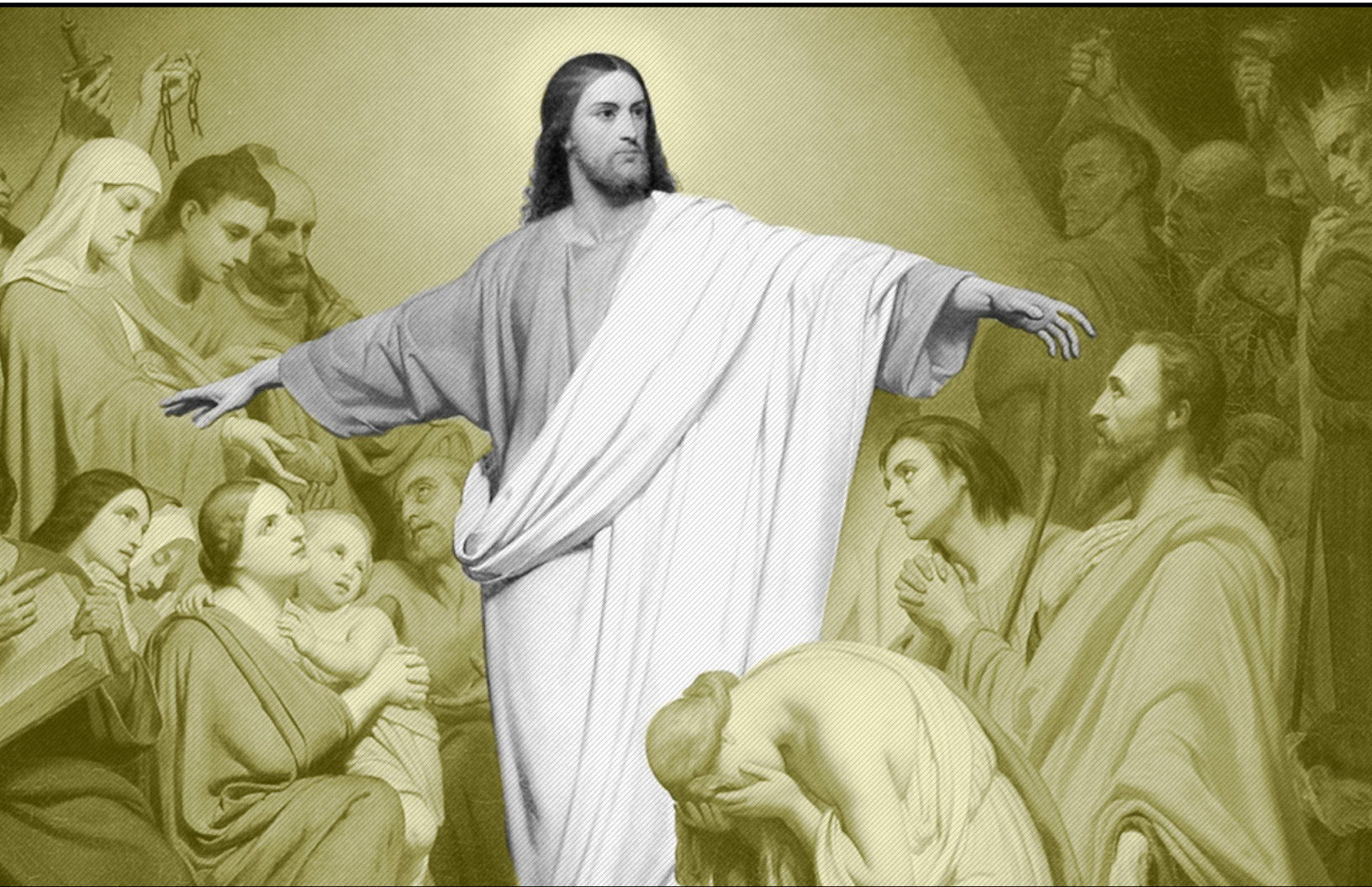


CHRISTIAN HISTORY

The Life & Times of Jesus



Did You Know?

Ted Olsen

Galilean Rabbi or Universal Lord?

