

Who Is the Historical Jesus?

by David Stewart

The fact that Jesus Christ was a real person in history cannot be denied. Beyond the testimony of the Bible, we also have statements preserved from ancient writers. For example, the Roman historian Tacitus stated that Christus “suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus” (*Annals* 15.44). The Jewish historian Josephus called Jesus a “wise man” and “doer of marvelous deeds.” He told of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection as well as the “race of Christians” who continued to honor him (*Antiquities* 18.3.3). The Jewish Talmud also speaks of “Yeshua of Nazareth” and says that “he was hanged on the eve of the Passover” (*Sanhedrin* 43a).

Since Jesus’ historical nature is indisputable, we should explore further the biblical claims. The story of Jesus’ life has been preserved in the four Gospel Accounts: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Matthew and John were apostles who walked with Jesus; Mark and Luke were early believers associated with the apostles Peter and Paul. Uninspired accounts of Jesus’ life written in the second and third centuries A.D. may contain some of the words of Jesus, but those works are often tainted by the views of the particular sect from which they originated (for example, the Gnostics).

The Gospels indicate that when Joseph and Mary were engaged to be married, the Holy Spirit overshadowed the virgin Mary, and a child was conceived within her—a miraculous conception (Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38). This detail gives us insight into an important truth: the divine and human sides of Jesus. Jesus is one of the persons of the Godhead (or Trinity), along with the Father and the Holy Spirit: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:1, 14).

The birth of Christ took place about 4 B.C. in Bethlehem, which was the city of King David, Jesus’ human ancestor. Jesus’ birth fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Micah: “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times” (Micah 5:2).

Jesus grew up in Nazareth of Galilee as the son of a carpenter. Joseph and Mary trained him according to the teaching of the Old Testament. At about the age of thirty, Jesus began his public ministry (Luke 3:23). He went to the Jordan River to be immersed by John the Baptist. At his baptism, the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus (Matthew 3:16). It was after this time that Jesus had the power to perform miraculous signs—deeds which revealed God’s compassion and testified to his identity as the Son of God. Jesus spent about three years preaching, teaching, and healing.

During that time, he gathered twelve men around him and called them “apostles” (Mark 3:14). He spent more time with those men because, except for Judas the betrayer, they would later go out and proclaim him to the world (Acts 1; 2).

Jesus’ teaching and miracles demonstrated God’s power and love. He called people not only to obey God in actions, but also to have the right kind of heart (Matthew 5—7). Jesus often exposed the hypocrisy and shallow religion of the Jewish leaders in his day (Matthew 23). His miracles were beyond question: They were instantaneous, public, and complete. Some people believed because of those signs, while others attributed them to the work of Satan (Matthew 12:24).

Jesus came into the world in fulfillment of God’s messianic promises to the Jews. God had promised Abraham that through his offspring all nations would be blessed (Genesis 12:3; 22:18; Galatians 3:8, 16). Then God promised through Moses that he would raise up another authoritative Prophet (Deuteronomy 18:15-22; Acts 3:22, 23; 7:37). God also promised David that one of his descendants would reign on the throne after him (2 Samuel 7:8-17; Acts 2:32-36). Jesus fulfilled all of these prophecies and many more. The Jews were often blinded by their expectation of a military messiah and rejected Jesus as the Christ. They did not consider the prophecies concerning the Suffering Servant (Psalm 22; Isaiah 53).

During his ministry, Jesus often predicted his death, burial, and resurrection (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:34). His own disciples did not understand, and one of them, Peter, even debated the issue with him (Matthew 16:21-23). Jesus willingly gave himself over to those who came to arrest him (Matthew 26:50). He did not argue with the Jewish rulers who tried him, nor did he defend himself in Pilate’s court (Matthew 26:63, 64; 27:14). Jesus was crucified under the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, at the time of Passover about A.D. 30 (Matthew 26:2; 27:24-26). He was led through the streets of Jerusalem in shame and crucified outside the city (John 19:16, 17; Hebrews 13:12). After his death, two of the Jewish leaders who believed, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, buried his body in a new tomb (John 19:38-42). On the third day, Jesus rose again (Mark 16:1-7). He revealed himself to the apostles and to more than 500 disciples, so that the fact of his resurrection would be thoroughly established (1 Corinthians 15:3-8).

After a period of forty days, Jesus ascended into heaven, where he reigns at the right hand of the Father until his second coming (Luke 24:50, 51; Acts 1:3, 9-11). After the ascension, the apostles returned to Jerusalem and waited until Pentecost. On that occasion, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit upon them and established his church. The apostles performed miraculous signs and boldly proclaimed that Jesus was risen from the dead. Through his sacrifice and resurrection, Jesus provides forgiveness of sins and eternal life (Acts 1; 2).

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