

4 October 2009 + “ Who Do They Say I Am?, Part 1”
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When I was a seminarian at Berkeley’s Graduate Theological Union, I loaded up on New Testament courses; I took all of them at the American Baptist seminary, where I also lived. I couldn’t get enough of the American Baptists – for many reasons, a few of them theological (which I’ll reveal when I get to the Radical Reformation.). Nor could I satisfy my fascination with Jesus. I approached my New Testament courses like an archaeological literary expedition, excavating layer after layer of historical and cultural adhesions. I wanted to know who Jesus was.

This month I’m taking you on a similar expedition, as we view Jesus through our Unitarian lens. Our Unitarian forebears have always considered Jesus to be human, rather than divine; but in two weeks, Patrick Kearns will bring in our Universalist heritage, and how inclusivity and acceptance of all became a central node of our UU faith.

A linguistic note: the word *Christ* comes from Greek Χριστός (*kristos*), meaning “anointed one.” It’s a translation of the Hebrew word מָשִׁיחַ (*messiah*). Due to our UU belief in Jesus as a teacher of love and justice – rather than a son of God who redeemed humankind – I speak not of “Jesus Christ,” but of Jesus, or of Yeshua bin Miriam¹ – Jesus son of Mary.



Yeshua was a Middle Eastern Jew, born in about 6 BCE² to Jewish parents in Galilee, a region of Palestine. “Other than eighty years of self-rule (the Maccabees) that ended a half-century before [his] birth, the Jews had not ruled themselves for three-quarters of a millenium.”³ Jesus was born into Roman rule – an Empire that subjected the Jewish people to enslavement. The few leaders at the top of the Empire’s pyramid were supported by the eighty percent of the population at the bottom. When the poor failed to pay their share of Judean tribute to Rome, those working people could be sold into slavery or even killed.⁴ This tension – Jewish people living at subsistence level, surrendering much of their goods to the empire that occupied them, often violently – was the world in which Jesus’ ministry took shape.

Over the course of two millennia, however, the ministry and teachings of Jesus have been pressed through the narrow filter of four gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – and distorted by those who most passionately claim to follow him. The political and historical context of Jesus’ life is too often overlooked, as are the gospels about him that didn’t make it into the Bible.

Fundamentalists tend to claim that the gospels most of us are familiar with – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were eye-witness accounts of Jesus by men who knew him

personally; they were not. The earliest Gospel, Mark, wasn't written down until 60 CE; Matthew's and Luke's came at least a decade later; John's gospel was written between 90 and 100 CE.

These gospels draw material from outside sources and (in some cases) from each other; they also rely heavily on oral tradition. These very different authors were speaking to very different communities. Matthew's gospel, for example, was written after "Jerusalem had been destroyed... while putting down the Jewish rebellion.... The temple lay in ruins, and the chosen people seemed to have been chosen chiefly to suffer. All of which is to say that Matthew had a lot of explaining to do... He had to tell [the story of Jesus] to people who were frightened and tired of waiting."⁵

To accept any or all of the gospels as objective reporting would be folly.⁶ "Gospel," after all, means *good news*, not "infallible." None of the surviving accounts of Jesus is an historic accounting of his life. Their writers "had a lot of explaining to do," and they wanted to proclaim the hope that Jesus had embodied; to convince their respective communities that he was a leader worth following.



What do we *know* about Jesus, then? What have scholars concluded to be factually true, not just archaeological layers of religious embroidery?

