

The Hidden Gospel of the Aramaic Jesus

By Neil Douglas-Klotz

"A good tree brings forth good fruit, an evil tree brings forth evil fruit"

(Matthew 7.17)

When or if Jesus spoke those 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, those words might sound more like this: "A ripe tree brings forth ripe fruit, an unripe tree brings forth unripe fruit."

That change makes a world of difference. The tree is not morally evil, but rather unripe: the right time and place are not ripe for it to bear. The saying is 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.

Three Hundred Years of Diversity

According to the most current research, early Christianity reflected tremendous diversity. While we may think of modern Christianity as divided into many branches of Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox varieties, there were many more groups in the early "Jesus movement" within the first two hundred years after Jesus' life. People held very diverse ideas about what Jesus said and did. We could call all these people Jewish Christians or Christian Jews, but neither term identifies a single orthodox group or family of groups in the first or second centuries. Hundreds of different versions of Jesus' words, hundreds of "Gospels," existed in the first three centuries after his death.

The remembered words and acts of Jesus were first passed on by word of mouth. As they were gradually put into writing, their diversity began to diminish. The process by which an oral transmission turns into a written one always involves selection, and the selection by each group of followers determines that group's stand on important issues. In addition, those who could not read were largely left out of the decision-making process.

With many written Gospels in existence, the diversity within early Christianity continued for three hundred years, until the Roman emperor Constantine, newly converted to one variety of the faith, realized that a stable empire could not be built upon hundreds of conflicting interpretations of who Jesus was. In 325 ce, he ordered a council of bishops and theologians to gather at Nicaea (in what is now Turkey) to settle once and for all who Jesus was and what he said and did. The theological portion of the debate centered on whether Jesus was human, divine, or some combination of both. There was reportedly a certain pressure on all who attended: If Constantine did not get the agreement of opinion he wanted, he might withdraw his support from Christianity altogether.

Given that pressure, various compromises were made. For instance, since the sun god was very popular in Roman culture, the council declared the Roman "sun" day to be the Christian sabbath. Likewise, the council adopted the traditional annual celebration of the birth of the sun, around the time of the winter solstice, for the celebration of Jesus' birthday. The council also adopted the traditional symbol of the sun, the cross of light, as the official emblem of Christianity. Before then, the cross rarely figured in any Christian art or tomb decoration. Nor did images of Jesus himself generally appear before that time because of the Jewish Christian wariness of idolatry.

On the theological side, the council composed the Nicene Creed—another compromise that a number of the council members did not fully support but to which they subscribed in order to please the emperor. The creed answered the question of whether Jesus was human or divine with obscure words, describing Jesus as "begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father." The creed also established the doctrine of the "Trinity"—the belief that God is three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. However, a large number of Christians at the time believed that God is one and indivisible, as the Jewish scriptures taught and as the name for God, "Alaha," (meaning "unity") clearly states in Jesus' own tongue, Aramaic.

More Hidden Gospels

In the past hundred years, scholars have searched for a "hidden Gospel" of a different kind. By examining various textual strands in the books of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, they have posited hypothetical sources that the writers of these books used. The best-known, called "Q" (for the German word *Quelle*, or source) consists essentially of the duplicate portions of Matthew and Luke that do not also appear in Mark. The hypothesis runs as follows: Many scholars consider

Mark to be the earliest written of the four canonical Gospels. If the authors of Matthew and Luke were not aware of each other's work, then the portions of these two books that do not use Mark as a source but that overlap must have used another source, which is Q.

Like the Gospel of Thomas, Q is proposed as a collection of sayings, aphorisms, and parables with very few actual events recorded in it. Many scholars now consider these early textual strands to be the products of various evolving communities of the Jesus movement. It is important to recognize, however, that this entire theoretical structure is based upon the assumptions mentioned above and that the theorists do not all agree.

But there is yet another story of a "hidden Gospel" that is rarely told. At the time of the council of Nicaea, the Persian Empire controlled parts of what is now Turkey, Syria, and Iraq. In this region, a group of early Christians had established themselves securely by the time the Romans had destroyed Jerusalem in the late first century. The early Jewish Christians in Persian lands were largely Semitic people who spoke Aramaic. Since the Persians were enemies of the Romans, and since the Romans persecuted the Christians, the Persians decided to let these Christians practice their religion in peace. These early Christians built schools, libraries, and places of worship in the Persian Empire, with Persian support, while the Romans were persecuting Christians in Europe.

During the first four centuries of the Christian era, Aramaic-speaking Christians in the Near East had copies of early scriptures that they could study and contemplate in their homes openly and without fear of reprisal. In the earliest days, those scriptures included the Gospel of Thomas, which was probably compiled in Syria and reflects a view of Jesus as a wisdom figure rather than a savior.

