

Jesus
Remembered
at
Christmas



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At the birth of a child no one knows what will happen for or to this newly hatched person, how this little one will turn out. Parents may hope, chance may bless, many may care, or few or none at all. But no one knows what this child will become.

Who was present at Jesus' birth to a poverty stricken family in Nazareth? Scarcely anyone at all. The mother for sure. But nobody, half a century later, would remember any others. That birth was too ordinary and insignificant at the time.

So what to make of the gospel accounts? Matthew and Luke, more than fifty years after Jesus' death, creatively imagined, told and wrote stories of his birth, relocating it to Bethlehem. They placed everyone who came to the manger with hindsight and scriptural reflection, not to record history, but to show how his followers revered him and how he had blessed them.



Who did the writers of these stories know?
Were they fifty years too late to have met Jesus himself?
Were they too late, even, to have met those who knew him?

It is least likely that they knew Jesus himself;
less likely that they had known friends who knew him;
most likely that they had known some who had known others who had been alive with him.

So at best, they had only third-hand memories, memories from among the scattered survivors of the Roman destruction of Galilee and Jerusalem in the late 60s CE.

Everyone knew his origins, how he was born as one of poor outcasts, yet had enriched the lives of so many who still lived in poverty and defeat.

So though no one knew the details of his birth,
yet he had become known and was a blessing to many who knew him.



Even his mother's birth-name for him may not be known.
For the name his friends called him, described what had happened for
him and what he had become for them and for others.

The name we know, 'Jesus' or 'Jesu', remains in the gospels untranslated
in these Latinised Greek forms of Aramaic.¹

How might we translate this name 'Jesus' today?

That depends on how we think of him at this moment,
on whether we know how he understood God,
on whether we have experience of that God,
on whether 'rescuing' is something we know and experience ...

If we had happened upon Jesus or his friends before his death and saw
what they were making of their lives even in dire straits under the routine
brutality of Roman occupied Galilee then we might think of him and his
friends as 'Rescued' or 'Rescuing' (or to reflect the divine hint in
Aramaic, 'Grescued' or 'Grescuing'), and his friends might sometimes
have named him their 'Grescuer'.²

We might learn how his name describes what happened for him:
rescued (by God perhaps) from a most unpromising start
and continuing life situation.

Or we might learn how his name describes what he did along with others:
rescuing (with God perhaps).

Or we might appreciate how others may have regarded him as their
rescuer (with God's help perhaps).



The gospel writers have Jesus ask his friends:
“Who am I? What is my name? Who do you say I am?”

They have his male friends reply with the names of prophets.

But had we been there, we might have heard women tell a different tale.³

One woman friend who knew Jesus directly might have said to him:

“We see you, *Rabboni*, as ‘Rescued’, ‘Grescued’, ‘Godrescued’.
For you like us were destitute, yet you found richness in daily living;
you lived in darkness, but discovered brightness;
you were asleep, but were awakened;
you were crippled, but learnt to stand, to walk, to leap, to dance.
This happened for you,
from a power within you that grew,
a power that was unearned and unexpected,
a gift from the One you learned to call ‘*Abba*’, your Parent,
One as close to you as every breath you take.”

Another of his women friends might say of her own experience:

“We know you as ‘Rescuing’, ‘Grescuing’, ‘Godrescuing’.
For, like you, we existed in abject destitution and you helped us find
richness in daily living;
you brightened the surrounding darkness and we began to see;
we were fast asleep and you awakened us;
we were crippled and you taught us to stand, to walk, to leap, to dance.
This happened for you and for us together, from a power within you
that you awoke within each of us, a power that emerged and grew
within each and among us all, a power we had not known, but that
came as unexpected gift, a gift from the One you taught us to name
‘*Abwoon*’, ‘Our Parent’,
One as close to us as every breath we take.”

