

Take Two: “A Jesus We Can’t Believe in”

(The fatal humanist misstep: a premise of doubt, followed by a destructive analysis. This boils down to a “scientific” positing of “reasonable alternatives” to explain all alleged difficulties, except the one they self-generated philosophically.)

“Who do people say that I am?” 28 And they told him, “John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets.” That, of course, is the “big” question for those who are being saved!

Let’s remember our theme: ***The triumph of truth in a baffling plot line, on both an intimate level and an international level, is hopeful and compelling.***

Before we give the right answer, we should consider the three wrong ones in the text—and a fourth fomented by doubt. This last is accompanied by a general tone of disparagement. The text cannot mean what it states, the language is mythological (not historical), or symbolic (not literal) and must be *retranslated*¹ so that we “get it.”

To believe that Jesus was John the Baptist is to believe that the man King Herod had beheaded (as a party favor gone terrorist act) and whose body his disciples had buried was reincarnated. Sin has consequences that were unfortunate for John and later for Herodias at Pompei (she was wife and sister to the king). The infamous couple, high-enders perish in the hot ash of the Vesuvian eruption. *Reincarnation did not happen—reincarnation never does. Reincarnation* at root seems a desperate grasp for a second chance, another go at a life in which one hopes to do better and “evolve” to higher being, or plain of being. The truth? There is no second chance. But, wonderfully, there is a first chance—be sure to take it!

Oddly, this supposed reincarnation was a *lateral* one and not a linear one—the spirit of John the Baptist had, according to this theory, *transmigrated* to Jesus—entered into and taken over someone else’s (Jesus’) unique body. *And without the second party obliging by first becoming a corpse, so that this spiritual body snatching could occur the usual way.* Really?! Who would believe such a thing? Well, the followers of Pythagorus would. Such a transition would line up with their belief that souls (of animals as well as humans) were eternal and had to go somewhere. Acquiring another body, even if that body already had a soul, was a philosophical possibility *after death*. Stranger beliefs do exist—but saving faith is not one of them because it is both well documented and has observable outcomes. Reincarnation both entails a degraded view of the body and a curious implication for

¹ The transfer of the locus of authority is critical. Now the truth is not in, or arising from the text. Now, it is the translator, or theologian who is the authority and, in a flattened world, divine inspiration is an obsolete, fanciful, but unverifiable concept. This man-centered-ness is key.

identity: which incarnation is the essential “you”? Christians ascribe to the uniqueness and once-ness of our existence. Some Eastern religions ascribe to various theories of reincarnation.

Along similar lines, but in a *linear* modality, the Scriptures foretold the coming of a “second Elijah.” Some had put this label on John² (**in the spirit of Elijah**, Luke 1:17, an angel speaking) but reincarnation, or the transmigration of souls, is **not what Jesus had in mind** when He said: **“For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John. 14”** **And if you care to accept it, he himself is Elijah, who was to come.**” Elijah, in departing this life (bodily) imparted his spirit upon Elisha, his protege. (See 2 Kings 2:9-18.) This impartation is made credible by its recorded precedent. John the Baptist certainly manifested the spirit of Elijah.

The least difficult, most accessible of the three wrong answers is the last one: Jesus is **one of the prophets**. (Lots of unbelievers, humanists, skeptics and liberal theologians vote for this one!) However, there is this one a huge difficulty with this premise: the 1st Century Jewish people were coming out of a prolonged period of *prophetic silence* (nearly four hundred years of “no prophetic word” from God). “Not hearing from God” was the new normal and part of the despair of faithful Jews! People, at the time of Jesus’ and John’s miraculous conceptions—yes, there were two miracles— were stirred by the rumors of a prophetic restart (Zechariah, Mary, Elizabeth and emissary angels speaking to shepherds etc—Simeon and Anna, the prophetess, in the Temple eight days later). Genuine spiritual renewal is always a hard sell—there are many detractors (resistors and rejectors). This piece (the long prophetic pause) of our religious heritage is one crucial foundation for the necessity of the birth narratives³ in the gospel story! **How could anyone prophesy if**

² There is, however, a little more information that might prove interesting. Elijah wore, most probably, a camel's hair girdle. "And they answered him, "He was a hairy man with a leather girdle bound about his loins." And he said, "It is Elijah the Tishbite," (2 Kings 1:8). According to the Treasury of Scripture Knowledge, in reference to 2 Kings 1:8, Elijah . . ."he wore a rough garment, either made of camels' hair, as that of John Baptist, or of a skin, dressed with the hair on. Sir J. Chardin informs us, in a MS. note on this place, cited by Mr. Harmer, that the eastern dervishes and fakeers are clothed just as Elijah was, with a hairy garment, girded with a leathern girdle."

