
SOMEWHERE IN THE JUDEAN DESERT...
OR IN THE HILLS ABOVE THE DEAD SEA...
OR IN THE GREEN MOUNTAINS OF GALILEE...

A wandering Bedouin stumbles upon a cave. In the cave, he finds a crumbling urn containing an ancient manuscript with leather pages. He realizes immediately that things of this sort fetch a good price, so he takes the manuscript home and later sells it to an infamous trader on the antiquities black market. The trader begins to carefully open the manuscript, which barely holds together in his shaking hands. His fragmentary knowledge of ancient strips, including Aramaic, allows him to read the words “Yeshua bar Alaha” within the first few lines of the text: “Jesus, Son of God.”

At this point in our story, various church officials, scholars and military intelligence officers hear of the document and begin to hunt of it. As an elaborate game of deception unfolds, the manuscript grows in reputation: it is said to contain a previously undiscovered gospel of the first-century Jewish prophet and reformer. Those in the hunt become more desperate. They begin to lie and steal to obtain the document. Those who have it, including scholars, hoard it so that no one else can see it.

With numerous variations this story has been told, as history or fiction, for the greater part of the past century. The discoveries in 1945 of the Dead Sea Scrolls as well as the ancient library found near Nag Hammadi, Egypt, have followed this general storyline. Today, there are still many unexplored caves in the areas where Jesus or his early followers could have travelled. Tomorrow may bring a find that totally revolutionizes the way we look at Jesus and early Christianity. Or perhaps, the finds as already been made, and the crucial manuscript is being held privately. All of this remains the subject of enormous popular speculation.

A strong undercurrent runs throughout this story and its variations: the suspicion that Jesus did and said things that are not contained within the four canonical Gospels approved by orthodox Christianity. The Gospel of Thomas, for instance, discovered as part of the Nag Hammadi Library, shows us a Jesus who speaks like a Jewish mystic:

> Let him who seeks, not cease seeking until he finds, and when he finds, he will be troubled, and when he has been troubled, he will marvel and he will reign over the All. (Saying 2)

Are these words simply the fabrication of an early group of pre-Christians whom scholars usually call gnostics? To what extent do they reflect the actual words of Jesus? Most scholars date the composition of the Gospel of Thomas in the first century CE. This makes it one of the oldest gospel texts in existence. It appears to have been first collected by Jewish Christians in the region of Eastern Syria, an area not usually mentioned in the history of what became Western Christianity. And so the mysteries about Jesus’ authentic words continue and lead us back further.
THREE HUNDERED YEARS OF DIVERSITY

According to the most current research, early pre-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. Many people held very diverse ideas about what Jesus said and did. We could call all these people Jewish Christians or Christian Jews, but as noted in the introduction, neither term identifies a single orthodox group or family of groups in the first or second centuries. According to one source, there were hundreds of different versions of Jesus’ words, hundreds of “gospels,” in the first three centuries after his death.¹

As the remembered words and acts of Jesus were gradually put into writing, this diversity began to diminish. The process by which an oral transmission turns into a written one always involves selection, and the selection each group of followers makes determines its stand on important issues. In addition, those who could not read were largely left out of the decision-making process.² With many written gospels in existence, the diversity within early pre-Christianity continue for three hundred years, until the Roman emperor Constantine, newly converted to a 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 centred 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.³

