CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 59: Life & Times of Jesus of Nazareth

The Life & Times of Jesus of Nazareth: Did You Know?

Facts, both fascinating and little-known about Jesus and his times.

editors

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, (about the size of Wheaton, Illinois, today) 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.

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The Life & Times of Jesus of Nazareth: From the Editor - What History Can, and Cannot, Do

What History Can, and Cannot, Do

Mark Galli

It didn't hit me until I was in the middle of editing the issue: we were about to tell readers about Jesus.

It isn't just a matter of getting it historically right. It goes without saying that at ***Christian History*** history is the priority. But I've felt the weight of presenting Jesus honestly and accurately because, well, he's my master, not to mention Lord of the cosmos. I want to get Luther, Calvin, and Wesley right because I respect them. But Jesus is someone I've given my life to. I really—really—want to get him right.

Some people may say that trying to understand Jesus historically is foolish at worst and risky at best, so let me clarify what we're trying to do here.

We're not trying to prove or disprove the reality of different incidents recorded in the Gospels. There simply isn't enough evidence to verify such matters one way or the other because, aside from the four Gospels, we have no other credible sources on the life of Jesus.

Some scholars, of course, decide on the credibility of a story based on how incredible it is. But this is to practice history badly. The funny thing is that less incredible episodes—take the incident of the woman caught in adultery—have little corroborating evidence: it's only mentioned in one Gospel and never referred to again in the rest of the New Testament. On the other hand, the most incredible event recorded, the Resurrection, has a great deal of corroborating evidence: four separate records, the dependence on what were considered unreliable witnesses, the inability of the authorities to produce a body, the changed attitude of the disciples, etc.

About all the discipline of history can do is marshal enough evidence to show that it is reasonable to trust the story the Gospels tell. That's essentially what Ben Witherington's article (page 12) does.

A large part of that "case," though, is to show that the world as portrayed in the Gospels accords with what we know from archaeology about the world of first-century Palestine. That's essentially what the rest of the issue is about.

To put it another way, we're not trying to prove by means of the discipline of history that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and the Lord of all. Only a combination of disciplines—history, biblical exegesis, homiletics, and theology (as well as prayer and faith)—can show someone that Jesus is who he claims to be. But we're hoping that this foray into first-century Palestine will play its part in helping readers believe even more deeply in the transcendent Lord of history.

Come to think of it, that's what we're trying to do ultimately in every issue of ***Christian History***.

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Walking with Jesus

Putting the issue in context.

Christians and non-Christians alike have argued over the "real" Jesus since the first century. Conclusions have ranged from the merely odd (like the Gnostic Jesuses who spoke with mystical vagueness) to the absurd (some have argued Jesus didn't even exist).

Recent historical scholarship has narrowed our options substantially. Ironically, we now know more about Jesus and his world than we have in centuries. "One scholar poignantly joked that the third quest for the historical Jesus threatens to become a quest of the historical Galilee," remarked a book reviewer recently. "But the joke is based on stunning success."

The first quest ended at the beginning of this century, when Albert Schweitzer showed that nineteenth-century biographies of Jesus merely made Jesus into a nineteenth-century person. The second quest began in the middle of this century and ended with skepticism: Rudolph Bultmann and his disciples believed nothing historically reliable was to be found in the Gospels.

We're now on our third quest for the historical Jesus. Though it's gained notoriety because of the skeptical conclusions of the Jesus Seminar, it has been a stunning success indeed. In the last 50 years, manuscript discoveries and archaeological finds have enlarged our understanding of Jesus because they've helped us understand the world of first-century Palestine as never before.

As we embark on the third millennium since Jesus' birth, then, we can know not only that Jesus really walked the land of Palestine, but we can imagine, with historical accuracy, what it would have been like to walk with him.

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Primary Sources

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

Ben Witherington III

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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The Humane Side of "the Extreme Penalty."

The philosopher Cicero said crucifixion was "the most cruel and hideous of punishments." Others just called it "the extreme penalty." As such, Rome reserved it for the worst elements of society: murderers, revolutionaries, and slaves. Contrary to popular depictions, Jesus was probably crucified, as in this picture, without any covering and in this cramped position.