N.T. Wright

A Gallery – Select Circle

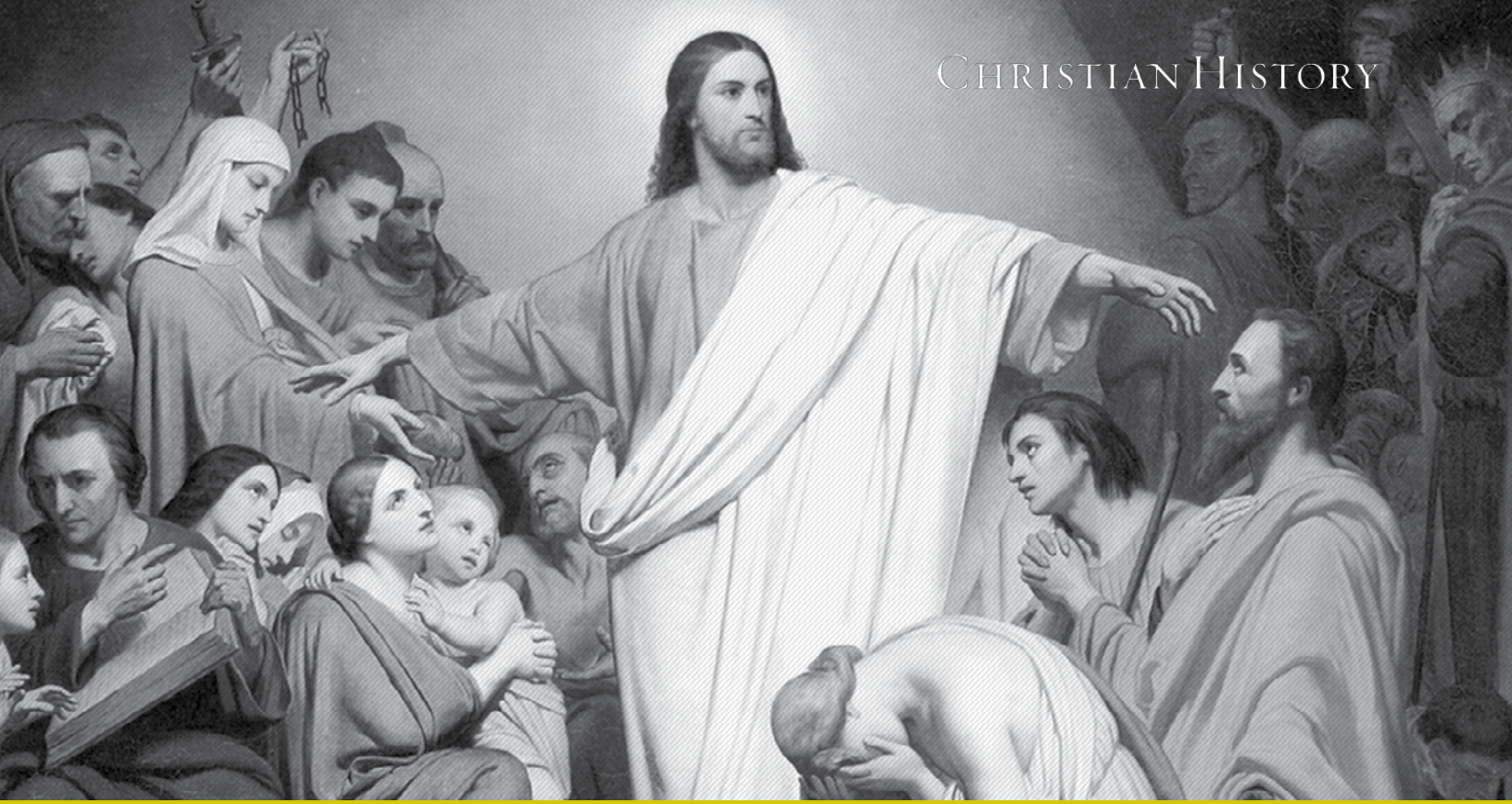
Stephen Miller

Crisis in the Middle East

Craig A. Evans

Primary Sources

Ben Witherington III



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The Life & Times of Jesus of Nazareth:

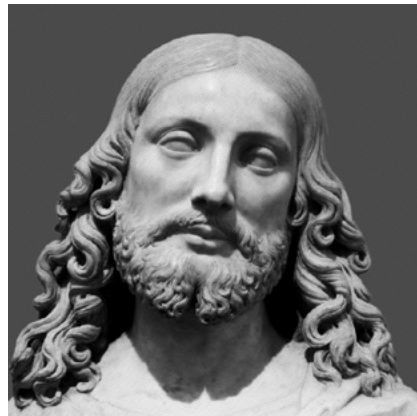
Did You Know?

The population of Palestine in Jesus' day was approximately 500,000 to 600,000 (about that of Vermont, Boston, or Jerusalem today). About 18,000 of these residents were clergy, priests and Levites. Jerusalem was a city of some 55,000, but during major feasts, could swell to 180,000.

Children in Jesus' day played games similar to hopscotch and jacks. Whistles, rattles, toy animals on wheels, hoops, and spinning tops have been found by archaeologists. Older children and adults found time to play, too, mainly with board games. A form of checkers was popular then.

Tradesmen would be instantly recognizable by the symbols they wore. Carpenters stuck wood chips behind their ears, tailors stuck needles in their tunics, and dyers wore colored rags. On the Sabbath, these symbols were left at home.

The second commandment forbade "graven images," so there are few Jewish portraits showing dress at the time. Also because of this prohibition, the Jews produced little in the way of painting, sculpture, or carvings. The masonry and carpentry of the day appear utilitarian. One notable exception to the commandment seems to be the tolerance of dolls for children.



At the two meals each day, bread was the main food. The light breakfasts—often flat bread, olives, and cheese (from goats or sheep)—were carried to work and eaten at mid-morning. Dinners were more substantial, consisting of vegetable (lentil) stew, bread (barley for the poor, wheat for the rich), fruit, eggs, and/or cheese. Fish was a common staple, but red meat was reserved for special occasions. Locusts were a delicacy and reportedly taste like shrimp. (Jews wouldn't have known

that, however, since shrimp and all other crustaceans were “unclean.”)

Only those in the tribe of Levi could be priests, but they had to be free from any physical blemishes, infirmities, or defects. Actually, there were deformed and dwarfish priests, but, though allowed to eat the holy food with the other priests and Levites, they could not make sacrifices.

There are a few hints of anti-Roman sentiment in Jesus’ ministry. When he sent the demonic “Legion” (a Roman word) into a herd of swine, it undoubtedly conjured images of the Roman military legions. (One legion occupying Jerusalem even used a boar as its mascot.) Sending the demonic legion to its destruction would have been a powerful symbol to the oppressed Jews.

Jesus wasn’t the only wonder worker of his day. Both Jews and Romans could list dozens of divinely inspired miracle workers. Jesus seems to have been different in that he eschewed magical formulas or incantations, refused pay, and took time to discuss the faith of those who sought his help.

Jesus lived close to three major ancient cities. The ancient capital of Galilee, Sepphoris, was just over the hill from Nazareth. Tiberias was on the lake, and travelers passed through Scythopolis to get to Jerusalem. Curiously we have no record of Jesus having visited these cities.

As carpenters, Joseph and Jesus would have created mainly farm tools (carts, plows, winnowing forks, and yokes), house parts (doors, frames, posts, and beams), furniture, and kitchen utensils.

The mountain where Jesus was transfigured could be Mount Tabor. Ironically, though Jesus rebuked Peter for suggesting he build three dwellings there, by the 700s three churches sat atop the mountain to commemorate the event.

Jesus lived during the age of papyrus rolls, which were no more than 33-feet long. This as much as anything else determined the length of literary works in antiquity. It is no accident that, for example, Luke’s Gospel is the maximum length for an ancient document, and thus another papyrus role had to be used to inscribe the Book of Acts.

The Life & Times of Jesus of Nazareth:

Galilean Rabbi or Universal Lord?

Despite earlier failings, the quest for the historical Jesus still matters. CT's interview with N.T. Wright.



*Even C. S. Lewis was skeptical of searches for the “historical Jesus.” And why not? Even before Albert Schweitzer published his *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* in 1906, many Christians bemoaned such searches because they usually denied the claims of the Gospels. The quests’ latest manifestation, the Jesus Seminar, has voted out almost every Gospel saying of Jesus as unhistorical.*

So why should Christians who believe in a Jesus available to all people of all times even care about what historians say about Jesus’ life on earth?

*We posed this and other questions to Tom Wright, whom Time magazine called “one of the most formidable of the traditionalist Bible scholars.” He is author of several influential books on the Jesus of history, most notably *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Fortress, 1996).*

If Christians believe in a resurrected Lord who transcends history, why should we even bother with the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth?

