

A MAN FROM LEBANON

He wasn't born in Bethlehem, his name wasn't Jesus, and it is possible that he wasn't his parent's eldest child. Almost everything we know about him was written by promoters with an agenda. If we remove the theological framework of the Christian scripture and look at the documents in terms of textual anthropology, a different picture of the man emerges. He was a radical, courageous and rebellious man. He championed the poor, women and social justice. He criticised his religious leaders, the rich and fundamental literalism. And he lived what he believed.

There are several ways to look for what scholars call *the historical Jesus*. Anthropologists and historians start by distinguishing between *the past* and *history*. The past has something to do with time and space. It is what really happened. The past is over and gone. We cannot recreate it and we have no idea what really happened in it. We may have artefacts from the past. We may have accounts of events that happened in the past. These accounts, texts or documents, are not the past but are contextual, cultural and subject narratives concerning the past. When artefacts, texts and documents are compiled and interpreted that interpretation is called history. History is alive and changing. For example, Louis Riel used to be a traitor and a villain; now he is a hero. Louis Riel's past hasn't changed, but his history has. Now the history of Jesus is changing. The past is the same, the texts are the same, but the research, contextual knowledge and interpretation are different.

Although the past hasn't altered, a radical new history is emerging of a man that I think that Unitarians can be proud to have as one of the sources of our faith.

His parents, Yoses and Myriam lived in the disrespected and working class town of Nazareth, in what is today known as Lebanon. They were not Israelites. Nazareth was in the north, far from any upscale metropolitan centre. A comparable town in Ontario today might be Sudbury. Although the Roman Empire had conquered the entire world as they know it Yoses and Myriam probably had little contact with it. They still spoke Aramaic. They were still Jewish. Their local tax collector for the Roman Empire was probably lived in Nazareth. Carpenters were generally poor, but Yoses and Myriam had at least seven children live to adulthood so they must have had decent food and shelter. Yoses and Myriam were the kind of parents who gave all their boys names that sounded alike. There's Myriam now, in a woollen robe (no linen or leather for a poor family), baking flat bread on a heated rock in the street in front of her mud brick house. She is cooking a stew of mutton and dates over an open fire. She is very young. Her daughters are helping her cook while her boys play in the dusty street. Myriam calls them to dinner: "Yoses, Yeashua, Yudas, Yames! You want dinner should get cold?"

Yeashua: His mother called him Yeashua. Although he was taught to be a carpenter Yeashua must have shown either an interest in or an aptitude for religion or studying early on. He wouldn't have gone to school; he didn't learn to read or write. It is unlikely that he spoke either Hebrew or Greek. His entire religious education would have been taught in Aramaic by his parents, extended family and by local and itinerant Rabbis. He seems, however, to have been very familiar with Jewish scripture, traditions, ritual and practice. There was a lot about Judaism that he didn't like. He didn't like the way that priests mediated his people's relationship with God. He didn't like the way the Temple made money, especially from the poor. He

didn't like the way his church treated women. He didn't like that some of the clergy positions were inherited. He didn't like the fact that his religious leaders were collaborating with the Roman Empire. He really didn't like the nit-picky interpretation and practice of rules and laws that prevented people from enjoying the life God gave them. He wanted people to live in the present, to focus on *this* day. His way of rebelling was to become a Rabbi.

Rabbis were well respected teachers of the laws and the prophets. The laws are the first five books of the scriptures, or the Torah: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy and Numbers. The prophets are books like Isaiah, Daniel, Micah and Jeremiah. He must have had a good working knowledge of these texts. He spent many years as an itinerant Rabbi, moving from town to town, teaching at different synagogues. He would have stayed at the home of a local family and eaten his meals there. He would not have been part of any formal church hierarchy. All the towns that he went to were predominantly Aramaic speaking. Greek was the universal language at the time. The Roman Empire had conquered Europe, the Middle East and parts of Africa and the language of commerce was a gutter Greek called 'coine' or common. The New Testament is written in this rough slang (some of it very poorly written) for it would reach the greatest number of people in Greek. But Yeashua wasn't speaking to the Roman Empire; he was speaking to Jews about Judaism. There is no evidence that he spoke Greek or Hebrew and there are puns in Christian documents that only work in Aramaic.

