

The Strange Story of Yeshua Bar-Yosef

Jonathan Gallagher

Yeshua Bar-Yosef was born many, many years ago. This most unremarkable fact is nothing out of the ordinary, since his family situation, social status, and way of life attract no comment. One man among so many others, the chief characteristic of Yeshua Bar-Yosef was his ordinariness. No-one special, not important, not distinctive, he was just another face in the crowd. In fact, if you had been living at that time, you would surely have passed him by on the street without a second look.

We have no idea of his looks, aside from the fact that he was not particularly striking. We know almost nothing about his home background or family life, and apart from one visit away from home we have no details of his formative years. His parents left no memoirs, no interesting stories, no descriptions of their relationship with him. As a story-line for a biography the information is very sketchy.

Yeshua Bar-Yosef spoke the common language of his time and place; he was no literary man and has left no writings; he received no formal training or higher education that we know of. He spent most of his life in manual work, an unremarkable village craftsman living at subsistence level. Like the vast majority of his contemporaries he was poor, one hard-pressed peasant among all the rest.

Nor was he regarded as anyone important by contemporary chroniclers, indeed he is hardly mentioned at all. For all practical purposes we may consider him a non-person among the mass of insignificant humanity who ever trod the earth. Unknown and unnoticed by the vast majority of those living at the time, Yeshua Bar-Yosef lived and died in a small country far from the center of power, a man from a backwater place that merited little attention from the rich and powerful.

So why mention him? If he was just another poor peasant in a world whose history is not made by peasants, if he was just another insignificant nonentity among the “monotonous moils of strained, hard-pressed humanity,” so what? If he was just one of those who make up the faceless millions, so what? Just one among the billions of humanity—what has he do with us?

What indeed? Aside from the fact we know his name, his presence on this earth seems to parallel all those unknown men and women who have lived and died without being noticed; who have been ignored by the vast majority their contemporaries as unimportant in the significant matters of history; who are viewed as nobodies by those people who believe they are the ones who matter.

In fact, the only reason I can tell you his name is because there exist a few highly “biased” accounts of his life and work, which give a brief account of his ideas and actions. These records were written down some time afterwards, in some cases long after his death, and their claims are uncorroborated by independent observers. They describe Yeshua Bar-Yosef in ways that would be considered unusual by many, and they work from an assumption that most historians or

biographers would consider invalid; and there have been numerous challenges to the accuracy of their information. I might also add that all these documents were written down in a different language to that used by Yeshua Bar-Josef (so everything is a translation) and that the documents are copies—no originals are known.

Knowing this makes the story of Yeshua Bar-Yosef the more remarkable. For although he was all of the “non-things” of this world—he was not a king, not a scholar, not a wealthy man, not a philosopher, not a general, not a politician, not a writer; nor did he live very long, nor did he speak with great oratory, nor did he achieve fame or notoriety in any widespread way—in spite of all this, he was recently voted the greatest man who ever lived, the man who has had the greatest influence on the thought and practice of humanity, the most famous man of all time. This is truly amazing for an individual who was practically unknown in his own time, who gave his message to the world in three short years, and who was killed with the blessing of contemporary political and religious leaders.

A man among men. Hardly known outside of his home locality during his lifetime. Not considered in any way a major historical figure, barely mentioned in historical accounts. Some seriously doubt he ever existed because there is so little “hard evidence.” Even in the records that do exist we have his name, some family genealogy, the circumstances of his birth, a childhood incident—and that’s it. Hardly enough to write any meaningful biography with such meager facts about his human background.

That’s all. Yeshua Bar-Yosef. Yeshua. As the records translate it, Iesus. Or as we would call him, Jesus.

A man so special that his specialness is all but invisible to those who look. For although others may have called him Yeshua Bar-Yosef, he took for himself another name. He called himself Bar-Nasha. The Son of man. Not the son of Joseph, but the son of all humanity, just a man.

Just a man? Meaning what, exactly?

The Aramaic word *barnasha* was used as a common expression for “a man,” mankind generally. If you were going to tell a story that began “there once was a man,” you’d say “there once was a *barnasha*.” Or as the Greek of the New Testament puts it, “A certain man...” Just a man, a member of the human race, a human being. That is Jesus’ chosen self-identification—eighty times in the gospels Jesus refers to himself by that expression:

“The Son of man came to search for and to save those who are lost.” Luke 19:10 FBV. “The Son of man has nowhere even to lay down his head.” Luke 9:58 FBV. “Who do people say the Son of man is?” Matt. 16:13 FBV.

