

**Was Jesus the First UU?  
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**By Ron Solberg**

May I help? That was the question Casey posed to me more than 50 years ago. A question that continues to ring in my ears over these many years since.

While I was teaching at the Science and Arts Academy a few years ago, I was provided with a student teacher for my 8<sup>th</sup> grade social studies class. He was struggling as do all student teachers. But he was diligent about correcting his miscues and mistakes. However, my students weren't being especially cooperative – and, in fact, periodically mocked him as he worked through his lesson plans.

It came to a head one day as students became downright rude in response to a few missteps by this student teacher. When the situation became intolerable, I asked the student teacher to leave the room. When he had left, I told my students about Casey – probably the very best student I had ever had. Not because he was necessarily smarter than anyone else but because he knew something that few students and me, in particular, understood.

As a first-year teacher, fresh out of college, I was struggling with my high school English class. After one particular day when nothing was going right, 17-year-old Casey came up to me after class and asked: “Mr. Solberg, may I help you with this class? I think I can do and say some things that will make this class better for everyone.” Of course I was shocked and, admittedly, a little embarrassed. Here was a student who, in that moment, became my teacher. Fortunately, I soon realized that in Casey I had a partner who understood that a successful classroom is a partnership between teacher and student – where periodically, one may become the other.

Years later, I recalled this episode to my recalcitrant middle schoolers. That teacher and student are in this together. That both must work collaboratively to make that classroom the best learning experience possible for everyone. Yes, there are mediocre teachers. And, yes there are mediocre students. But working together, in good fellowship with one another, the classroom becomes a rewarding experience for all.

I continue to understand that we're all in this real-life classroom, from birth to death. Sometimes we may be teachers. Sometimes, students. But only one or the other, briefly. And probably neither at the same time. Casey, I understand now, provided me with an important clue as to the nature of Jesus – one with which I'm coming to grips, day by day.

When I first asked “Was Jesus the very first UU” I didn't know where that query would take me. Frankly, I was apprehensive – worried -- that you might think me naïve, asking the question. “Who are you, Ron, to set yourself up as one who can understand a historical figure who remains an enigma to a host of the world's very best minds. As a result I've dialogued with some of these best minds through articles and books that I've included in a rather brief and modest annotated bibliography that I'm sharing with you. Copies on blue paper are available in the back of the church on the desk there for your taking.

One of those Biblical scholars, Bart E. Ehrman wrote: “Even before he was born, it was known that he would be someone special. A supernatural being informed his mother the child she was to conceive would not be a mere mortal but would be divine. He was born miraculously, and he became an unusually precocious young man. As an adult he left home and went on an itinerant preaching ministry, urging his listeners to live, not for the material things of this world, but for what is spiritual. He gathered a number of disciples around him, who became convinced that his teachings were divinely inspired, in no small part because he himself was divine. He proved it to them by doing many miracles, healing the sick, casting out demons, and raising the dead. But at the end of his life he roused opposition, and his enemies delivered him over to the Roman authorities for judgment. Still, after he left this world, he returned to meet his followers in order to convince them that he was not really dead but lived on in the heavenly realm. Later some of his followers wrote books about him.”

That pretty much says it all about the Jesus we've come to know through the traditional *New Testament*. Ah, but this isn't about the Jesus Of Nazareth, says Ehrman. It instead describes Appollonius of Tyana, who lived at about the same time as did our Jesus. In fact, this in part could serve as a description of the 50 Jewish Messiahs, of which Jesus was only one, who has appeared over the last 2000 years. Author Jerry Rabow tells us about them in his *50 Jewish Messiahs* book.

At times Jesus comes across as a political figure who is an alternative to the Roman plutocrats and Jewish priestly aristocracy; a zealot who asks his disciples to abandon their families and take up arms for the impending revolution. He's an apocalyptic who's predicting the end of times. A messianic Jewish figure who is promising a new Kingdom on Earth. And still at other times, he's a simple rabbinic teacher, a man of peace. A healer of the physically impaired, terminally ill, and emotionally scarred.

So what was he? Truly? And does it really make any difference to those of us who call ourselves Unitarian Universalists, humanists, atheists, agnostics, Christians, deists, neo-pagans – or perhaps nothing at all. Well, it does, as our church is still identified as one that evolved out of the early Protestant movement. And we regularly cite Jesus' words and stories in our churches, just as we are doing so in song this morning.