He was almost certainly baptized by John the Baptist. Many people thought that John the Baptist was the Messiah and he had many disciples. The image of a humble, penitent Yeashua being baptized by John seems to have been spread about by John's disciples to prove that John, not Yeashua, was the messiah. None of the Gospel's deny that John Baptised Yeashua. It was just too well known a story. Jewish baptism was an act of ritual purification and transformation. Yeashua participated in this tradition Jewish ritual.

As Yeashua travelled as a Rabbi, or teacher, he gathered Disciples, or students. One of the most unusual things about him was that he had woman among his close followers. He taught specifically to women, telling parables about women, teaching in women's homes, healing women and raising women from the dead. Yeashua has women ministers, or deacons, among his followers. The coine Greek word, diakonos, is applied to both men and women throughout the gospels and the letters of Paul. The original Aramaic word probably meant *servant*. The Greek word means *waits at the table*. When it is translated into English the men become ministers in the Church and the women serve Jesus at the table. To an Aramic or Greek speaker it would have been clear that both the men and women became servants or ministers in Yeashsua's religious activities. No English translation reflects this.

Perhaps the most astounding story of Yeashua's support of women, and one most likely to reflect the past, is one where Yeashua heals a woman who has been having her period for twelve years. She touches him, and he talks to her about her suffering and her faith. Yeashua continues with his ministry immediately. At the time a woman having her period could not go into a synagogue or the Temple. If a Priest touched such an 'unclean' women he couldn't go into the Temple for six weeks and had to undergo ritual acts of purity, cleansing and sacrifice before carrying out his duties. Yeashua put a menstruating woman ahead of the Temple, its rituals and traditions. When he said that the last will be first and the first will be last he really meant it. He really had the courage of his conviction.

One story concerns his absolute ban on divorce. No man may put away his wife. No woman may put away her husband. What God has joined together let no one tear apart. At the time a man could divorce his wife very easily. A wife could not divorce her husband at all. Yeashua probably really said something like this because every subsequent document tries to modify it in some way. It is also probably attributable to Yeashua because of its uniqueness.

A woman putting away her husband? What? The very idea of equity in divorce was unimaginable. Any kind of equity for women was unimaginable. This was a completely new idea. It would have made a lot of men very uncomfortable to think that their wives might leave them. And it might make a lot of wives feel a lot more comfortable to consider the possibility sending men packing. A new way of thinking was born. Every market place would have been buzzing with women talking about the power

Yeashua was bringing to women. He may have thought that divorce was a really bad thing, especially since many men left their wives destitute, but he also turned first century thinking on its head.

He tells a rich man who does everything right according to Temple law that he is not doing enough to get to the Kingdom of God. The rich man must sell everything he owns and give it to the poor. The man can't do it. Yeashua says that it is harder for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God than it is for a camel/rope to pass through the eye of a needle. This is almost certainly an original saying. Camel and rope are the same word in Aramaic. A rope going through the eye of a needle is a good analogy. A rope is a lot like a thread. A thread can go through the eye of a needle but a rope definitely cannot. A rich man, therefore, cannot enter the Kingdom of God any more than a rope can go through the eye of a needle. But the "eye of the needle" was also the name of a low narrow stone pass, or gate on a popular trade route. It was hard but not impossible for a camel to get through the pass. The camel had to first take off all its packs of treasure and leave them behind. Then the camel had to crawl through the pass on its knees. This interpretation implies that the rich can enter the kingdom of God if he gives up his riches and repents. The dual meaning of the word camel and rope could only have been said in Aramaic so it must have been said by an Aramaic speaker. This double meaning would have been understood by Aramaic speakers at the time but has been lost in Greek and without local context.