If we believe as traditional Christianity always has that God became truly human in Jesus of Nazareth, then he was an actual person who worked and spoke in this world. When Christians allow “the Christ of faith” to float free, they reinvent him to suit particular ideologies.

The most obvious recent example is how Hitler’s theologians made a Christ who legitimated Nazi ideology. That happened while many German theologians were saying they couldn’t know much about Jesus historically.

The Jesus who actually was shows us who the transcendent Lord actually is because Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. So the yesterday is just as important as the today and forever.

Do you see some dangers in using history as a means to examine Jesus?

There are always dangers, particularly with ancient history, because we don’t really know nearly as much as we’d like to. My son is a historian studying the nineteenth century and has the opposite problem: there’s so much documentation, he could go on researching a five-year period all his life and never read all the material.

But once you’ve read Josephus, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Philo, the New Testament, and a smattering of other texts, you’ve read almost all the primary sources about first-century Judaism and Christianity. It’s like connect-the-dots. The more dots, and the closer they are together, the less a child can improvise. But if you’re trying to draw a picture of someone and you’ve only got four dots, people may connect them quite differently.

Of course, when scholars do not connect the dots right in studying the historical Jesus, they can end up with some strange pictures of Jesus.

Do the apocryphal gospels shed any light on Jesus’ life?

Though the apocryphal gospels can get fanciful, I don’t believe everything in them must be wrong. Some material may well go back to Jesus himself.

For example, in the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus says, “[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.” It doesn’t occur in exactly the same form in the canonical Gospels, but I have no trouble believing Jesus could have said that sort of thing.

What has been the biggest temptation and challenge you face as a Christian scholar studying Jesus?

To assume I know what the text says, usually something that affirms my Christian tradition. Theologians often say, “What Jesus really meant was ... “ and then follow with something that Luther or some twentieth-century theologian said. You have to ask why Jesus used his words instead of those that later theologians use.

But when I stick with what the Gospels actually report Jesus saying, I gain new insights that make the truisms of one’s own tradition look cheap and shallow. When you come to the parable of the Prodigal Son, for example, we assume, “Of course, it’s about God’s gracious welcome for sinners.” End of conversation. But when I discovered most first-century Jews believed they were still in exile, still suffering under the pagans because of their rebellion, I realized, *Hey, this is a story of exile and restoration.*

Scholars today emphasize the Jewishness of Jesus. Why is that so important?

We have to recognize Jesus’ apocalyptic eschatology, the first-century Jewish sense that history was coming to its climax. Starting a Jewish movement in the first century was not simply saying, “Here is a better way of doing religion, sacrifice, and forgiveness.” It was not a new philosophy or teaching. It was a movement saying, “The great moment of history is upon us. We’ve got to seize it or be seized by it!”

The Jesus who was shows us who the eternal Lord is because he is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Of course this clashes radically with, and offends, more recent Western assumptions that world history actually reached its climax in the European Enlightenment or in today’s postmodern era.

One of the great struggles we have as Christians is to say Easter morning was the beginning of God's new age for the world. Christians often talk as if the Resurrection simply "meant" that individuals can know the living Jesus and discover forgiveness for themselves. That's true, of course, but the full meaning of Easter is the much bigger truth that we are already living in God's new age, under the hidden rule of Christ.

But to set Jesus thoroughly in his Jewish, apocalyptic, first-century world makes him seem irrelevant today.

Many people assume the only things that are "relevant" are great truths hanging in mid-air, applicable to everybody equally. But the entire biblical revelation, from Genesis to Revelation, insists that God reveals himself through the particularity of Israel's history, which reaches its climax in Jesus, the Jewish Messiah.

That is always scandalous intellectually and culturally. But it is only by holding on to Jesus as the Jewish prophet who finally fulfills his messianic vocation that we understand in biblical terms—not in our terms—the Lord of all space and time.

What are some of the misunderstandings we've developed?

Let me give but two examples. First, the word *messiah* is routinely taken as a description of divinity. When people read Peter's pronouncement, "You are the Messiah," many think Peter is saying Jesus is the Second Person of the Trinity. But in Jesus' day, *messiah* referred to the concept of king—not deity.

Second, many people believe that when Jesus spoke of giving his life as a "ransom for many," he was implicitly pointing to an atonement theology that Luther or Augustine developed. In fact, within first-century Judaism, some believed the suffering and death of God's righteous people could bring about Israel's liberation; that it could focus and thus conclude the time of wrath. I have argued that Jesus believed his death would bring salvation not through some abstract theological scheme but by his taking upon himself the fate of the nation, and thus of the world, so that God's new age would come at last.

I don't want to deny the importance of theologians trying to fill out for us the full meaning of atonement or Christ's divinity, but we must always begin with what the text said in its original setting.

What makes us think that the Jesus we're trying to reconstruct now is not just a figment of late-twentieth-century scholars' imagination, just as earlier scholars reimagined Jesus in their Enlightenment world?

The one big thing that has changed is we recognize that our own standpoint as scholars does make a difference. Nineteenth-century historians believed they could research and write as neutral, unbiased, impartial spectators. Most scholars now readily acknowledge the impossibility of objectivity.

We also recognize history is a corporate discipline. Though it involves individual scholars, it also requires we engage other colleagues around the world, including several who don't share our views. We recognize our views have to be tested against those of others if we're going to come to a fuller picture of Jesus.

What to you has been the most challenging aspect of researching Jesus historically?

First, trying to come to terms with first century Jewish ways of talking about Jesus' death. That has been absolutely explosive for me for the last 20 years. It's like an artist trying to paint a kaleidoscope that is constantly moving; it's frustrating but also extremely exciting.

Second, how do I use God-language in a way that does justice historically to how people spoke and thought in the first century and that still resonates for us today? That's always been a huge challenge.

I guess the pattern of my own life—of going from my study into the church and back again (my study overlooks an 800-year-old cathedral, where I worship morning and evening)—that rhythm has been enormously helpful.

N. T. Wright is a leading British New Testament scholar and retired Anglican bishop.

The Life & Times of Jesus of Nazareth:

A Gallery— Select Circle



What do we know about those closest to Jesus?

Mary

18 B.C.?-A.D. 48? | *History's most venerated mother*

Though Mary plays a key role in the birth stories of Matthew and Luke, she is scarcely mentioned in the other two Gospels and not at all in the New Testament letters. Yet Mary today is the most venerated woman in history.

