

Introduction:

The Hidden Gospel: Decoding the Spirituality of the Aramaic Jesus

Quest Books 1999. Copyright Neil Douglas-Klotz 1999. All rights reserved.

“A good tree brings forth good fruit, an evil tree brings forth evil fruit”
(Matthew 7:17).

When or if Jesus spoke these words, he spoke them in a Middle Eastern language, Aramaic. In Aramaic and in all the Semitic languages, the word for good primarily means ripe, and the word for evil primarily means unripe. When heard with Aramaic ears, this sentence might sound more like this:

“A ripe tree brings forth ripe fruit, an unripe tree brings forth unripe fruit.”

This makes a world of difference. The tree is not morally bad, but rather unripe: this is not the right time and place for it to bear. The saying gives an example from nature. Rather than imposing an external standard of goodness, the lesson has to do with time and place, setting and circumstance, health and disease.

Likewise, whenever a saying of Jesus refers to spirit, we must remember that he would have used an Aramaic or Hebrew word. In both of these languages, the same word stands for spirit, breath, air, and wind. So “Holy Spirit” must also be “Holy Breath.” The duality between spirit and body, which we often take for granted in our Western languages, falls away. If Jesus made the famous statement about speaking or sinning against the Holy Spirit (for instance, in Luke 12:10), then somehow the Middle Eastern concept of breath is also involved.

The Hidden Gospel explores these simple yet radical differences that reveal the spirituality behind the sayings of Jesus from a Middle Eastern viewpoint. The differences stem from the nature of Middle Eastern languages themselves as well as the worldview behind them, that is, the ways in which they divide and make sense of reality. The book also invites the reader to participate in the wisdom revealed by this approach as a direct, personal experience.

Another World

The German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once said, “The limits of my language are the limits of my world.” This especially holds true for the translation and interpretation of the words of Jesus. For one thing, Middle Eastern languages allow for many different interpretations, and even different literal translations, of the words of a prophet or mystic.

If I were writing about the words of Moses or Isaiah, a Jewish audience would easily understand what I am doing in this book as *midrash*, a type of spiritual translation-interpretation that uses the possible meanings of Hebrew words as a basis for contemplation, devotion, and spiritual practice. In *midrash* one attempts through contemplation to make a scriptural passage or a saying of a

holy person into a living experience that can meet the challenges of the present. Likewise, most Sufi Muslims would understand my efforts as *tawil*, a style of translation-interpretation that again considers the possible multiple meanings of a sacred text in order to cultivate wisdom for one's everyday life. As we shall explore later, in both traditions each person is free to do this interpretation in her or his own way.

In the Christian Church, especially as it evolved in the West, it became more important to determine what Jesus represented as "Christ" or "Messiah" than to look at his sayings in a Middle Eastern sense. In addition, up until the last fifty years, most Western Christian churches blamed the people they identified with "the Jews" of the Gospels for the death of Jesus. So for the Western Christian church at least, facing the question of Jesus' own Jewishness was definitely off the agenda.

At the same time, in scholarly circles over the past hundred years, researchers began to look at Western textual or historical evidence for who Jesus was and what he said. In some extreme viewpoints, the factual existence of Jesus was considered a myth and presumed to have no reality outside the text. In others, presuppositions about the nature of early Christianity prejudiced the opinions of scholars about which strands of text were the oldest and so the most historically accurate. In addition, since the primary Western and Orthodox church texts were in Greek, scholars saw no point in looking at Aramaic or Hebrew versions. To do so would have underlined Jesus' Jewishness. Most often, scholars interpreted Jesus according to Greek or Hellenistic influences of his time, rather than Middle Eastern ones. The "historical Jesus" emerged as a multitude of conflicting figures, varying according to the disposition of the scholar and the facts she or he selected.

Over the past generation, much of this has changed. There has been a concerted effort in some quarters of the Christian church to review and reinterpret the sections of the Gospels (particularly in John) that seem to demonize the people called "the Jews." One Christian scholar has made a convincing case that one cannot even speak of distinct groups called Christians or Jews in the biblical era.¹ As we shall see, the earliest so-called "Jesus movements" represented a multiplicity of practices and beliefs. The same was true for what we call "Judaism," which also did not begin to take the organized shape we recognize today until after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 C.E. So the word translated as "Jews" in the Gospels should more accurately be translated "Judaeans"—the inhabitants of the area called Judaea by the Romans.

