

The Search for **JESUS YESHUA**

Reflections on David Warden's paper for ANVIL April 2021 [John Baxter 4-5-21](#)

This essay, which has kept on expanding and being rewritten, is my reaction to David Warden's carefully researched paper which argues that Jesus is no more an historical figure than Romulus or King Arthur. It is restricted to considering that question and is not an attempt to write yet another version of the historical Jesus.

Dualist Supernaturalism

My starting point is that I am a Humanist who finds a secular understanding of Buddhist teaching and practice useful. This means as regards religion I reject all forms of dualist supernaturalism when they are taken literally. Supernaturalists think that apparently inexplicable events are best understood as the work of beings or a being who either continuously or on special occasions can intrude and overturn the normal workings of nature for good or malicious reasons. Such a view could be held quite rationally when there was very limited understanding of how the world works, be it concerning human health or the weather. At such times and in such cultures the potential of the scientific method, maths and historical critical study to provide reliable knowledge had yet to be established. Now that they are recognised as the way truth is determined when it comes to knowledge about the world, choosing in the name of "faith" to break or ignore what maths, science and historical scrutiny shows us, becomes increasingly questionable. It becomes even more questionable as mathematical, scientific and historical research point towards the conclusion that the cosmos operates in a totally consistent way at all levels.

The Inexplicable and the Unexplained

Certainly our world remains a source of mystery with unsolved questions and incredible complexity facing us at every turn, be it in scientific and mathematical investigations or historical/critical study, but that just opens up more opportunities for scientific, mathematical and historical research and there are no grounds for continuing to believe in inherently inexplicable events as the supernaturalists claim. To put it bluntly, while I find Buddhist teaching about humanity insightful and the practice of meditation powerfully helpful, and while I find Paul, Jesus and the gospels impressive and inspiring in many ways, I reject "nature miracles" or interventionist devas, angels or devils, gods or a single god, immortal souls, heavens, hells or cycles of transmigration or rebirth or stories of the physical resuscitation of those who have died or the resurrection of Jesus after crucifixion as "objectively true". All these I see as seriously erroneous ways of understanding reality, the way things are.

The Deep Roots of Supernaturalist Thinking

At the same time I recognise such language and thinking is important for understanding the thinking of the time. It also need to be recognised that symbolic, metaphorical and ritualistic/ceremonial ways of communicating human beliefs and values are transcultural and can relate to historical events and key individuals. (Think Josephus' "conversion" and Constantine's vision.) More than that I also recognise that across religions and cultures **supernaturalist ways of thinking and expressing ourselves are deeply rooted and taken for granted** with and without them being seen by their authors as literally true. They are also continuously used in the arts, theatre, films etc where a certain "suspension of disbelief" is needed if a work is to be enjoyed or appreciated, not to mention as tools in political propaganda.

Ockham's Razor

Why then do I reject supernaturalism? Because I follow Ockham's razor and seek the simplest solution to a problem which in these cases is to see magical, mystical or miraculous events or experiences not as the actions of beneficent or malign beings intervening from another different or "more spiritual" level, but as expressions of how human beings think, act and express themselves when faced with special situations or encounters with particularly awe-inspiring individuals.

Barton and Vermes

For me, a book which explores all these problems particularly well is John Barton's History of the Bible. (Written at the end of a lifetime of theological study as Professor of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture and editor of the Oxford Bible Commentary his work is a model of knowledgeable and sensitive open mindedness.) I have used what he has to say about Paul, the Gospels and Jesus in a diagram which seeks to illustrate the main points of agreed and problematic academic study. Barton is also clear in stating **how much is not agreed and not known and the range there is among such scholars regarding their basic viewpoints**. I also recommend the work of Gesa Vermes, Professor of Jewish Studies who has done valuable work showing Jesus in his contemporary Jewish context.

