

WHO ARE YOU MISTER, OR WILL THE REAL JESUS PLEASE STAND UP?

RESPONSE TO "CONSIDER JESUS" BY SUSAN SUCHOCKI
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There is no historical task which so reveals a man's true self as the writing of a Life of Jesus.....Jesus as a concrete historical personality remains a stranger to our time, but his spirit, which lies hidden in his words, is known in simplicity, and its influence is direct....He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, he came to those who knew him not. (Albert Schweitzer)

Almost all the people in our civilization pour their noblest ethical aspirations into a single figure and then identify this figure as Jesus....I find it exhilarating to believe that the perfection we have poured into the figure of Jesus has come from the human mind and imagination, and ethical aspiration....I'm for a better and better Jesus, born from the aspiring heart of humanity. (John MacKinnon)

One could certainly offer divergent interpretative conclusions about the reconstructable historical Jesus. But one cannot dismiss it or the search for the historical Jesus as mere reconstruction, as if reconstruction invalidated somehow the entire project. Because there is only reconstruction. (John Dominic Crossan)

The variety of interpretations of the historical Jesus that the current quest has proposed is bewildering....Political, social, and environmental problems of our age will not be cured through the ever renewed search for Jesus the exemplary personality and his wisdom, in order to legitimize the individual's search for perfection and success. A new paradigm, one that is not exploitative, and that also includes the voices of people outside the Western world, may eventually liberate us from the quest for the historical Jesus. (Helmut Koester)

Susan, thank you for a fine paper. You put a lot of thought and work into it, did an inordinate amount of reading, even listened to talking books on the Gospels, drawing upon and pulling together many diverse sources, so much so that it literally haunted your night dreams. I salute your courage in sharing those nightmares with this august body. I assure you, as one who believes in the importance of dreams and the symbolism they contain, that they speak to more than your state of mind at the time. They were revelatory not only of your understandable anxiety about writing your paper on Jesus, but also of the bewildering mass of materials and viewpoints about

the historical Jesus, who he was, what he taught, and how to unravel the myth from the history. It's enough to put anyone's mind into a tizzy.

Your first dream's reference to the pages turning faster and faster as you try to cut and insert pages that were out of order reminded me of the verse at the end of the Gospel of John: "There are also many other things which Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the

books that would be written." Old John had no idea how many books were yet to be written about his favorite theological hero. The writer of Ecclesiastes said long ago, "Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh."(Eccl. 12:12) How much more so is that the case when it comes to writing and studying books about Jesus. Albert Schweitzer, at the turn of the century, made a valiant attempt to review and assess the efforts of 19th Century historians and Biblical scholars to write a Life of Jesus and concluded that they told us far more about the people who wrote them than they did about Jesus of Nazareth. The liberal Catholic theologian, George Tyrell complained that what they offered was "only the reflection of a Liberal Protestant face at the bottom of a deep well."

Remember the old game show "To Tell The Truth"? A panel of judges would try to decide which of three contestants was the person they said they were. All used the same name, but two of them were imposters. The panelists would ask them all kinds of questions trying to figure out which of them was the genuine article. Near the end of the show the announcer would finally say, "Will the real Jesus please stand up?" Of course we all know that the real Jesus cannot stand up because all we have in the pages of the New Testament, as Tillich once said, are various pictures of Jesus as the Christ. Jesus does not stand up on his own, but only in terms of someone's image or picture of him as the Christ of faith.

I wrote my B.D. thesis at Andover Newton on "The Problem of the Essence of Christianity" and waded through Schleimacher, Hegel, Feuerbach, Harnack, Kierkegaard, Schweitzer and others in an effort to find some historical basis to the Christian faith in the life and teachings of Jesus and in contemporary religious experience. A hundred plus pages later I concluded that Jesus had sought to point his contemporaries towards a first-hand experience of the divine and the ethic that derived from that experience, but that succeeding generations were more interested in the Christological image of the man who did the pointing than in the experience and ethic he tried to evoke. I later found Emerson's complaint about historical Christianity's dwelling "with noxious exaggeration about the person of Jesus", very compelling, realizing that too often it was a person who had no historical existence apart from the imagination of the theologian or preacher. Don Robinson, our late former colleague in Hingham, wrote that "with relatively few exceptions, Christians have been too enchanted by the figure of Jesus to hear what he taught. Surely he himself would have preferred it the other way around." I'm no longer sure it's that simple, but the point is well made. The question is what did he teach and how do you know he taught it? That too is as much a historical question as to who he was and what did he believe about himself? Which is what we are trying to come to terms with in our chosen topic.

