

# WHO IS YESHUA?

## Part 3

# YESHUA IS JEWISH

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When it comes to the identity of the person commonly known as Jesus, many answers might be given. Sometimes people would rather have him be a common human, claiming that Jesus was not the Son of God nor the Messiah of Israel, but just like everyone else—a mere human being who lived and died a common death. Obviously this claim is contrary to the Biblical account that tells about the miracles of Jesus, his atoning death on the cross, his victory over death by rising from the grave, and subsequent ascension into heaven. Suffice it to say that it relies on a number of speculations that are rather spurious. But the point is that some people would be more comfortable with the notion that Jesus was an ordinary human.

On the other hand, there are those who see Jesus only in a divine sense, disregarding the fact that he was also fully human, and in particular that he was fully Jewish. If you visit the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth, in one of the chapels there is a portrait of Jesus, Mary and Joseph on the ceiling. But what is peculiar about this painting is what is in the hand of Jesus—a crucifix. It is a historical fallacy, since the use of the crucifix does not come on the scene until long after Jesus. At best it is an artistic absurdity. But it is important to note the message that is conveyed by this image. It is all about depicting Jesus within the environment of the Church, using iconography to perpetuate the sense of Jesus belonging to a mystical realm, not in history, not as a Jewish man in the Jewish land of his forefathers.

Examine closely most works of religious art and you are likely to see a blue-eyed European-looking Jesus gazing back at you. The result has been a distance between the real Jesus who walked this earth, and the pseudo-person “Christ of the Church.”

For much of our world, the understanding of Jesus is often not very accurate. And I dare say, the same is true for many well-meaning godly Christians. We have, to a great extent, lost track of the fact that while it is true that he came to redeem all peoples in all nations, the real Jesus came into history as a Semitic man from the nation of Israel and the tribe of Judah. And he lived a Torah-observant life and communicated his message of redemption using culturally Jewish methods.

So it makes sense that if we are to understand his message, indeed if we are to understand the person of Jesus, we must consider what it means when we say, “Jesus was Jewish.”

### **His real name was *Yeshua***

The English name Jesus comes to us by way of the Greek *Iesus*. But the actual name that he answered to was *Yeshua*, meaning in Hebrew, “The Lord is Salvation.” The primary reason that the pronunciation of his name has been altered is because Hebrew names which begin with the “Y” sound were transliterated into English by using the letter “J.” This was suitable in old English since

at that time the letter “J” was pronounced with the “Y” sound. But later, when our pronunciation changed, the spelling was never adapted.

This is important because some people have charged that the name Jesus is not found in the Old Testament—therefore He could not be the Jewish Messiah. In fact the name Yeshua appears 29 times in the Old Testament. Moreover, a survey of literary sources during the Second Temple period shows that Yeshua was the fifth most common name of that era. Indeed this one who was born in Bethlehem and raised in Nazareth was known by a most familiar Hebrew name.

### **He received a Jewish education**

Although little is said about the life of Yeshua before his adult years, there is little doubt that he was trained in a traditional Jewish educational setting. That means he would have started school at the age of four or five, primarily learning how to read and write Scripture. Like other students, by the time he finished this initial part of his training, he would have memorized great portions of Scripture, possibly even the entire Torah. Since having your own copy of Scripture was not an option, students were taught to keep a copy in their minds, so they committed the Torah to memory.

The Bible tells us that Yeshua participated in his first Passover at the age of 12 (Luke 2:41-50). This practice was keeping with the custom of that day, and also served as a precursor of the practice of the Bar Mitzvah ceremony. For the next 18 years, the only thing that is said in the Bible about that time is what is recorded in Luke 2:52, which says: “Yeshua kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.”

Now if you read some of the non-biblical material out there, you can encounter stories such as the legend that Jesus went to India and Tibet when he was 13 and there he studied under the gurus of those countries before returning to Jerusalem at the age of 30. But that is a myth that is not just the result of a fanciful imagination, but ignorance of culture and common sense.

By the time Yeshua reached 30, he had become not only an expert on the Torah, but on the Prophets and other Writings of the Old Testament. We see that in the New Testament where he frequently quoted from all parts of the Hebrew Scriptures. That means that he would have gone on to secondary school, known as *Beit Midrash*, where for the first time the Prophets and Writings were studied in addition to the Torah. And he would have memorized much of those passages and learned how to interpret and apply Scripture. So for a man to be as accomplished as Yeshua with all of the *Tanach*, that meant he had to have gone to secondary school after the age of 12. At the same time he would be learning a craft, which in his case was the family business of carpentry or construction.

Clearly by the time he reached the age of 30, he was not just the *Word* of God in the flesh dwelling among humanity, he was skillfully communicating the meaning of the *Words* of God because He had spent his life learning them perfectly.