Given this 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. This day of the week had no particular significance for Jesus or his early followers. Likewise, the council adopted the traditional 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, to be the official emblem of Christianity. Before this time, the cross rarely figured in any Christian art or tomb decoration. Nor did any images of Jesus himself generally appear before this time because 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 neither fully supported nor fully understood but put their names to in order to please the emperor. The creed solved 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 some version of what is called the Trinity – a belief in God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit as an orthodox doctrine of the Western Christian Church. However, a large number, perhaps even a majority, of Christians at the time believed that God is one and indivisible, as the Jewish scriptures taught and as the name of God, Alaha which means Unity), clearly states in Jesus’ own tongue, Aramaic. By one account, the years following the council at Nicaea and the two subsequent councils at Ephesus and Chalcedon, at least one million of these early “Unitarian” Jewish Christians were killed because of their beliefs.⁴
Furthermore, the council at Nicaea banned all versions and variations of the Gospels except Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. According to one contemporary but perhaps apocryphal account, the decision was made in the following way: One day the hundreds of gospel and accounts of Jesus’ teachings that were available at the time were placed under a table in the meeting hall. At the end of day, everyone left, the hall was locked, and all of the assembled bishops were asked to pray that the true gospels would miraculously appear on top of the table by the next morning. The next day, only the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were on the table. There is no report of who held the key to the room overnight. Whether this account is true or not, from that time onward, the alternative versions of Jesus’ life and words were either hidden (like the Gospel of Thomas) or destroyed. We know about some of them, like the Gospel of the Hebrews, only because they are mentioned in the writings of the early church officials who opposed them.

Undoubtedly, all religions have elements of their history that would sadden the prophet upon whom the religion is based. Some of it can be explained as simple human nature: the early pre-Christian, for instance, had been persecuted for many years under the Roman Empire, and once they saw the opportunity to gain imperial sponsorship, the temptation was irresistible. And yet, because we know that so many accounts were destroyed in the process, and because the religion that claims Jesus’ name has been so influential in Western culture, the search for the definitive version of his words continues.

MORE HIDDEN GOSPELS

In the past one hundred years, scholars have searched for a “hidden Gospel” in a different way as well. 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 most well-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: Most scholars now consider Mark to be the earliest written Gospel of which we have a copy. 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 and that overlap must have used another source: Q.

Like the Gospel of Thomas, Q is proposed to be 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 Jesus movement communities. It is important, however, to recognize that this entire theoretical structure is based upon the presumptions mentioned above. While these scholars see their work as historical, it is still theory, an all of the theorists do not even agree.

But there is yet another story of a “hidden Gospel,” this one rarely told. At the time of the council of Nicaea, the eastern areas of what are now Turkey, Syria, and Iraq were controlled by the Persian Empire. In this region, a group of early Christians had established themselves securely but the time of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70CD. The early Jewish Christians in Persian lands were largely of Semitic extract, and all were Aramaic-speaking. 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 (another instance of the old axiom: the enemy of my enemy must be my friend). These early Christians built schools, libraries, and places of worship in the Persian Empire, with
Persian support, throughout the time that the Roans persecuted the Christians in European and Mediterranean areas.

For the first four centuries of the Christian era, Aramaic-speaking Christians in these lands had copies of early scriptures that they could study and contemplate in their homes openly and without fear of reprisal. In the earliest days, these included the Gospel of Thomas, which was most likely compiled in what is now Syria, and which reflects a view of Jesus as a wisdom figure rather than a saviour.

The version of the 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 Yeshua spoke, these Aramaic Christians felt (and their descendants still feel) that the Peshitta is a version of the original Aramaic words of Jesus, and that they stayed very close in spirit to his original message. While some Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christian groups went along with the council of Nicaea, most soon broke contract 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. Little was heard from or reported about them in Europe for the next fifteen hundred years, while Christianity in the West underwent its own political and theological evolution.

As modern Assyrian Christian writer Abraham Rihbany commented:

> [T]he Syrian Christians of Semitic stock have had very little to do with the development of the “creeds of Christendom.” Theological organization has been as foreign to the minds of the Eastern Christians as political organization. They have always been worshippers rather than theologians, believers rather than systematic thinkers…… The Christian Church had its simple origin with a group of Jewish followers of Jesus Christ in Palestine… The creed of the theologians consists of many “articles”; the creed of Christ only two: “Love the Lord they God with all thy heart, and thy neighbor as thy self.”

Another Aramaic Christian scholar, George Lamsa, pointed out the irony that most Christians in Europe were not allowed to read the scriptures until well after the advent of the printing press in the Middle Ages; until that time only priests were allowed to see the scriptures. Even the possession of a translation of the Gospels in a vernacular language like English was a crime punishable by death. On the other hand, a thousand years earlier, Aramaic-speaking Christians had copies of the Gospels in Aramaic in their homes and for their open use.