I liked your reference, Susan, to Jesus as a liminal figure who lived on the edge of his time and history and initiated shifts in religious and cultural norms. It

reminded me of Tillich's autobiographical reflection about living "on the boundary." Jesus certainly did become a transformative agent for social and cultural change, but it is clear that most of what he effected happened after he died and not necessarily in ways he may have envisioned. Yes, he was a prophet in the tradition of Isaiah whose passage he is said to have quoted in Luke 4 and applied to his own ministry. He makes a nice impression on the home town crowd and then manages to insult them sufficiently to get himself thrown out, barely escaping in one piece. Not a very good beginning for a new prophetic ministry.

You state your opinion that the Isaiah passage, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...",etc. was Jesus' first prophetic utterance and yet you agree with Crossan that the event described in Luke did not actually happen. I beg to differ with both you

and Crossan. I would argue that something very much like that event (or a series thereof) must have happened, that it was a source of embarrassment that Jesus was not accepted in his own village, Mark says he could perform no mighty works there, and that it was necessary to rewrite the story in such a way as to make Jesus look good. And that's what Luke did. I think that your's and Crossan's view that Jesus' acts and intentions to break open the restrictive community of Pharisaic, Sadducean, and Essenic Judaism, reaching out to the sick, the lame, to social outcasts, and to those outside the community of Israel, had a lot to do with his poor reception in Nazareth. But he acted and preached the same Gospel elsewhere and was apparently better received. Something else happened in Nazareth that we're not hearing about from the written record.

Was Jesus a Capital "P" Prophet? Yes and No. Presumably the age of Prophecy was dead. Along come John the Baptist and Jesus to break the mold and reinitiate the prophetic spirit. Each seemed to speak with direct authority from God, their discourses coming out of periods of fasting and visionary encounters with the divine. Prophetic judgments are uttered and there are attempts to interpret the signs of the times. This much they shared with the major prophets of old. But not all of the prophets were healers and magicians as Jesus clearly was. Certainly Amos, Isaiah and Jeremiah were not. It is clear that healing and casting out of demons were central to Jesus' ministry. Not all prophets are healers and not all healers are prophets, though one could be both as Jesus clearly was. In terms of our own world view I think we could say that Jesus had a way with schizophrenics and hysterics and was able to effect healing transformations in his subjects. Crossan makes an interesting distinction between healing illness and curing diseases, saying that Jesus often did the former, but not the latter. I'm not sure that's altogether true.

Susan, you state that "at some point Jesus shifted from an exegetical, oral prophet to an eschatological figure." (P.11) I would ask, did he really shift or was he always both? You ask, "Was Jesus an eschatological megalomaniac?" As opposed to an apocalyptic psychotic? Schweitzer, I think, answered these questions in his little study, *A PSYCHIATRIC STUDY OF JESUS*, in which he concluded that Jesus was not insane

according to the socially accepted beliefs and behavioral standards of his own time and epoch. He may have had an exaggerated impression of his own importance and capacity to bring about historical change through divine action, but he was not insane, nor was he a megalomaniac. He remains, as Schweitzer said, "a stranger to our times." Though he may have been caught up to a greater or lesser extent in the apocalyptic world-view of his time his mystical vision of a radically inclusive kingdom of "commonsensality" (as Crossan put it) is still relevant and one towards which the world has yet to embrace in its fullness.

I think it is fairly clear that Jesus was originally a disciple of John the Baptist and then later broke away and developed his own following, no doubt after John's beheading. Crossan says that Jesus was baptised by John and for a time accepted John's apocalyptic program, believing that human history would soon come to an end through divine intervention. But after John's death Jesus abandoned apocalyptic thought for a kind of realized eschatology with a program of radical social realignment. Crossan says that Schweitzer collapsed eschatology into apocalyptic. I don't think it was that simple. Jesus may have revised his views after breaking with John, but he did not totally abandon apocalyptic thought, anymore than Jung abandoned the idea of the unconscious when he broke with Freud. It is a fine line indeed between eschatological and apocalyptic thinking. Both are dealing with final resolutions and end time programs, one still within history, the other from beyond it.

