

## THE BIBLE TAKE 2: JESUS AS TEACHER

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I suspect that, like the two million people who attended the inauguration of Barack Obama a few weeks ago, when you arrived here you did not expect that you would be asked to recite the Lord's Prayer! Today I would like to use the Lord's Prayer as a gateway to understanding the richness and variety of interpretations of the life and teachings of Jesus. Let me begin by asking, in what language did Jesus speak to his followers? [pause] The answer is **Aramaic**, which was "the common spoken language throughout the Middle East at the time of Jesus and the tongue in which he expressed his teachings. (Hebrew was primarily a temple language at this time.) According to some scholars, Aramaic was a derivative of Hebrew; others say that Aramaic itself is older, and based on still more ancient Middle Eastern roots. Although Greek was introduced into the Middle East after the conquest of Alexander the Great, it never became the language of the native people. Aramaic served as the lingua franca [the common language] until it was replaced by a derivative tongue, Arabic, during the rise of Islam." [Neil Douglas-Klotz, *Prayers of the Cosmos*, p. 2]

Why is this significant in our understanding of the teachings of Jesus? What most Christians know as the New Testament is based on a long series of translations that began with **Greek** (not Aramaic) manuscripts, because these were the oldest written manuscripts available. Whether any of the original Gospels were actually written in Aramaic remains a mystery. Not until recently have there been systematic attempts to reconstruct the Aramaic words of Jesus in English. One of the pioneers in this endeavor is Neil Douglas-Klotz, author of a fascinating little book titled *Prayers of the Cosmos: Meditations on the Aramaic Words of Jesus*. "Unlike Greek," he tells us, "Aramaic does not draw sharp lines between means and ends, or between an inner quality and an outer action. Both are always present. When Jesus refers to the 'kingdom of heaven,' this kingdom is always both *within* and *among* us. Likewise, 'neighbor' is both inside and outside, as is the 'self' we are to love to the same degree as our 'neighbor.' Unlike Greek, Aramaic presents a fluid and holistic view of the cosmos. The arbitrary borders found in Greek between 'mind,' 'body,' and 'spirit' fall away. [pp. 2-3] In other words, the Aramaic version of the teachings of Jesus invites—indeed **requires**—a variety of different interpretations. A literalist approach to the teachings of Jesus violates the ambiguity and richness of the language in which he spoke.

The same can be said about Jesus' **style** of teaching. Let me remind you of the important distinction between the style of the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and the Gospel of John. In the Gospel of John, the last of the Gospels written about 60 years after the life of Jesus, he makes long proclamations about himself and his relationship to God—the famous "I am . . ." statements so frequently quoted by biblical fundamentalists. In the Synoptic Gospels, the style of Jesus' teachings is very different. He relies mainly on **parables and aphorisms—stories and "one-liners."** This method of conveying wisdom is deliberately

indirect and provocative of further thought and dialogue. As Marcus Borg explains, “Parables are an interactive form of teaching. . . . They tease the mind into active thought and engage the listener in the question, ‘What do you think?’ But, additionally, they probably not only led hearers to think privately to themselves about their meaning, but also provoked interaction among the hearers and between the hearers and Jesus. . . .”

“In the parable of the good Samaritan, what do you think of a priest and Levite who pass by a man who has been beaten up and lies half dead on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho? Is it just what you would expect from a priest and Levite because you don’t think much of official religious functionaries? Or do you see their ethical dilemma? . . . Or in the parable of the prodigal son, what do you think of a son who asks for his inheritance while his father is still alive and then squanders it in a foreign land? What do you think of a father who welcomes home a son like that by treating him so extravagantly? And what do you think of an older brother who resents what has happened?” [Marcus Borg, *Jesus*, pp. 153-54]

The questions that Jesus provoked in his listeners are as alive today as they were two thousand years ago. They challenge us not only at the level of “What do you **think**?” but also “What would you **do**?” This past week a man who had been beaten lay unconscious on a street in Washington, DC while dozens of people passed by him. By the time an emergency rescue team was called, it was too late and he died. Neighborhood residents explained that men often lie in a drunken stupor on the sidewalk in that part of the city. What would **you** have done? What would **I** have done?

The parables of Jesus rely heavily on **analogies and metaphors**, the language of “is like . . .” Many of these parables describe his vision of the **kingdom of God**, a translation of the Greek word *basileia* that was based on the monarchy-dominated language of the King James version of the Bible. Many modern scholars prefer the phrase “God’s domain” as a reference to the realm of experience which, in the words of my college professor J. Arthur Baird, “is not some far-off goal, but the dimension of God’s presence, to be entered **now**.” [*Rediscovering the Power of the Gospel*, p. 75] Many of our Christian brothers and sisters interpret the Kingdom of God as referring to a heavenly afterlife. I recently saw a bumper sticker that read, “My car may be small, but my reward is in Heaven. Another of my favorite bumper stickers says, “In case of the Rapture, can I have your car?”