Though designed to be a slow and painful death (and thus a deterrent), some practices were instituted to make it more humane. The condemned were usually first stripped, tied to a post, and given 39 lashes with a short whip that held tiny, lead balls that would bite into the flesh and cause bleeding—to hasten death once on the cross. Breaking the legs of the crucified, which constricted the chest and lungs and made breathing finally impossible, was another means of bringing death on more quickly.

Without such measures, victims would hang in agony for days on end.

—Mark Galli

More resources:

Ben Witherington III is the author of The Jesus Quest, an excellent look at today's research from an evangelical perspective. From the Jesus Seminar to N.T. Wright, Witherington examines and critiques the many ways scholars have interpreted Jesus.

His latest book, to be published in November, is The Paul Quest: The Renewed Search for the Jew of Tarsus, which you can preorder at Amazon.com.

He has also written many fascinating books on the roles of women in Jesus' ministry and in the early days of the Christian church. These include Women and the Genesis of Christianity, Women in the Earliest Churches, and Women in the Ministry of Jesus.

Links:

Witherington's ***Jesus Quest*** was reviewed in several publications, including First Things.

The most recent quest has received a lot of press. ***U.S. News*** has covered it often, with articles like "In Search of Jesus", "Who Was Jesus?" (for which they had a special online chat session), and "Bob Funk's Radical Reformation Roadshow" (about the Jesus Seminar's publicity attempts).

Time has of course covered the Jesus Seminar as well, in their article "The Gospel Truth?"

The ***Atlantic***'s article, "The Search for a No-Frills Jesus," by Charlotte Allen, is interesting too.

Traditionalist Christians have been vocal but reasoned in their response, such as in this article by Craig L. Blomberg: "The Seventy-Four 'Scholars': Who Does the Jesus Seminar Really Speak For?"

In 1996, Harper SanFrancisco published an e-mail debate exploring the significance of the historical Jesus for Christian faith. The seven-week debate took place between John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, both members of the Jesus Seminar, and Luke Timothy Johnson, the Seminar's foremost critic. Even after the seven weeks, the conversation continued.

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Crisis in the Middle East

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

Craig A. Evans

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."

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.

Craig Evans is professor of biblical studies at Trinity Western University in Langley, British Columbia, and author of numerous books and articles on Jesus and the Gospels.

More resources:

Craig Evans has written many books on Jesus and the Gospels, many of which are still in print. One such book is his commentary on Luke.

A more expensive work, Jesus and His Contemporaries, compares the prayers, parables, prophecies, and miracles of Jesus with those attributed to other Jewish figures of Palestine who are his near contemporaries.

Links:

Craig Evans recently wrote an article regarding the reliability of the Gospel of Thomas for our sister magazine, ***Christianity Today***.

Much of what we know about the ethnic and religious tensions of Jesus' day is from the Jewish historian Josephus. There's a biography of him online, as well as a site devoted to his works. One of the best sites is the Josephus Home Page.

The Dead Sea Scrolls, which have elicited a slew of web sites, are assumed to be an Essene library. The Library of Congress probably has the best online exhibit.

Christianity Today ran a great article on the history and impact of the

Scrolls titled "The War of the Scrolls"

The Ecole Initiative, an excellent resource for the history of early Christianity, has a lengthy article on the Pharisees and the Sadducees

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 59: Life & Times of Jesus of Nazareth

The Place of Prayer

What exactly took place in a synagogue service?

John McRay

Though first-century Palestine was mostly illiterate, theological education remained a high priority for Jews. So the illiterate gathered with the literate and learned the Scriptures together in a place named for the Greek word for ***assembly***—the synagogue. They heard the Scriptures read and sermons preached, and they discussed the meanings of the passages.

Synagogues provided a spectrum of services from hotel to courtroom, but these activities were secondary to the synagogue's main function as a place of Scripture reading and worship. In fact, outside Judea, the word synagogue was often replaced by the phrase place of prayer. So what was a synagogue service like?