Even in the ten years since I published *Prayers from the Cosmos*, an interpretive translation of Jesus' sayings from an Aramaic viewpoint, there has been increasing acknowledgment by biblical scholars that the most appropriate background against which to view all early Jesus movements is one that could be called Jewish—or really, Middle Eastern. For instance, many scholars now consider that the Gospel of Thomas reflects a type of early Jewish Christian spirituality rather than a later, corrupted form of "orthodox" Christianity.² In addition, discussions about spirituality—the experience of the

sacred—have entered scholarly and religious circles in a much larger way. As *Prayers of the Cosmos* is in keeping with these views, it has enjoyed phenomenal success worldwide. A major Protestant denomination even included parts of the book in its training handbook for ministers to broaden their perspectives on the spirituality of the Lord's Prayer.

Scholars have also acknowledged in recent years that early Christian roots not only reach back to Jewish spirituality but also extend forward in time into Islam. According to Christian scholar Hans Küng and others, some of the earliest views of Jesus (for instance, Jesus as the adopted rather than the exclusive "son of God") were preserved in early Islam. In this sense, Küng has written that Islam poses a challenge for Christians as "a reminder of their own past."³

These perspectives now allow us, perhaps for the first time in Western history, to begin to see Jesus not as either an orthodox Christian or Jew, but as a teacher influenced by the spirituality of Middle East in general—as what I call a "native Middle Eastern" person.

No doubt, "historical" Jesus research has given us much of value. In addition to the above, it has also helped identify, at least theoretically, a core of Jesus' wisdom sayings that may be the most ancient. In some cases, however, judgments about authenticity are still based on presumptions about what early Christianity was like. As I will discuss later, barring the discovery of some new and definitive ancient manuscript, scholars are unlikely to arrive at any general agreement about what Jesus said and did using the methods of "historical Jesus" research.

This book complements historical Jesus research by presenting the interpretive methods of Middle Eastern spirituality. I recognize the value of both faith-based and scholarly approaches. Throughout the book, and in a brief afterword, I have attempted to place what is essentially a work of spiritual interpretation and inspiration within the context of current biblical studies. I am willing to leave open the question of what Jesus definitively said and did. Considering all that we know from the witnesses of the canonical Gospels, from non-canonical books like the Gospel of Thomas, and from the various hypothetical textual strands identified by scholars, there is much that Jesus could have said and done.

This book makes a simple proposition based on the following fact: when or if Jesus said anything that is attributed to him in any of these texts, he said it in Aramaic (or possibly Hebrew when quoting from scripture). For this reason, looking at Jesus' words in Aramaic reveals the spirituality of his teachings in light of the Middle Eastern tradition as a whole. Jesus may indeed have been influenced by the Hellenistic culture present in certain areas of Palestine, but the overwhelming number of people in his audience were not Greek speakers. They spoke Aramaic as their mother tongue, which since at least the third century B.C.E. had been the common spoken language not only of Palestine but of the entire Middle East.⁴ In addition, people *heard* the words of Jesus, rather than read them. In the oral tradition that followed him, people

repeated and meditated upon his sayings and stories in a circular, spiritual way, not a linear, theological, or Western historical one.

The Texts

We do not have any Gospel manuscripts in Palestinian Aramaic, the dialect that Jesus would have spoken. The translation I have used for my study is the bible of the Eastern Christians, called the Peshitta, which is written in Western Aramaic, often called Syriac by Western scholars. The earliest manuscript copy of the Peshitta dates to the fourth century C.E. Today, Aramaic-speaking Christians of various denominations claim it as the original form of Jesus' words. To justify this claim, they point to many idioms (like "poor in spirit") that make perfect sense in Aramaic but remain obscure in Greek. Western scholars, on the other hand, are convinced that the Peshitta is a translation backward from Greek into Western Aramaic.⁵

For my purposes, this doesn't matter. I do not determine the validity of what Jesus may have said or done based on the Peshitta. I am also not attempting to recreate an original Aramaic text from it.⁶ What Jesus said or did remains for each person to decide for him or herself, based on the alleged evidence, the philosophical presumptions that determine what a person recognizes as fact, and her or his own beliefs. This holds true whether the person is an agnostic academic or a fundamentalist Christian. The Peshitta is the most Semitic—the the most Jewish if you will—of all of the early versions of the New Testament. At the very least, it offers us a view of Jesus' thought, language, culture, and spirituality through the eyes of a very early community of Eastern Jewish Christians. No Greek text can give us this view.