We know some things about what others of his and later times knew and said about him, primarily in the *New Testament*. We certainly know what church figures, historians, theologians, and political figures have said about him over the many centuries after his death --though compelled to know him through the lenses of many different cultures and times.

A modern theologian and religious figure may help us understand Jesus. You may find it curious that I would quote Pope Francis as he addressed Congress last September to know Jesus. But, bear with me. The Pope said: “You are called to defend and preserve the dignity of your fellow citizens in the tireless and demanding pursuit of the common good, for this is the chief aim of all politics. A political society endures when it seeks, as a vocation, to satisfy common needs by stimulating the growth of all its members, especially those in situations of greater vulnerability or risk” . . . draw upon the nation's “deepest cultural

reserves” and “the richness of your cultural heritage” not its most irrational fears – to find the best way forward amid the confusion and conflicts and crises of the present age.”

The Pope could well have substituted religion, ethics, and education for politics in his admonition. He was doing no more than truly echoing the words and actions of his teacher, Jesus. “Zealot” Author and Scholar Reza Aslan says succinctly with “There is absolutely no difference between religion and politics at all in Jesus' time. . . every seemingly religious word that came out of Jesus' mouth had very clear and unmistakable political connotations to it. “

As so many teachers understand, a good story can implant an idea that lasts and motivates. Jesus the teacher was at his best when telling his stories, or parables.

Our Celebration Singers will be sharing with you, now, one of Jesus’ more memorable stories – The rich man (Diverus) treatment of poor man Lazarus. They will perform the second half of the song later, telling us that there are consequences to all actions, both good and bad.

### **Message: Jesus as Student**

Thinking about Jesus as Student reminds me, again, of the youthful student Casey who asked, “May I Help?” As I was on this quest, Jesus was becoming more familiar and knowable to me. My research was documenting Jesus as the Great Questioner- one with a plethora of questions –so many more questions than answers.

One scholar said Jesus asked 307 questions. Of those 183 he asked, he only answered 3. The title of the book? *Jesus is the Question*. Many questions to which Jesus does provide answers, clearly, are offered up indirectly as parables and stories – much like the “Diverus and Lazarus.”

Another scholar suggests that Jesus regularly used the parables to attack the powerful Roman state and aristocratic Jewish priesthood. Fearing retribution or arrest, Jesus used these enigmatic stories, knowing that only his loyal followers could truly grasp their meaning.

Through this quest, I was learning anew, that we really know so little, both theologically and historically about Jesus. However, we do know much about Jesus’ ethics through his words. **I among many others have made judgments about Jesus’ theology by suggesting that ethics and theology come out to be about the same. That, over the centuries, has led to considerable confusion and misunderstanding.**

Thomas Jefferson addressed this as he separated the two – Jesus’ ethics from his supposed theology -- in his 1803 version of the *New Testament*. He cut and pasted portions from the traditional *New Testament*, eliminating references to the virgin birth, miraculous healings, demonic possessions, or supernatural events of any kind. He did so with the following words: “To the corruptions of Christianity I am indeed opposed; but not to the genuine precepts of Jesus himself.”

While Jefferson was very sympathetic to Unitarianism, he was not officially one himself or, as a matter of fact, to any formal religious practice. Though, he predicted “there is not a young man now living in the U.S. who will not die a Unitarian.” Jefferson may have been a very wise man, he was certainly no prophet. Focusing only on Jesus words and non-supernatural actions, Jefferson may have created the most authentic and accurate historically ethical book about Jesus we have available to us today. “The Jefferson Bible.”

### **Introduce singers . . . The Celebration Singers will conclude the “Diverus and Lazarus” parable, telling us how the rich man’s action led to dire consequences.**

Therefore, contrary to some common assumptions, Jesus is not the ultimate “Answer Man,” but more like the “Great Questioner.” Through his questions, Jesus modeled the struggle, the wondering, the thinking-it-through that helps each of us understand, not just the answer, but ourselves, and ultimately our places in the world. We may not agree with the parable’s hellish consequences – but, perhaps, the story may be posing yet another question? “If every action generates a reaction, good or bad, what, in fact, are the repercussions of an unkindness done by one to another – here in this life or in another?”