The version of the canonical scriptures these Jewish Christians used originated around Edessa in what is now eastern Turkey and came to be known as the Peshitta—meaning "simple, straight, and true." The Peshitta included the basic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—but in a form of Aramaic close to the dialect that Jesus himself would have used.

Since they spoke and worshipped in the same language that Jesus (or Yeshua) spoke, these Aramaic Christians believed (as their descendants still do) that the Peshitta is a version of the original Aramaic words of Jesus and that they have stayed very close in spirit to his original message. Although some Aramaic-

speaking Jewish Christian groups accepted the decisions of the council of Nicaea, most soon broke contact with the rest of both Roman and Eastern Orthodox Christianity over the increasingly complex creeds and the forceful attempts to impose a single theology on all Christians.

The Mind of Middle Eastern Spirituality

The mind of a Semitic language speaker divides and makes sense of reality differently from that of a Greek or Latin speaker.

The Western view divides cosmology, that is, the way we view our place in the universe, from psychology, the way we view our inner life. It considers neither to be the stuff of historical or scientific facts. The view of a Semitic language differs from the Western one by reflecting the notion that there is a single community that includes everything from planets to the voices of the subconscious.

Jesus was an Aramaic speaker, as were the vast majority of his listeners. An Aramaic report of Jesus' words allows us, at the very least, to witness the view of a very early group of Jewish Christians about what Jesus taught. But more than that, it also allows us to participate in the richness of the Aramaic mindset, with all the ambiguities and paradoxes present in its spirituality, that is, in its experience of the sacred.

In addition, if we consider Jesus' words in Aramaic, we can participate in an important Semitic language tradition—translation and interpretation as personal spiritual practices, rather than as academic pursuits. The practices themselves have many layers and nuances.

To begin with, a single word in Aramaic or Hebrew can often mean several seemingly different things. For instance, the root word *shem* (based on the two-letter root ShM) can mean "light, sound, name, atmosphere." If we consider the admonition of Jesus to pray "with or in my *shem*" (usually translated "in my name"), which meaning is intended? According to Middle Eastern tradition, in the words of sacred scripture or the words of a prophet, all possible meanings may be present.

In the Middle Eastern tradition of translation and interpretation, the words of a prophet or mystic—stories, prayers, and visionary statements—challenge listeners to understand those words according to their own life experience. This tradition proposes that we can only fix the meaning of a sacred text at a particular

time and place in relation to our own life experience. Such translation-interpretation not only bridges languages but also connects that which can be said in language and that which remains a wordless experience. It is a "translation" between our outer and inner lives, as well as between our lives as individuals and as members of a community. As we look at the major themes in Yeshua's teaching, we need to remember that the search in which we engage is for our own souls, rather than for some so-called objective notion of who Jesus was.

When we look at the sayings and stories of Jesus, as the Gospel of Thomas and the early Q strands of Matthew and Luke do, rather than at the later, theological claims about his person and status, we come face to face with a native mystic of the Middle East. Even the Gospel of John (considered a more theologized work by many scholars) reveals many elements of a Jewish mystical background. Although there has been much speculation that Jesus may have received the essence of his teaching elsewhere, in India or Greece for example, nothing in his prophetic or mystical teaching requires a source outside the broader traditions of the Middle East. They include not only various Jewish traditions but also those of Egyptian wisdom and other folk traditions of the time.

Why Undertake the Hunt?

Does this approach really make a difference to anything more than our personal spiritual experience, as important as that may be? I believe it makes an enormous difference in the way we view both each other and our place in the natural world.

Yeshua lived in a world where the sacred and the natural were part of each other, not separated by a wide gulf. When Western Christianity made the choices it did fifteen hundred or so years ago, it not only created theological creeds that limited the support for individual spiritual experience, but it also weakened the links between humanity, nature, and the divine. The tendency to limit diversity in spiritual experience resulted in a limitation and control of the natural world in order to advance what we call civilization. Now many of us have begun to question just what sort of civilization it is that has brought us to the brink of ecological disaster.

From a Middle Eastern point of view, if the divine is truly "Unity," then the evolution of Western Christianity must have been for a particular purpose. That purpose includes the difficulties it has had contacting its original, earth-based,

Middle Eastern roots and the tragic results of those difficulties. Until now, the "hidden Gospel" has lain buried deep within the Western psyche, perhaps waiting for just this moment to be discovered. As we unearth this real treasure, we may discover the missing link to our collective Western soul and find the solutions to the problems that confront us in the world today.