Barnasha—Jesus is the Son of man. He identifies with us in our humanity. He does not claim anything more than being a man among men, a type of the whole race. In Hebrew the term is *ben adam*—son of Adam, and Adam means man. Not only were Cain, Abel and Seth “*ben adam*,” sons of Adam. We too are sons of Adam. Jesus also was a son of Adam, a “Son of man.”

Son of man means man—the Psalmist uses this in his parallelism: “What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?” Psalm 8:4 NIV. When God speaks to Ezekiel, over and over (in fact 93 times!) he uses the term “son of man,” emphasizing man’s feebleness in contrast to God’s greatness.

So Jesus calls himself Son of man. But though he is human, he is more than just a man. Jesus used the title “Son of man” knowingly—for that title also meant a divine figure:

“In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” Daniel 7:13, 14 NIV.

The Son of man is reflective of Messianic expectations—and Jesus knows this. By using this term in reference to himself Jesus calls attention and invites investigation. By using the term Son of man Jesus not only identifies himself as “just a man,” but also the apocalyptic Son of man, the future figure of divine intervention. This was a double-edged sword, for with the development of the “Son of man” concept (for example in the apocryphal Book of Enoch) this becomes associated with a nationalistic messiah who will come in triumph to deliver his people from oppression and foreign domination. The gospels reveal this expectation of the people, in sharp contrast to the true nature of Jesus as Messiah.

Though Jesus as divine Son of man denies the political and nationalistic perversions of messiahship, he emphasizes the cataclysmic and eschatological aspects of the coming of the Son of man:

“But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” “For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.” “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory.” Matt 26:64, 24:27, 25:31 NIV.

Jesus is the glorious, divine being; the Messiah, the Son of man.

Yet—and here is something the disciples just could not understand—this Son of man is also a tragic, suffering figure. “Then Jesus started to teach them that the Son of man would have to suffer a great deal and would be rejected by the national leaders, chief priests, and religious teachers—and be killed, and three days later would rise again.” Mark 8:31 FBV. “As you know, the Passover is two days away—and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.” Matt. 26:2 NIV. “The Son of man has to suffer greatly and be humiliated.” Mark 9:12 FBV.

The Son of man is not only the glorious, divine being. He is also the suffering servant, the man going to his death at the hands of men. This idea was an incomprehensible shock to his Jewish listeners, and is a primary reason why the disciples failed to understand Jesus’ message of his

impending death. That the Son of man should be killed was utterly unthinkable. But he was, and by using this title, Jesus summed up the whole meaning and purpose of his life and ministry.

Interestingly, at the end, just before *barnasha* Jesus reveals the completeness of his love, humanity is called on to choose. Pilate asks the crowd, “Do you want me to release the King of the Jews to you?” But they shout back, “No, not him, but Barabbas.” See John 18:39. Instead of the Son of man, we want Bar-abbas, meaning literally, “son of father.” Barabbas is the son of our father. We are Barabbas, our father’s children. And as Jesus told those who rejected him, you are of your father the devil...

The choice still needs to be made. Who do we choose—Barabbas, or *barnasha*.

For *barnasha* Jesus was:

- Human. He was a true son of Adam. He fully entered into the human situation.
- The type of man, the representative of man, the consummation of humanity. The second adam.
- The promised messiah, the divine being coming to save his people. Christ.
- The suffering servant, the one who would be killed, the crucified. The savior of the world.
- Son of man, and yet also Son of God. For he revealed God as only God can...

So although the life of Yeshua Bar-Yosef went unrecorded by those who thought they knew what was important, those who believed and understood wrote down as men inspired all that is necessary for us also to trust and believe in this saving Son of man. Although we can only say that history indicates he lived in Judea and died under Pontius Pilate, the truth is that we see a man who was both man and more than a man—God Himself.

Jesus the Son of man means that God identifies with us humans! We are revealing to the whole universe the issues in the cosmic conflict. In our decisions we are a spectacle to angels and to humanity, illustrating God’s answers. For we as human beings are the ones to whom he came—to live among us and to die at our hands, to reveal who we are and who we can become, to save us from ourselves and to re-create us in the image of God once again. To be family, at one, forever.

Thanks to God, who came simply as the Son of man, who chose to allow himself to be called, Yeshua Bar-Yosef.

-end-

© Jonathan Gallagher 2008