Down by the riverside

Synagogue services in the New Testament era would have been similar regardless of geographical location—similar but not uniform. Architecture and interior design differed from synagogue to synagogue. In fact, among the more than 50 or so synagogue ruins found in Israel this century, no two are alike. Services could be conducted in a variety of buildings, in homes, or even in the open air.

Whenever possible, urban synagogues were built near rivers or springs so members could purify themselves in running water. This location also helped visitors find the local synagogue, as Paul and his companions did in Philippi: "On the Sabbath, we went outside the city gate to the river," Luke writes, "where we expected to find a place of prayer" (Acts 16:13).

The interior typically consisted of a room lined with benches and chairs on three sides, with the seats of greater honor progressively elevated. Chairs and benches were also placed in the open space for large crowds.

Special chairs associated with later synagogues have been thought to be the "Moses Seat" referred to in the New Testament (Matt. 23:2)—a seat of special honor. However, there was more than one such seat in a synagogue, and the Moses Seat was more likely a literary allusion than a real chair. Instead, this chair was used as a kind of throne for the Torah scroll while the other (the Haftorah, or "Prophets Scroll") was being read to the congregation. After the readings, both were returned to a scroll cabinet (the ark).

Although the synagogue was open three times a day for those who wanted to pray, special services were held on market days, Mondays and Thursdays. The Sabbath was the regular day for services, and most people attended on that morning.

The Mishnah (a collection of rabbinic laws) preserves a tradition that on the Sabbath, a ***minion*** (group of 10 men over the age of 13) was required to begin the services. Unlike temple services, these assemblies were characterized by simplicity. There was no official participation by priests or Levites, and no sacrifices were offered. Instead, services were conducted by ordinary members of the community.

The Sabbath service likely began with the congregation standing, facing toward Jerusalem, and reciting prayers beginning with the Shema (Deut. 6:4). These verses taken from the Torah were actually more a confession of faith than prayers; the ***Shema*** was recited twice daily by adult males.

Alternatively, one individual called "the ruler" (head of the synagogue chosen by the synagogue elders) would stand before the ark and recite the ***Shema*** aloud while the congregation prayed silently. Then all responded with a loud "Amen."

Other prayers were then said, which became known as the ***Shemoneh Esreh*** (Eighteen Benedictions). During Sabbath services only the first three (praises) and the last three (thanksgivings) were used. The full series of benedictions was said only during morning daily prayer. (Eventually a nineteenth benediction was added—a prayer against heretics, including Christians: "For apostates may there be no hope and may the Nazarenes and the heretics suddenly perish.")

The heart of the service

After the prayers came the essence of the synagogue service, the reading of the Torah. The ***hazzan*** (attendant) of the synagogue took the scroll from the ark and offered it to the first of seven selected readers. The selection was read carefully, not more than one verse recited from memory.

The reading, like the prayers, was done while standing. Priests and Levites, if present, were given the honor of reading the Torah and pronouncing the priestly benediction, which had to be spoken in Hebrew. The Torah was read first, then the Haftorah, accompanied by a continuous translation into Aramaic (the language commonly spoken in Palestine). Only one verse at a time could be read from the Law before translation, and three verses for the Prophets.

Following the reading of the Law and Prophets, a sermon was given by someone invited by the ***hazzan***. Preaching was not the prerogative of any one group or class of people. Jesus, for example, preached in the Nazareth synagogue. Paul often "proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews" (Acts 13:5). Of course, then as now, those best qualified were preferred, especially those who were educated and well-traveled.

Whether the custom of seven readers was adhered to in Nazareth in Jesus' day is not known. If so, he must have been in the last group to read because he read from the Prophets rather than the Law, and then he immediately gave the sermon (Luke 4:16ff). It does seem, however, that he selected his own passage to read (4:17).

The preacher closed the sermon with a brief prayer. On leaving the synagogue service, it was customary for each person to give alms for the poor. Since presents as well as money were acceptable, the porch of the synagogue might be littered with various gifts.

