

Lost In Translation: When, if ever, did Jesus become the Christ?

Cliff Schelling

I have heard it said the only time you hear the name Jesus spoken in a Unitarian Church is when the janitor falls off a ladder. Contrary to this joke, today's presentation is titled "Lost in Translation: When, if ever, did Jesus become the Christ?"

I will first share with you why the question is being asked, followed by the story of Jesus, the story of Christ, the controversy that defined Christianity and conclude by answering the question in the title — in less than twenty minutes.

I was raised a Roman Catholic and lived across the street from the Catholic school and church, whose bells punctuated the daily life of our community, which included religious processions through the streets. I attended mass every day before school and twice on Sundays. My uncle was a Roman Catholic Pastor and Monsignor and I was an altar boy who said the mass in Latin. My father was a convert from Methodism, where he was in the Order of the Deacons. All the men in his family were Masons and all the women were members of the Eastern Star. So it probably wouldn't surprise you that when I, at seventeen, started dating Fran, who was raised in a Jewish family, all hell broke loose. I remember saying to my tormentors that I didn't understand the problem, after all Jesus was Jewish, wasn't he? Just as I respected my mother's Catholicism and my father's Methodism, I participated in Passover meals, without eating meat on Fridays, and learned how to sing in Hebrew at the Synagogue.

Fifty years later, sitting in this room, Fran asked the Episcopal Priest who was presenting that day, "When did Jesus become a Catholic?" I chuckled at the question and the answer, and realized the time had come to finally address this issue.

For all my friends in the mental health field, I do not feel I'm choosing between my mother and my wife. For all my friends who are lovingly supported in other churches, it is not my intention to promote or undermine anyone's faith. And, while the information I'll present is well researched and readily available, I offer it to you as my opinion, leaving each of you the freedom to reject the facts and the conclusions I draw from them. My objective is to find common ground between competing perspectives and I will welcome your comments and corrections to anything I say after the presentation.

Jesus was a Torah observant Jew who spoke Aramaic, and so were his mother, father, brothers, sisters, disciples and those to whom he preached. He was a carpenter from the insignificant Galilean town of Nazareth, living, like all Jews, under Roman occupation. While Jews tended to be Sadducees, Pharisees, Essen or Zealots, all Jews felt their lives and culture were threatened, since thousands of Jews had already been crucified, with Judaism itself, at times being outlawed. The Sadducees were the temple priests whose strategy was to appease the Romans in order to survive. The Zealots, on the other hand, actively resisted Roman occupation and eventually revolted against their oppressors. The Essen withdrew, to the extent possible, and lived ascetic lives in the wilderness and the Pharisees were the teachers who interpreted the Torah, and who today would be called Rabbis. Collectively, Jews, who were enslaved under the Egyptians, conquered by the Babylonians, occupied by the Greek and oppressed by the Romans, dreamt of a time when their suffering would end and there would be peace on earth: the Kingdom of God.

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Some Jews believed a man from the house of David would help God bring about this Kingdom, and throughout Jewish history, many men have claimed to be this Messiah. Indeed, in 1994, Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson, was considered the Messiah by a small, vocal faction of Lubavitcher Jews in Brooklyn, New York.

At the time of Jesus, Jewish theology had evolved to reflect their perception of God and themselves. Unlike other peoples, they were not subjects to a capricious deity; they were partners in a covenant with God. God and man had made promises to each other, were responsible to each other and should trust each other. God gave Moses the Torah or the law, which Jesus said he had come to fulfill. Jesus not only preached the Torah was the path to the Kingdom; he also challenged people to be more righteous than the requirements of the law in order to bring about this Kingdom in their lifetime. The Torah said do not kill; Jesus said do not be angry. The Torah said do not steal; Jesus said do not lust. The Torah said love your neighbors; Jesus said love your enemies.

Jesus offered no new revelation from God and everything he said and did grew out of his Jewish faith. What was unique and electrifying was his emphasis on love as the focal point of the Torah and his empowering message that Jews could bring about peace on earth through their own loving behavior, NOW.

