

TURNING WINE INTO WATER: TOM HARPUR
AND THE “RE-MYTHOLOGIZATION” OF THE GOSPELS

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Introduction

Canadian author Tom Harpur recently published his latest book, *Water into Wine: An Empowering Vision of the Gospels*, a follow-up to his best-selling book, *The Pagan Christ*. *Water into Wine* is not exactly a sequel to *The Pagan Christ*, as there is less emphasis on the pagan origins of Jesus; it is more of a devotional commentary on the Gospels based on the claims made in *The Pagan Christ*. Harpur seems to see himself as the pastor of the unchurched, the chaplain of those who have given up on organized religion.¹ Therefore, this latest book is designed to help the reader to apply the principles of *The Pagan Christ* to a radical re-reading of the Gospels.

1. *Improvements*

It must be confessed that Tom Harpur is a talented author, able to communicate effectively, perhaps as a result of years of writing religion columns in the *Toronto Star*. Harpur is passionate about his material and readers who already accept his views will be strengthened in their beliefs.

There are some improvements in this book over *The Pagan Christ*. First of all, *Water into Wine* is much easier to follow than *The Pagan Christ*. *The Pagan Christ* seemed to present a barrage of information and it was often difficult to trace how one section

1. Harpur, *Water into Wine*, 219–21, gives pastoral advice to those who accept his vision of spirituality in his conclusion.

related to another. Since *Water into Wine* is loosely based on the traditional chronology of Jesus' life, it has a much more logical flow.

Secondly, in *The Pagan Christ*, Harpur relied heavily on two older writers, Gerald Massey and Alvin Boyd Kuhn, whose scholarship is questionable.² In *The Pagan Christ*, there are 18 books by Massey and Kuhn in the bibliography and 107 references to them listed in the index. In *Water into Wine*, however, there are no books by Massey and Kuhn in the bibliography and only five references to them in the index. Perhaps Harpur realized these authors' lack of credibility, and saw that they do not strengthen his argument.³ Replacing Massey and Kuhn as inspiration are Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung and literary professor Harold Bloom, Joseph Campbell continuing his important influence from *The Pagan Christ*.

2. Methodological Problems

There are many problems with *Water into Wine*, apart from any theological differences between orthodox Christians and followers of the Cosmic Christ spirituality. Throughout the book, Harpur continues to claim that there is no historical evidence for the existence of Jesus Christ. Harpur rejects any historical credibility for the Gospels, claiming that they are simply a metaphor of one's own spiritual journey, to be interpreted allegorically (p. 20).⁴ Although those who do not accept the reality of the

2. Problems with the theories of Massey and Kuhn are discussed in Porter and Bedard, *Unmasking the Pagan Christ*, 25–45.

3. Although he is not often mentioned by name, Kuhn's influence in particular can still be seen. On p. 121 Harpur speaks of communion as a time to "re-member." Kuhn, *Rebirth*, 203, taught that communion was about the dismembering of the god in the distribution of the elements and then the response of the follower in re-membering; cf. Porter and Bedard, *Unmasking the Pagan Christ*, 37–38. On pp. 188–90, while acknowledging the historicity of Pontius Pilate, Harpur offers an allegorical interpretation of his name, following Kuhn's teaching. (Kuhn, *Rebirth*, 204; cf. Porter and Bedard, *Unmasking the Pagan Christ*, 36).

4. In a recently reprinted interview with Albert Einstein, who is popularly believed to have been one of the most brilliant people in the last century,

supernatural may object to the presence of miracles and see in them evidence for the mythological nature of the story as a whole, it must be noted that many ancient histories included supernatural signs while assuming the general historicity of the story.⁵ Harpur also claims that Paul had no knowledge of a historical Jesus or his teachings (pp. 20–21), despite the evidence presented by numerous scholars of references to the historical Jesus in Paul’s writings.⁶ The fact is that there is an abundance of evidence for the existence of Jesus, everything from the Gospels themselves, to Paul’s letters, to Josephus and numerous other secular writers of the first and second centuries.⁷

It is at the meeting of the mythological and historical that Harpur seems to stumble. He would like to argue that there are the Gospels, which are pure myth and allegory, and the letters of Paul, a real person who preached a Gnostic-type spirituality. However, problems develop when the mythological and the historical overlap. One problem concerns James, the brother of Jesus. How can James, whom Harpur accepts as historical, be the brother of an allegory? Harpur explains that the use of “brother” with regard to James is similar to the way believers often call each other “brother” or “sister” today (p. 23). Yet that logic fails if Jesus is simply the symbol of the divinity within each human. There is no analogy, ancient or modern, to people referring to their own divine soul as a “brother.”

