

“Who Was Jesus, Really?”  
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I think we can all agree that Jesus is pretty famous. But we don't really know all that much about him. The details are pretty sketchy. I would love to know more. Was he married? Who was that Mary Magdalene, anyway? Did he get along with his mother? What did he do on his days off? It seems to be human to wonder what a famous person is “really” like, or what stories are “really true” and which ones are just rumors. I can just see an ancient tabloid with the headlines, “Jesus Secretly Married!” “John the Baptist Claims, ‘I Taught Jesus Everything He Knows!’” or, “Exclusive Interview with Jesus’s Ex-Student: ‘The Walking on Water Miracle Was a Complete Hoax!’”

I don't care as much as some people do about the lives of the rich and famous. But I do find the tabloids helpful in one respect: if the tabloids say that something is true, I can be pretty certain that it's NOT.

I think we all know that not everything we read in the Bible is literally true. But is there anything in the Christian bible that tells us what kind of a person Jesus really was? What he really said and what he really did? And where would we even begin to try to separate out truth from fiction? It would be helpful to have some kind of litmus test, like the tabloids test.

Because there aren't corroborating documents, like letters, for example, that were written during Jesus's lifetime, there is no absolute proof of anything about Jesus's life. But there are tests of authenticity, and from those tests, we can conclude that something is more likely to be true.

One place to start is to look for inconsistency. Thomas Jefferson was one of the first people to systematically dissect the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. He did his best to try to separate out what probably reflected the authentic Jesus and what probably did not. He had found in his reading of the Gospels that Jesus seemed to have a split personality. In a letter to William Short (1820), he wrote:

Among the sayings and discourses imputed to [Jesus] by his biographers, I find many passages of...correct morality and of the most lovely benevolence; and others again of so much ignorance, so much absurdity, so much untruth, charlatanism, and imposture, as to pronounce it impossible that such contradictions should have proceeded from the same being.

The division between the authentic Jesus and the “embroidered” Jesus was so obvious to Jefferson that in a letter he had written to John Adams six years prior, he said, “In the New Testament there is internal evidence that parts of it have proceeded from an extraordinary

man; and that other parts are the fabric of very inferior minds. It is as easy to separate those parts, as to pick out diamonds from dunghills.”

Like Jefferson, any careful reader of the Gospels can't help but notice a dichotomy between the Jesus who teaches people not to judge and to keep one's hearts open to all people, and the so-called Jesus, who will return to the Earth on Judgment Day for humanity's final rewards and punishments. Between the Jesus who teaches the people to treat their enemies with love; and the so-called Jesus who calls his enemies “children of the devil.” Between the Jesus who teaches that God forgives unconditionally; and the so-called Jesus who says, “whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness but is guilty of eternal sin.”

It's like they had Jesus partially confused with someone else! Why the split personality? The early Christian church had an agenda, and so they added and changed the accounts of Jesus's life and ministry to fit that agenda. Part of it apparently was to scare people into following their new religion by promising them a way to escape God's condemnation.

There's a pattern in religion that I've noticed. An authentic spiritual leader appears, and teaches the same things that all true spiritual leaders teach: that compassion and being present in the moment, these two things lead to an experience of ultimate reality. That spiritual leader gains followers, and after the leader dies, the followers create rituals and explanations and structures, and before you know it, they've lost sight of the core truths of compassion and presence. It's no longer about compassion and presence, it's about all the other stuff.

It's ironic, I have to say, that this is exactly what happened with Jesus and the church that sprang up after him. Jesus was preaching “back to the basics,” to get rid of distractions, like wealth and possessions, and certain Jewish laws which led people away from the essential truths. Then the early church did exactly the same thing: they lost sight of those truths of compassion and presence –which were exactly what Jesus said that people needed to keep before them –and got caught up with rituals, power and control of the church.

Unitarian minister Ralph Waldo Emerson saw all too clearly what had happened. He asked, “Is it not time to present this matter of Christianity exactly as it is, to...not mistake the stream for the source?” The stream, of course, being Christianity, and the source being Jesus.