### **He lived an Orthodox lifestyle**

Yeshua observed the laws of Torah. He kept the Sabbath and the festivals, and observed the dietary laws. What about his attire? Matthew 9, Mark 5 and Luke 8 tell us that he wore *tzitzit*—the tassels or fringes that were worn on a daily basis attached to one's outer garment in Biblical days (today they are worn by Orthodox Jews on an undergarment called a *tallit katan* and by Reform

Jews as part of the modern day prayer shawl). He wore *tefillin*, the small leather boxes containing Scripture that were placed on the head and arm during prayer. Altogether, his appearance and his behavior were consistent with the customs of the day.

## **He taught as a rabbi**

It was the practice during the Second Temple period for learned rabbis to have *talmidim* (disciples) follow them and to continue the learning process. *Talmidim* would seek not just to learn everything that the rabbi could teach them, but actually to become just like their rabbi in terms of how he taught and lived his life. Together, they would travel about from place to place, usually stopping at the local synagogue to discuss Scripture and often in the homes of individuals.

This is certainly the case when we consider the life of Yeshua. He called *talmidim* to leave their homes and all that they had in order to follow him. They traveled together, encountered people together, and all along the way the disciples learned His way of applying Scripture and how to live their lives following His example.

Yeshua's message was a continuation of the faith of the fathers of Israel: practicing personal integrity, righteousness, obedience to God, and trust in Him for one's needs. It was an echo of the patriarchs and prophets who were the teachers of Israel before him.

Now what about some specific ways that Yeshua taught as a rabbi? When we consider some of the passages of the New Testament in this light, it significantly helps us to understand what he was saying.

### **1. Parables (*mashal*)**

The themes Yeshua used in his parables are very similar to those used by other rabbis during the first century—especially shepherds, farmers, kings and landowners. Parables were often perplexing to the hearer. Some people would be disinterested and move on. But disciples who desired to know everything possible about their rabbi and his teachings would want to know the full meaning. So they would ask him and then adopt the answer as their own. Such was the case of Yeshua and his disciples.

### **2. The hinting method (*remez*)**

Rabbis would often use part of a Scripture passage to get a response from the audience that completed the thought. Such as: “In the beginning, God created...” (the heavens and the earth). “For you shall love your neighbor...” (as yourself). “Give us this day our...” (daily bread).

In Matt. 21 children were singing out to Yeshua in the Temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David” (v. 15). When those who opposed Yeshua expressed their disapproval of the children's actions, Yeshua responded by quoting the first half of Ps. 8:2, which reads, “Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babes Thou has prepared praise for Thyself.” The indignation felt by the chief priests and scribes is understandable, for they would have known the second half of the verse, which reads, “because of Thine adversaries, to make the enemy and the revengeful cease.”

So by giving hint or starting the thought process, a teacher such as Yeshua could test the knowledge of his audience, and could therefore provoke a response from them, whether it be a positive or negative response.

### **3. Interpretation with authority (*s'mikeh*)**

Not all rabbis were considered to have authority to interpret Scripture. Most rabbis were called Torah teachers who could only teach the specific interpretations held by a select few rabbis who were said to have authority. It would be the equivalent of today's Sunday School teacher and an ordained minister.

Yeshua was recognized as being a rabbi with authority. We are told:

And He came down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee. And He was teaching them on the Sabbath; and they were amazed at His teaching, for His message was with authority (Luke 4:31-32).

An indicator of Yeshua practicing authoritative interpretation are times when he says, "You have heard it said...but I say to you..." (Matt 5).

The ancient Jewish sages described their way of teaching as being a yoke. Like beasts of burden attached to a wooden apparatus that cause them to submit to the instructions of the master, disciples were called to submit to the instructions of rabbis who were considered to have authority to make interpretations. They referred to the process as being "yoked to the Torah."

But in actuality they were yoked to the interpretation of Torah held by a particular rabbi. It was said that to neglect the interpretations of the rabbis with authority, was to neglect the Torah itself. To cast away the "yoke of the commandments" was certain to get you branded as a heretic.

But by the time of Yeshua, the mere number of interpretations had become vast, and thus the number of obligations was vast. To the point that it was a great burden, indeed an impossible burden, to live out. So Yeshua came along and, as one with authority, he brought an interpretation of Torah that was really not new, for it was a return to the pure message of Moses and the prophets. Here is how he addressed this issue:

Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My load is light. (Matt. 11:28-12:13)

He came and scoured away the layers and layers of burdensome obligations set forth by those who came between Moses and Yeshua. He made Torah light again. He called people to live by faith. And to love their neighbors as themselves, to live humbly before God and to know and practice lives of genuine sacrifice. The result would be rest for their souls.

But it was also a message that stirred anger in the souls of those whose own interpretations were being nullified. We can easily see how they would call him a heretic for in their eyes he was rejecting the yoke of Torah. When in fact He was bringing the people back to the original yoke of Torah, one that He would help the people to carry for them.