Psychologically, it was a revolutionary belief in the power of a small group to change life on earth. Politically, even though Jesus preached “love your enemies”, the Sadducees, Zealots and Romans noticed the large crowds that gathered around him and heard a different meaning in his words. Because he promised the Kingdom of God, some Jews thought of him as the Messiah, who is a *man* who will help God remove the Romans, and transform the world with a Jewish God reigning supreme. “Your kingdom come” is the messianic age prayer that seeks the divine kingdom, not the one of Caesar. Jesus talked about the Father in Heaven and since the Caesars in Rome were also called “father”, Jesus was seen as insisting that Caesar was not the “true” father and Rome was not the source of his power.

Because Jesus was of the house of David, through his father Joseph, and because he continually referred to himself as the Son of Man, a Messianic title, his mission and intention appeared clear to observers. He was viewed as a political threat. The Romans saw him as the leader of an insurrectionist movement. The Sadducees, having seen Jews slaughtered by the Romans in the past, feared the reaction of the Roman army.

The Romans, with the help of the Sadducees, had Jesus arrested, tried and crucified along with other criminals, which was a common Roman punishment at that time. On the third day some said he arose from the dead, which with the exception of the Sadducees, who believed resurrection was not in the bible, Jews believed would happen to *all* the righteous in the kingdom of God.

The concept of resurrection seems to have emerged in a number of agrarian cultures, metaphorically reflecting their experience of burying a dead plant only to have it arise again in the spring.

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In fact, centuries before the birth of Jesus the Egyptians, Cretins, Phrigians, Babylonians and Persians annually celebrated the death and resurrection of Tammuz, Attis, Osiris, Mithra and other gods.

The Jesus movement, referred to as Ebionites, continued under the leadership of his brother James until his death in 62AD. This group held to Jewish practices and affirmed that Jesus was the Messiah who would bring about the Kingdom of God. The word messiah only has meaning within the context of Jewish history and culture.

However, the Jews revolted against Roman oppression, which resulted in the Qumran community being destroyed in 68AD. Jerusalem was decimated in 70AD, along with the temple and the Sadducees. In addition, Masada, the Zealots fortress was destroyed in 73 AD, with everyone committing suicide to avoid capture. Only the Pharisees survived.

One of the triggers for the conflict was Rome's desire to put a statue of Caligula in the Jewish temple and a statute of the Jewish god in the Roman temple. But the jealous God of Adam had evolved into the nameless God of Moses. Moses was told that God's name was "I am". It is not a name; it is from the verb "to be". God is "a living process, a becoming". God is not a thing, and therefore cannot be presented as an image. To do so would be idolatry.

A second Jewish revolt took place sixty years later, in mid 130AD, led by another messiah claimant Bar Kokhba, which also failed eliminating the Jerusalem community that followed Jesus and 850,000 other Jews. Since Jesus did not bring about the Kingdom of God, the belief in him as a messiah slowly faded away amongst most Jews.

As a Jesuit theologian explained it to me, "we know very little about Jesus of Nazareth and most of what we think we know is wrong". In fact, there was nothing ever recorded about Jesus by the Romans or Jews during his lifetime or within thirty years of his death. The oldest papyrus *fragment*, of a New Testament document is from 125-150 AD. The oldest whole document is a *copy of copies* of Mark, believed to be originally written in 70 AD, and directly composed in Greek to a gentile audience after the fall of Jerusalem. It was not a translation of a Semitic original. The oldest copy of a letter written by Paul dates to about 200 AD. There is a growing consensus among biblical scholars that none of the canonical Gospels can reach back to Jesus and their purpose was not to chronicle events but transmit the doctrinal message of the church.

Saul of Tarsus was a Hellenized Jew and Roman citizen from south-central Turkey who spoke Greek and *never knew Jesus*. In fact, Saul persecuted the followers of Jesus until three years after the crucifixion when he said he experienced a vision of the resurrected Jesus. He claimed almost total independence from the mother church in Jerusalem and mostly preached to gentiles. Saul referred to Jesus as the Christ, and preached to the very Roman Kingdom of Caesar that the Jewish Kingdom of God would replace. I can only assume that Romans had no interest in hearing how the Jews were suffering under Roman occupation or how the Roman Empire would be replaced.