- Jesus was a peasant who knew suffering and poverty, either first-hand or by observing his people. He understood the brutal effects of political oppression.
- By the time he was an adult, "something about Jesus – what he did, what he taught, who he was – drew people to him."⁷
- He was known as a healer by a society that considered the body and the spirit (*pneuma*) as one.
- Jesus turned away no one, accepting the sick, the poor, prostitutes. His inclusivity was so remarkable that it drew concern; Pharisees complained that he ate with tax collectors and "sinners."
- Those in power considered Jesus as a political threat, a "subversive"⁸ – not just because he embraced those at the bottom of the political pyramid. His frequent mention of "the kingdom of God" was, itself, rebellious. The Greek⁹ word for kingdom, *basileia*, is translated "in just about every other ancient text" as "empire." But "in Jesus' day there was only one empire – the empire of Rome. To speak of an empire of God was to guarantee comparison with the empire of Rome, a comparison that would not have been flattering to the Romans."¹⁰
- After his execution and death, the followers of Jesus had "experiences of Jesus as a

- living reality after his death... a presence within the life of the community.”¹¹
In the years following his death, “a dramatic transformation of [Yeshua] took place. His followers began to speak of Jesus as “Lord” and “Son of God,” religio-political terms usually reserved for the emperor of Rome.”¹² Bestowing this title on Jesus was a subtle expression of resistance against the power of the Roman empire, and a sign that Jesus’ message would live far beyond his own life.

Given all of those facts, it’s not hard to wonder how Jesus the man was elevated to divine status, and the founder of a religion with 2 billion followers alive today.

Back in seminary, one of my New Testament final exams began with this essay question: Who was the first Christian? My answer then, as now: Paul (...plus a long essay).

One of you, in fact, asked me recently: Why did early followers of Jesus accept Paul as an authority? For a man who didn’t even know Jesus, how did Paul manage to define the Christianity that emerged from a diverse set of followers? To refresh my understanding, I called my favorite New Testament scholar, whom I have on speed-dial: the *other* Reverend Hewitt, my dad.

Paul was the perfect spokesperson and salesperson for Jesus’ message. He was bicultural, with a foot in both the Hebrew and Roman worlds. He had the original insight that everyone, not just Jewish people, were equal and loved in the eyes of God (if you hear the stirrings of Universalism, you’re not imagining it).

Perhaps most importantly, Paul had enough charisma to convince the non-Jewish people of the Mediterranean that Jesus wasn’t just a “wandering Palestinian sage, entirely entrenched in Judaism,” but rather a leader who had renegotiated a new understanding of God’s covenant with the Jews to encompass *all* of humankind. There were no credible barriers between people any longer. In the days of violent empire, it was a radical and compelling message.

In many ways, Paul was the first community organizer. He went into houses where masters held slaves, called them together, and convinced them they were all equal in the eyes of God. Always on the move, Paul gathered people, he enfranchised them, and then he moved on to the next city while his new followers were asked to go out and enfranchise others.

Slowly, a new movement spread across the landscape. “They were now a people, a new community of faith, which had embarked together on a new way of life,” says Jim Wallis,¹³ “To follow Jesus meant to share Jesus’ life and to share it with others.” Early Christians called themselves People of the Way; many of them lived on the margins of society.¹⁴ Still, there wasn’t necessarily a single, shared understanding of who Jesus had been.

If Paul legitimized and organized Christianity, it was Constantine who took it from “a small group from the backwaters of the Roman Empire” to “the official religion;... the only tolerated religion, of the Roman Empire by the end of the 4th century.”¹⁵ It was a breathtaking reversal: Jesus had been “executed by the Romans as a public criminal, as a threat to the social order;” three centuries later, he was “hailed as a God, as part of the one, true God who is the God of the new Christian Roman Empire.”¹⁶

Emperors don’t like it when disputes between priests and bishops interrupt their empire-building. Constantine was annoyed to learn that some Church leaders were teaching both Universalist and Unitarian understandings of Jesus. One target of his annoyance was Arius, a priest in Alexandria who “rejected his bishop’s authority” by emphasizing the human nature of Jesus.¹⁷

Constantine’s addressed this theological sniping – called the Arian Controversy (... be sure to spell that carefully for your friends who don’t quite understand Unitarianism) – by calling all bishops to Nicaea, in modern-day Turkey. Arius traveled from his post in Egypt, along with around 300 bishops and around a thousand other priests (and you thought UU congregational meetings can be a drag?).