And another woman from among those who had not known Jesus but had learnt of him from others after his cruel death:

“Though we never knew him, we think of him as the first ‘Rescuer’, ‘Grescuer’, ‘Godrescuer’. For like him and his friends, we existed in destitution. And his friends – rescued and rescuing, Grescued and Grescuing, Godrescued and Godrescuing – welcomed us as family. They helped us find richness in being alive even in dire straits. We were surrounded by darkness and they opened our eyes. We were fast asleep and were awakened. We were crippled and were taught to stand, to walk, to leap, to dance. This happened for us in the small communities of friends, companions sharing food as he had taught them. They remembered him as ‘Rescued’, ‘Grescued’, ‘Godrescued’. They knew him as ‘Rescuing’, ‘Grescuing’, ‘Godrescuing’, and they themselves had become these names, discovering the power within each and within communities, a power that emerges and grows and sustains, a power once unknown, that came as unexpected and unearned gift, a gift from the One he taught us to know and call ‘Emmanuel’, ‘God-with-us’, ‘Abwoon’, ‘Our Parent’, ‘the One Parent of all the living’. One as close to us as every breath we take.”



But even if his mother had named him ‘Grescued’ at his birth, she could have so named him only in hope. She could not have foretold the outcome of a life born into such poverty.

That is why I say that the gospel writers created the stories with hindsight, using as templates the hopes of the prophets and the story patterns of the births of emperors and kings and gods, to show how highly they regarded him and what he had done for them ...



What can we reimagine from what we find in the gospels?

What could we reconstruct? If we were there with camera phones, what footage might we have captured?

This much perhaps:

- someone who was born to nobodies in a nowhere spot in Galilee called Nazareth, a village of 200-1200 persons;
- a man who, in his early to late twenties, had had a profound awakening that raised him up from the deadness of destitution into rich living, into confidence in God, the One Parent, even though his circumstances remained unchanged;
- one whose awakening and raising he found he could share with others, energizing, enlightening and transforming the way each thought and lived;
- persons previously ignoring or ignorant of one another suddenly recognising themselves as belonging to the family of the One Parent, as companions sharing food, looking out for one another in daily living, but open to newcomers also, recognising any living being as brother or sister within the household of the One Parent, a household that is this earth where all live, though most are unaware of their kinship or of earth as home;
- we might glimpse an elite group of religious leaders (elite in the sense that they were literate and had leisure enough to read and learn scripture, to meet and discuss religious matters). We might watch their first encounter with Jesus and his groups of friends, illiterate outcasts too poor and ignorant to observe strict religious practices. We might see the leaders suddenly surprised at how the inner core of the law and the prophets had blossomed and fruited among such common people, destitute and unfortunate, who were outside the leaders' own religious circle, but for whom they had great compassion but had been unable to help, for they had no idea how to do so.

- we might record how both groups, the religious leaders and the Jesus people, profited from the encounter:
how the leaders found that the ordinary human interactions between people in the Jesus groups were more profoundly religious than their own more restricted and excluding practices; how shocked they were that the Jesus groups fulfilled the hopes of the prophets in the scriptures that the leaders knew well and revered (such as Isaiah 61:1f as recalled in Luke 4:16f); and how the Jesus groups, in welcoming the leaders, learnt from them that the One Parent did not exclude them, but did indeed love every one of them and gift them, and the leaders showed how this had been promised and saw that it had come to pass. The illiterates learnt words and a language to express in story and parable the things that had happened for them. For example the Greek awakening word '*egeiro*' led them to tell stories of blind persons seeing and dead persons coming alive; the Greek raising-up word '*anastasis*' gave them confidence to tell how they could now stand tall before the One Parent and respond to being children of such a Parent by helping all in need and accepting help when in need.



Notes

¹ In Aramaic, Jesus' mother's mother-tongue, the name, '*Jeshuah*' or '*Jehoshuah*', has two roots both meaning 'rescued', 'rescuing', 'rescuer'. One root combines with 'J', a hint of 'JHWH', an English approximation of the four Hebrew letters for the sacred name for God that Jews, for reverence, never speak.

² The words I have coined as an English version for the name 'Jesus' (such as 'Grescued') may feel clumsy. But the jolt and pause this gives might make us aware or remind us how his friends, in so naming him, knew that he (and they) felt 'rescued' and would sometimes acknowledge that 'G[od]' was behind the rescuing.

³ The three who speak here are not indentified with any specific women in the gospels.