Here is what New Testament scholar Marcus Borg says about that interpretation: “Jesus’ mission and message were not about ‘heaven,’ not about how to attain a blessed afterlife. Though Jesus, like many of his Jewish contemporaries, affirmed an afterlife, it was not his primary concern. Because many Christians as well as non-Christians tend to see Jesus and Christianity within the framework of what happens after death, it seems important to realize at the outset that this was not what his mission was about. It wasn’t about what you must believe or how you must behave in order to attain heaven. Rather, his mission was about the character of God, the way of centering in God, and the kingdom of God . . . . [The author of the book of] Matthew “most often changes ‘kingdom of God’ to ‘kingdom of heaven’ not because he’s thinking of an afterlife, but because of a common Jewish reverential practice of avoiding using the word ‘God’ as much as possible. And the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, is **for the earth**, as the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew affirms. It is about the transformation of life in this

world. So also [the Gospel of] John's phrase 'eternal life' does not mean what we commonly mean by heaven. The Greek phrase translated as 'eternal life' or 'everlasting life' means 'the life of the age to come.' And for John, the life of the age to come—eternal life . . . consists of knowing God in the present." [Borg, *Jesus*, pp. 143-44]

So if the kingdom of God does **not** refer to a blissful afterlife, then what **does** it mean in Jesus' teachings? Throughout his parables and one-liners, Jesus' describes the domain of God as contrary to the accepted wisdom and practices of his day. As Marcus Borg explains, "Jesus often used the language of paradox and reversal to shatter the conventional wisdom of his time. Impossible combinations abound in his teaching. What kind of world is it in which a Samaritan—a heretic and impure person—can be 'good,' indeed the hero of a story? What kind of world is it in which a Pharisee—typically viewed as righteous and pure—can be pronounced unrighteous and an outcast can be accepted? What kind of world is it in which riding a donkey can be a symbol of kingship, in which purity is a matter of the heart and not of external boundaries, in which the poor are blessed, the first are last and the last first, the humble exalted and the exalted humbled?"

"So also Jesus frequently spoke of the Kingdom of God in the language of impossible or unexpected combinations. The Kingdom, something great, is compared to something very tiny: it is like 'a grain of mustard seed.' Moreover, mustard was a weed; thus the Kingdom is like a weed. The Kingdom is compared to something impure: it is like a woman (associated in [Jewish patriarchal society] with impurity) putting leaven (which was [also considered] impure) into flour. The Kingdom is for children, who in that world were nobodies; thus, the Kingdom is for nobodies. The same point is made by Jesus' meals with outcasts: the Kingdom is a banquet of outcasts, of nobodies. Many who expect to be in the Kingdom will not be: many shall come from the east and the west to the banquet of the Kingdom, and . . . will find themselves shut out. Moreover, the Kingdom is not somewhere else; rather it is among you, inside you, and outside you. Neither is it some time in the future, for it is here, spread out on the earth; people just do not see it." [Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, pp. 80—81] No wonder he made his followers' heads spin and his opponents' stomachs churn with anger.

Just as Jesus' topsy-turvy vision of the kingdom served as a warning to the powerful, the rich, and the self-righteous of his time, may it also serve as a judgment against the greedy business executives, the power-hungry politicians, and the smugly self-righteous religious leaders of **our** time. This Jesus is **not** the Jesus many of us grew up believing in. His mastery of the deliberately rich and multidimensional Aramaic language and his use of the deliberately paradoxical teaching style of parables and one-liners mark him as a wisdom for all times. His teachings "work" at many different levels, because they challenge us not only to **think** differently, but to **act** differently. "Believing in Jesus" does not mean believing certain doctrines **about** him, but instead being animated by the same Spirit that so inspired his life and teachings. In that Spirit, let me invite you to join me in reading Neil Douglas-Klotz's version of the Lord's Prayer based on his translation of the Aramaic language that Jesus himself spoke. It is printed on the back of your yellow order of service.

O Birther! Father-Mother of the Cosmos  
Focus your light within us--make it useful:

Create your reign of unity now--  
Your one desire then acts with ours, as in all light, so in all forms.  
Grant what we need each day in bread and insight.  
Loose the cords of mistakes binding us,  
As we release the strands we hold of others' guilt.  
Don't let surface things delude us,  
But free us from what holds us back.  
From you is born all ruling will, the power and the life to do.  
The song that beautifies all, from age to age it renews.  
Truly--power to these statements--  
May they be the ground from which all my actions grow. Amen