

Jesus Then and Now: A Unitarian Universalist Perspective

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That song we just heard, “The Birthday Party,” is pretty wonderful, isn’t it? It’s whimsical, and it sets Jesus right where he should be – a prophet and teacher along with the world’s other great prophets and teachers. They’re all basically equivalent, if different in their specifics. Now, I think it’s a safe bet that Mohammed would probably *not* say, “Hey Buddha, it’s great to see ya” if they met on a train to Jerusalem, but those are just details, right? As Unitarian Universalists, we can feel pretty comfortable with this song. It probably suits the way many of us think about Jesus.

Today, I’d like us to think about Jesus, or Yeshua ben Miriam as he really should be called, in a very different way – not as the prophet of love but as someone who challenged the conventional wisdom of his day in ways, and for reasons, that are still worth reflecting on. More specifically, I want to consider what Jesus taught, what he did, why he taught what he taught and did what he did, and what it has to do with those of us in this room today. Jesus’s work had nothing to do with “becoming a Christian” or believing in any creeds. We don’t need scriptural inerrancy, the virgin birth, the nativity narratives, supernatural miracles, Judas, the trial and crucifixion narrative, blood atonement, bodily resurrections, the second coming, or any other church doctrines to find something of value in this man’s life. Which is good, because I don’t personally believe in any of those things and I’m guessing few of you do either.

Because virtually everything challenging about Yeshua ben Miriam has been tamed to death if not actually reversed in much of Christianity today, we need to start by understanding what he was doing in light of his own social context. Sound biblical scholarship can help us with that. I take Marcus Borg’s work and that of the Jesus Seminar as reasonable, and from this work I conclude that there really was a person who later became known as Jesus, and that much of what this person actually said and did posed a direct challenge to the conventional wisdom of his day. It’s true that we know only a limited amount about this person. But there are some words and actions that the Jesus Seminar thinks are likely to originate with Jesus, and it is those words and actions that I want to consider today.

We need to begin by thinking about conventional wisdom. Every society has some form of conventional wisdom, those central values and truths about how things are that everyone knows and that are generally taken for granted. There are a few sociological aspects of conventional wisdom, as true in first-century Roman-occupied Judea as in 21st-century America. First, conventional wisdom tends to focus on rewards and punishments, and most forms of conventional wisdom say that you deserve what you get. If good things happen to you, you must have behaved well and followed the rules. If bad things happen to you, you must have messed up somehow. Second, the conventional wisdom most commonly found during periods of social insecurity claims to offer security to those who follow the conventional wisdom. Third, conventional wisdom virtually always defines and maintains boundaries and hierarchies between groups of people. And finally, conventional wisdom always, without exception, serves those individuals and groups who have the most power in a society.

Conventional wisdom for Jews under Roman occupation focused on the idea of purity, keeping razor-sharp boundaries between various groups of people so that the Jews would remain separate from anyone that might defile the holiness demanded of them by God. The Jewish attempt to remain holy in this context was both a religious and a strategic move. Having already had their temple destroyed by the Babylonians a few centuries earlier, Jews did not want to do anything to anger God, who could easily marshal the Romans to destroy the second temple on God's behalf. And in a context of occupation where assimilation into Roman paganism was available and might have tempted some Jews, focusing on holiness and purity was a way to maintain group boundaries and a Jewish identity.

This focus on holiness resulted in a large number of distinctions between more and less pure people, in a society that was already divided hierarchically by gender, generation, religion, and socioeconomic status. The righteous followed the purity system scrupulously; everyone else either couldn't or didn't, and in the time of Yeshua ben Miriam, "everyone else" was probably almost everyone, period. The impure, unclean, defiled, profane, dirty, wicked sinners included Gentiles, the physically maimed, the chronically ill, the abjectly poor, sometimes the merely poor but not destitute, and of course women more often than men because the society was profoundly patriarchal. If this list suggests to you that those without social power were more likely to be unclean than those with social power, I've made my point; the only real socially powerful group that was automatically defined as unclean was the Gentiles.

Beyond supporting simple purity distinctions, conventional wisdom held up several social institutions as core to providing identity and offering security: the family, honor, religiosity, and wealth. These institutions are held up by conventional wisdom in many times and places, not least our own, but it is necessary to realize just how important identity and security was to a group of people who could be sure of neither. If you've seen the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*, you may recall Judas singing, "We are occupied. Have you forgotten how put down we are?" When you're occupied, you have no real security, and your identity can easily become tenuous. By lifting up standard social institutions as the key to identity and security, Jewish conventional wisdom of Jesus' day was doing something that made a lot of sense.

In contrast, Yeshua ben Miriam came along and said and did things that made no sense, at least not in light of conventional wisdom. He told followers that anyone who came to him and who did not hate his or her own family members could not be his disciple. When someone asked for permission to bury his father before taking up with Jesus, he was told to leave the dead to bury their own dead. So much for family values!

He warned his followers to watch out for the scholars who liked to parade around in long robes, and who wished to be addressed properly and to receive the most important seats at the synagogues. He said that God's kingdom was full of children, and this in a society where children were essentially nonpersons. So much for honor!

Jesus was especially hard on the wealthy. He said that it was not possible to serve both God and a bank account, and that it was easier for a camel to squeeze through a needle's eye than for wealthy people to get into God's domain. He said that the poor were blessed. So much for wealth as a sign of righteousness!