Roman Catholic tradition says she was born in Jerusalem to Joachim and Anne, who were elderly and childless. Gospel references begin when she was probably about 14 years old, already engaged to a man named Joseph (Jewish women were generally married shortly after they could have children). Luke reported that while Mary was living with her parents in Nazareth, an angel visited her and told her she would give birth to a holy child who would be called “the Son of God.”

Though the stories began with a miracle, Mary later appeared confused or in doubt about Jesus’ mission. She was once convinced he had gone mad, and tried to get him to stop preaching and come home.

Christian tradition quickly asserted that Mary remained a virgin all of her life. The first reference is the apocryphal *Protevangelium of James*, an embellished story of Jesus’ infancy. Early church leaders such as Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria believed Mary remained a virgin, and Athanasius wrote extensively on the “ever virgin” Mary.

The Gospel accounts record that Jesus had brothers and sisters, but Roman Catholics, following the lead of many early church leaders, argue they were Jesus’ cousins or Joseph’s children from a previous marriage. Protestants have taught Mary was a virgin only until the birth of Jesus, after which she and Joseph conceived James, Joses, Judas,

Simon, and unnamed daughters.

Mary was present at the Day of Pentecost, but then she disappears from history. One tradition says she lived in Jerusalem until she died, in A.D. 48, at about age 66. Another says she moved to Ephesus. Still another, asserted by Gregory of Tours (d. 593) based on earlier apocryphal writings, says that when she died, her body was “borne on a cloud into paradise, where it was reunited with her soul and now rejoices with the elect.”

Mary slowly grew in importance to early Christians; at first she was considered the new Eve. By the fourth century, she was given the title *theotokos*, the “God bearer,” and was increasingly seen as a compassionate intercessor to whom believers could pray.

By the Middle Ages, English historian Eadmer taught that Mary was herself conceived without original sin. This belief, along with that of her “Assumption” (rise to heaven) grew to such an extent in Roman Catholic circles that today they are part of that church’s official doctrine.

Today, many people (not just Roman Catholics and Orthodox) claim to experience visions of Mary, and she remains an important object of devotion for millions.

John the Baptist

4 B.C.?-A.D. 27? | *Essene Elijah?*

Though born into a priestly family, as an adult John rejected the life of his father. Instead, he became a prophet who lived alone in the desert, ate honey and locusts, and wore camel hair clothing. Like Old Testament prophets (with similar dress and diets), John urged people to repent. But he also used the ritual of baptism as a dramatic and public symbol of washing away sins.

Some scholars have suggested that John had once been a member of the Essene sect in Qumran, the community famous for preserving the Dead Sea Scrolls. Like John, these Jews lived in the Judean wilderness and even had rules on how to eat honey and locusts. They also performed daily ritual cleansing similar to baptism, and their documents confirm that they eagerly anticipated the arrival of a Messiah promised by the prophets.

But instead of awaiting the Messiah, John saw Jesus and announced the arrival of one: “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” A short time after Jesus began his ministry, John was beheaded by Galilean ruler Herod Antipas for condemning Herod’s marriage to the ex-wife of Herod’s half-brother, Philip.

Peter

died c. A.D. 64 | *Top of the list*

Simon bar Jona (son of Jonah) was a fisherman who lived in Capernaum when he, with his brother Andrew, was invited by Jesus to join his ministry.

Jesus renamed him Peter (*petros* in Greek, or “the rock”) and he quickly became a leader of the other 11 followers: in every list of apostles, he is named first.

Peter was also the first apostle to recognize Jesus as Messiah and Son of God. In response, Jesus said, “On this rock I will build my church.” From this, Roman Catholics have concluded Peter was the first pope.

Ironically, Peter is probably best known not for overseeing the church but for denying he was one of Jesus’ disciples. Still, after Jesus was gone, he took control of the movement, designating a successor for Judas, acting as spokesman, speaking to thousands at Pentecost. Years later, when believers faced a potential split, Peter sided with Paul in arguing that Christians were not required to observe Jewish laws. He later changed his mind, earning Paul’s ire.

Two New Testament letters are attributed to Peter, but his name was used pseudonymously (i.e., appended to letters he could not have written) several times through the sixth century—the Apocalypse of Peter, the Gospel of Peter, Preaching of Peter, Acts of Peter, Acts of Peter and Paul, Passion of Peter and Paul, and Martyrdom of Peter.

Peter’s recollections of Jesus were said to be the basis for the Gospel of Mark. Papias, an early church writer, said, “Mark became Peter’s interpreter and wrote accurately all that he remembered ... of the things said or done by the Lord.”

Early Christian writers also reported that Peter was crucified upside down (his requested position) in Rome when Nero persecuted Christians in A.D. 64.

James and John

died c. A.D. 50 and 95 | *Tough and tender*

James and John were brothers, the sons of Salome and Zebedee, a Galilean fisherman who owned a fleet of boats. The brothers were mending their nets when Jesus invited them to follow him.

Both men were brazen and hot-tempered, and it is possibly for this reason that Jesus nicknamed them Boanerges: “Sons of Thunder.” Once, when Samaritans failed to treat Jesus hospitably, they asked, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?” Jesus declined the offer. Another time they boldly asked Jesus if they could have the seats of honor beside him when he became king.

In spite of their impertinence, Jesus accepted them with Peter into his inner circle. They alone were allowed to see Jesus raise the daughter of Jairus from the dead, to witness the Transfiguration, and to pray nearest him in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night of his arrest. John is thought by some scholars to have been the unnamed disciple into whose care the dying Jesus entrusted his mother.

James became the first apostle martyred (either beheaded or run through with a sword by Herod Agrippa I) and the only one whose death is reported in the New Testament. According to one tradition, popularized by Clement of Alexandria, James converted the servant accompanying him, who shared in his death. Another tradition (likely begun in the seventh century) alleges that he preached in Spain before his martyrdom.

John, according to some traditions, was martyred with his brother. More persistent traditions preserved by writers like Eusebius say John outlived the other apostles and in his old age moved to Asia Minor and settled at Ephesus. During persecution of Christians by Emperor Domitian, he was exiled to a small island, Patmos, where he wrote the Book of Revelation. A later Latin legend recounts how Domitian ordered John to be thrown into a vat of boiling oil, but he came out unscathed.

Once freed, he returned to Ephesus to write the Gospel and the three letters bearing his name. Modern scholars debate the full extent of his authorship, but most associate John with the fourth Gospel not only because of tradition but because he is the only apostle whose name is

missing from the book.

Jerome, a fourth-century church scholar, said that when John was old and feeble, he was carried to Christian gatherings where he gave a single message: “Little children, love one another.”