The selection of themes I have chosen for this book remain valid no matter what dialect of Aramaic Jesus may have used. Like the word "good" carrying the meaning of "ripe," my interpretations attempt to recover the Middle Eastern mind-set of Jesus and his listeners and to derive practical wisdom from it. To do this, I work with the native code present in all Semitic languages. The Aramaic version also allows me to use a style of interpretation similar to Jewish *midrash*. This style most closely approximates the way these sayings would have been heard and experienced—with many different ears and in many different ways.

In addition to the Aramaic version of the canonical Gospels, I have also referred to sections of the Gospel of Thomas, which most scholars now believe was also originally collected and composed by Eastern Jewish Christians in Syria in the first century. The most complete copy we have of the Gospel of Thomas is in Coptic, a form of the old Egyptian language written primarily in Greek characters. Where I have quoted this text, I have combined several scholarly translations of this Coptic manuscript. I will say more about this in the first chapter.

Where I have juxtaposed an Aramaic translation with a standard English one, I have used the Authorized or King James version (KJV) for the latter. I have done so not because it is the most accurate translation of the Greek, but because it has been the most influential psychologically for most English

speakers. It is the most often quoted in literature and sayings that cut across all religious boundaries. Where I have made reference to the Greek version of the Gospels, this is to the standard scholarly text edited by Nestle-Aland.

The Organization of this Book

The themes explored in this book are drawn from my study of Jesus' words in Aramaic over the past seventeen years. Some of this research was the basis for my previous books, *Prayers of the Cosmos* and *Desert Wisdom*. Those books are collections of multi-leveled translations, with notes and meditations that illustrate various themes or passages. *Prayers of the Cosmos* focuses primarily on multiple readings of the Lord's Prayer and Beatitudes based on the Aramaic text. *Desert Wisdom* broadened its scope to include many different writings from the Middle East, and organized them to show how the various voices commented on key life themes: What is my purpose in life? How to I know myself? What is my relationship to others? I composed both books so that a reader could browse, search through, or select from them in many different ways, according to her or his needs at the moment. With this style, I sought to approximate the oral, storytelling way in which one would receive this wisdom from a Middle Eastern spiritual teacher.

The Hidden Gospel is a bit different, in that it is meant to be read from beginning to end. Each chapter presents an essay on what I consider one of the most important aspects of Jesus' Middle Eastern worldview. Most chapters juxtapose the Western and Aramaic/Hebrew senses of key words in Jesus' recorded teaching.

In each chapter I illustrate a Middle Eastern way of looking at Jesus' teaching and provide examples translated from the sayings and stories contained in the Aramaic version of the recorded Gospels. In the beginning chapters, I also reflect on the background that reveals, for me, a "hidden Gospel," the ways we can uncover it, and its implications for the relationship of humans to nature and the divine. I also gradually lay the groundwork for the interpretive methods I use, which are part of a long tradition in the Middle East.

As I reflect on each theme, I attempt to open up the meanings of each key word to the extent possible in Aramaic. Readers can then begin to make their own interpretations and translations as they meditate on these and other words of Jesus. I do not consider my interpretations the only correct ones. I intend to demonstrate a method of reflection and meditation, native to the Middle East, that will hopefully help revivify a person's faith and life. Because I consider certain material central to Jesus' teaching, in some cases, I have added new readings of passages that I translated in previous books, or placed them in a new context.

To supplement my own renderings, I have added an interpretive glossary at the end of the book. This lists key English words found in the usual translations of the Gospel texts I have considered, followed by their Aramaic counterparts as found in the Peshitta, plus alternative meanings. With this

tool readers can begin to construct their own translations and interpretations using the same methods I have.

Interspersed with the commentary and renderings, I have also added examples of simple “body prayers” or meditations inspired by the themes. These meditations use traditional Middle Eastern prayer methods such as sounded words, contemplation, breathing awareness, and body awareness. I have done this not to be “new age” in any sense, but to underline the fact that in a Middle Eastern way of sacred interpretation, translation *is* spiritual practice and is usually accompanied by prayer and meditation. In this tradition, the words of a prophet or mystic are not a dead text, an object existing outside of oneself, but rather a living, breathing reality that one embodies as one hears, remembers, repeats, and meditates upon them.