**THE MIND OF MIDDLE EASTERN SPIRITUALITY**

As both Lamsa and Sihbany note, the mind of a Semitic language speaker inherently divides and makes sense of reality differently than that of a Greek or Latin speaker. As people of the West, we have been raised with many Greek and European language concepts. We have been taught that they constitute
the essence of civilization and science, and so we take them for granted. However, there are other equally valid ways to view the world.

For instance, as we shall explore later, both Aramaic and Hebrew have only one preposition that must describe both the relationship “within” (as in “within my interior, emotional life”) and “among” (as in “among my exterior social community”). When “within” and “among” are the same word, then the way in which I treat the different voices within me – my interior “selves” – is always connected to the way I treat my friends, neighbours, and enemies – my exterior “selves”. In addition, the Greek division of human life into “mind,” “body,” “emotions,” “psyche,” and “spirit” underlies the modern Western view. The Semitic languages do not divide reality in this way. They provide multiple words for the subconscious self, all tied to the communal self. They imply a continuum between what we all spirit and body, not a division.

We may think of this as mysticism, but again the distinction between the mystical and the prophetic is also the result of later speculation and thought grounded in the Greek language. Academics usually speak of mysticism as an esoteric teaching imparted to only a few, or pursued in solitude by ascetics. They define prophecy as an exoteric, socially critical teaching that seeks to change outer affairs. This division does not exist in Hebrew, Aramaic, or Arabic. Likewise, the Western view of what constitutes “history” is prejudiced by a language that separates inner from outer. 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 Semitic language view differs entirely from the Western, reflecting the notion that there is a single community that includes everything from planets to the voices of the subconscious.

Jesus was born an Aramaic speaker, as were the vast majority of his listeners. An Aramaic version of Jesus’ reported words allows us at the very least to witness the view that a very early group of Jewish Christians held of what Jesus taught. But more than that, it allows us to participate in the richness of the Aramaic mind-set, with all of the ambiguities and paradoxes present in its spirituality, that is, in its experience of the sacred.

DECODING THE HIDDEN GOSPEL

If we consider Jesus’ words in Aramaic, we can then 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. The next several chapters will gradually increase our acquaintance with them.

To begin with, a single work in Aramaic or Hebrew can often mean several seemingly different things. For instance, the Aramaic word shema (as well as its Semitic root ShM, or shem) can mean light, sound, name or 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. One needs then to look at a given statement several different ways. In addition, Aramaic and Hebrew lend themselves to rich and poetic wordplay, like inner rhyming of vowels, repetition of consonant sounds,
and parallel phrasing. These devices further increase the possible translations and interpretations of a given statement.

When the root word like *shem* becomes modified, its meanings may expand further. For instance, the first line of the prayer usually called the Lord’s Prayer or “Our Father” contains the word *shem-aya*, usually translated “heaven”. The ending added to *shem* implies that its effect extends without limit. In order to hear more of the possibilities of this first line, one needs to render the phrase from the Aramaic Gospels, *Abwoon d’bashmaya*, several different ways – something like this:

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O Thou, the One from whom
breath enters being in
all radiant forms.

O parent of the universe, from your
deep interior comes the next wave
of shining life.

O fruitful, nurturing Life-giver!
Your sound rings everywhere
throughout the cosmos.

Father-Mother who births Unity,
You vibrate life into form
in each new instant.¹⁰
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The King James version gives us “Our Father which art in heaven”. Three hundred years later, the New Jerusalem Bible improved this only by shortening it slightly to “Our Father in heaven”. In both, the additional nuances and suggestions of the Aramaic, which would have been heard by the Semitic listener, are missing. It’s not that these English translations are wrong; they are simply very limited. They can’t hold the spiritual possibilities of the original Aramaic – and there are many others, even for this one line of the prayer. Metaphorically, they are like fruit juice that has been strained through a very fine filter and heated, leaving all of the valuable vitamins, minerals, trace elements, and pulp behind.¹¹

Each stanza of my poetic translation above is itself incomplete, yet points toward a unity that is only expressed in the Aramaic words themselves: *Abwoon d’bashmaya*. Likewise, when read aloud, one line may be heard more clearly than another by a particular person, depending upon her or his life experience. According to the Middle Eastern tradition of spiritual interpretation, this would be the translation of the moment for that person.

