

Rabbi Jesus

Recently, Shlomo Riskin, an American Israeli Orthodox rabbi, came in for sustained attack because he was shown on a Christian Embassy video referring to "Rabbi Jesus". Such was the brouhaha that Rabbi Riskin had to defend himself, claiming not to have praised Jesus. He said, "I never praised the character or the personality of the person in whose name Jews were slaughtered throughout history. If that is how my words were understood, I am disturbed by that understanding and state that that was not my intention at all. I apologize if my words were taken improperly. I related to the historical persona of Jesus, who was not a Christian, did not hate Jews, but was a Jewish and religious person."

Now I mean no offense, but I still need to be convinced that there actually was such a specific person as Jesus. The Gospels were written in Greek, anywhere between 40 to 100 years after his presumed death, and as the late Hyam Maccoby has amply illustrated, their stories contradict each other and the Jewish context of the times. The text in Josephus that refers to him is suspect, and the derogatory hints in the Talmud were written hundreds of years later.

What is certain is that the Dead Sea Scrolls refer to leaders and teachers that sound very similar to the John the Baptist and the Jesus of the Gospels. Except they speak of a generation earlier. In the period leading up to the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70, there were all kinds of sects and charismatic teachers wandering around the Judean countryside teaching and healing. Virtually all the popular teachings attributed to Jesus can be found in earlier popular and proselytizing mainstream Jewish, Pharisaic, teachers such as Hillel.

It seems to me that it was Paul, Saul of Tarsus, who was the founder of Christianity. As he admits, he never met a historical figure and only had his famous vision on the road to Damascus. It would not have been difficult to create a persona as a construct out of a range of popular figures from a previous generation. The genius of Paul was to create a compelling narrative and legend. He borrowed from Judaism and other cultures and selected a range of popular ideas that appealed to a much wider audience in the Roman Empire than the more exacting, divided, and national-based ideology of the Judaism of the time. There have been distinguished Jewish academics, such as the late David Flusser, who have tried to identify Jesus and place him in a Jewish context, and probably this was what Riskin was basing himself on. But I am afraid I remain a skeptic, albeit a sympathetic one.

As we have seen, both within Christianity and within Judaism, it is not difficult to create new religions or variations on existing ones that acquire a mythology, even supernatural support. Mass hysteria can lead to all sorts of visions and mental states. Religion is notoriously good at persuading its followers of almost anything. Think of all the wars that have been waged in the name of God, Jesus, or Muhammad.

The fact is that history is very subjective. Just consider, in our own case, the different perspectives on the Hasmoneans between the Books of the Maccabees and the Talmud. Different people looking at the same "events" can come up with very different interpretations. Myth is not necessarily derogatory. It doesn't only mean "fairy stories"; it can also mean "hallowed traditions" and ways of relating to the world. It can be important in conveying values. It creates symbols and examples appropriate to the different moods and values of religions.

There are different ways of regarding Jesus within Christianity. He is worshipped as God, while others see him as man, and some as an ideal. Just as there are differences in understanding the Koran, as between Shia and Sunni, and opposing ways of looking at King David, for example, in Judaism.

In the end, what emerges from different contexts is a religious culture and way of life that sets out to try to make humans, humanity, and the world a better place. Sadly, its efforts are always hampered by the abuses and misuses with which people succeed in distorting the theory. (But then, I cannot think of any area of human ideology where this does not happen.) And then for a while, a new improved version tries to do things better.

Of course, I agree that there is no objective, archaeological evidence for Moses or Sinai, and that too becomes a matter of faith, intuitive or cognitive. What has and does keep Judaism alive is more a commitment to following God's Law rather than historical facts that are as yet unconfirmed. I suspect this is precisely why the Torah describes Moses as a man of poor speech. His inability to complete the cycle from slavery to freedom in the Land of Israel and the absence of a grave are all to emphasize the priority of the Divine over the human and no one has ever suggested Moses was more than man.

If individuals are inspired by whichever Jesus narrative they feel comfortable with, that is entirely a matter for them. What matters to me is that it should increase the amount of good and spirituality in the world. But I do not see why we Jews should in any way feel obliged to adopt an agenda that is not ours, even if its origins were born, in part, from our tradition. Rabbi Riskin's desire to see Jesus as a good rabbi seems to me to be an unnecessary attempt to curry favor with those he might be enlisting to support his political agenda, rather than his spiritual one. Sadly, I fear he ended up doing more harm than good. As they say in Yiddish, and I translate, "Don't mix in!"