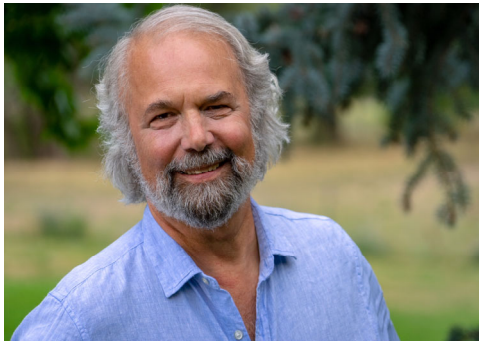


UNCOVERING THE ORIGINAL GOSPEL OF JESUS OF NAZARETH

PULSE OF SPIRIT
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DAVID KARCHERE is a speaker and workshop leader who assists people in renewing their Primal Spirituality—an experience that virtually all human beings know at birth, and that ideally grows as they mature.

This week's *Pulse of Spirit* is an exploration of the original gospel that Jesus of Nazareth brought to the world. The purpose here is not to promote any religious dogma or tradition. It is to understand, as accurately as possible, what he was saying in the context in which he was saying it. But even more importantly, it is to experience its significance to us now.

At 30 years old, Jesus sought out his cousin, John, in the wilderness just north of the Dead Sea, to be baptized by him in the Jordan River. John wore clothes of camel's hair and wore a leather girdle around his hips. He ate wild honey and locusts, thought by some to be carob beans.

We get the impression from the New Testament record that John attracted a large following. Here is the message he gave his followers as recorded in the King James Version of the Bible:

Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Jesus brought the same message to his followers as he initiated his ministry.

What Jesus precisely said, we'll never know. We presume he taught in the common language of the day, Aramaic. Even if he did, and we knew the precise words he used, we are not people of that day with all the cultural context into which he spoke. Nonetheless, in this article, I'll attempt to get back to the original meaning of Jesus' gospel, and how it might have been obscured and distorted through the centuries.

The word that was translated from Latin as *repent* was used in the Latin Vulgate version of the Bible that was commissioned in 382 A.D., only two years after Rome adopted Christianity as its state religion, and approximately 350 years after it crucified Jesus. The word the author, Jerome, used was from the Latin root *poena*, meaning punishment. This is the origin of such words as *penal colony*, *penitentiary*, and *penance*.

The way the human psyche works, if a person associates something hurtful with something loving, they tend to either avoid the loving experience or learn to know love in a hurtful way. That's what has happened to Jesus' message of love. It has implicitly been represented as *Punish yourself. The kingdom of heaven is coming*. So billions of people through the centuries have learned to associate his gospel with pain, even to the extreme of self-flagellation for some. And then, billions of others have avoided Jesus' message altogether because of the way religion has represented it.

Of course, people are free to believe what they choose to believe and practice their religion in any way they want, as long as it doesn't do immediate harm to others. But what I am interested in is this question: *What happens when we remove the punishing insinuation from Jesus' original message of pure love?*

The Latin translation of Jesus' gospel was from the Greek versions of the New Testament that were available. Those versions used a word that was a form of the Greek word *metanoia*, which Merriam-Webster defines as *a transformative change of heart, especially: a spiritual conversion*.

That is a long way from punishment!

It is possible that Jesus spoke in Greek at times. It was the most universal language of the Mediterranean. But Jesus was most often speaking to Jews who spoke Aramaic. So he probably didn't use the word *metanoia*.

Some current Aramaic versions of the New Testament use the word *thubu*. We are left to wonder where the word came from. Sometimes, it is translated as meaning *repent*, going right back to the Latin translation from Greek. In some cases, the word *thubu* is translated into English as *return*. How different does Jesus' gospel sound using that word:

Return: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Aramaic is sometimes considered a sister language to Hebrew, and the word *thubu* sounds like it could be a variant of a Hebrew word, *teshuvah*. In any event, they have similar meanings. And the meaning of the word *teshuvah* must have been familiar and even engrained in Jesus' audience.