The Apostle to the Gentiles

Barton points out that the earliest Christian writings are the letters of the sophisticated, much travelled, highly educated Paul, self-styled Apostle to the Gentiles. He wrote a series of letters to the churches he visited or founded in Palestine, Syria and Turkey. Scholars argue that they predate the gospels by between 20 and 40 years. In his letters Paul elucidates his theology, based on but going beyond and adapting his Pharisaic studies, which sees Yeshua, whose name he translates from Aramaic to the Greek Jesus, as being the expected Jewish Messiah. He also sees Jesus as the pre-existent Son of God, Saviour of humanity who will inaugurate the immanent End Time, the Apocalypse. Jesus will then return giving the saved new "resurrection bodies" as humanity is judged.

Seeing Jesus as pre-existent Son of God

Seeing Jesus as pre-existent Son of God was not acceptable to fiercely monotheistic Jews who were doubtful about a Messiah or to a minority of Jews who saw Jesus as Messiah in a political or "suffering servant" human sense, but not as divine, even if he were to be the harbinger of the End Time, for this was then quite a widespread belief among Jews.

Divinity for Jesus was however acceptable to the pagan God-fearers who attended the synagogues which Paul visited and they became happy to see Jesus as the Son of God and to see themselves as being "saved" by him. The gospels are then written as the "testimonies" of their authors to the life and teaching of Jesus, but they do this in a way that expands on or illustrates what they had already learnt from Paul, who thus can be seen as crucial in the founding of what became the new religion of Christianity with its community the Church.

Four Gripping Gospels

The four Christian gospels, whatever their relationship to each other are outstandingly arresting literary and artistic works which continue to grip the imagination of millions. (see diagram) They portray testimonies to the reactions of their authors to Jesus in a biographical form illuminated by sayings and anecdotes, amazing healings and resuscitations from death, confrontations with hypocritical religious authorities and satanic powers, manipulations of nature and the weather, mass feedings of the hungry involving bread, wine and fish and an extended treatment of the events leading up to and including his terrible death by torture and inspiring resurrection in the minds of his

disciples as told in a series of vividly imaginable stories leading on to his Second Coming in the End Time.

These gospels, it is agreed by scholars, were not written by eyewitnesses (except for the Biblical scholar Bauckham's claim regarding John) all then communicate what they had heard from the encounters of others with a most unusual, powerful, inspiring, enigmatic and hyper-charismatic man. Each gospel is also multi-layered using both realistic descriptions, metaphors, symbols and subtle allusions to the Hebrew scriptures which they see are "being fulfilled" as it seeks to bring its readers to know and meet the "living" Jesus and accept him as their "Saviour."

The Rabbi from Nazareth

How then do I see Yeshua of Nazareth? First I accept he can only be approached through examining the layers of adulation, reverence and religious symbolism placed upon him by Paul and the evangelists that are mixed in with accounts of what he said and did. Still he comes across to me as a Jewish rabbi of his time and place seeking to live in harmony with Yahweh's "Kingdom" while living under the oppressive kingdom of the Roman Emperor and his underlings. To me he is a maverick Messiah figure with a mission and teachings open to being misunderstood (both then and now) and who used anger, wit and irony in pursuit of compassion, honesty, justice and respect for all, be they Jew, pagan Greek, heretical Samaritan, man or woman, slave or free, old or young, possibly in preparation for an immanent End Time he thought he saw coming. He treats the rich with reservation, the poor with sympathy, women and men equally, and the flawed and wicked with understanding, and if repentant, forgiveness. What was he saying and what was he trying to say? What was original about it and what did he get wrong? Volumes have been written and will be seeking to answer these questions. Personally, I still find the figure and person of Jesus arresting, inspiring and puzzling ever since I sat down and read the Sermon on the Mount at 13. Never however, did I feel he was not a real historical figure.