In spite of much archaeological work, we still have no description of a full service from the first century. We can assume that Jews worshiped in a flexible manner and with considerable diversity. After the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, of course, synagogue life changed radically. There was a strong impetus to transfer some of the temple ritual to the synagogues. By the second and third centuries, the synagogue services had crystallized into a form unknown in Jesus' day.

John McRay is professor of New Testament and archaeology at Wheaton College, Illinois, and author of* Archaeology and the New Testament *(Baker, 1991).

More resources:

John McRay's Archaeology and the New Testament is still in print.

The Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels is the most in-depth of the many Bible dictionaries available, and includes a great deal of information on the religious life of Jesus' day. But don't be misled by the word ***dictionary***. The 177 entries, from ***Abiathar*** to ***Zechariah's Song***, average more than five pages each.

Links:

Biblical Archaeology Review recently ran an interesting cover story on "How to Tell a Samaritan Synagogue

From a Jewish Synagogue"

The first-century Capernaum synagogue where Jesus worshiped and taught is now online, in a site devoted to "the town of Jesus."

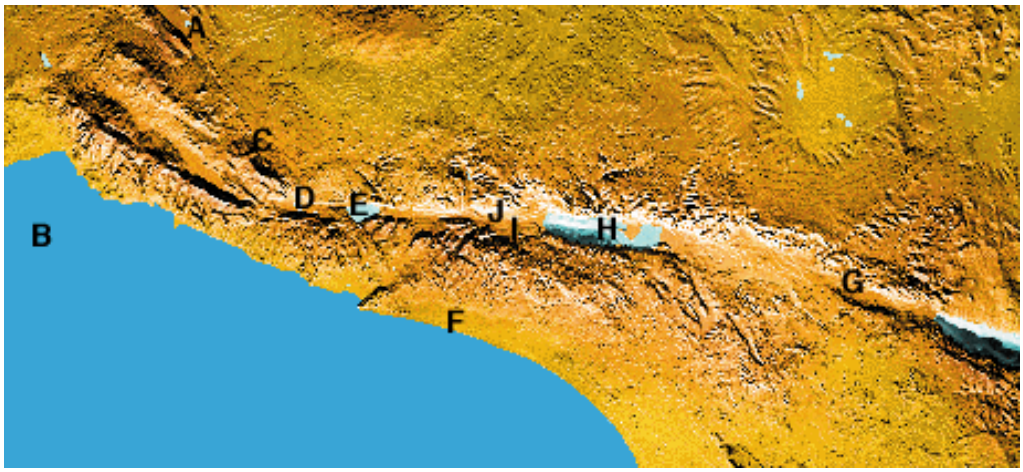
CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 59: Life & Times of Jesus of Nazareth

The Life & Times of Jesus of Nazareth: Christian History Map - Getting Physical

The geography that shaped the world—and world-view—of first-century Jews

Ted Olsen

Sideways? Like most of the ancient Near East, first-century Jews oriented themselves not by magnetic north, but by the sun's rising in the east. Thus, east (literally "in front" in Hebrew) would have been at the top of their maps. Still, this map would have made little sense because they also perceived the world as a flat disk or circle upon primeval waters or as a garment stretching across the void. Heaven and earth were thought to be sealed together at the rim of the horizon to prevent the influx of cosmic waters. Heaven rested on the earth, which was in turn set on pillars or foundations.



Interstate interchange. (A) Damascus was the intersection of Palestine's two major roads. The Great Trunk Road followed the mountain ranges to the Sea of Galilee (which it encircled), through Capernaum on the northwestern shore, then continued about five miles east of the Mediterranean sea through Gaza on its way to Memphis, Egypt. The King's Highway roughly followed the mountain range on the eastern side of the Jordan, ending at the Gulf of Aqaba.

Here there be dragons. (B) To the Jews and neighboring cultures, the sea was a dangerous and scary place. Not only was its power second only to God's (e.g. Jonah 2:5-6, Ps. 93:3-4), but it was thought to hold sea monsters—thus the hope of a "new earth" that has "no more sea," (Rev. 21:1).