I have attempted to keep the endnotes to a minimum, because I intend this book to be primarily inspirational and experiential. It can be easily read through without reference to the notes. However, readers who wish to follow up the threads of this work that connect to other biblical or psychological scholarship can do so through the endnotes, which are keyed to the bibliography. The endnotes also contain formal transliterations of all the Aramaic words that I translate or interpret, for the benefit of those who wish to do their own comparative Semitic language research. In some cases, one endnote gives the transliterations for a whole phrase or passage, in order to cut down on the number of notes. The transliterations are keyed by number to the glossary. In the main text, I use approximate transliterations of Aramaic or Hebrew words where necessary, so that readers can use them in the body prayers or see their relationship to other key words. Finally, the endnotes also contain references to related biblical or Middle Eastern texts that can provide food for further study. In this sense, this book, like my previous ones, can be read on a number of different levels.

Personal Background

In keeping with the style of Middle Eastern interpretation, which emphasizes personal experience, it is appropriate that I should relate some of my own personal background. While part of my family comes from a Jewish background, I was raised Christian, and for the past twenty-three years I have studied both traditions, as well various mystical traditions of Islam, including Sufism. I consider myself a practicing Sufi, as I believe this spiritual path enables me to receive the wisdom from all of these traditions. From an academic standpoint my background and doctorate are in both religious studies (in particular, hermeneutics, the science of interpretation) and psychology (in particular, the body-oriented psychologies of the religious traditions of the world). For ten years I taught this combination of textual interpretation and psychology at the university level. My experiential background includes the privilege of learning from many Jewish, Christian, and Sufi mystics, both hidden and known, and many Middle Eastern people throughout the world.

I believe that, like them, Jesus was a breathing, flesh-and-blood person. His Middle Eastern name was Yeshua, a form similar to the biblical name usually

spelled Joshua, meaning, “Ya—the Sacred Life—will save or preserve.” Throughout the book, I alternate the names Jesus and Yeshua, using the latter where I emphasize his Middle Eastern background. Whatever Yeshua himself may have felt his mission to be, he inspired developments that profoundly affect the world two thousand years later.

To affirm Jesus as a native Middle Eastern person not only opens up the insights I have presented in this book; it also enables Christians to understand that the mind and message of the prophet they revere arise from the same earth as have the traditions of their Jewish and Muslim sisters and brothers. In the recognition of this fact lies the power to overcome centuries of mistrust and tragedy. How far back this tragic divide began is not the subject of this book. My purpose is to build bridges of meaning that can help connect the lovers and devotees of Jesus of all traditions, as well as all who have been inspired by his words and example.

If these efforts have some merit, they go to my teachers. If there is benefit, let it be toward the next two thousand years, when—by the will of the One—the wisdom of a native Middle Eastern Jesus takes its rightful place in the discussions and actions that determine the future of our planet.

¹Notes

Note: A date in parentheses after an author’s name refers to the date of publication of the work cited, as listed in the bibliography. The number in parentheses after the transliteration of an Aramaic word refers to the number of that entry in the glossary. My two previous books are abbreviated as POC (*Prayers of the Cosmos*) and DW (*Desert Wisdom*).

Introduction

See “No Jews or Christians in the Bible” by Dr. John J. Pilch (1998), p. 3.

² The composition date of the Gospel of Thomas has been estimated in the first century C.E., making at least the core of it as old or older than the canonical Gospels. For instance, see Stephen J. Patterson (1998).

³ See Küng, (1993), pp. 123-124. Küng comments (p. 95), “I wonder: if a Muslim or Jew should be expected to recognize the Hellenist councils from Nicaea to Chalcedon, what would Jesus of Nazareth, the Jew, have done?”

⁴ In *A Wandering Aramean: Collected Aramaic Essays*, Joseph Fitzmyer, S.J. (1979) moves this date back to the eighth century B.C.E. He also maintains that a type of “Postbiblical Hebrew” did survive the captivities of the sixth century in some areas, but that Aramaic was the most common spoken language of first century C.E. Palestine. See p. 29ff.

⁵ This raises the question of why no definitive manuscripts exist, in any language, of what Jesus said and did. This has much to do with the development of Western Christianity, as I shall show in the first chapter. It also has to do with the way words proceed from an oral to a written transmission. In ancient times, an oral culture of memorized words and stories was much more predominant than it is today. The linear nature of written texts is not the same as the more circular or fluid dimensions of oral transmission. For more on the differences between oral and written culture in relation to the Gospels, see the work of Werner Kelber who began what is now a heated discussion in the early 80’s with his book *The Oral and the Written Gospel* (1997).

⁶ This was attempted by biblical scholar C.C. Torrey earlier in this century (1933) and (1936).