In this tradition of translation and interpretation, the words of a prophet or mystic – stories, prayers, and visionary statements – challenge listeners to understand them according to their own life experience. These traditions propose that we can only fix the meaning of a sacred text at a particular time and place in relation to our own life experience. This type of 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 we are engaged in is for our own souls, rather than for some so-called objective notion of who Jesus was. In a Middle Eastern sense, this book can be heard as a series of stories and lessons toward this end.

TOOLS FOR THE SEARCH

In this book I bring together tools that open up the meaning of Jesus’ words and place these words firmly in the context of his native language, ecology, culture, and spirituality. To recap, these tools are:

- The Aramaic language, as well as its cultural background
- The shared worldview, psychology, and cosmology of related Semitic languages and cultures, including Hebrew and Arabic
- The tradition of mystical translation and interpretation associated with these languages
- The spiritual practices that arise from this worldview and tradition of interpretation
- Various early Christian reports of Jesus’ words, including the four canonical Gospels (in the Aramaic version) and the Gospel of Thomas (in the Coptic and fragmentary Green versions)

Bringing together all these tools, we possess a powerful means for seeing Jesus through a native Middle Eastern lens. Figuratively, we put on a pair of eyeglasses that allow us to perceive reality in depth rather than in two dimensions. Hopefully, as we progress chapter by chapter through this book, the depth of field will fill in and increase for the viewer, so that the real Gospel hidden behind the usual translations reveals itself.

This process is made difficult because so much has been written and said about Jesus in the past two thousand years. To use another image, we are attempting to restore the natural wildflowers, plants and trees to a particular area after it has been over-cultivated or over-grazed.

A current and popular academic view says that all we can really do is determine a picture of the early Christian communities that created the texts we have; all else is supposition, and we can find no “real” Jesus behind any of the texts. We can say with safety that truth is relative. But life is not safe. It constantly asks us to make decisions based on our own, often intuitive, sense of what feels right in a given situation. We carry this intuitive sense of wisdom with us at all times. It can be enlarged and enriched with practice and contemplation. My purpose here is reveal a hidden resource to do this: the wisdom of Jesus.

In relation to early Christian communities, I am making one major assumption: these groups did not simply fabricate anything they wanted Jesus to say. No doubt additions were made to various texts. But a natural process of transmission from an oral tradition to a written one involves remembrance and selection. Various groups selected the parables and sayings they remembered from oral tradition and felt were important. They left out other sayings and wove their own interpretations around them, as a storyteller would do today. Even in the so-called factual world of Western journalism, we find that
reporters select facts they consider important, which are often rewritten by editors, and sometimes publishers, who never witnessed the events at all.

When we look primarily 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 theologised work by many scholars) reveals many elements of a Jewish mystical background. While there has been much speculation that Jesus may have received the essence of his teaching elsewhere, in India or Greece for example, I don’t find anything in his prophetic or mystical teaching that implies a source outside the broader traditions of the Middle East. These include not only various Jewish traditions, but also those of Egyptian wisdom and other indigenous fold traditions active at the time.

**WHY UNDERTAKE THE HUNT?**

Does any of this really make a difference to anything more than our personal spiritual experience, as important as this may be? I believe that 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. As we shall see, the division between heaven and earth, which we take for granted, is the result of an inadequate translation and interpretation of a very profound Jewish creation story.

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 carried over to a tendency to limit and control the natural world, for the purposes of advancing what we call civilization. Now many of us have begun to question just what sort of civilization this 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 particular evolution of Western Christianity must have been for a particular purpose. This includes the difficulties it has had contacting its original earth-based, Middle Eastern roots and the tragic results of these difficulties. Until now, the “hidden Gospel” has lain buried deep within the Western psyche, perhaps awaiting just this moment to be discovered. As we unearth this real treasure, I believe we will discover the missing link to our collective Western soul and find the solutions to the problems that confront us in the world today.