

# *A Fragment.*

*of outside-the-Box stories*

*similar to those found in the Gospel of Matthew.Ish.*

**by Michael J. Kimpan**

Once upon a time, a Jewish king was born. His genetic *bona fides*<sup>1</sup> were in tact, though quite complicated - everyone who *needed* to be included in this royal genealogy most certainly was - Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob... even the great King David - but the difficulty was that some *Others* were included as well<sup>2</sup>.

Such is the Origin Story of the great teacher of Israel, Jesus Christ, the son of god, in whom a voice from the heavens declared to be enthusiastically pleased (and this, *not* while performing the baptism ritual in the Temple - thank G-d!<sup>3</sup> - but rather while he was being dunked downstream in the Jordan river by his cousin, clothed in a camel-hair loincloth).

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<sup>1</sup> Of this *genesis of Jesus*, Harrington writes boldly, 'Matthew 1 answers the question, 'Who Is Jesus?' It establishes Jesus' identity as the Son of David and the Son of God in the context of Jewish history and the Jewish Scriptures. In effect, Jesus embodies the heritage of his people Israel.' (Harrington, Daniel. *The Synoptic Gospels Set Free: Preaching Without Anti-Judaism* Paulist Press, 2009. p. 14)

<sup>2</sup> In addition to the attention given to these 'difficulties' with Matthew's inclusive genealogy is the fulfilled promise of Abraham, found in the person of Jesus - 'Jesus is the one through whom the promise to Abraham for all nations will be fulfilled, and who will be accused of being a friend of Gentiles and sinners.' (Burrige, R. *Four Gospels, One Jesus? A Symbolic Reading* Burrige, Eerdmans, 2005. p.70)

<sup>3</sup> Brian McLaren triggered the genesis of my own outside-the-Box thinking regarding Jesus' baptism in his book, *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?* in which he writes, 'The ceremonial washing in Temple-affiliated baths was, then, a celebration of identity... There was a theological assumption behind this identity: God loves *us* and finds *them* unclean, smelly, disgusting, dirty, unacceptable. The Temple and its baptisms, then, were ritual enactments to bond adherents to this strong-superior identity: *God is hostile to all unclean people, and through our baptism we separate ourselves from all that is unclean.*'

McLaren then asks, 'What would it mean to be baptized in a public place, in a natural river rather than a man-made bath, in running - maybe even muddy - river water? John defines the essential meaning himself: he proclaims not a baptism of conformity but a baptism of repentance, which means a *radical, far-reaching rethinking of everything.*'

(*Ibid.*, 180-183, *emphasis mine*)

It is this '*rethinking of everything*' which is at the heart of the good news of the kingdom - proclaimed by both John and his cousin, Jesus.

***We should have seen it coming.***

With his identity intact and authority in hand, having escaped the slaughter of his innocence [sic] by way of Egypt as a child, he returned to the occupied land of Israel as a man on a mission - not only for himself and his Father, but also for his disciples - the learners, students and followers, those who'd later gather in his name to recall all he had taught them. He sometimes spoke in stories, and other times used sermons, yet always connected with and healed all kinds of people, all the while crossing both cultural and religious boundaries and taboos in his steadfast effort to stand in solidarity with the so-called *Other*.

This 'new Moses' would *expound upon* and *expand* the Law of the Torah, as the seeds of not merely the letters, but the *spirit* of the Law would take root in the soil of the hearts of the hearers, and grow just like the Ivy at Wrigley Field, er... the kingdoms of heaven. Or a treasure in a different kind of field. Or a really, really, *really* expensive pearl. Or leaven. Or a mustard seed. Kind of like mixing baking soda and vinegar. Or something.

*At the appropriate time*<sup>4</sup>, this Messiah went up on top of a mountain and man-handled the Torah - in a way similar to Moses, but...somehow, better. And unlike the Great Prophet, Jesus

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<sup>4</sup> Though in the original text, regarding a specific passage (26:1-2), the wording is important - 'When he sends disciples into the city to prepare a room for the Passover, Jesus announces that his 'time' is at hand - *kairos* in Greek, the critical moment, rather than *chronos*, chronological time.' (Burridge, R. *Four Gospels, One Jesus? A Symbolic Reading* Burridge, Eerdmans, 2005. p. 94) They rather appropriately say timing is everything.

didn't break them<sup>5</sup>. Jesus handled the teachings of the Law like the master potter's hands manipulate clay in order to create a beautiful work of art, or useful new tools with which to live, and enjoy living. His *flippitty-do-dah* way of saying, 'You've heard it said *thusly*...but I say it *that-ly*...' shined as a bright light that could not be hidden - like a *City on a Hill* - illuminating the path toward a greater understanding of the righteousness which all the Law and the Prophets, the Pharisees and scribes, and any other religious leaders had taught up to that point. His discourse, of course, showed us not just a better way to live... but a better way to be.

*And it happened*<sup>6</sup> that he said,

'You've been told God only loves the Chosen [people of Israel];

*But what I AM telling you is, Love chooses Everyone.*

You've been told your righteous deeds will be rewarded by God;

*But what I AM telling you is, God was proud of You before you'd even done anything*<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Moses did, according to the text. *Quite literally*. Regarding the 'letter of the law' of the Torah, I'd suggest Jesus did, too - also according to the text; but did so *better than Moses did*.