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The Life & Times of Jesus of Nazareth:

Crisis in the Middle East

Ethnic and religious tensions ran high in Jesus' day too.



During the reign of Herod the Great, two teachers persuaded several young men to clamber up on the temple gates and cut down a golden eagle the king had mounted in honor of his Roman overlords. Herod was so enraged, he had the teachers and the youths burned alive.

Such was the political climate of first-century Palestine. The land seemed to be at peace, but it was a *Pax Romana*, a peace vigilantly guarded by legions of Roman soldiers charged with squelching any hint of rebellion.

Not everyone was upset with the Roman imposition, of course. Many had even prospered from it. So Palestinian Jews were as diverse in their opinions as they were in their languages: Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, Latin, and (to the east) Nabatean.

And this diversity led to inevitable conflict.

Long hostilities

Romans were not the only “enemies” of traditional Jews. Sandwiched between the Jewish districts of Judea and Galilee lay the hill country of Samaria.

Tensions between Jews and Samaritans can be traced back to the ninth century B.C. (after Solomon’s death), when the northern tribes rebelled from the Jerusalem monarchy and formed their own kingdom. The two rival states, Israel and Judah, fought for centuries.

Samaritan-Judean hostilities increased dramatically when Hyrcanus I, one of the Jewish kings whose dynasty had been founded by the Maccabean family (Hasmonaeans), destroyed the Samaritan temple at Mount Gerizim in 128 B.C.

The Samaritans exacted violent revenge, defiling the Jewish temple with human bones and attacking a festival-bound caravan of Galileans. The Jews responded in kind. The Samaritans fought back again.

The Jews’ hatred of Samaritans grew stronger over time. To be called a Samaritan was a grievous insult, (Jesus was accused of being “a Samaritan and demon-possessed”—John 8:48). Some rabbis said that to eat the bread of Samaritans was to eat pork, or to marry a Samaritan was to lie with a beast.

Jews believed Samaritans were, at best, only partially Jewish. Instead, they believed Samaritans were Gentiles descended from the old Assyrian Empire.

The Samaritans, however, believed that they were descendants of the northern tribes and that only the “Law of Moses” (more or less the Pentateuch) constituted true Scripture. Anything not written by Moses (whom they believed was “the light of the world”) was rejected. Because they thus rejected much of Jewish law, non-Samaritan Jews thought Samaritans morally negligent.

Among those most hostile to the Samaritans were the Hasidaeans, whose name means “pious ones.” They believed sacrifice should be made in Jerusalem and only Jerusalem, so the Samaritan belief in

the sacredness of Mount Gerizim was ridiculous to them. They were primarily teachers and interpreters of the *Torah* and soon allied themselves with the anti-Samaritan and anti-Roman Hasmonaeans.

Three rivals

The Hasidaeans may have been united in their hatred of the Samaritans, but they soon found themselves divided over other issues. From this one religio-political group came three rivals: the Sadducees, the Pharisees, and the Essenes.

The Sadducees were a small group, whose more conservative views greatly influenced the ruling priests. Unlike their rivals, they accepted the political status quo. Indeed, because of their influence and political clout, they worked hard to preserve it. With the ruling priests, they collaborated with Rome to manage Judea. In return for their cooperation (which consisted primarily of maintaining law and order and collecting the Roman tribute), Rome gave them preferential treatment and helped them hold on to their power.

The Sadducees were the Deists and Pelagians of their day. They believed in the remoteness of God from the created order and were staunch advocates of free will: “They take away fate entirely,” wrote the Jewish historian Josephus, “and say there is no such thing, and that the events of human affairs are not at its disposal; but they suppose that all our actions are in our own power, so that we are ourselves the causes of what is good, and receive what is evil from our own folly.”

They also accepted the authority of the written law but rejected the oral traditions held dear by the earlier Hasidaeans and their principal political and religious rivals, the Pharisees. They also rejected the idea of resurrection and the existence of angels.

Josephus also noted that the sect “take[s] away the belief of the immortal duration of the soul, and the punishments and rewards in Hades.” They were inclined to be severe and quick in their judgments, but because of public pressure, they usually followed the policies of the more tolerant Pharisees. The Sadducees, Josephus noted, “are able to persuade none but the rich, and have not the populace obsequious to them.”

The Pharisees, on the other hand, were a larger and more popular party.

They accepted and expanded the oral traditions. Because of their zeal for the holiness code (especially that of Leviticus), they emphasized purity and separation from those who did not observe their practices. Unlike the Sadducees, the Pharisees believed in resurrection and in angels. As to free will, Josephus puts them between the fatalistic Essenes and the free-will Sadducees: they ascribed everything to “fate” and God’s providence, yet they believed the power to do good or evil “is principally in the power of men, although fate does cooperate in every action.”

Politics and the Church

In contrast to the Sadducees, the Pharisees did not collaborate with Rome. Indeed, Josephus records, “A cunning sect they were and soon elevated to a pitch of open fighting and doing mischief. Accordingly, when all the people of the Jews gave assurance of their good will to Caesar, and to the king’s government, these very men [about 6,000] did not swear.” Josephus also chronicles their prophecy that the throne would someday be taken from Herod the Great—a probable allusion to the coming of the Messiah. When Herod learned of it, he put several Pharisees to death.

The Pharisees’ rebelliousness may be traced back to the days of the Hasmonaean dynasty. On one occasion, convinced that the priest-king Alexander Jannaeus was not qualified to offer up sacrifice, Pharisees incited the crowd to pelt their ruler with lemons that had been gathered for the festival.

Thanks to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Essenes have become the most talked about and controversial of the parties mentioned by Josephus. We are told that the Essenes formed their own communities, sometimes in the wilderness, shared their possessions, observed strict interpretations of the law, and were mostly celibate. This group was so strict that to spit, to talk out of turn, or to laugh loudly was punished with a reduction in one’s food allowance.

Most scholars assume that the Dead Sea Scrolls represent an Essene library, with many of the scrolls actually produced by the group. The scrolls reveal a community concerned with end times, in which it would be vindicated and would assume leadership over the temple.

The scrolls depict a great final war between the “sons of light” (the Essenes and pious Jews who joined them) and the “sons of darkness” (the Romans and faithless Jews who collaborated with them). One scroll may actually describe a confrontation in which the Messiah slays the Roman emperor.

Of the three Jewish parties, early Christians seem to have had the most in common with the Essenes. Curiously, however, the Essenes are never mentioned anywhere in the New Testament.

Other groups?