If we take away all the parts that reflect the early Christian agenda, what we are left with is what is probably closer to the real Jesus. That Jesus spoke to people about the Kingdom of God, which was his way of describing the place of pure love and attention to the present moment. He told them that it was “within you.” He said that it was “in your midst.” And he understood that people's attachment to things undermined their ability to be present to the ultimate. He said, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

Jesus was a mystic. I use this term for someone who experiences and understands that Love is the ultimate source of life. Someone who experiences, firsthand, being in the presence of the ultimate, which some would describe as divinity, or the universe, or God or Goddess or reaching enlightenment or nirvana. Someone who embodies love, and who radiates the joy of that presence with the ultimate.

Jesus understood the true nature of compassion: that compassion is unconditional. He taught that acting with compassion takes precedence over cultural norms and even laws. He taught that the compassionate person extends feelings of love toward even a person who does not reciprocate, toward even a person who hates us. He taught by example that it is compassion that compels us to challenge structures of cruelty and injustice. As Mark Belletini put it, Jesus invited his followers “to so transform society that the hardships of poverty, illness and cultural cruelty would no longer rule the roost and distort the powerful and central reality of love.”

It is a rare person who is able to live in the present moment in a spirit of compassion at all times. We are only human, after all. We worry, we get angry, we grieve our losses. After the death of their beloved teacher and friend, the followers of Jesus must have been devastated. But they must have recounted stories about the things that Jesus said and did. And, in the midst of their pain and grief, I think they also would have found themselves feeling inspired all over again by the example Jesus set, and the teachings he gave them. And maybe they began to feel that maybe all was not lost.

They realized that they had been “transformed by their experience, by the words of their teacher, by their own pain, and by their...path to awakening.” (from Mark Belletini, adapted) In this place, of grief mixed with hope, they experienced a renewal of their spirits. UU minister Katherine McTigue suggests that, maybe they start to notice that they are no longer the same people as they were before Jesus said, “Follow me!” The change in them “slowly ripens, slowly awakens and strengthens them, until they find themselves planting new seeds for change all around them.”

Just as nature continuously cycles through life and death and rebirth, so we, too, have times when we feel spiritually alive and vibrant, and other times when we feel spiritually dead and disconnected from all that is beautiful and joyful. Jesus taught that we have choices about how to live our lives. That our lives can shine again from our brokenness.

We don't need to believe in a supernatural resurrection of Jesus to recognize that he lives on. The real Jesus lives on through his legacy of transforming lives and spirits. The real Jesus lives on through his legacy of teaching of what radical compassion looks like, and how to access a relationship with the ultimate. The real Jesus lives on as an example of a truly extraordinary man and teacher who had the courage to do what was right, no matter what the cost.

If we listen closely for the real Jesus, we can find him. We can find him and we, too, can learn from what he taught 2000 years ago, because his message of love and presence stands outside the bounds of time.

In his poem, "Easter Exultet," James Broughton doesn't say, but I think he could have been paraphrasing Jesus:

Shake out your qualms.  
Shake up your dreams.  
Deepen your roots.  
Extend your branches.  
Trust deep water  
and head for the open,  
even if your vision  
shipwrecks you.  
Quit your addiction  
to sneer and complain.  
Open a lookout.  
Dance on a brink.  
Run with your wildfire.  
You are closer to glory  
leaping an abyss  
than upholstering a rut.  
Not dawdling.  
Not doubting.  
Intrepid all the way  
Walk toward clarity.  
At every crossroad  
Be prepared  
to bump into wonder.  
Only love prevails.  
En route to disaster  
insist on canticles.  
Lift your ineffable  
out of the mundane.  
Nothing perishes;  
nothing survives;  
everything transforms!  
Honeymoon with Big Joy!  
By James Broughton from "Little Sermons of the Big Joy"

May it be so!