

How Shall We View Jesus?

Jewish religious practice is characterized by the worship of God and by a calendar which celebrates particular encounters between Him and their ancestors: the Holy Sabbath (when God rested), Pesah [or Passover] (which commemorates the Exodus from Egypt and, more specifically, when the “angel of death” passed over the houses of the Israelites while he struck down the first-born children of Egypt, the last plague visited upon the Egyptians just prior to the Exodus), Sukkot (recalling God’s protection when Israel dwelt in the wilderness), Shabuot or Shavuot – I have seen both spellings – (which is associated with the Revelation on Mount Sinai, the giving of the Ten Commandments), and so on.

Muhammad is credited with naming the Jews “the People of the Book” because of their reverence for the Torah – the first five books of the Bible – which tradition dates from the time of Moses. In a book entitled “Yosl Rakover Talks To God,” Zvi Kolitz’s fictional Holocaust character, Yosl Rakover, observes that “To be a Jew is to be ... an external swimmer against the roiling, evil current of humanity...” He says that, “I am happy to belong to the unhappiest of all peoples in the world, whose Torah embodies the highest law and the most beautiful morality” and, speaking of God and the Torah, “I love Him. But I love His Torah more. Even if I were disappointed in Him, I would still cherish His Torah.” It is this reverence for the Torah and its place in Jewish history and identity, as well as the fact that the printing press wasn’t invented until the middle ages, that has caused countless generations of Jews to learn the Torah by heart.

Now, Jesus was a Jew and, like other Jewish boys his age, he was expected to learn the Torah, probably from about the age of six onwards. According to Rob Bell, author of “Velvet Elvis,” this began with a period of instruction, most likely by the local rabbi, known as Bet Sefer, which lasted until about the age of ten. At that time, students who had distinguished themselves would proceed on to a second period of instruction known as Bet Talmud, in which they would memorize the rest of the Hebrew scriptures as well as learn to question what they were taught and the oral tradition surrounding the text. About the age of fourteen or fifteen, only the best of the best were still studying, and those remaining would apply to a well known rabbi to become one of his disciples. If accepted, the student would “take on that rabbi’s yoke,” i.e., accept his understanding of God and the scriptures, and try to learn to emulate him. This final period of study, known as Bet Midrash, during which the rabbi’s disciples would follow him wherever he went, might last until about the age of thirty, when the student himself might become a rabbi – a teacher in his own right – and able to accept disciples of his own.

As you know, during the major part of his life referred to in the Gospels, Jesus was a rabbi or teacher with a message of love and justice. He taught us to think of God as a loving father; to “love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind” and to love our neighbours as ourselves; and to love our enemies. He authorized his disciples to continue to spread his message after his death, which they did – with most of them suffering the same fate that befell Jesus (If I remember correctly, almost all of them were put to death for their beliefs, just as Jesus was).

So how did this Jewish rabbi become the centrepiece of our own religion, with all the attributes that were to become attached to him during the development of the Christian church? How did he become divine, “the only begotten son of God”? How did he come to be a miracle worker, to have a virgin birth, to be without sin, to be the only name through which salvation is possible? Well, a lot of it has to do with the emperor Constantine. You see, Jesus’ disciples had their own experience of Him, but by the time that the Church was finally thrashing out what was to be believed about Him, some three or four hundred years later, that thrashing out was done by an entirely different set of people under an entirely different set of circumstances. Probably the major factor in the Church’s ensuing set of beliefs about Jesus came about because of the emperor’s decision to convert to Christianity.¹ That resulted in many of his subjects becoming more-or-less instant Christians, bringing with them the pagan beliefs they had held up until that time.

Now, the main rival to Christianity during the preceding centuries had been Mithraism, and Mithras was a sun god. He was often pictured with the sun behind his head, and that sun eventually became the halo around representations of the heads of the major figures in Christian art. He was said to have been born of a virgin, and his birth was witnessed by shepherds and by Magi who brought gifts to his birth-cave. The birthday of the physical form of this deity was celebrated on the twenty-fifth of December (a date that was adopted by Christians as the birthday of Christ in the fourth century A.D.). The Mithraic festival of Epiphany, marking the arrival of the Magi at Mithras’ birthplace, was taken over by Christianity as late as 813 A.D.

