

The twelve things Jesus most likely said

By Rex Weyler

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During the twentieth century, a virtual industry has grown up around the quest to identify an authentic, historical Jesus. Was Jesus a real person? Which stories about him might be true? Which words attributed to him did he actually speak?

Scholars such as John Dominic Crossan (*The Historical Jesus*), Bruce Chilton (*Rabbi Jesus*), Elaine Pagels (*The Gnostic Gospels*), and academic associations, including the Jesus Seminar and Jesus Project, have led this quest. The search has been aided by the discovery of early gospel manuscripts and previously unknown texts that provide accounts of Jesus.

Archeologists have discovered most new manuscripts in Egypt, including the Gospels of Thomas, Mary, and Philip. Fourth century Roman authorities purged gospels by the Ebionites, Nazoreans, and others, which survive only in attacks by their detractors, but nevertheless provide evidence regarding the words of Jesus.

Historical triage

Ancient texts refer to an historical “Yeshua,” meaning “God’s deliverance” in Aramaic, the language of Jesus and his followers. This name became “Iesous” in Greek and “Jesus” in sixteenth century England. Historians remain uncertain which stories reflect a real person, but many impartial scholars believe that the textual references and distinctive tone in his message suggest an historical Jesus, even if history has been mixed with legend.

To determine authentic Jesus sayings, scholars use a triage strategy. Some statements – love your enemy, do to others as you would have them do to you – echo proverbs common to virtually all first century cultures, and which Jesus could have heard from his mother or a wise uncle.

Secondly, writers in later centuries attributed Persian, Egyptian, and Greek sayings to Jesus, often bearing telltale words or references typical of later sources, not the voice of a Galilean, Aramaic Jesus. Other sayings, however, particularly those that reflect a distinctive voice and consistent message, appear genuine.

Original voices

Manuscript scholars today believe the gospel writers relied on earlier sources, anthologies of sayings collected by Jesus followers between 30 and 60 AD. The most prominent of these is the Thomas collection, discovered in Egypt, comprising 114 sayings attributed to Jesus, many appearing in later narrative gospels.

Likewise, some 200 verses from the Luke and Matthew gospels are so similar that they can only be explained if one writer copied from the other or if they both copied from a common source. Because of inconsistencies between the two gospels, most scholars believe the Luke and Matthew authors copied the parallel verses from a sayings collection, known as “Quelle” in German, meaning “source,” commonly called the “Q” sayings.

Finally, Luke and Matthew often disagree on events, but when they do agree, they follow Mark, suggesting they used Mark as a source. The earliest manuscripts of Mark employ primitive construction and Aramaic phrases indicating that Mark, not Matthew, was the earliest narrative account, likely composed between 70 and 80 AD.

To determine authentic Jesus sayings, scholars give special emphasis to these three early texts – the Thomas and Q collections and the earliest known Mark manuscripts. We might reasonably ask, therefore: Do any sayings appear in all three of these early sources? The answer is yes, there are twelve.

The core message

Jesus wrote nothing, making it impossible to prove definitively which words he may have spoken. Nevertheless, we can put the following twelve sayings in a special category as core ideas that a historical Jesus likely expressed. Language varies among the three sources, so the most likely original version is quoted here.

1. **Seek and find:** “Seek and you will find.” (Thomas 92)
2. **The hidden revealed:** “There is nothing hidden that will not be revealed.” (Thomas 5, 6)
3. **The mustard seed:** “The kingdom ... is like a mustard seed. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it falls on prepared soil, it produces a large plant and shelter for birds of the sky.” (Thomas 20)
4. **Kingdom here:** “The kingdom ... will not come by watching for it. It will not be said, ‘Look, here!’ or ‘Look, there!’ Rather the Father’s kingdom is spread out upon the earth, and people don’t see it.” (Thomas 113)

These four sayings comprise the starting point, a distinctive new message to first century peasants. The sayings imply that knowledge begins with personal seeking, not social convention. In Jewish tradition, the “kingdom of God” conveyed a promise that a just ruler, sent by God, would free common people from foreign oppression. But Jesus turns this dream back onto the seeker.

Spiritual knowledge starts with self-awareness, something small, like a mustard seed, but it grows and becomes useful to others. In this kingdom, self-reflection is not simply a private matter, but the beginning a public matter. The kingdom is “spread out upon the earth,” an invitation to look beyond one’s self.

5. **Don’t hide your light:** “No one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket or in a hidden place. Rather, one puts it on a lampstand so that all who pass will see its light.” (Thomas 33)

6. **Action not ritual:** “You’ll know who they are by what they produce. Since when do people pick grapes from thorns or figs from thistles?” (Matthew 7:16)

7. **A public mission:** Instructions vary but generally include “no knapsack, no spending money,” “cure the sick,” stay at “whichever house you enter,” and “eat what they serve.” (Thomas, Mark, Luke).

The historical Jesus suggests that after discovering the light within, one should speak out and prove one’s knowledge with action, not ritual. He sends his followers out, not to preach doctrine, but to cure and help people.

8. **The rich get richer:** “To those who have, more will be given, and from those who don’t have, even what they do have will be taken away.” (Mark 4:25)

9. **First and Last:** “The last will be first and the first last.” (Q, Matthew 20:16)

Jesus primarily spoke to destitute peasants. His earliest Jewish followers called themselves “ebionim,” the “poor ones.” He empowered them to help create the kingdom on earth by healing the sick and sharing what they had. The Ebionites believed that they created the “presence” of Jesus through acts of compassion. The rich may get richer, but public compassion creates heaven on earth.

The last three among the twelve core sayings appear more cryptic:

10. **A strong person’s house:** “One can’t enter a strong person’s house and take it by force without tying his hands.” (Thomas 35).

The author of Mark associates this saying with demon exorcism, but it may suggest the seeker’s personal struggle. The “strong person” a seeker must overcome may refer to one’s own pride.

11. **Blaspheming the spirit:** “Whoever utters a word against the son of Adam (humanity) will be forgiven, but whoever blasphemes against the holy spirit won’t be forgiven.” (Q: Luke 12:10).

Many scholars doubt this saying comes from Jesus, although J. D. Crossan believes it does. A second century manual of Christian instructions, Didache, uses this saying to rebuke those who restrict “inspired speech,” meaning individual expressions of spirit.

Finally, among the twelve sayings appearing in all three earliest accounts – Thomas, the Q verses, and the original Mark manuscripts – we find this:

12. **Unity moves mountains:** “When you make the two into one, you will become children of Adam (human), and when you say, ‘Mountain, move,’ it will move.” (Thomas 106)

This widely attested maxim parallels common lore, but with a distinctive Jesus twist. First century religious seekers frequently debated the unity or duality of spirit and matter. Plato had hypothesized that that matter was a corrupted manifestation of heavenly spirit, classic “dualism.” Others, such as Thales in Greece taught that spirit existed within nature, thus “unity.” In several early sayings, Jesus appears to agree with the unity position: Make the two into one, unite male and female.

The idea that “faith moves mountains” is a Paul adaptation (1 Corinthians, 13:2), not Jesus language. In the original Jesus saying, awareness of unity, not faith, moves mountains. Jesus appears to say that when we discover spirit or the light within, we dispel duality. Matter and spirit are one. The tiny seed of wisdom grows into compassion and influences the world.

A real, historical Jesus, the Galilean Yeshua, likely walked the earth two thousand years ago, even if later stories merged legend and history. He encouraged his listeners to look within, discover the light inside, and share that light with the world. Regardless of the vagaries of history, this message of self-reflection and public generosity still might inspire us today.

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