And Jesus was pretty hard on those who felt that their religious correctness and public piety were all they needed, using a parable to compare a right-living Pharisee with a tax collector. Tax collecting may not sound that sinful to us, but tax collectors in Jesus' time were Jews who collaborated with the Romans by getting Jewish money into Roman coffers. They were hated as sellouts and were considered unclean by pious Jews. So, we have a story in which a righteous Jew and an unrighteous Jew are praying in the temple, and the unrighteous Jew is acquitted by God because he is humble. So much for traditional religiosity!

Jesus also told a story about a man who was giving a big dinner and invited many guests, only to have them all reject the invitation because they had other, more important things to do. Here's the rest of the parable:

“Then the master of the house got angry and instructed his slave: ‘Quick! Go out into the streets and alleys of the town, and usher in the poor, and crippled, the blind, and the lame.’ And the slave said, ‘Sir, your orders have been carried out, and there’s still room.’ And the master said to the slave, ‘Then go out into the roads and the country lanes, and force people to come in so my house will be filled.’”

It's a heartwarming story, but for a purity-driven people, the image it suggests is nothing less than a nightmare: the mixing of classes, sexes, ranks – men would be eating with women, freeborn with slaves, the socially powerful with the socially outcast, and the ritually pure with the ritually impure. For Jews in the time of Yeshua ben Miriam, who people ate with reflected broader social patterns: if you would not associate with someone, you certainly wouldn't eat with them. You would lose your purity. And it was bad enough that Jesus would tell a parable along these lines; worse, he seemed to actually live out this parable in his own open table practices. Jesus seems to have been called a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. In other words, like the host in his parable, Jesus ate with anyone. Jesus' willingness to eat with outcasts destroyed social definitions of them as unacceptable and let them see themselves as accepted by God. Clearly, this was good news for the poor, but not such good news for those who were deeply invested in the division between purity and impurity, between righteousness and wickedness.

If it's hard to see what's so radical about this practice, think about our own social boundaries and hierarchies today. Who would you refuse to eat with? Jesus ate with them. Who would you rather not hang out with? Jesus hung out with them. Who would gross you out? You see where I'm going with this. The open table of Yeshua ben Miriam was a practice of absolute egalitarianism, one in which compassion transcended distinctions. In a deeply and multiply stratified society, a non-discriminating meal pointed to the possibility of a non-discriminating society. Since we don't really have either non-discriminating table practices or a non-discriminating society today either, we can probably appreciate both how powerful and how strange this practice would have been.

Nor was eating the only way Yeshua ben Miriam signaled his commitment to the inclusion and well-being of the impure. Consider, for example, Joe Uveges's wonderful song “Rise Up,” based on the story in John's Gospel about Jesus encountering a cripple at the pool of Bethesda. Think

back to the song for a minute, and recall the joy in that cripple's voice as he gets up and gets his life back. In this case, it doesn't matter whether the event happened literally or not; the story tells us something about how later people remembered an individual with compassion to spare.

Why did Yeshua ben Miriam say and do these things? Where did his commitment and passion come from? In short: from faith. Jesus' words and work were a response to his encounter with a recklessly compassionate, utterly gracious, deeply loving God, one who welcomed home the prodigal son with open arms, who sent rain on the just and the unjust, and who provided for the birds and the lilies. Jesus envisioned God as a proprietor who paid workers the same amount regardless of how long they worked. He reassured his followers that God would give to those who asked, would enable seekers to find that which they sought, and would open the door for those who knocked.

Such was Yeshua ben Miriam, who we today call Jesus. But what does his life mean for us? What is the relationship between Jesus then and now? Here, biblical scholarship and sociology and all the other sources of insight we have at hand must be laid down. All we really have to help us today are questions.

Unitarian Universalist minister Victoria Weinstein, in a sermon entitled, "Jesus was a Humanist," raises a question that I find helpful, and that leads to many other questions. Weinstein asks, "How can I behave today in such a way as though God exists; as though justice and healing and forgiveness, and radical, inclusive love are the deepest reality within which we live and move and have our being?" Let me repeat that question: "How can I behave today in such a way as though God exists; as though justice and healing and forgiveness, and radical, inclusive love are the deepest reality within which we live and move and have our being?" A powerful question. Here are some other questions for us:

What is the conventional wisdom of our time? Whom does it benefit? Whom does it hurt? What is our relationship to today's conventional wisdom? Should our relationship to today's conventional wisdom change in any ways?

What does purity look like for us today? Who do we consider righteous? Why? Who do we consider outcasts? Why? Who won't we eat with? Hang out with? Take care of? Who don't we want in our church? Who don't we want in our lives?

How can we prioritize compassion over purity, today and every day?

How do we see ultimate reality? As hostile? As indifferent? As generous? How does the way we see reality impact how we live? Would our lives be better if we had a different impression of ultimate reality? Would our world be better?

In what sense is Jesus' life still a summons to serve humanity, as the hymn suggests? What does it mean for us to commit ourselves to building a land where we bind up the broken? Where we free the captives? Where we create peace? Where we bring good tidings to the afflicted and those who mourn? What would those good tidings look like?

Do we engage directly with the poor, the devalued, the cast off of our society? If not, is this something we might try to do?

What would it look like if we all made a spiritual discipline of extravagant hospitality and generosity? What would it look like if our commitment to inclusion was marked by open tables and by the practice of healing the suffering simply by being present with them in full compassion?

Today marks the second week of Advent. With all who celebrate Advent around the world, we might ask: What is waiting to be born in us? What are our hopes for the year – for our lives, our communities, our world?

Today is also the fifth day of Hannukah. With all who celebrate Hannukah around the world, we might ask: What miracles can we find in our lives today if we keep our eyes open?

Amen, and blessed be.