Josephus also wrote of a “fourth philosophy,” but he was probably not actually describing another party or sect, like the Sadducees or the Pharisees (which he also calls “philosophies”). Instead he described a social and political tactic adopted by some (including Pharisees) whereby violence was used against collaborators with Rome.

The zealots were a coalition of rebel groups that formed during the great revolt against Rome in A.D. 66-70. Those who embraced the tactics of the fourth philosophy included the *sicarii*, or “men of the dagger.” These assassins often attacked in broad daylight, in the midst of large crowds. After plunging in the knife, they shouted cries of outrage and calls for assistance as the victim fell. By this subterfuge, they were not often detected or apprehended. On one occasion the *sicarii* kidnapped a secretary of one of the ruling priests, demanding that ten of their associates be released from prison.

False messiahs

Most Jews’ biggest problem was Roman domination. The Pharisees believed that deliverance would come through scrupulous observance of the law, including their oral traditions—their “fence” erected around the law. Though some were violent, most were probably passive in their criticism of the Herodians and the Romans. Essenes also hoped for revolution, but they looked to heaven in anticipation of a dramatic and final moment when prophecies would be fulfilled.

Some individuals, though, took it upon themselves to usher in the awaited new age. Following the death of Herod the Great, several men attempted to place the crown upon their own heads. One or two of these

figures may have thought of themselves as David-like figures, perhaps even in messianic terms. Simon of Perea, a tall and attractive former slave of Herod, plundered and burned the royal palace in Jericho but was quickly conquered. Athronges, the shepherd of Judea, was little known but “remarkable for his great stature and feats of strength.” He ruled over parts of Judea for more than two years before being subdued by the Romans.

A generation later prophets supplanted political rulers. The first was Theudas, who “persuaded a great part of the people to take their effects with them and follow him to the river Jordan; for he told them ... he would, by his own command, divide the river and afford them an easy passage over it, and many were deluded by his words.” This Joshua-like act was probably intended as a confirming sign not only of Theudas’s true prophetic status but of the beginning of a new conquest of the Promised Land, whereby Israel’s poor and marginalized would regain their lost patrimony. But the Roman governor dispatched the cavalry, which made short work of Theudas and his band of followers. Many were killed, and the head of the prophet was mounted on a pole by one of the gates of Jerusalem.

A decade later, a Jew from Egypt, “who declared that he was a prophet,” persuaded many to join him atop the Mount of Olives, where at his command the walls of Jerusalem, as in the days of Joshua, would collapse providing his following entry into and possession of the holy city. Once again Roman soldiers attacked, and although 400 Jews were killed and another 200 were taken prisoner, the Egyptian Jew somehow escaped. (The apostle Paul was once asked if he was this fugitive—Acts 21:38.)

As for Jesus, he actually had much in common with the Pharisees, but he criticized and threatened them at least as much as any other group. These threats and talk of the disciples sitting on 12 thrones judging the 12 tribes of Israel clearly implied a change in administration, something intolerable to the ruling priests and their Roman masters. Given the ethnic and religious tensions of the times, it’s not hard to see why, from a purely political perspective, Jesus’ death was necessary.

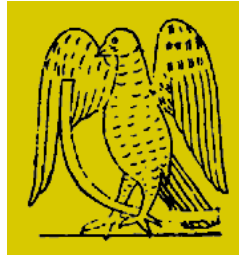
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The Life & Times of Jesus of Nazareth:

Primary Sources

What type of history do the four Evangelists tell, and what does it reveal about Jesus?



No modern biographer would ignore all of Jesus' early life, as Mark does, or skip over his formative experiences as a young adult, as all Gospels but Luke do (Luke 2:41-52). Nor would a modern biographer of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, for example, spend half of his account on just the last week of his subject's life, even if the person died tragically. And most modern historical works at least attempt to present themselves as reasonably objective.

But the authors of the four Gospels broke all these rules, especially the last. They were not disinterested observers of Jesus and his movement. No author who launches his work with the phrase "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God" is pretending to write as a neutral reporter.

If the Gospels are not like modern works of history, neither are they like folklore. The time gap between the death of Jesus and the writing of the Jesus traditions (between 30 and 60 years) is too short to consider the Gospels as mere legends or folklore, which always have long gestation periods.

If they are neither modern biographies nor legends, what type of history do these Gospels contain? What do they reveal about Jesus? I believe upon close reading that three of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and John) are ancient biographies, and one (Luke) presents itself as an ancient history.

Revealing character

The Gospels were not written to give a chronology of Jesus' ministry as much as to reveal who he was. Even markers that seem to be precise were only devices to move the narrative along. Mark, for example, frequently uses the term *immediately* in transitions, but he usually only means "after that."

The authors did not have access to the extensive sources available today; besides, they were more interested in presenting what was typical and revealing of a person than in giving a blow-by-blow chronicle of each year of a person's life. So ancient biographies were anecdotal by necessity.

Furthermore, most ancients did not believe a person's character developed over time. Character was viewed as fixed at birth, determined by factors such as gender, generation, and geography; it was revealed gradually but consistently. Ancients also believed that how one died was especially revealing of one's true character. This is one reason the Gospel writers spent so many words recounting Jesus' last week.

One feature of the Gospels that troubles some modern readers is their lack of chronological precision, but this is typical of ancient biographies. Again, the focus is on the persons involved and what they did, not on the space-time coordinates of the event.

Jesus' cleansing of the temple provides a fine illustration. While all four Gospels record only one cleansing, the fourth Gospel places this event near the outset, while the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark, Luke) place it during Passion week. A modern reader may think Jesus cleansed the temple twice. But this interpretation overlooks two points: (1) ancient readers would have concluded there was only one cleansing since no Gospel includes two such events; (2) the ancient audience was aware that a biographer had freedom to arrange his material in whatever fashion he felt most revealing of his subject.

In this case, the fourth Evangelist wished to stress at the outset how Jesus replaced the institutions of Judaism with himself (e.g., he is God's Torah or Word, he is the temple, he is the source of new life and purity). Many ancient biographies, such as Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* or Tacitus's *Agricola*, were likewise more interested in events that reveal character than in a strict chronological record.

In some ancient historical (versus biographical) works, especially in the Greek tradition, there was more attention to chronology. This helps explain the “synchronisms” in Luke 3:1-2 or Acts 18:2. A synchronism tries to locate an event in divine history in relation to secular events, like the reign of a certain governor. Thus Luke-Acts would have seemed to ancients to be less biographical and more historical in character.

What can we depend on?

What kind of historical information, then, do the Gospels give about Jesus?