Harpur also struggles with what to do with Peter. Interpreting the twelve disciples as a reference to the zodiac, Harpur takes the

Einstein replied to a question about his belief in a historical Jesus with these words: “Unquestionably! No one can read the Gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus. His personality pulsates in every word. No myth is filled with such life” (Isaacson, “Einstein and Faith,” no pages).

5. Suetonius describes how a man had been thrown by a supernatural being out of the room that had been Augustus’s nursery as a baby. (Suetonius, *Aug. 6*, cited from *The Twelve Caesars*, 55).

6. Porter and Bedard, *Unmasking the Pagan Christ*, 121–24; Kim, “Sayings”; Bedard, “Paul and the Historical Jesus,” 9–22.

7. Porter and Bedard, *Unmasking the Pagan Christ*, 105–44. Cf. Bruce, *Jesus and Christian Origins*.

Twelve as being mythological,⁸ including Peter (pp. 66–70). What then is to be done with the book of Acts? Acts is basically divided into the ministry of Peter and the ministry of Paul. Why would Luke blend the actions of a mythological figure and those of a historical church leader? What also is to be done with Paul's interaction with Peter and John (another of the supposedly mythic Twelve) in Gal 2:9? The problem is that there is no clear division in the Bible between a mythical Jesus and his Twelve and a historical Paul or James. Their ministries blend into one another, since all of them are presented as historical figures.

One of the things Harpur attempts with *Water into Wine* is to bring modern relevance to the ancient Gospels. He seems to assume that taking the Gospels as historically valuable leaves them irrelevant to modern readers, being only the experience of one man's life two thousand years ago. By interpreting the stories allegorically, Harpur seeks to breathe new life into them. However, the church has never presented the Gospels simply as ancient history. For thousands of years, preachers have attempted to close the gap by applying the principles found in the biblical stories to the experiences of the congregation. Most biblical interpreters acknowledge the presence of symbols and types in the Gospel stories. Jesus did not wither the fig tree in Matt 21:19 and parallels simply because he could. Christians who accept the historicity of the Bible acknowledge that this was also a symbol of what would happen to Israel.⁹ Some of Harpur's allegorical interpretations are modified versions of applications found in many modern sermons. For example, Harpur argues that the feeding of the five thousand in Matt 14:13–21 and parallels represents our spiritual hunger, for which God provides spiritual nourishment (pp. 118–19). Despite Harpur's use of pagan symbolism, a similar application could be made from this story without denying its original historicity.

Some of Harpur's allegorical interpretations are quite extreme, however. Interpreting the presence of both the donkey

8. First Corinthians 15:5 demonstrates that the Twelve were historical and accepted as so early in church tradition.

9. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 421.

and the colt in Matthew's version of the triumphal entry (Matt 21:1–7), Harpur suggests the possibility of a reference to reincarnation (pp. 169–70). This is not just to the traditional Eastern view of reincarnation. Harpur suggests that even Eastern mystical beliefs must be rethought: “With physicists today talking about parallel universes and astrophysicists describing trillions upon trillions of teeming galaxies beyond our wildest imagination, surely it is time the old doctrine of reincarnation was interpreted anew?”¹⁰ Harpur offers the idea that people may be reincarnated, not again on earth, but on new and higher planes of existence.¹¹ As interesting as this may be, these radical interpretations are not necessary for the Gospel accounts to be made relevant to modern readers.

Speaking of reincarnation, as in *The Pagan Christ*, Harpur attempts to use Origen as an example of a Church Father who understood the non-historical and spiritual nature of the Bible. Obviously Origen did embrace allegorical interpretation, but the claim that he rejected the historical value of the Bible is unfounded.¹² Harpur once more brings Origen into the discussion, this time claiming his support for belief in reincarnation (p. 170). Although Harpur does not cite the source, this view of Origen is based on the book *Reincarnation in Christianity* by the Theosophist Geddes MacGregor, who argued that Origen wrote on reincarnation but that those texts have been destroyed, leaving no extant evidence.¹³ That this is unlikely is demonstrated by Origen's comments on the relationship of John the Baptist to Elijah. He explicitly denies that John is Elijah reincarnated: “In this place it does not appear to me that by Elijah the soul is spoken of, lest I should fall into the dogma of transmigration, which is foreign to the church of God, and not handed down by the

10. Harpur, *Water into Wine*, 170.

11. Harpur, *Water into Wine*, 170–71, offers the “many mansions” of John as possible evidence.

12. Origen explicitly speaks against those who reject the historical core of the gospel in *De Principiis* 4.1.19. Cf. Porter and Bedard, *Unmasking the Pagan Christ*, 149–52.