Teshuvah appears in some form nearly 1,000 times in the Hebrew Bible. Here is a perspective on the meaning of the word from a contemporary Jewish source.

The Hebrew word teshuvah is typically translated as repentance, suggesting that its objective is to feel regret, guilt, and shame. In truth, the goal of teshuvah is anything but.

Teshuvah means to return. But return where? The Sages have taught over the millennia that the essence of each person is his or her soul. According to Chassidic philosophy, the soul is literally "a part of G-d on high" and is therefore incorruptible and can never truly be blemished by sin. Therefore, when we sin, we are merely losing our way and forgetting who we really are—much like being overtaken by "a temporary state of insanity."

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Every person possesses a core of inherent goodness whose integrity cannot be compromised. While outwardly, one's actions may not always reflect this inner goodness and G-dliness, people always have the ability to shed their superficial facade and do teshuvah—returning to their truest, deepest selves.

Mendel Kalmenson and Zalman Abraham

Considering the cultural context into which he was speaking—a Jewish culture, not a Roman one—

doesn't it seem likely that this is as close as we can get to an understanding of his message in English:

Return: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

It's so easy to corrupt a spiritual teaching. You can make a true statement meaningless and ineffectual with what might seem to be only a slight misinterpretation. So, if you take "at hand" to mean it's coming next year, it means nothing. It has no immediate spiritual relevance. It might be some kind of religious prophecy, but that's different.

Spiritual truth is in the now. When I think of my hand, it is right here now. It is not in tomorrow or a year from now, and not just after you die. It's not just in Rome, Jerusalem, or Mecca. It is right here.

The Greek word translated as *at hand* conveyed *extreme closeness* and *a presence*.

Then think logically about what Jesus might have been saying at the initiation of his ministry. Was he prophesying something that was to come years later? Or after people died? Or was it something that he was immediately aware of, and something that was immediately present for him, and equally available for those he spoke to, and vividly so because it was present in and through him?

We can't "prove" exactly what Jesus meant in the words that were translated as *at hand*. But consider the power of his words when we understand them to mean *right here and now*.

Return: for the kingdom of heaven is here.

To *return* a person has to *turn*. There has to be a spiritual reorientation. *Turn. Allow your hungering and thirsting to be for the experience of the kingdom of heaven.* In other places, Jesus' teaching was to enter into the kingdom of heaven.

Truly I say to you, unless you change and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 18:3, New American Standard Bible

When a person enters the kingdom of heaven in the present moment, they experience themselves differently. They feel creative powers differently than they did prior to that moment. Their hunger and thirst are to love and create, and to imagine a brilliant future.

Even more profound is how a person knows themselves to be when they enter this experience. We experience that dimension of ourselves that is *a part of G-d on high*.

For some people, touching spirituality is a temporary elevation of their human experience. Jesus seems to have been inviting something far more radical—entering a state of consciousness that becomes the dominant way you see the world.

This is what I invite anyone reading these words to experience. *Turn, and then enter the gates. Cross the threshold to know yourself on the other side of that threshold. Know the dimension of the Creator that you are, that you have been born to express through your human experience. Know the powers of the Creator that you have.*

And what are those powers of the Creator? We could think of many things. You look out and see the power to move the tides, birth species, or carve landscapes. But what are the powers of Creation that we have that are relevant to the human world?

We have the power to love another human being. We have the power to love unconditionally and wholeheartedly. When we cross the threshold and enter the kingdom of heaven, we inherit the power of divine love for all people, and for ourselves.

We inherit the power of the Creator to surround another human being—to enfold them with positive energy, to make a space for them, and a home for them in our heart.

You inherit the power to bring the activating spirit of life to another human being—to radiate a positive energy that uplifts and brings joy.

Return: for the kingdom of heaven is here.

Change and become like a child. Enter the kingdom of heaven.

Know that dimension of yourself that is part of God on high.

*David Karchere
dkarchere@emnet.org
Sunrise Ranch
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