Arius came prepared to argue that Jesus was human, *not* of the same essence as God. He was, to put it mildly, disappointed. Arius and his handful of supporters were in the minority. Over the course of a month, the “orthodox bishops won approval of every one of their proposals,”¹⁸ and plank after plank of dogma was nailed into place. The Trinity – Jesus as son of God – became doctrine; the Bible was established as “the only approved scripture. All other ideas were then declared heretical. For offering a choice that Jesus was not the same as God, Arius and his followers were persecuted as *antitrinitarians*.”¹⁹

The Emperor wrote in a letter, “*Arius alone beguiled by the subtlety of the devil, was discovered to be the sole disseminator of this mischief...*”²⁰ as one of the Council members explained, “*it was unanimously decided that his impious opinion should be anathematized, with all the blasphemous expressions he has uttered.*”²¹ Arius was excommunicated, and exiled. Arian or Anti-Trinitarian beliefs didn’t disappear entirely... but it would be another twelve centuries before they would be loudly and proudly professed again.



What does this mean for us, today? What do we take from this small piece of our long history? It’s meaningful for me to remember these things:

❖ First, beneath the dogma and the centuries of projection, I discover that I love Jesus, for who he was and how we can still learn from his ministry.

❖ Second, “heretics” like Arian have been imprisoned and even killed for daring to voice their beliefs – reminding me to appreciate the freedom of this pulpit.

❖ Finally, no matter what your unique take on Jesus is, perhaps the real importance of Arius and early “anti-trinitarians” wasn’t the *what* of their beliefs, but their *how* of arriving there. As Chris Walton (editor of the *UUWorld*) points out, “they introduced and developed liberal forms of interpreting scripture and tradition.”

May we be newly grateful for the freedom, reason, and tolerance of our heritage; may we continue to celebrate our religious legacy of faith, hope, and love.

Endnotes

1. This is the name used by Erik Walker Wikstrom in his wonderful book, *Teacher, Guide Mystic: Rediscovering Jesus in a Secular World*.

2. BCE = Before the Common Era / CE = Common Era

3. See <http://www.jesuscentral.mobi/m/en/historical-jesus/jesus-before.php>

4. See for example Wikstrom, p. 15.

5. In “God’s Beloved Thief,” a sermon by Barbara Brown Taylor (*Home By Another Way*, p. 4).

6. As Biblical scholar Robert Funk explains, “We do not have original copies of any of the gospels.... The temporal gap that separates Jesus from the first surviving copies of the gospels – about one hundred and seventy-five years – corresponds to the lapse of in time from 1776 – the writing of the Declaration of Independence – to 1950. What if the oldest copies of the Declaration of Independence dated only from 1950?” (In *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say? The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, p. 6.)

7. Wikstrom, p. 39.

8. The fact that he was crucified – a punishment meted out only to the lower class – “tells us that Jesus was perceived, at least by his executioners, as a lower class subversive.” John Dominic Crossan, in Frontline’s “From Jesus to Christ” series. See <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/story/death.html>.

9. While Jesus spoke Aramaic, the early gospels were written in Koine Greek.

10. Wikstrom, pp. 17-18.

11. Marcus Borg. See <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week230/cover.html>.
12. From the Following Jesus website; see http://followingjesus.org/invitation/hide_and_seek.htm
13. In *The Call to Conversion*.
14. See http://followingjesus.org/invitation/hide_and_seek.htm. It should be stated, however, that the term “Christian” was used as early as 64 CE to describe them.
15. Shaye I.D. Cohen (Samuel Ungerleider Professor of Judaic Studies and Professor of Religious Studies, Brown University).
16. Ibid. See <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/why/legitimization.html>
17. In *The Early Church*, Hinson, pp. 230-1.
18. Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Council_of_Nicaea.
19. Rev. Jaco B. ten Hove (UU), in *Articulating Your UU Faith*, p. 38.
20. Letter 14; Book 1. See www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf202.ii.iv.ix.html
21. Chapter IX.—The Letter of the Synod, relative to its Decisions: and the Condemnation of Arius and those who agreed with him.