First, the Gospel accounts (especially Matthew, Mark, and John), present a good deal about Jesus’ character and how he was evaluated by his contemporaries. These character sketches, however, are largely indirect, and let Jesus’ words and deeds speak for themselves.

Second, the Gospel writers presented what they deemed were the salient facts readers absolutely must know to understand Jesus’ mission, person, and work.

Third, these writers presented this information in a broadly chronological way (e.g., Jesus’ birth obviously came before his ministry, and his ministry before his death), but they were not concerned with chronological minutiae (except, perhaps, in parts of Luke).

Fourth, this literature was written by and for a special community—a tiny minority in the Roman Empire—so they could know more about their Savior.

The Gospels also appear to have been written, in at least the case of the last three Gospels, for audiences that had inadequate knowledge of Jesus’ Jewish world, including the meaning of Aramaic words (Mark 15:34; John 19:13) and Jewish customs (Mark 7:3).

In the case of the fourth Gospel, the audience was not expected to have personally known the characters in the story (see John 11:2, 12:4,6). The Gospels, then, were by and large written for non-Jewish converts to Christianity.

Given all this, what can the discipline of history, using the Gospels as the main source, tell us about Jesus?

A birth that needed explaining

Jesus was born somewhere between 4 and 6 B.C. It might seem strange to suggest that Jesus was born “before Christ,” but this is due to an early miscalculation when in A.D. 525 Pope John I ordered a new calendar that would be reckoned from Christ’s birth. Regardless of the numbers, the Gospel accounts are clear that Jesus was born during the reign of Herod the Great, who died before this new calendar had begun counting the new era. In fact, Matthew 2:1-12 (where Jesus’ family flees to Egypt until Herod dies) suggests Jesus was born some time before Herod’s death.

The remarkable story of the virginal conception is found in two different accounts: Matthew 1:18-25 and Luke 1:26-38. What is most remarkable about these stories is that they try to account for something extraordinary that, so far as we can tell, Jews were not expecting—a Messiah coming into the world by means of a virginal conception.

Isaiah 7:14 in the Hebrew simply says, “Behold, the nubile young woman is with child and will bear a son,” though the later Greek version says, “The virgin will be with child, and will give birth to a son.” Still, it was not necessary to conclude that a miraculous conception was involved, only that a woman who had, up to that point, been a virgin, would now conceive. In other words, it was the anomaly of what happened at Jesus’ origins, not the Old Testament text, that led early Christians to search the Scriptures for an explanation.

At a minimum, the historical conclusion is that Jesus’ origins were unusual. It seems unlikely that early Christians would invent a story about a virginal conception knowing it would inevitably lead to charges that Jesus was illegitimate (a charge in fact we find in the third-century debate between Celsus the Jew and Origen, and one perhaps hinted at in Mark 6:3 and John 8:41). It was enough that their Savior had a scandalous death; early Christian writers were not looking to add more implausibility to the account.

The facts of youth

Though the Gospel writers, with the exception of the story in Luke 2:41-52 (Jesus talking with teachers in the temple), said nothing of Jesus’ youth, four things we know with a high degree of certainty.

First, Jesus grew up in a devout Jewish home. This is suggested by the birth narratives: Joseph is described as “a righteous man;” the family went to Jerusalem for the rites of purification after the birth; they attended Jewish festivals (Luke 2:41-52, John 7:2-5). By the time Jesus began his ministry, he knew the Hebrew Scriptures: he frequently quoted them in his discussions and debates and was even asked to read them in his hometown synagogue.

Second, Jesus grew up in Nazareth, a backwater town in Galilee. No historical scholar doubts this. It was not the kind of thing Jesus’ admiring biographers would make up, for no one was looking for a Messiah who came from Nazareth; indeed no one was looking for one who came from Galilee in general (John 1:46).

Third, in addition to knowing Hebrew, Jesus spoke Aramaic (a Semitic cousin of Hebrew) as his native tongue. It is also likely he knew at least some Greek (enough to deal with a centurion and a toll collector). Our earliest Gospel (Mark) stresses that Jesus prayed in Aramaic (15:34) and even used the Aramaic form of the word *father* (*Abba*, Mark 14:36) to address God. Jesus regularly identified himself to others using the Aramaic phrase *bar enasha* (“Son of Man”), an allusion to the figure spoken of in Daniel 7, one of the Aramaic chapters of the book.

Fourth, Jesus grew up in an artisan’s home. The traditions emphasize that Jesus was the son of an artisan, a carpenter, and may have been an artisan himself. Jesus was therefore not a peasant in the normal sense of that term (a poor person who makes his living by farming). He had a trade, which would have been considered an honorable thing in a Jewish or lower income Greco-Roman context (though the social elite of the Greco-Roman world looked down on anybody who worked with their hands).

A prophet, and then some

Jesus was about 30 years old when he began his public ministry (Luke 3:23), and the four Gospels imply his ministry lasted from one to three years (the latter is more probable). The Gospels, as ancient works, are interested in discerning the character of Jesus and his ministry, and they accomplish this by showing Jesus in relationships with various people and movements of his times.

First, there was his relationship with the prophet John, also known as “the Baptist,” which reveals something of Jesus’ relationship to all Jewish prophets.

All four Gospels explain that the ministries of John and Jesus were closely related. It is also clear that Jesus had great admiration for John and frequently compared himself and his ministry to John’s (Mark 11:27-33; Matt. 11:16-19). There may also have even been a period of joint or closely parallel ministry (John 3:22-4:6).

Most important, Jesus submitted to baptism at John’s hands, which not only validated John’s ministry but was a “watershed” event for Jesus. As for its historicity, the Gospel writers clearly would not have made up a story about Jesus’ submitting to John’s baptism: the baptism of a sinless Messiah (Heb. 4:15) was only another problem to have to explain.

During the baptism, Jesus, like other Jewish prophets, had a confirming vision and received an anointing from God for ministry. This call was unique, however, in that Jesus heard himself called God’s Son, and he later responded by calling God *Abba*, a term of intimate familiarity. The Gospel writers suggested that Jesus’ ministry was a confirmation and fulfillment of all prophetic callings. God’s final saving and judging activity was on the horizon, and God’s people needed to be prepared. They needed to repent.

Furthermore, Jesus’ ministry was more extensive than that of other prophets: he reached out to the rejected of society; he dined with tax collectors and notable sinners. While John, like other prophets, was something of an ascetic, Jesus was a convivial attender of parties and banquets (Mark 2:18-20; cf. John 2:1-12; Luke 19:1-9).