I have the feeling that Crossan, (and maybe you Susan), is trying to have a Jesus who is more appealing to both contemporary psychology and egalitarian socialist thought. I think that Jesus mixed with lepers and social outcasts, ate with tax collectors and prostitutes, and believed that the world as he knew it would soon come to an end, and looked for signs of the divine inbreaking into history in his own healing ministry. I think it is fair to say that Jesus softened his apocalyptic program, but that he still believed he was living in the end times. In fact he may have tried to provoke divine intervention by bringing about his own demise in the role of Son of Man/Suffering Servant/Messiah who would return on the clouds of heaven after his death. That's the old "Passover Plot" theory once promoted by Hugh Schonfield and others. Nothing that I've read in the recent Jesus literature convinces me that it might still not be the best explanation for what happened.

Which brings us to the question of Jesus as Messianic figure and the rout in the temple. The tradition of the Messianic Secret in Mark is indicative of the fact that he probably did not openly proclaim the mantle of messiah except perhaps among some of his most intimate disciples and then towards the end of his ministry if at all. I'm not convinced one way or the other. I do believe with you that his action in the temple was a powerful eschatological act. If it actually happened, and I think it did, it was certainly enough to provoke action by the Roman and Jewish authorities. I do not agree with Crossan that the Passion story portrayed in the Gospels is pure theological fiction. They no doubt had a theological axe to grind in their varying narrative constructions, but that there was some reasonable facsimile to actual historical events behind them I have no doubt.

I enjoyed your selection of the passage from the Gospel of Thomas. I like the way Salome puts the question to Jesus: "Who are you, mister? You have climbed onto my couch and eaten from my table as if you are from someone." This could imply that Jesus may have been sexually intimate with Salome or other women. But that may be reading too much into an obscure Gnostic passage. This is clearly Jesus the mystic talking when he says, "I am the one who comes from what is whole..I am all. From me all has come forth, and to me all has reached." In the Gospel of John he says, "I and the Father are one", a mystical statement if there ever was one.

I don't think there is any question but that Jesus had a mystical experience of "cosmic consciousness of unity with God" that he interpreted in terms of his radical view of the Kingdom of God being at hand. His religious experience became foundational to the experience of his closest disciples and followers and in turn opened up the possibility of a personal relationship to the divine unmediated by priesthood, temple and Torah. It was indeed radical in its implications. I agree with you that "the teaching from Jesus about the possibility of an intimate relationship with God, got lost, and Christians put Jesus in as the mediator", and thus failed to see what the teacher was pointing at. The Gnostic heresy tried to

preserve some of this, but it too became a club for the spiritual elite (those "in the know") and forgot to include the social nobodies whom Jesus embraced in his ministry to the poor and the sick.

It's interesting that you did not attempt to come to terms with the resurrection experience of the early church. Don Robinson based his study of JESUS SON OF JOSEPH on the view that the resurrection experience was key to understanding the rest of the Gospels. He took the position that the resurrection experience was a variation on the universal mystical experience found in all times and places, but interpreted in terms of the particular cultural and religious categories of thought and tradition then current. The resurrection experience goes back to Jesus' own break through mystical experience of his oneness with God and is carried forward by Paul and the Gospel writers in mythic garb and story, but behind the myth is the primal mystical experience now given institutional form. The mystic Jesus still lives.

I must admit that I was a bit taken back by your confession of amazement "that any one can study the historical Jesus and remain Christian." I would simply ask you, "Why?" I found myself liking Jesus even more at the end of our reading and study than I did before I began. Though you don't consider yourself a Christian, what do you think of Jesus? Do you like him or do you still find him to be a strange and enigmatic figure? Or both? I can imagine that some would feel more secure in their Christian commitment to the person and teachings of Jesus than they would had they not engaged upon such a study. For those who want a more human Jesus and a radically inclusive ethic than this is the path to take. For those who want supernatural confirmation of the Jesus of Dogma than they had better stay clear of the historical study of Jesus.