Warden says: [This paper is about Jesus' existence, not his teaching.](#)

If the gospels contain teaching which though related to contemporary Jewish teaching and set in the context of first century Palestine, (as Vermes has shown) yet at the same time is very different and original, that strikes me as a good reason for considering them as bearing the mark of an individual – . Love your neighbour as your self – where "your neighbour" is illustrated in his story of the good Samaritan. Love your enemy, forgive those who wrong and persecute you for seeking justice. I could go on and on. Startling and counter-intuitive, his manner, style, often puzzling parables, confrontational and vivid teachings strike me as coming from a brilliant, charismatic maverick. The record he has left is far too rough-edged and contradictory and raises too many questions to be the product of the work of an anonymous group who sat down to construct a character who would fit in smoothly with the new religious ideology they wished to promote.

Warden says: [There are no actual witness testimonies in the New Testament](#)

Although Saul/Paul never knew Yeshua when he was alive, he says he persecuted followers of Yeshua for proclaiming he was the Messiah shortly after his crucifixion. This points to the existence of a group of Yeshua followers at the very least, and a good deal being remembered by them about him as well.

Warden says: There is no evidence of an oral tradition

Nor can there be, but it is a reasonable hypothesis that testimonies about this remarkable man and how he had impacted on his hearers would have circulated among different groups.

Warden says: [When the risen Jesus appeared to 500 people this is in the same context as his appearance to Paul \(in a vision\) \(I Corinthians 15 vs 6-10\)](#)

Yes, absolutely. Paul is claiming Jesus “appeared” to five hundred in one place, as he “appeared” to him. That is the five hundred had some form of religious experience (psychological?) similar to his own. (That does not constitute evidence for a physical historical resurrection, as I think Bauckham and others wrongly claim.) **The really important point here surely is that Paul’s letter is evidence of the meeting of a significant number of disciples of Yeshua after his crucifixion who saw him as the Jewish Messiah and who met together to remember him.** They would not have done this if they had seen his death to be a failure. So why did they come together in such a substantial number? Was this perhaps one of the first celebrations of his “last supper” after his crucifixion as he had told them to do “in remembrance/recalling of me” and was their experience of his “resurrection” when a good number felt his “living presence” as members of “his Body” as they partook of his “Body and Blood” in the bread and the wine? Was it through celebrating this ritual then that they “felt” his “spirit” to be “alive” and guiding them? Presumably, many had heard him speak when he was alive before recognising his resurrected presence was now amongst them.

Warden says: [Subjective experience of Christ today has no bearing on the topic.](#)

No. It is crucially important because it shows what a singular impact the stories about Yeshua, his teaching and crucifixion had from the start and continues to have. In fact I would suggest that **the contemporary subjective experience of Christians today who are “born again” and have powerful “conversion experiences” and “come to know Christ” is exactly what the resurrection experience has been since Yeshua was crucified. It is also experienced by countless numbers in and through the ritual of the Eucharist where his “real presence” is emphasised.** Shared personal and group religious experiences and sacramental rituals backed up by the vivid depiction in story form as in the Empty Tomb narratives for me explains the resurrection of Jesus.

David Warden’s paper attempts to reduce the figure of Yeshua to being no more than a character in a mythical/literary construct similar to King Arthur or Romulus and other mythical or mythicised biographies known in the first century. To back up his arguments he has referred to many books which have taken a similar point of view. I have not had the opportunity to read any of them. It does though seem from what he says that he and possibly they treat Paul and the gospels as not being worth serious consideration except as examples of superstitious supernaturalism to debunk.

As one who rejects supernaturalism I think this is to miss the point about the way Paul and the evangelists use supernaturalist language which is that at the time they were written and for many ever since it is a style of speaking that is easily understood and emotionally accepted as a necessary part of dramatizing powerful testimonies to the life, character and impact upon them in this case of a most unusual man

To conclude then, no-one in human history has inspired, pre-occupied, or puzzled more people than Yeshua except possibly Gotama the Buddha or Muhammad the Prophet whose lives also raise problems regarding historical evidence and supernaturalistic claims. Still, to suggest Yeshua is to be written off as a literary construct strikes me as an inadequate and oversimplified reading of what remains complicated evidence which can be legitimately read in different ways.