Refrigerator. (C) The tallest mountain in the area, 9,232-foot Mount Hermon, is covered with snow most of the year. From biblical times until recently, the snow was carried to nearby villages in its foothills to cool foods and drinks. Though now on the Syria-Lebanon border, first-century Jews would have considered it part of their rightful land, as it represented the northwestern limit of the Israelite conquest under Moses and Joshua.

Skirting the Hula. (D) You'll find a lake here on Bible maps but not today. The Lake Hula Valley was once a desolate swamp avoided by humans and populated by water buffalo, wild boar, migratory birds, and mosquitoes. Fishing in the malarial lake, a nursery for papyrus and water lilies, was practically nonexistent. In 1951 the lake and swamps were almost completely drained to create farmland.

God's delight. (E) "The Lord has created seven seas," said the early rabbis, "but the sea of Gennesaret (Galilee) is his delight." Unlike the Dead Sea, it had clear, sandy beaches, countless fish, and affluent residents along its shores. The lake fills the crater of an extinct volcano, so it is surrounded by black basaltic rock.

Landlubbers. (F) Palestine's Mediterranean coastline is remarkably straight, with no natural harbors, and from the eleventh century b.c., the Philistines controlled it. (Hence the land was named Palestine, land of the Philistines.) These two facts explain the Jews' lack of maritime activity.

Out of Africa. (G) Most of Israel's geographical features were created by its location on the Afro-Arabian fault line, which stretches from Turkey to Mozambique—more than one-sixth of the earth's circumference. The Great Rift Valley that is home to Lakes Victoria and Nyasa reaches its deepest point, 2,570 feet below sea level, by the Dead Sea. Between 1900 and 1980 over 50 earthquakes occurred along the Dead Sea Rift.

Greater salt lake. (H) Averaging 1,312 feet below sea level, the Dead Sea is the lowest point on earth, (during Jesus' day it was another 115 feet lower). The 53-mile-long lake is also the world's saltiest body of water: between 26 and 35 percent salt. By contrast, Utah's Great Salt Lake is only 18 percent salt, and the ocean is 3.5 percent. But the area was a hot commodity for its bitumen (hardened petroleum), used mainly for caulking ships and embalming.

Vulnerable navel. (I) Jerusalem was horribly situated. It had only one reliable spring (Shiloah), and during droughts water had to be carried long distances to supply city residents. Its only raw material was stone. And since it was surrounded by higher mountains, it was not a strategic defensive location. Still, Jerusalem was considered the omphalos (the earth's navel), from which order was established and diffused to "those who dwell at the earth's farthest bounds."

Badlands. (J) After his baptism in the Jordan River just north of the Dead Sea, Jesus wandered in the barren Wilderness of Judea. Only a few miles north of Jericho, it is as barren and uninhabited as the badlands of North Dakota. The practice of baptism and seclusion in the Judean wilderness was common among the Essenes, who had a hideaway here.

More resources:

A lot of this information came from the Anchor Bible Dictionary. It is also available on CD-ROM from Logos Bible Software.

There are several

great Bible atlases available. One of my favorites is The Moody Atlas of Bible Lands by Barry J. Beitzel.

Links:

Like maps? Check out the Perry-Castañeda collection at the University of Texas, which has great maps and an extraordinary number of map-related links.

Check out this sixth-century map, located in Jordan, of the Holy Land. Scholars date it at about 560-565 A.D.

The Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs has created an excellent exhibit about the history of "Jerusalem in Old Maps

and Views."

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem has a similar exhibit.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 59: Life & Times of Jesus of Nazareth

On the Road

The inns and outs of travel in first-century Palestine.

Merilyn Hargis

The first description of the Promised Land given to Moses captures the essence of Palestine's geography: "The land you are crossing the Jordan to take possession of is a land of mountains and valleys that drinks rain from heaven." Palestine itself was only the size of modern New Jersey, but its dramatic changes in elevation were only one of the countless perils for travelers.