Perhaps the 'human face' of Matthew is a fitting portrait, indeed, as the Jesus of this version of good news shows his followers by example how to be better humans - Burridge's 'human face of God' or John's *word made flesh*.

It's the teachings of the Torah with skin and bones. *Emmanuel*.

<sup>6</sup> Again, wording is important (isn't it always?) - 'The phrase 'and it happened' is Greek for the Hebrew *wayhei*, common throughout the Old Testament and traditionally translated as 'and it came to pass.' (Burridge, R. *Four Gospels, One Jesus? A Symbolic Reading* Eerdmans, 2005. p. 76).

This is noted not due to the importance of chronological timing *per se*, but to point out that in the Gospel of Matthew, *references to the Hebrew Scriptures abound* - and many are hidden in plain sight... kind of like the kingdom.

<sup>7</sup> It's interesting to note the *chronology* of the heavenly voice saying, 'This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased,' spoke these identity-affirming and divinity confirming words *prior* to any 'dunamis' - 'mighty acts of power' according to our text, or *dynamic* (or explosive-like, *dynamite*) works on the part of Jesus.

At this point in Matthew's story, Jesus hasn't even gotten through '*the temptations*' yet.

You've been told it's blasphemy against the holy spirit that is unforgivable;

*But what **I AM** telling you is, exclusion of the Other is the very definition of 'blasphemy'.*

You've been told YHVH told Abraham to sacrifice his son as a test of faith;

*But what **I AM** telling you is, old Abe misheard Her<sup>8</sup>.*

Jesus said *loads* of provocative things like this, leaving tid-bits here and there, scattered like the seed of the sower into the hearts and minds of both Jews and Gentiles alike. Whenever we heard him pray out loud, he did so by making a political statement<sup>9</sup>. When asked to teach, whether on a mountain, or on a hill, or in the middle of a field or the corner of a garden, or at the front of our synagogue - even in the middle of having dinner with the so-called 'sinners' - he'd preach the hell out of that sermon. *Seriously*.

Yet of the most dynamic works he ever did, from my perspective, was *the Way* he taught - how he expertly used our sacred texts and traditions, along with our context, to extend the boundaries of our exclusive little Temple cult to include...well, *everybody* - those with only a

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<sup>8</sup> It'd be a laughable irony, but it *is* actually plausible - the character of Abraham was indeed very old at this point in the tale recorded in Genesis, and perhaps old enough to be hard of hearing - even apart from the cultural context of the collective *elohim* from his homeland of Ur, the possibility of *mishearing* a directive from a divinity has incredible consequence for the faith (and this, proven to be true throughout history); regardless, the dominant anthropomorphic view of *God as Father* comes from the patriarchal cultural and religious norms rooted in that same tradition. Perhaps 'God' is a woman after all.

<sup>9</sup> 'The phrase 'father in heaven' may have political resonances. The emperor Augustus claimed the title 'father' (along with 'god,' 'son of god,' and 'savior'); although Tiberius, emperor at the time of Jesus, rejected the title, it had already gained political prominence. By speaking of a 'father in heaven' or 'heavenly father,' Matthew may be making a political statement; the ultimate authority is not the human emperor.' (Newsom, C., Ringe, S., Lapsley, J., et al., *Women's Bible Commentary* Westminster John Knox Press, 2012. p. 470)

Of this I have no doubt.

little faith<sup>10</sup> and those with a lot<sup>11</sup>, and everyone in between. Even the doubters find their place in his ever-expanding kingdom, eventually.<sup>12</sup>

*The good news is, nobody is outside the Box.*

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<sup>10</sup> 'a little faith' or 'little faith' (i.e., as his disciples)

<sup>11</sup> 'great faith' (i.e., the indigenous Canaanite woman. Let us keep in mind the importance of the *land* and its' history according to the Hebrew Scriptures, which includes the genocide of the Canaanite people in the Jewish conquest narratives bearing the name Yeshua, or *Joshua* [for reference - Joshua was Moses' assistant, and after his death led the people of Israel across the Jordan in a military campaign, taking her ancestors' dwelling place as their own 'promised land.' Joshua is also the name of Jesus]; and let us also recall Rahab is in the lineage of Jesus from the word, **Go!**).

The woman insisted she was worthy despite the insult of this Messiah figure essentially calling her 'a bitch' (see *Women's Bible Commentary*, p. 474 - 'The claim that Jesus' response, 'It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs,' was expressed with a smile on his lips is apologetic. Nor does the point that the term for 'dogs' (Gk. *kynaria*) really means 'puppies' or 'household dogs' soften the response ('little bitch' is no nicer than 'bitch'). The designation was not a Jewish term for Gentiles; it was a standard insult, found in Euripides, Aristotle, Quintillian, and others.'

The insistence upon her rights and dignity, along with her request for the miracle of healing must have taken great faith and character indeed.

<sup>12</sup> Though we'll have to wait until the end of John for that story. Or read the *Gospel of Thomas*.