphors to express the impact such a person can have. Sometimes I feel that churches get so involved in the literal interpretations of these metaphors that the underlying message is in danger of being lost. It is hard to pin down the great appeal of Jesus’ spiritual message, but it has to do with how we lead our lives, and how we show compassion to others. It has to do with the Golden Rule of doing unto

others as we would like them to do unto us. I find this rule quite beautiful even though I know I can never come close to being in full compliance. It has to do with enjoying the Christmas stories even when we believe them to be mythical and in finding deep joy in life. It remains something we must find and experience for ourselves, using whatever metaphors we find helpful, in our quest for spiritual truth.