Jesus’ public utterances were another way in which he transcended the character of the Old Testament prophets, who prefaced their prophecies with “this is what the Lord says.” Jesus spoke on his own authority, and the Gospels also suggest that in an extraordinary gesture, he affirmed the truthfulness of his own teaching in advance by prefacing it with “I tell you the truth” (Mark 14:18, 30; Luke 23:43; John 3:5, 5:19).

The well-known story of John’s beheading (Mark 6:14-29) suggests that anyone with a following would have been considered a threat by Roman and Jewish authorities.

Prophets and messianic pretenders made those in power nervous. In this environment, it is not surprising that Jesus' ministry was a short one. What is surprising, historically speaking, is that it lasted as long as it did. Jesus, like John, was seen as a political threat, even if he did not cast himself as a leader of some sort of revolt or protest movement (Luke 13:31-32).

Inner circle

The four Gospels further portray Jesus' character by showing his relationships with his own disciples, both men and women (it is revealing that he dared, in an apparently unprecedented move, to have women followers in his itinerant group—Luke 8:1-3). That Jesus chose 12 is attested not only in the Gospels but in the earliest letters of Paul (1 Cor. 15:5). Jesus did not include himself among those 12, which suggests he saw himself not as a part of a reconstituted Israel but as a shepherd or leader of a new Israel.

Jesus' relationship with his family is also revealing. A number of stories suggest his family did not fully understand him (Mark 3:21,31-35; John 2:1-12 and 7:4-5 and Luke 2:41-52). Indeed, the evidence suggests Jesus believed the coming of God's final dominion meant primary loyalty was owed to an alternative family, the family of faith (Mark 3:31-35). Jesus called disciples away from their families and warned that physical families would be divided over him. It is hardly likely that the early church made up a saying like Matthew 10:34 ("I have come to turn a man against his father ..."). This suggests that Jesus may well have been too radical for many in his own day who wanted to ground religion in family ties.

Did he know he was the Messiah?

Two themes most characterized Jesus' preaching: his announcement that God's saving reign was happening through his ministry, and that he was the "Son of Man."

All the Gospels agree Jesus used this phrase to describe himself. It has strong claims of going back to Jesus himself, rather than being something the early church put on his lips. In Paul's letters and in the Acts of the Apostles, Jesus is called "Christ" or "Lord." *Son of Man* was not a title the early church usually used to refer to Jesus.

In combination with the phrase “Kingdom of God,” *Son of Man* suggests Jesus saw himself in light of the prophecy found in Daniel 7, where one like a “son of man” was promised an eternal kingdom. Furthermore, the Daniel text stresses not just the humanness of this figure but also his more-than-mortal character, for he is said to be destined to reign forever.

Some historians debate whether it was possible for Jesus to have believed such a thing about himself. Yet many messianic pretenders and contenders of the times (including Theudas and Judas the Galilean—Acts 5:35-39), made such claims for themselves. Why couldn’t Jesus have done the same?

Remarkable week

The Gospel writers spent their greatest efforts on the last week of Jesus’ life, largely to explain how a good man was crucified. The following events, historically speaking, transpired:

1. Actions and words by Jesus in the outer precincts of the temple provoked Jewish authorities to begin the process that led to Jesus’ death.
2. Jesus shared a final meal with his inner circle in which he forewarned the disciples about his demise but interpreted the event as connected to the redemption of God’s people, as the Exodus-Sinai events celebrated at Passover had been.
3. Jesus was captured in the garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives (a frequent camping spot for pilgrims) as a result of a tip off by Judas, one of Jesus’ inner circle.
4. A pre-trial hearing, and possibly a hastily convened ad hoc trial by Jewish authorities, resulted in the handing over of Jesus to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor.
5. A Roman trial was held, after which Jesus was executed on the eve of Passover on Friday, April 7, A.D. 30, on a hill called Golgotha, outside the city gates of Jerusalem.
6. Jesus was buried in a Judean sympathizer’s tomb near the site of the crucifixion.

7. An empty tomb was discovered the following Sunday morning.
8. Various followers of Jesus claimed to have seen Jesus alive.

The fact that Jesus' shameful death is treated as something positive needs to be explained. Jesus' earliest followers were Jews, and there is no hard evidence that first-century Jews were looking for a crucified Messiah. Nor did Gentiles see such a death in a positive light. It seems reasonable to conclude that there must indeed have been a rather remarkable sequel to this crucifixion to cause these Gospel writers and early Christians to diligently search the Scriptures looking for clues that would explain each aspect of Jesus' last week.

Furthermore, it is not believable that the early church—in a patriarchal age in which women were not usually considered credible witnesses—would have invented a story about women being the first to see the empty tomb and the risen Jesus. This was not how someone in antiquity would construct a myth to win friends and persuade people.

An ancient would begin by supplying credible male witnesses, then add an impartial third party who could not be accused of wishful thinking or being delusional after the loss of their hero. A propagandist would also want to describe in detail the crucial event itself—remarkably, something not one of the four Gospels does.

From a historical point of view, an adequate explanation must be given for the exquisite and extensive acclamations of Jesus after his death. There were many prophets, sages, and messianic pretenders who walked the stage of the Holy Land before and after Jesus, but none spawned a world religion. Many charismatic Jewish leaders had died in more heroic fashion (e.g. some of the Maccabees), yet they did not create new forms of Judaism.

Even looking at the deeds and words of Jesus, one is hard pressed to find the basis of later acclamations: Jesus' miracles were not unprecedented; his words, while remarkable in themselves, would not likely have started a Jesus movement among Jews, especially in light of his crucifixion. His relationships suggested a good deal about Jesus, but were they sufficient to have created the "Good News of Jesus Christ, Son of God"? I doubt it.

Explaining the resurrection

I am therefore left with the conclusion that the end of Jesus' life and immediate sequel to his death must explain both the shape of the Gospels and the rise of early Christianity.

It is not an accident that in the earliest source about Jesus and early Christianity, Paul's letters, the focus is on Jesus crucified and risen (Paul is the only once-hostile witness to have claimed to have seen the risen Jesus). To Paul, it seems, knowing Jesus' deeds and words was secondary to knowing his death and resurrection: "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins ... that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day" (1 Cor. 15:3-4).

No, the Gospels aren't modern biographies or modern histories, but the modern historian can still learn a great deal about Jesus' life and times from them. Most importantly, I believe they reveal why Jesus, who had been known as the Son of Man during his life, came to be known, shortly after his death, as the risen Son of God.

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