Do UU ethics resemble those of Jesus? Was he a UU at heart? Yet, another question -- if not the first, was Jesus but one of several early UU’s?

There are of course, others, who have been both teachers and students. Socrates comes to mind when he supposedly admitted: “I know only one thing. That I know nothing.” While Socrates via Plato probably didn’t actually say that, it is clear that he believed that “to question is the answer.” Now where have we seen that before? The very words, declaring the same on UU’s bumper stickers? More importantly, one of the seven principles of UU’s: “A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”

Okay, where does this leave us? The implication is that if one is both teacher and student, asking questions, always asking questions and providing answers, generating even more questions -- it’s a never-ending process. It’s also an evolutionary process – new questions lead to new answers. The result: We are today what we weren’t yesterday and won’t be tomorrow.

A personal observation: the *New Testament* depicts a Jesus who evolves into someone – a someone very different from that someone who began a ministry three years earlier. Someone who is very human and uncertain about his life’s answers. Do you recall Jesus’ very last question? One that is revealing of his humanity and a spiritual condition? One that all of humankind has shared with him at one time or another over the millennia? – fear, doubt, loneliness, and uncertainty : “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

In truth, is that his question to God? Or, rather, was that a question to those who could have helped him? To those who could have helped him even as he had been helping them? The final irony. He had no one around like my student Casey who would have responded with yet another question -- “Can I help?”

**Jesus as inspiration.** Today we have an opportunity to see Jesus “The Great Questioner” in ways no theologians and historians of the past have seen him. The discovery, over the last century, of lost scriptures has provided us with new insights as to the ways teacher-student Jesus of Nazareth inspired the early Christian communities and their beliefs.

Scholar Hal Taussig assembled a council of 18 scholars to reconsider which newly discovered documents belong in the New Testament. The product, *A New New Testament*. This expanded Testament is extraordinary, providing us with new insights to the ethical and cultural depths to which the early Christian community studied and treasured Jesus’ ethical ministry. One of the most amazing and spell-binding entries is *The Thunder: A Perfect Mind*. Found in a collection of early Christian documents, the divine, but very mortal, self-proclaiming every-woman voice of “Thunder” speaks simultaneously of her own deep pain and her glorious boldness— strikingly similar to the voice of Jesus in the Gospel of John. Some have suggested that it resembles American Poet Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself.” Coincidentally, Whitman has been called Democracy’s greatest poet. Jill . . .

### **The Thunder: Perfect Mind**

I was sent out from power  
I came to those pondering me  
And I was found among those seeking me  
Look at me, all you who contemplate me  
Audience hear me □ Those expecting me, receive me  
Don’t chase me from your sight  
Don’t let your voice or your hearing hate me  
Don’t ignore me any place, any time  
Be careful. Do not ignore me  
I am the first and the last  
I am she who is honored and she who is mocked  
I am the whore and the holy woman  
I am the wife and the virgin  
I am the mother and the daughter  
I am the limbs of my mother  
I am a sterile woman and she has many children  
I am both awareness and obliviousness  
I am humiliation and pride  
I am without shame,  
I am ashamed  
Do not be arrogant to me when I am thrown to the ground  
Do not laugh at me in the lowest places  
Do not throw me down among those slaughtered viciously  
I am she who exists in all fears and in trembling boldness  
I am she who is timid.  
I am the silence never found  
And the idea infinitely recalled

### **Concluding Words:**

Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the man, is every bit as compelling, charismatic, and praiseworthy as Jesus the Christ – and perhaps more so. He is, in short, someone worth believing in. Not for his answers, but rather, for his questions.

### **Benediction**

AN ENDING, OR MERELY PRELUDE TO MORE GLORIOUS BEGINNINGS?

By [Michael A Schuler](#)

We have reached the end of this time  
For the gathering of memory  
And for letting the imagination play with future possibilities.  
We have enjoyed magic moments and edified each other.  
Shall it be concluded, then?  
Or will this adventure, now commenced, continue?—  
Our separate paths converging, meeting, merging  
In the unending quest for love more perfect,  
The joyous struggle for meaning more sufficient and life more abundant.  
I pose the final question;  
Is this ending to be an ending,

Or merely prelude to new, more glorious beginnings?  
In your hearts lies the answer.