His belief that the rich wouldn't find the Kingdom of God unless they give away their treasure went hand in hand with his belief that the first two commandments were the ones that really mattered. And he phrased them very differently than Moses did. He replaced THOU SHALL HAVE NO OTHER GOD'S BEFORE ME with *love the lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind*. And to the second commandment, *Love your neighbour*, he added *as you love yourself*. They hardly even sound like commandments anymore. These were enormous changes not just to the way religion was practised but to the way God was perceived.

He said that God was the God of the living, not the God of the dead. As a result he re-interpreted a lot of the rules, particularly rules that caused unnecessary suffering. He healed the sick on the Sabbath, arguing that compassion takes precedent over the rule against working. He makes the clever statement that Sabbath was made for man not man for the Sabbath. He ignored rules about ritual washing. In a desert land these rules were particularly difficult for the poor to comply with. He makes the clever comment that it is not what goes into a man that defiles him but what comes out of him. He teaches to tax collectors, sex trade workers, alcoholics and other outcasts and says it is not the healthy who need doctors but the sick. These actions and sayings are all contrary to Jewish and Temple law. He tries to liberate people from human constructed traditions that limit their joy.

When his mother and brothers hear about this they come to get him. They want to take charge of him because they think that he is “out of his mind.” More than anything I think this shows that he comes from a pretty normal family, the kind any bright idealist young man would want to get away from. He is certainly on dangerous ground, theologically, politically and familially.

When someone asks him how to pray Yeashua says something like: *Don't go into the Temple, or the synagogue. Don't go into the public square. Find a quiet spot, like your room, or even your closet. Don't use some ritual formula that you've been taught by priests, just pray simply from the heart. Say something like this: Daddy, your name is sacred to me. May the kingdom of heaven be here on Earth. Give me today my daily bread. Forgive me for my mistakes, and forgive those who have hurt me. Amen.* This simple prayer is an extreme insult to the religious authorities and the Temple. The only proper prayers are ritual prayers, they can only be said in the Temple or synagogue and they must be mediated by religious professionals.

Translation? They cost money. Only temple money may be used in the temple and the only place to exchange civic money into temple money is at the temple. The exchange rates are extremely high. Pre-purified, sacrificial animals must be purchased at the temple at inflated prices. Sacrificial rituals have to be paid for in Temple money. Naming's, circumcisions, marriages, funerals, purity rituals: all required by religious law and all are expensive. Yeashua accuses the temple priests of devouring the houses of widows.

Some point to the Beatitudes, or the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew as an example of how Yeashua's ideas encouraged the underclasses to stay meek and subservient:

Blessed are the poor in spirit

For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn

For they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek

For they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness

For they will be filled

Blessed are the merciful

For they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the peacemakers

For they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake

For theirs IS the kingdom of heaven.

Yeashua describes the depressed, the bereaved, the meek, the merciful, those who seek justice, those who work for peace, and those who are persecuted for their values: these are seven different types of people with different types of needs and values. It doesn't describe one subservient underclass. Where we do get Yeashua giving advise on how the subservient underclass should behave we get something like non-violent civil disobedience. It's taken two thousand years to rediscover its meaning but in the first century everyone would have known exactly what it meant.

Yeashua said something like this:

Some say an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth but I say do not resist an evil person if someone strikes you on the right cheek turn to him the other as well...if someone forces you to go one mile go with him two miles.

This was almost certainly said in the context of whether or not people should rise up violently against Rome. First Yeashua acknowledges that people want to rise up and fight (an eye for an eye). Jewish people were looking for the Messiah who would free them from Roman bondage. Zealots were carrying swords and looking for the opportunity to overthrow the Empire. But instead Yeshua offers a fascinating option. First, there was a very rigid custom surrounding slapping someone. Equals slap one another on the left cheek. A master slaps a servant on the right cheek. A Roman always slaps a Jew on the right cheek. Yeashua is effectively saying that if a Roman slaps you on the right cheek, defining you as a lesser person, turn your left cheek to him, to let him know that you believe that you are his equal. This is a really extreme idea. Next, Roman soldiers carried enormously heavy packs and were allowed to conscript any passing man to carry his load for him. Roman law, however, put a firm limit on the distance that one man could be

compelled to carry a pack: one mile. Any Roman soldier caught compelling a man to carry his pack for more than a mile would be shamed and humiliated. By suggesting that someone 'walk the extra mile' Yeashua is recommending defying Roman custom in a dangerous way. This is not encouraging the underclasses to remain meek and subservient. These are perfect examples of non-violent civil disobedience.