Concerning John the Baptist, it says in Matthew 3:4, "Now John himself had a garment of camel's hair, and a leather belt about his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey." It may be that Zecharias, who had access to the temple and things in the temple, may have acquired Elijah's camel hair garment and given it to John the Baptist to wear. This is speculation, but it is an interesting possibility. carm.org/bible-difficulties/matthew-mark/was-john-baptist-really-elijah There is this complication: Elijah ascended bodily into heaven according to Scripture. The suggestion that he had assumed another body would be superfluous.

³ Here are theories that vacate the birth narratives as essential, and/ or historical: adoption-ists. They believe that Jesus became the Christ at His baptism, as a result of a developing self-awareness of Himself as Messiah. But the contrary position (He was born divine, Son of Man and Messiah) is not really “improbable” even if they do resemble folklore and legend. Some others find

prophecy doesn't happen any more?! What I should underscore is that presuppositions (“prophecy doesn’t happen anymore,” “the gifts were only for the apostolic age,” a credentialing function—which is an enormous distortion of what signs and wonders meant in both Jesus and the apostles’ ministries and a faulty end times theory filters the data (skews the truth). All this spiritual upheaval was, even if accurately related, baffling. ***The triumph of truth in a baffling plot line*** is what we are on about, correct? So, the existence of wrong answers, theological error and philosophical missteps are to be expected. They happen.

Now, friends, after reincarnation, a spiritualized second Elijah and the “just a prophet” misstep, for the real, and right answer: **You are the Messiah.** (v.29) Great. But, sadly, Peter could hardly have known of what he spoke. For one, if Jesus was the Messiah (which He is!), *Jesus was totally unlike what Peter had been taught to expect.* (Remember those presuppositions!) In fact, he had systematically and programmatically been mis-taught which, rather than distancing us from Peter, joins us at the educational and theological hip—so to speak. ***We have all been possibly mis-taught; it is a common part of our human condition.*** However, that is not to say, that Peter’s mis-education was intentionally wrong (the higher up the education chain we go, the more likely such intentionality crops up, especially in modern state education). But, as ever, the mind of a child is unable to process adult notions as an adult might do. So, despite the best of intentions even, my Sunday School presentation of the person of Jesus turns out to be, well, bankrupt. *My dedicated teachers, sweet ladies, were unwittingly committing the error of Peter minding the things of man and spinning the Scripture to make it more relevant.*

We can easily position ourselves to rebuke the Lord (“Oh, no, Lord, surely not . . . it’s too primitive, too disgusting . . . why all this business about physical abuse and blood!?” as if our spirituality is more refined, or highly evolved than His!)⁴. Jesus was gentle as a lamb, not ferocious as a shepherd defending his flock. Jesus was victim, passive, emasculated, even a contemporary pacifist. Who was I, a mere child, to question the authority of these

the genealogies problematic (not the Jews, Jesus had to be of the house of David!). Still others, equating sexuality with sin miss the redemptive thrust of the whole business—procreation is not inherently sinful, or debased. Christians do not denigrate the physical side of things. Docetists and Gnostics do and they agree in disputing the virgin birth! God is too holy to be born, according to them. And finally the language is problematic—miraculous conception might be superior to virgin birth as He was conceived by the operation of the Holy Spirit and not through the offices of a human father.

⁴ Those qualified to teach really need to get their stuff right so as to teach truthfully, properly, and not repulse those seeking the truth. My teachers, mostly women, unfortunately built their theology upon the feminine virtues of Jesus (those parts they really liked) and left out the less desirable (evil, oppressive maleness) masculine virtues aside being led by the cultural agenda. A distortion problem, always. They made Jesus an anti-war demonstrator with a tie-died shirt and beads. Hippie-dom is actually embarrassing these days!

teachers with their feminized versions of Jesus? *I couldn't know any better unless someone taught me better!* So, I, like the majority of unbelieving men I know, graduated Sunday School—feeling empty, devalued, robbed and angry. Presenting opinion as truth is risky.

