

## **Jesus of Nazareth**

The central figure in the foundation of Christianity was **Jesus of Nazareth**. In the earliest of his biographies, we have glimpses into a radical Jewish teacher from humble origins who drew on Pharisaical teachings. We also have glimpses of a Jewish shaman who cured the sick and cast out demons along the lines of popular Jewish practice. For some of his contemporaries, Jesus seemed to have been regarded as the **Messiah**, or "Anointed One," meaning that he was the king anointed by Yahweh to deliver Israel from its enemies. For the Christians following Paul, Jesus was the crucified and risen God that served as a prelude to the final judgement and destruction of the world. For these early Christians, Jesus was the **Christos**, Greek for "anointed one," but this was God himself incarnate. For the last biography of Jesus, that ascribed to John, Jesus was the **logos**, the divine plan or pattern of the universe made flesh in its completeness.

Who was this founder, this man with so many identities? Did he actually exist? What were the circumstances of his life? What did he actually say? Through what means have we come to know of him?

The last question will help us answer the others. We come to know about Jesus of Nazareth through sources that are well-removed from his life and, in the case of the biographies, removed even from the living memory of his life. How reliable are those sources? Where did they come from?

### ***The Gospels***

The texts through which we come to know of Jesus of Nazareth are the **Gospels**, a set of four canonical texts outlining the life and sayings of Jesus. The first three of these Gospels—whose authorship is attributed to Mark, Matthew, and Luke—recount events and sayings in very similar and parallel ways; these are called **Synoptic** gospels after the Greek word meaning "that which can be seen at a glance." The fourth gospel, attributed to John, is a theological work vastly different from the other three.

These biographies were written relatively late. The first, the Gospel attributed to Mark, was written at its earliest between 70 and 80 AD; the last, that attribute to John, was probably written around 120-135 AD.

The reason for the lateness of biographies of Jesus was that the early Christians felt no need for either a biography of Jesus or a collection of his sayings. For the early Christians believed that the Christ event in history was the immediate prelude to the end of the world and final judgement of humankind. Paul of Tarsus in his epistles wrote that the present generation, his own, would see the apocalypse. In the Synoptic gospels, Jesus of Nazareth also claimed that the people around him would still be alive for the last days.

Anticipating the immediate end of the world at any moment, the early Christians felt no obligation to record the life or sayings of Jesus—there was, after all, no future to bequeath this material to. These early Christians were more concerned with preparing themselves for the expected apocalypse and for spreading the truth of Christianity to as many people as possible before the anticipated end of history.

During this time, the life and sayings of Jesus circulated in an **oral** form through Christian teachers and public speakers. This oral material included stories and sayings attributed to Jesus, but they did not exist in any systematic, organized, or universal form. These sayings and stories would be used by teachers and speakers as they fit the particular occasion or subject of the moment. A public speaker would use a saying attributed to Jesus as an occasion to lecture or discuss some aspect of Christianity or morality with his audience. What the speaker talked about largely determined what the speaker chose to remember about the life and sayings of Jesus.

At the same time that these stories and sayings were circulating haphazardly around the early Christian world, another set of stories about Jesus were being created. When Paul reinvented Christianity as a religion of a dead and risen God, Christians soon found themselves having to legitimate Jesus of Nazareth as deserving that status. The very first thing that needed to be accounted for was the death and resurrection of Jesus. The history of Jesus' death, called the

**Passion** ("suffering"), and the resurrection are probably the oldest strata of the stories surrounding Jesus.

But the early Christians needed more than the Passion and Resurrection to legitimate Christ as having divine status. So the early Hebrew teachers of Christianity turned to the prophetic and messianic tradition of Judaism and began to develop proofs of Christ's divinity by aligning events in Jesus's life with older prophecies. This process also included configuring the humbly born Jesus of Nazareth as a descendant of King David through his father, Joseph, since the messianic prophecies were clear that the Messiah would come from the line of David.

This legitimizing process continued when the religion entered the Greek world. The Greeks associated divinity with miraculous stories and miraculous birth—from the Greek world would arise, for instance, the idea that Jesus of Nazareth was born of a virgin, even though the virgin birth of Jesus contradicted the earlier placement of Jesus as a descendant of David through Joseph.

None of this material existed in a written, coherent or universal form for several decades after the death of Jesus. At some point, scholars believe that a written text of only the sayings and teachings of Jesus was in circulation, probably in an effort to standardize the proliferating teachings attributed to Jesus in the oral tradition. This text, called **Q**, is only the product of guesswork by scholars, but it seemed to be a source used in two gospels.