Your second dream was even more intriguing than your first. You were the one who ran away naked and left Jesus alone in the Garden of Gethsemene. Your unconscious was telling you not only about your feeling of vulnerability in the writing of your paper, but also pointing you to review the latest thinking about who that figure was in the Garden with Jesus and what he was doing there. Morton Smith's book, *THE SECRET GOSPEL OF MARK*, which I read a number of years ago, (reviewed by Crossan on pages 328-332), cites a letter from Clement of Alexandria, discovered at the Greek Orthodox monastery of Mar Saba between Bethlehem and the Dead Sea, and photographed by Smith. In the letter Clement cites a passage that was once considered to be part of the Gospel of Mark. It is a story of a young man who was raised from the dead in a tomb, like Lazarus, who came forth, looked upon Jesus and loved him and asked to be his follower. After six days with Jesus he is told to come back the next evening wearing only a linen cloth over his naked body. He remains with Jesus that night and is taught "the mystery of the kingdom of God."

Crossan and other scholars believe that "canonical Mark is a censored version of Secret Mark", and that it was used as part of an esoteric rite of baptismal initiation into the secrets of the kingdom of God among certain levels of believers, a practice that in fact began with Jesus among his most intimate disciples. Theologically, it was a death/rebirth ritual in the waters of creation, a restoration of the lost innocence of the Garden of Eden. The story and the practice were too easily interpreted and distorted for erotic purposes (which the 2nd Century Carpocratians did with glee) and so the passage and the practice was soon deleted from later versions of Mark's Gospel. But they left a tracer behind--the naked young man who ran off and left his loin cloth behind when Jesus was apprehended in the Garden. What was he doing there? Probably receiving baptismal initiation into the secrets of the kingdom of God in the small river that ran through the Garden. That's what your dream was all about, Sue, and I always say we should pay attention to our dreams. I think we sometimes wonder whether we would have passed muster in the Garden of Gethsemene or ran away to save our skin. Some of us are still running away

from Jesus even though we've spent hours trying to find him in the spinning pages of history. Are you running with me Jesus? I'm trying to get away. I just hope you can keep up.

A number of years ago I had a dream in which I was stepping onto a down escalator. As I did so the steps folded in flat and I found myself falling endlessly down into feathers of blackness--nothing to do but to let it happen. The falling goes on and on and never seems to end. Finally I reach bottom. I am enveloped in darkness. Something tells me this is a falling into Christ, to let go and let God. I feel myself being carried along by a moving current. It takes me where it wants to go. Since I can't fight it I just go with the flow. Eventually the movement stops and I sense I have arrived somewhere. I open my eyes and see the upper portion of the large oval windows inside the First Parish of Norwell.

Is the Unitarian Universalist Church only a featherbed for falling Christians, or is it also a place where we encounter the composite Christ of our human experience of the divine? The historical Jesus is gone, but the risen Christ or the divine current continues to meet us in all that we do and are in our professional role as ministers--from our call to ministry to our continuing personal and professional obligations, from pastoral healer to prophetic social critic, from itinerate preacher (and we're all itinerates even in our home pulpits after 25 years) to our institutional forms and worship practices--it all goes back to the Jesus experience in one way or another, maybe even our problems with sexual abuse in the ministry go back to Jesus. I think it is important that Unitarian Universalist ministers, even those of us who do not consider ourselves to be Christians, have a continuing encounter with the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith knowing that the one will always be entangled with the other.

Thanks again, Susan, for helping us to consider Jesus, who he was and what he taught, and for giving me the opportunity to respond. I enjoyed the trip and the pleasure of being carried along by the current. The next time I fall on a featherbed I'll think of Jesus and remember your dreams.

I think it is fair to say that Jesus now comes to us maybe a little better known than Schweitzer said he was, but he still remains a stranger to our times, and perhaps to all times, and therein lies his continuing usefulness to us. The challenge is, can we welcome the stranger, not only in Jesus, but in ourselves, and in all those whom the world would deny a place at the messianic banquet?