[Now, by this time, you should be asking yourselves, “According to whom?” Of course, I wasn’t there, so I can’t answer for the accuracy of any of this information on the basis of my own experience, but this is what the historians say.]

Mithras was also a dying-and-being-reborn deity, and his rebirth occurred during the Easter season. Before returning to heaven, he celebrated a last supper with his twelve disciples, representing the twelve signs of the zodiac, in memory of which his followers partook of a sacred meal of bread marked with a cross. This was one of seven Mithraic sacraments, which became models for the seven Christian sacraments. It was called mizd, the English translation of which is “mass.” Like early Christianity, its priesthood consisted only of celibate men, and women were forbidden to enter Mithraic temples.

Mithras was said to have performed the usual assortment of miracles: raising the dead,

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In 312 A.D., just before a battle which was later to become famous, the Roman emperor Constantine had what he described as a vision in which he saw a cross of light – which he took to be the Christian crucifix – superimposed on the sun. He interpreted this as a message from God and ordered his soldiers to paint similar crosses on their shields. They entered and won the battle under the sign of the cross, with the result that Constantine converted to Christianity. When he converted to Christianity, so did most of his subjects, many of whom were followers of Mithras. They became Christians, but they brought with them their pagan beliefs.

healing the sick, making the blind see and the lame walk, casting out devils. His devotees insisted on moral conduct, and emphasized abstinence and self-control. They believed in revelation, atoning sacrifice, immortality of the soul, the last judgement, the resurrection of the body, and the fiery destruction of the universe. They believed in baptism, confirmation, salvation through good works, and life after death. Believers in Mithras dipped their hands in a basin of holy-water and made the sign of the cross when they entered his temple.

So why didn't all of these new converts to Christianity just abandon their pagan beliefs and be satisfied with Jesus' simple teachings when they decided to espouse Christianity? Well, let me tell you the story of the Grand Inquisitor:

The story of the Grand Inquisitor recounts how Jesus, revisiting the world, appearing in Spain during the time of the Spanish Inquisition. Naturally, he was arrested and condemned by the Grand Inquisitor because He had been offered the three things by which men may be controlled – bread, authority and mystery – and he had turned them down. Men, it is said, will follow one who gives them bread, obey one who rewards the obedient and punishes the disobedient, and believe in one who is wrapped in mystery; but He would not use these things. Men were to follow Him, obey Him, and believe in Him, out of love and devotion or not at all. That attitude the Inquisition had had to set aside, or there would have been very few to accept Christ as He was being portrayed by the Church. And now He had come to repeat His great mistake and spoil their work, and He was to be burnt at the stake the next day. When the Grand Inquisitor had finished speaking, the Prisoner simply crossed the prison-cell and kissed the old man on his bloodless lips. The Inquisitor opened the door and bade Him go. He went out into the night and was never seen again. It is reported that that kiss burned in the old man's heart, but that he did not alter either his opinion or practice.

In fact, there has been a great deal of advantage to the Church to incorporating into its belief system a variety of pagan beliefs represented, in this case, by Mithraism. Consider, for example, that all of these similarities between Christianity and Mithraism had already been present in ancient Egyptian mythology for many thousands of years. The dying and resurrected hero of Egyptian mythology:

- was born of a virgin in a cave on December 25th
- had a star herald his birth
- had no known history between the ages of twelve and thirty
- was baptized by a god figure named Anuo the Baptizer, who was later beheaded
- was visited by wise men from the East
- turned water into wine at a wedding
- walked on water, healed the sick, cast our demons, and performed other miracles
- was betrayed for 30 pieces of silver
- was put to death on a cross
- was crucified between two thieves
- was resurrected on the third day

- died to redeem the world
- ascended into heaven and sits on the right hand of his father as the divine judge

...all of which suggests that there is something appealing to people about these kinds of stories. John Spong and Elaine Pagels are the names that come to mind as having argued that these and many of our other favourite Bible stories are literally beyond belief; but I would argue, in contrast, (1) not only that they serve a purpose for both the believers and for the organized church but (2) that they are not beyond belief if taken figuratively rather than literally (leaving aside, temporarily at least, the issue of whether or not they should be taken literally). You, of course, will have to decide for yourself which of these Christ's you wish to follow – the literal Christ or the figurative one – or, perhaps, whether you wish to follow neither or both.