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While the message of Jesus was comforting and empowering even to Gentiles, there was little interest in adding Jewish dietary practices to their “bucket list”. Moreover, rumor has it that after the first adult Gentile male was circumcised, as required by the Torah, the volunteer list evaporated.

Saul, being a Greek speaking Roman citizen, must have realized the Greco-Roman culture had different world views and spiritual references, which included important people like the Caesars being called “Son-of-God”. It also included virgin births, often with human mothers and divine fathers like Zeus. For example, Mithra , Dionysus and Hercules all had virgin births. Also, important people often assumed the role of “savior”, similar to the Roman Dionysus, the Persian Mithras and the Egyptian Isis. Saul said in his first epistle to the Corinthians that he became all things to all men, adapting Christianity to the beliefs and practices of those whom he desired to convert. The Roman Catholic Church refers to this need to use the language and metaphors of your audience as the Principal of Accommodation.

The Jesus movement was a political movement and Torah observant, whereas the Christ movement neither. Jesus preached to Jews that the Torah was the path to the Kingdom of God, while Saul preached to gentiles that the Torah was unnecessary for salvation. The meaning of messiah became *lost in translation*, and the focus shifted from, *practice to belief*, from observance of the Torah to belief in the Christ, from faith in a nameless God to faith in a physical Jesus, from Jesus as a human messiah to Christ as God-made man, from a covenanted partnership with God to a subject worship of God, from the religion of Jesus to a religion about Jesus, from Son-of-Man to Son-of-God. The focus shifted from learning from the teacher how to end suffering to trying to end suffering by worshipping the teacher.

A slightly different perspective is that the message of Jesus, which was that we have the power through love to bring about the Kingdom of God now, was so relevant and revolutionary to all humans that it had to escape the ethnocentric container of Judaism, in the same way that Buddhism grew out of Hinduism.

During the first centuries of Christianity, after the destruction of Jerusalem, the vast majority of the members of the Christian church were Greek speaking non-Jewish inhabitants of the Roman Empire, thanks to Saul of Tarsus. As you can imagine, what made sense to a gentile audience was idolatrous to a Jewish audience. What reinforced values in the western part of the empire often undermined values in the east. Many Christians believed that Jesus was the Son-of-God but not God himself. If you can imagine how Americans might feel about residents not willing to salute the flag you probably have a good idea how pagan Romans felt about the Jews and later the Christians. These insolent people refused to show any respect for the very gods that protected Rome. Christians disagreed with Jews by insisting that the Jewish Jesus was God and with pagans by insisting that Apollo was not God. Nevertheless, Christians wouldn't go away and survived numerous attempts to eliminate them. In fact, by the fourth century Christians represented a passionate, peaceful and well organized segment of the Empire.

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After many years of persecution, the Roman Caesars Constantine and Licinius issued the Edict of Milan in 313, which terminated the persecution of Christians. In 324 Constantine, following the advice of a dream, had a cross painted on the shields of his legion and defeated Licinius becoming the Roman Emperor, and politically unifying the empire. He then wanted to use Christianity to unify the diverse, quarrelsome peoples of the empire. But first, he had to unite the diverse, quarrelsome Christians.

Jesus was like a Rorschach test. While there were many gospels and beliefs about him and the Kingdom of God, the primary controversy focused on whether he was God. This was called the Arian controversy. Christianity became the state religion, reacting to and appealing to Constantine, as the head of state, as well as the ethnic, cultural and spiritual differences between Rome and Constantinople. Councils were called in the east and the west, usually lacking fair representation, making decisions that wouldn't last. After years of councils, creeds, deportations, and excommunications, the Nicene Creed was adopted in 325AD. For most Christians, however, the question of Jesus Christ's divinity and the concept of the Trinity were settled at the Council of Constantinople in 381AD.