### **4. Simple and complex (*kal-ve-homer*)**

The final rabbinical teaching method used by Yeshua is interpretive in nature, a way of deriving meaning from Scripture. It was one of the seven formal rules formulated by Hillel, a contemporary rabbi of Yeshua. It was a practice of deductive reasoning. Namely, that a logical

conclusion can be derived from a simple situation to a more complex one. Literally the word *kal* means “light” and *homer* means “heavy.” It gives the sense that if something is true in a simple, light situation, it will also be true in a more complex, heavy one. An example of this method is Yeshua’s teaching on the relationship between being responsible with material things and spiritual things:

And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the mammon of unrighteousness; that when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal dwellings. He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much. (Luke 16:9,10)

Yeshua was seeking to help his listeners understand the importance of spiritual responsibility. He knew they could relate to the simple concept of being responsible when it comes to their possessions. And, in the same way by reasoning outward, they needed to be responsible with the more complex subject of spiritual matters.

An indicator of simple-and-complex-reasoning is the phrase, “How much more...”

Or what man is there among you, when his son shall ask him for a loaf, will give him a stone? Or if he shall ask for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him! (Matt. 7:9-11)

The teaching here is that since in a simple sense people care for their small family, in a complex sense our Heavenly Father cares for everyone in the family of God. Again in Matt. 12 the opponents of Yeshua sought to get him to contradict Torah by provoking him into healing a man on the Sabbath who had a withered hand. Yeshua responded by saying:

And He said to them, “What man shall there be among you, who shall have one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will he not take hold of it, and lift it out? Of *how much more value* then is a man than a sheep! So then, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” Then He said to the man, “Stretch out your hand!” And he stretched it out, and it was restored to normal, like the other (Matt. 12:11-13).

He knew that each of his opponents would not let one of their valued possessions suffer and perish just because it was the Sabbath. The life of the sheep was the light aspect in this reasoning. And the life of the disabled man was the heavy aspect. He deduced the value of the life of the man called for healing, the equivalent of pulling a sheep from a pit, regardless of the day or time.

This means of interpretation provides a practical, caring way of applying biblical principles. Instead of giving increasingly complex guidelines in simple situations, it enables us to be guided by simple guidelines in complex situations.

This teaching practice is just another example of the unequalled ability of Yeshua to communicate to people like us. In every way, Yeshua was thorough in his preparation and knowledge. He was logical in its application and clear in its proclamation. And He did it in such a way that we are blessed, not burdened.

## **He was raised up from among his Jewish brothers**

All of these things taken together are entirely Jewish characteristics. To follow Yeshua and to observe him, would leave you with the undeniable conclusion that he lived precisely as learned Orthodox Jewish rabbi. And he taught a message about Himself that He would literally fulfill as the King and Messiah of Israel, and the Savior of mankind. Without a doubt he is the fulfillment of Moses' prophecy:

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers, you shall listen to him. (Deut. 18:15)

Yeshua was indeed raised up from among the Jewish people. He was very much like Moses in that He called the people to live in pure obedience to the words of God, not burdened down by layer upon layer of interpretations. And he is calling all of his countrymen today, every Jewish person, to listen to Him. Yeshua has a very Jewish message for the Jewish people. It's recorded for all to see and to read. You just have to open the book and let him speak to you.

Listen to Yeshua. That is the ultimate message for all of us. When we read his parables, they should cause us to desire to explore his message deeper, to seek what he is trying to teach us, not to shrug our shoulders and look for something else. God has told us "If you seek me you will find me when you search for Me with all your heart" (Jer. 29:13). Are you seeking Him, wanting to know His plan for your life in every way?

When we encounter a verse in Scripture that begins a thought in our minds, how do we respond to the rest of the passage or principle? Do we stop where it is convenient or are we willing to come to grasp with the full and complete message that may not be so comfortable to confront?

When we hear that Yeshua has authority, are we willing to submit to it? To be yoked to him alone? Or do we say, "I'll just pick and choose what I want to obey when it comes to Yeshua, and go with some other authority (or no authority at all) the rest of the time.

When we hear echoes of Yeshua's voice saying, "Come, follow me," are we willing to set aside all the enticements of this world to see what He has in store for us? As His disciples, are we really willing to be like Yeshua? There is a price to following him—suffering, ridicule, a lack of prosperity. Are we willing to pay that price?

When we hear him call us to greater responsibility, are we willing to accept it? Are we willing to be people of faith and righteousness in every context of life, from simple relationships with family and friends, to interactions in this very complex world?

Yeshua is calling us to listen to Him about all these things. It is a calling that comes with a warning. When God described in the Torah about the ultimate prophet to come, He included this sober admonition:

And it shall come about that whoever will not listen to My words which he shall speak in My name, I Myself will require it of him. (Deut. 18:19)

God is calling us to accountability when it comes to the words of Yeshua. He has said "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life" (John 6:47). "Love one another," he says (John 13:34). "Love your enemies" too (Matt. 5:44). "Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness" he exhorts us (Matt. 6:33). And so much more.

Yeshua has spoken the words of God. He has clearly taught a wonderful, powerful, pure message. It is now up to us to decide whether we will listen to him or not.