13. MacGregor, *Reincarnation in Christianity*, 58.

Apostles, nor anywhere set forth in the Scriptures” (*Commentary on Matthew* 13.1).¹⁴

There are also some difficulties with Harpur’s treatment of Judas, the disciple who betrayed Jesus. Not surprisingly, Harpur deals with the recent publication of the *Gospel of Judas*, as its Gnostic nature is in line with Harpur’s own spiritual vision (pp. 180–82). Harpur seems to see the *Gospel of Judas* as being valuable, especially for how it challenges orthodox presuppositions with its positive portrayal of Judas. Yet when Harpur gets to his allegorical interpretation of Judas, he makes him represent the shadow aspect of our spiritual experience manifested in disappointments and betrayals (pp. 182–83). There is a certain lack of consistency in accepting both the Gnostic positive Judas and the allegorical negative Judas. Harpur also attempts to blame the portrayal of Judas in the Gospels as the cause of Christian crimes against Jews, since the Greek words for “Judas” and “Jew” sound alike (pp. 179–82). The problem with interpreting Judas as a codeword for the Jews is that the name is also used for one of Jesus’ brothers (Mark 6:3) and we later find the brothers as important figures in the early church (Acts 1:14).

As Harpur rightly acknowledges, many Christian apologists rely on 1 Cor 15:1–8 as the earliest account of Jesus’ resurrection (p. 202). Harpur himself once relied on this passage as the basis for his former semi-orthodox position, but has since come to reject it as authentic. Harpur cites a number of pieces of evidence that demonstrate the non-historical nature of 1 Cor 15:1–8. First of all, the Corinthian passage lacks a number of details that are found in the later Gospel accounts. But it is difficult to understand how later writings can disprove an earlier account, especially with just a difference in detail rather than a contradiction. Harpur also points out a lack of specific information, such as where and when, that he would expect in a historical account. This does not prove what Harpur is trying to demonstrate. If a modern preacher mentioned the 9/11 attack, without any reference to New York city, the World Trade Center, terrorism, Al-Qaeda, or Osama Bin Laden, most people would be

14. Cf. Origen, *Commentary on John*, 6:4.

able to fill in the details because it was a defining moment in recent history. In the same way, not every reference to the resurrection would need to supply all the details, as most Christians would be familiar with the story because it was the defining moment in Christian history. Finally, Harpur notes that in 1 Cor 15:8, when Paul refers to his own experience of seeing Jesus, he uses the Greek word *opthe* (pp. 203–4).¹⁵ It makes sense that Paul would change the word for “seeing” in that the earlier part of the pericope, which belongs to an older tradition, is now being augmented by Paul’s own experience. Harpur’s argument is that this Greek word is the one that is used in the pagan mystery religions. While this word can be used for a mystical experience, it has other natural uses as well (e.g. Acts 7:26; Matt 9:30) and in no way requires an inner vision or dream unrelated to reality.

Conclusion

Tom Harpur will continue to remain a popular writer on religion in Canada, especially among those who have become disillusioned with the traditional church. Harpur calls for repentance of the sins of the church and a determination to experience true spirituality rather than empty ritual. While this aim is admirable, the sins of the church do not include a historical interpretation of the Bible and true spirituality is not incompatible with belief in a physical and historical Jesus of Nazareth.

Water into Wine, like its predecessor *The Pagan Christ*, is filled with inconsistencies, factual errors, forced arguments, and hasty conclusions. While the Church always needs new reflection and understanding of its nature and its relationship with Jesus Christ, this reflection can find more than enough room in the historic orthodox Christian faith that includes a historical Jesus who is both Christ and Lord. Rather than improving the Christian faith, Tom Harpur has attempted to take something powerful and turn it into something weak and inoffensive, he has literally attempted to turn wine into water.

15. The Greek word in 1 Cor 15:8 is ὄφθη, more usually transliterated *ōphthē*.

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