The Gospels were the first attempt in early Christianity to come up with a coherent picture of the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. The first gospel, Mark, is the shortest and shows the greatest familiarity with Jewish life and thought. The later gospels, however, show increasingly less familiarity with the Jewish context of Jesus's life and mission until we come to the last gospel whose author is uninterested in that context. All of the authors of the gospels show some unfamiliarity with Palestinian geography which indicates that they were written by non-Palestinians, either Jewish or Greek.

All of the gospels are anonymous and were written largely in an attempt to provide some standard collection of the stories circulating about Jesus—with the exception of the *Gospel of John* which is more concerned with making a theological argument. These gospels were not, however, immediately recognized as authority. As late as 96 AD, Clement, the Bishop of Rome, proclaimed the only authoritative texts of Christianity to be the Old Testament and the various sayings attributed to Jesus in circulation. The Gospels didn't appear in Christian writings until around 135 AD.

By that point, gospel writing began to take off and continued unabated until the end of the third century. For the oral tradition surrounding the life of Jesus was very rich: there were stories of the life of Mary, the life of Joseph, of the youth and young adulthood of Jesus, of the events in hell between Jesus's death and resurrection, and so on. By the end of the third century, these stories had also found their own gossellers whose texts competed with the original four.

The first four gospels, however, soon were regarded as authoritative and authors were ascribed to them. It wasn't until the end of the second century that Irenaeus of Lyon argued that two of the gospels, Matthew and John, were written by two of Christ's apostles and the other two, Mark and Luke, were written by disciples of Christ's apostles. From this point onwards, the four gospels had the quality of eyewitness testimony.

This tortured route of transmission that ended with the four gospels indicates several things about the life and sayings of Jesus of Nazareth: first, the sayings and stories remembered by teachers and speakers was strongly influenced by how the religion was presented and the circumstances it was presented in. Simply considering Jesus to be a dead and risen God immediately created a situation which privileged stories of the death and resurrection of Jesus. As Christian teachers moved into different communities, they would find need of different parts of the tradition. Second, the long period of oral transmission and the decentralized way in which the stories and sayings were distributed throughout the Christian world indicate that many of these stories and sayings were distorted or even made up whole cloth to suit particular needs. This has

led some scholars to assert that, if there was a historical Jesus, his life and teachings are permanently lost to history.

For all that, there is a remarkable consistency to the teachings and actions of Jesus of Nazareth (except those contained in *John*) and this lends tremendous credence to the Christian belief that the historical Jesus is the Jesus of the gospels. The truth probably lies somewhere between the scholarly belief in the unreliability of the gospels and the Christian belief in them as an infallible portrait of Jesus.

So what do we learn about Jesus of Nazareth as he is presented in the Gospels?

As might be expected, the cornerstone of the Gospels is the death and resurrection of Jesus. In their central arguments, the Jesus of Nazareth is a dead and resurrected god whose purpose was the spreading of truth before the final judgement.

In the teachings attributed to Jesus, it is abundantly clear that he was an apocalyptic teacher who believed that the world would end within the lifetime of the people he was speaking to. The foundation of these teachings was that human beings could be saved by both believing his word and by modelling their lives on the higher moral law of God, that higher moral law that was the foundation of Jewish law. To this end he believed that Pharisaical teaching was an appropriate guide to following this higher moral law; his criticism of the Pharisees was that they did not live by what they taught.

In line with this higher moral law, Jesus of Nazareth preached an ethics of selfless concern for the welfare of others, rejection of material wealth, and non-retribution, all of which were standard in Jewish ethics. In many statements, Jesus of Nazareth explicitly rejects government and politics as a legitimate sphere of human action.

The religion that he taught was an intensely individual and interioristic religion. Righteousness, which means the performance of right actions, for Jesus of Nazareth was not a quality of actions but a quality of the interior state of the individual. This was not really a break with the Jewish tradition, but it was the core of the way Jesus defined the human relationship with the divine.

There is abundant evidence in the Gospels that Jesus considered his teachings to be for Jews only; this is a curious tradition for the gopellers to maintain in the face of the massive spread of Christianity into the Gentile world. But nowhere does Jesus of Nazareth construct his teachings or the religion he's espousing as anything other than for Jews and in one place explicitly says that his mission is only to the Jews.