The highly politicized, unmaning of Jesus advances the cause of feminists and their left leaning liberationist allies, but damaged the cause of advancing the kingdom of God in the process! Again, another good story (women's rights), another cultural narrative (suffrage (see Eileen Giblin's story, a English war bride in Australia) and human rights), but not the great story—that gospel is typically suppressed (*by benign, enlightened persons with the best of progressive intentions*) in each generation and our cultural oppression as men continued unabated. Occasionally, the scripture objects and disrupts this process of degradation. The Word of God defends itself: saying, Whoa, not that story, but the gospel! Pay attention to the gospel narrative. Jesus is the Messiah. He heals, He performs miracles, feeds multitudes (with multiplied loaves and sufficient fish). He liberates the human race from its cultural and/or religious captivities—they are many, and they are everywhere. The re-emergence of prophecy in the first century AD was iconoclastic—it was in-breaking and shattering in its impact.

Certainly, my Sunday School curriculum (fashionably designed, produced and marketed) is not the only false narrative out there in the American church. The Sadducean narrative continues apace. They were open to a Messiah on their terms only (he must a mere man, prophet, healer and exorcist): **no miracles, no afterlife, no judgment, no resurrection and no supernaturalism (angels are obviously out)**. These wealthy, elite, educated, literate and liberal Jews were actually **Jews in name only** (that disbelief piece hasn't changed). *They and their intellect descendants are so lost*. Based on an impoverished personal experience (ironically, seen by them as privilege), they reject any **facticity** to the traditions of the their fathers when it came to things supernatural. It's all symbols, analogies and metaphors—people don't think like that anymore. Of course, Enlightenment thinkers are the Gentile counterparts to these Sadducees (including German Idealists, higher critics, French radicals, humanists and other secularists), and they began their “historical and scientific treatment” of the Scripture with strikingly similar presuppositions. A premise of doubt followed by destructive analysis leading to thorough skeptical disparagement—with the scholar dominating the whole exercise, thus making himself the actual, undisputed locus of authority. Expressed biblically, they knew Him not, having chosen to forget.

God (as a personal, theistic being) is excluded, supernatural events not admitted. Before I critique their position too entirely, I want to propose a game-changing proposition. ***What if there is a quantifiable as well as qualifiable distinctions between the testaments?*** The Old Testament literature covers centuries of human interaction with God.

The New Testament is much more compressed, only seven, or eight decades at tops. Therefore the OT is more conducive to source analysis/criticism⁵ (Let me explain: the idea that different theologies contributed to the formation of the literature at different points in time, attracting redaction and revision as the new thinking was harmonized with the existing material is a direct outcome of the so-called scientific/historical method). Within limits, this is a helpful and appropriate approach to Old Testament scholarship—a work hundreds of years in the making.

However, the soft underbelly of this man-centered approach is the unhelpful presumptions that the OT is, by definition, a purely human artifice. It is **only** a social construction, **merely a cultural artifact** (like a tool, a shard, or fragment of a ceramic pot) and as such a physical object is completely amenable to comparison with other like objects, equally “human” religious streams (as in other holy books). It isn’t unique, or exceptional at all! The Word of God becomes one “language event of human beings” among many—not sacred, holy or revelatory . . . Definitely the bible is not revelatory truth with an exclusive claim to the truth. (That is unthinkable, preposterous.) Really?! What if the Word of God (Scripture) actually is what it claims to be **God-breathed, inspired, revelation truth**? What if it is trustworthy and reliable and accurate? And what if different methodologies are more apt to one testament and not really helpful for the other?

That is not a moon made out of blue cheese, or a purple cow! What if it is a word from the outside (from heaven, as recorded in several places) that is both transformative and re-energizing (like solar energy which replenishes the earth)? At the end of the day, Jesus question escapes the trappings of humanistic theology and asks you to tell Him who He is. **Who do you say that I am?**

⁵ There are also the critical approaches known as “form criticism,” “literary criticism” and “historical criticism.” Linguistics, archeology, paleontology and physical anthropology add additional insights which, with proper qualification, can help us read the text in context.