

“Anyone with two good ears . . .”

Finding Sayings of Jesus in Surprising Places.

A review article by Gregory C. Jenks

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Tarif Khalidi

The Muslim Jesus. Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.

Martin Palmer (in association with Eva Wong)

The Jesus Sutras. Rediscovering the Lost Scrolls of Taoist Christianity. New York: Ballantine Wellspring, 2001.

Ray Riegert & Thomas Moore (eds)

The Lost Sutras of Jesus: Unlocking the Ancient Wisdom of the Xian Monks. Ulysses Press: Berkeley, CA, 2003.

The hymn writer tells us that “in Christ there is no East or West,” but it can still come as something of a surprise to discover that Arab Muslims and Chinese Taoists have long cherished their own collections of sayings attributed to Jesus.

The books under review here remind us that this is so, and that Jesus has a treasured place in the spiritual wisdom of other religions.

Tarif Khalidi has gathered together several hundred sayings that survive in popular Islamic sources outside the Qur’an. He has arranged them in chronological order, making it easy to identify those that have the longest pedigree.

Some of these Jesus sayings are clearly dependent on the canonical Gospels:

/64/ Jesus said to the disciples, "O disciples, do not cast pearls before swine, for the swine can do nothing with them. Do not impart wisdom to one who does not desire it, for wisdom is more precious than pearls and whoever rejects wisdom is worse than a swine." [mid-ninth century]

Other transform Jesus into a devout Muslim:

/71/ The disciples said, "Christ of God, look at the house of God—how beautiful it is!" He replied, "Amen, Amen, Truly I say to you, God will not leave one stone of this mosque upon another but will destroy it utterly because of the sins of its people. God does nothing with gold, silver, or these stones. More dear to God than all these are the pure in heart. Through them, God builds up the earth, or else destroys it if these hearts are other than pure. [mid-ninth century CE]

For someone with an interest in the history of the ancient Jesus traditions, it is fascinating to find a rich vein of these sayings and stories in a new context. The more important question, however, is what the existence of Muslim Jesus stories tell us about the significance of Jesus for non-Christians.

¹ <http://www.faithfutures.org/JDB/intro.html>

Around the same time as the early Muslim societies were absorbing Christian stories about Jesus into their own life, other Christians had taken their stories about Jesus to a remote location in China.

During the Tang Dynasty some Christian missionaries set up a monastery at the eastern end of the Silk Road. Their teachings are known to us from the Stone Sutra now displayed in the Forest Stone Steles Museum at Xian as well as from a small collection of parchments.

These ancient Christian texts from China seem to reflect the traditions of the Syrian Church, but perhaps not without some considerable influence from Buddhism. These practitioners of the “Luminous Religion” are sometimes labelled “Nestorian” because of that Syrian connection. Palmer prefers to describe them as “Taoist Christians.”

A Hymn to the Trinity of the Luminous Religion gives us a sense of the authentic blending of Syrian and Chinese voices in this Jesus community:

Most Holy One, and Universally Honoured One, Messiah,
We rejoice in the Merciful Father, ocean of hidden mercy,
Most Holy One, and Most Meek One, Pure Wind Character,
Purity and clean is your law, beyond all contradiction.
[from a draft translation by Johan Ferreira]

The provenance and transmission history of these ancient Chinese Christian writings remain to be determined. However, it seems likely that they reveal both a capacity of the Syrian missionaries to enculturate their message for a new context, and also a sustained interest in the World-Honoured One (Jesus) on the part of Chinese Taoists.

Once again, these texts offer us both close parallels to the Gospels and sayings that present Jesus in the local colours of the host culture:

¹The World-Honoured One said, if somebody gives alms, they should do it in the knowledge of the World-Honoured One. ²Let not your left hand know what your right hand is doing. ³Pay no attention to outsiders but worship the One Sacred Spirit. ⁴The One will become visible to you, and then you should worship only the One.
⁵Don't hesitate when you pray. ⁶Ask first for forgiveness for your sins and at the same time forgive those who have sinned against you. ⁷The Heavenly Ruler above will forgive you as you forgive others.
⁸If you have a treasure, do not store it on earth where it can decay or be stolen. ⁹Instead present it to heaven, where it will not rot or be stolen.
[*Jesus Sutras*, p. 60]

In all these cases, careful critical work is needed to assess the value of these materials for a history of the Jesus tradition. Further work is needed to appreciate the ongoing spiritual significance of Jesus in such non-Christian contexts.

Over time, we can anticipate such research being undertaken. In the meantime these texts present us with a timely challenge to our natural assumption that Jesus belongs to us, and that other religions have no claim upon him.

Towards the end of the first century of the Common Era the community of Jesus people that generated the Gospel of John found themselves in a situation where various groups contested their claim to a special knowledge of God in and through Jesus. The continuing community of Torah-observant Jews centred around the local synagogues rejected their claims about Jesus.

Others—such as the Pauline Christians², the Thomas Christians³, and the descendants of the early Q communities centred in the Galilee⁴—contested the interpretation of Jesus held precious in the Johannine communities.⁵

In response to that polyphony of voices claiming to speak in his name, the Johannine Jesus is portrayed as saying: “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” [John 10:16]

Do we have the divine generosity to entertain the possibility that some of those other pens may have Muslim sheep, or Taoist lambs? Have we ears to hear? Or eyes to see?

How might such a tolerant view of other world faiths make a difference in our world?

² These were the churches whose faith and practices reflected the teachings of Paul and his followers. The Pauline Churches came to dominate early Christianity, and writings associated with Paul—including Luke-Acts and Hebrews—comprise the largest single corpus in the New Testament. In this tradition an interpretation of Jesus’ death as a saving sacrifice was the most important element in defining who Jesus was and what he had done for humanity.

³ The Thomas Christians are identified as such because their legacy is perhaps best known to us from the *Gospel of Thomas*. This collection of 114 sayings attributed to Jesus reflects an understanding of Jesus as the Teacher of Holy Wisdom, and has no apparent interest in his death.

⁴ As Galilee was the centre for Jesus’ own ministry and, it seems, for many of his earliest followers, many scholars speak of the early Galilean Christians as the “Q community.” This community is thought to have continued to practise the itinerant healing and preaching work begun by Jesus, and to have played a critical role in preserving the sayings of Jesus known as the *Sayings Gospel Q*.

⁵ The Johannine communities seem to have formed a distinct and self-conscious voice within first century Christianity. They had both a very developed theology and very simple biology for their understanding of Jesus: he was the divine Word made flesh (John 1:1–18) and also the natural son of Joseph and Mary (John 6:42; 7:40–43; 8:39–41).