He was asked whether or not Jews should have to pay taxes to Rome. He pointed out that Cesar's picture was on the money. He said "give to Cesar what is Cesar's, and give to God what is God's." Any Jewish person at the time would know that that meant "don't pay your taxes." From the perspective of Jewish theology everything belongs to God. Everything: including Cesar's money. In this sense he really was fostering sedition, though of a non-violent sort.

Yeashua encouraged people to live in the now and to rely on God and on one another. He and his students carried nothing with them: not even bread for their journey. They ate what others shared with them. They stayed at the homes of strangers or slept in dumps. They collected donations but they gave all the money that they collected to the poor. He asked his disciples to love without expectation and to give to anyone who asked. Yeashua said something like *look at the lilies of the field, they toil not, neither do they spin, but Solomon in all his splendour was never dressed like one of these. Won't God, who loves you, look after you even better?* It was something he lived by, not just something he said.

He encouraged people to support one another. The miracle of the loaves and fishes becomes even more amazing when we put it into the context of Yeashua and his message. Yeashua teaches to a huge crowd of people all day long until it becomes dark. His disciples want to send the crowds away to surrounding villages to get food. Yeashua believes that there is enough food to feed them all. He sends the disciples out to the crowd to gather up what people are willing to share. Only a few loaves of bread and a few small fish are donated. Yeashua blesses the pathetic offering and insists that it will be enough. He sends the food out to groups of people, whom he has sit together in large circles on the grass. Perhaps there are a few crumbs for each group. Everyone eats until they have had enough. In the end the disciples gather up twelve baskets of left overs. The most simple explanation for this event is perhaps the most remarkable. Someone in that group of hungry people, looking at those few crumbs in the middle of the circle got up and added whatever food he or she had to those few crumbs. Maybe it was a piece of flat bread, maybe it was an artichoke. Then someone else got up and added, perhaps, a few olives, and another person some goat cheese. Then suddenly everyone was on their feet: adding dates, figs, dried fish and smoked lamb, flat bread and spiced chicken salted nuts and seeds and dried fruit. Rich food and poor food, rich people and poor people: sharing what they had with one another. Yeashua demonstrated his belief that by loving one another we find the kingdom of heaven on earth. Viewed this way the loaves and fishes is a timeless, living, social miracle, and not just some event that happened in the past.

Did he predict his death? Of course he did. All of his disciples and followers expected him to go to Jerusalem, the heart of Judaism, the location of the Temple. He couldn't avoid it. The way he criticized the Temple, its laws, its

practises, and its priests he was not going to be ignored. The way he encouraged Jews to stand up for themselves and stand up to Rome was enough to get him executed. He knew that he was going to Jerusalem to die and he went willingly.

Yeashua was so radical that the surprise isn't that he was executed but that he lived long enough to have a three year long ministry. His support of women in both society and in religious leadership was so novel and so culturally inconceivable that the world didn't see anything like it for again for nineteen hundred years. He wanted to reform Judaism into a religion that put people ahead of the rules, the poor ahead of the rich, and joy ahead of ritual. Judaism did not see this kind of reform again until the 20th century.

He wanted his people to stand up to Rome non-violently, in a way that reflected their personhood, equality and dignity without meekness or subservience. No one tried this approach with a powerful occupying force again until Ghandi. Yeashua was two thousand years ahead of his time. He was a true revolutionary. In fact his ideas were so radical that they are still revolutionary today.

Yeashua was a heretic. He lived by deeds not creeds. And he promoted the worth and dignity of the lowest people in his society. As a Unitarian I am proud that Yeashua is one of the sources of our faith.