Included in the gospels are a number of miraculous events, many of which correspond with shamanic practices of curing the sick and casting out demons. In the gospels, Jesus is perfectly comfortable with many of the superstitions of the popular Judaism of the time, such as belief in demons. The gopellers, however, are less comfortable with these stories and present these miracles as arguments for the divinity and special mission of Jesus rather than in the shamanic tradition from which they are derived.

Ultimately the Jesus who emerges from the gospels is concerned with preparing the Jews for the last event in history and who actively preaches that human beings can enter individually into a correct relationship with God through both faith and trust in God and through an active, ethical concern with both the material well-being and the suffering of others.

### **Paul of Tarsus**

The second important founder of Christianity is Paul of Tarsus (originally Saul of Tarsus, ~5-67 AD) who, even though he was a young contemporary of Jesus of Nazareth, never even met him. The most salient aspect of the theology and ethics of Paul is his emphasis on Christianity as a **universal** religion. Whereas Jesus of Nazareth and many of his followers seemed to narrowly conceive of the religion as a religion of the Jews, Paul, in the context of the debate between the Hebrews and the Hellenists, tirelessly and creatively recast Christianity as a religion for all peoples.

This required some significant innovations that Paul would build off of the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth that were circulating around him. The centerpiece of the debate between the Hebrews and the Hellenists was the refusal of the Hellenic Christians to abide by Jewish law—it was, after all, a foreign law. The flashpoints for the dispute were Jewish rules of eating and circumcision, neither of which the non-Jewish Christians wanted to adopt. For the Jewish Christians, this made the Greek Christians unclean.

Paul argued that the Law was utterly worthless in gaining salvation; the sacrifice of Christ was enough. In order to make this argument, he relied on the Greek and Roman legal concept of the **spirit and the letter** of the law. In Greek and Roman jurisprudence, one could argue that, even though a defendant has committed a crime according to the letter of the law, that defendant has not broken the law in terms of the *spirit* or intent of the law. There was, Paul argued a deeper intent or spirit to the Law given the Hebrews; that intent or spirit was summed up in the teachings and the death of Jesus of Nazareth and was inscribed in every human soul. Much of this had precedents in the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, but the full-out rejection of the Jewish Law was an earth-shattering change for it allowed Christianity, which did not have many Jewish followers, to explosively spread throughout the Roman world.

Paul also had to deal with cultural practices among the Greeks and Romans who were forming Christian communities. It is clear that he felt that many of these practices were not only antithetical to Jewish law, but to what he considered the spirit of Christianity as well. So while Paul was magnificently tolerant of Greek practices of eating or circumcision, he did not tolerate other aspects, such as homosexuality. In pursuit of this, he took a contradictory course to his universal stance and declared salvation off-limits to an entire set of people engaged in certain behaviors. In social and political terms, his list of excluded peoples would reverberate throughout Christian history in social tensions and, in some cases, violent oppression of excluded groups.

The bulk of the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth are eschatological; he is largely concerned with individuals preparing for the end of the world. While Paul, like Jesus of Nazareth, seemed to believe that the end of the world would happen within the generation of his listeners, he nevertheless downplayed the eschatological aspects of the religion, preferring instead to focus on the personal salvation aspects of the teachings. It is Paul who is largely responsible for the individualistic and personal focus of Christianity.

While the career of Jesus of Nazareth strongly focuses on women and the social status of women, Paul was reactionary against both Jesus' radicalism towards women and the Greek liberality that allowed women a stronger voice in the community than was allowed among the Jews. He demanded that women be silent in church and in matters of theology, thus re-establishing a gendered difference that, it seems, Jesus had in part erased. At the same time, however, there are clearly women serving in the roles of priests and he speaks them.

While Jesus of Nazareth has absolutely nothing to say about slavery—even though it was a common practice—Paul seems to approve of it. In fact, he demands that slaves obey their masters. At the same time, however, he understands the contradiction of a Christian owning another Christian as a slave. He doesn't demand that slaveowners give over their slaves, just simply that it would be the Christian thing to do. In the history of racial slavery from the 1600's to the 1800's, the injunction by Paul that slaves should obey their masters would loom very large in the arguments for slavery.

Above everything else, Paul was a masterful compromiser. He knew when issues mattered and when an important issue should simply be let go of in favor of the expansion of the church. This gives his extant writings a character of indecisiveness, contradiction, and sometimes opportunism. But his goal was the expansion of the central teachings of Jesus of Nazareth throughout the Roman world; as long as he felt that the core or spirit of those teachings were adhered to, he was willing to compromise other things or tolerate in one situation what he wouldn't in another.