The key debaters were Arius and Athanasius. At a theological level the debate was between Jesus being Son-of-God or God himself. At the political level it was between western and eastern world views. At the psychological level it was between the need for freedom and the need for security.

Romans, who when vulnerable were inclined to seek the protection of powerful patrons, found it natural to worship a Christ who was no less mighty than God. On the other hand, "The heart of Arianism was the idea that "Jesus was a beacon of moral progress sent not so much to rescue helpless humans as to inspire them to develop their own potential for divinity." Centuries later, Unitarians would take a similar position.

Many of these conflicts between people inspired by the Jesus who preached "love your enemy" were resolved, unresolved and resolved again and again by the sword.

In the fifth century, during the Pelagian controversy, this Arian perspective was completely undermined. St. Augustine argued that Salvation is entirely in God's hands; there is nothing an individual can do. It is only God's grace and not any action or willingness on the part of the individual that leads to salvation.

The Christ movement saw Jesus as a savior and the resulting Christian Church elevated Jesus to a triune Godhead and preached that only through the organized church can we secure salvation through faith. This broke the intellectual links that had bound it to Judaism, while accommodating the Greco-Roman Stoic names for the Divine Unity.

So, when, if ever, did Jesus become the Christ?

Abraham and Moses had visions, which resulted in Judaism. Mohamed had visions, which resulted in Islam. Joseph Smith had visions, which resulted in Mormonism. Paul and Constantine had visions, which resulted in Christianity. Today there are more than 38,000 Christian denominations in the world.

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Seen through Paul's eyes, Christ was God incarnate and had therefore always existed. From a Christian perspective, Jesus was the realization of 1000 years of Jewish prophecies with the essence of his teaching of love communicated in Corinthians and the Beatitudes.

Seen through Jewish eyes, Jesus of Nazareth, in keeping with Jewish Tradition, saw God as a partner bound to a negotiated contract, a covenant. His preaching and behavior suggested that Jews would achieve peace on earth and liberation from the Romans, in the Kingdom of God, if they satisfied the terms of the covenant they had with God by living according to the law, which was the Torah. From a Jewish perspective, since Jesus did not bring about the Kingdom of God, by definition he was never the Christ, which is the Greek for Messiah.

That God is, is the only theological dogma in Judaism, if it could be called that. There are no speculations about the essence or nature of God. In the Jewish tradition it would be better to practice Torah than believe in God. In fact the war against idolatry is the main religious theme that runs through the Old Testament, which says "Whoever denies idolatry is as if he fulfilled the whole Torah" (Hullin) Therefore, the very idea of Jesus being God, who is nameless, would be considered idolatry and contrary to the 10 commandments, which says "you shall have no other gods before Me." Seen through Jewish eyes, Jesus was turned into an idol.

One of my favorite churches is the National Shrine to the Immaculate Conception in Washington DC. If we walk through that incredibly beautiful church, and a Jewish temple, and a Muslim Mosque, it would appear that Christ has become a Roman god, in this case with blue eyes and blonde hair, whereas Jesus was a darker Semite and Jewish Rabbi. Over time, paganism was outlawed with Christ and the saints becoming the new Roman pantheon of the gods.

Many Protestants feel they have solved the problem of idolatry with the Reformation and removing the statutes of Jesus, Mary, Joseph, Francis, Anthony, Theresa and the other saints that believers prayed to. On the other hand, if idolatry is subordinating us through the worship of images, ideas or objects, has the bible itself become an idol?

There is a saying in Judaism that expresses a Jewish perspective about the differences between Jesus and Paul, Christians and Jews, and Catholics and Protestants, which is "Two Rabbis, three opinions."

Jesus was the proverbial "finger pointing at the moon" with most of Western Civilization focusing more on his finger than to what he was referring. Jesus challenged the priests of his time and would probably challenge the priests of our time to practice love not idolatry.

Whether we accept or reject Jesus as the Christ, the important questions to ask are "what did Jesus teach? And, is it relevant today? He taught that love is the way to end suffering and transform the world. I'll leave it to you to decide if that is relevant today?"