Nevertheless, travel was a major part of first-century Palestinian life, as the Gospels record: Mary left Nazareth to visit Elizabeth in the hills of Judea; foreign dignitaries came to pay homage to the new king of the Jews; Jesus attended the wedding feast at Cana and visited with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in Bethany. In fact, the travel narratives form a large proportion of the Gospels.

Getting around

The least expensive mode of transportation was, of course, walking. Walking speed depended on the climate, season, and terrain, but one could generally walk about 20 miles in a day. Itineraries and travelogues of ancient Egyptians suggest that such a rate was typical for millennia. People walking the Persian Royal Road from Persepolis to Sardis (1,560 miles) averaged 18 miles a day, completing the entire journey in three months; government couriers changing horses at posting stations could cover the same distance in nine days. The Book of Acts recorded Peter walking 40 miles from Joppa to Caesarea in two days. Of course, Jews did not permit travel on the Sabbath, when walking was limited to 2,000 cubits (about three-fifths of a mile).

Jesus, like many of his contemporaries, crisscrossed the country numerous times. Assuming he went from Nazareth to Jerusalem annually for each of the three required annual feasts using the shortest route through Samaria, a distance of 75 miles each way, he would have walked a minimum of 13,500 miles ***before*** beginning his ministry. On at least one of his later pilgrimages, he went from Capernaum to Jerusalem by way of Jericho, 106 miles each way. Estimating conservatively, Jesus probably walked at least 15,000 miles in his lifetime.

Donkeys were frequently used to transport goods. They are fairly strong for their size, sure-footed, and even-tempered, especially when compared with camels. As early as 3000 B.C., caravans ranging from 100 to 3,000 donkeys brought goods from Asia Minor to Mesopotamia. The animals were not used for riding except by women, children, or those too weak or old to walk. The fictional Good Samaritan, for example, put the injured man on a donkey to transport him to the inn. When Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey, it was an act of great humility.

Horses were faster and more prestigious than donkeys but also more expensive. A horse can travel 25 to 30 miles per day; changing horses throughout the day can yield extra miles. Roman couriers averaged 50 miles but could ride up to 200 miles a day if required. Emperor Tiberias, for example, rode 500 miles in three days to see his dying brother Drusus.

Chariots, from Egypt, were typically used only by the very wealthy or powerful, and the only mention of such transportation in the New Testament is the story of an Ethiopian eunuch riding on the long road

from Jerusalem to Gaza.

Dangers, toils, and snares

Along their way, travelers risked dangers and hardships.

Attacks by wild beasts remained a threat until the end of the nineteenth century, particularly along the Jordan Valley. Worse than the lions, which were eradicated from Palestine during the 1800s, were the unpredictable Syrian bears in the hills.

Far more likely were attacks by bandits along lonely stretches, as described in the parable of the Good Samaritan. These attacks were often politically motivated, and the Roman penalty for such acts was crucifixion (Barabbas was likely such a bandit). More than a millennium earlier, an Egyptian official described similar dangers:

"Behold, the ambuscade is in a ravine 2,000 cubits deep, filled with boulders and pebbles. ... The narrow valley is dangerous with Bedouins, hidden under the bushes.

"Their hearts are not mild, and they do not listen to wheedling. You are alone; there is no messenger with you, no army host behind you. You find no scout, that he might make you a way of crossing.

"You come to a decision to go forward, although you do not know the road. Shuddering seizes you, [the hair of] your head stands up, and your soul lies in your hand. Your path is filled with boulders and pebbles, without a toe hold for passing by, overgrown with reeds, thorns, brambles and 'wolf's-paw.' The ravine is on one side of you, and the mountain rises on the other. You go on jolting, with your chariot on its side, afraid to press your horse [too] hard."

Where to stay

For Jews hospitality to travelers was a necessity. Not only did the land and climate make necessary the giving of water, food and protection, but God commanded it. Jews described Abraham as the model host and considered him the founder of inns for travelers. In one story, God himself dropped in on Abraham just after the three heavenly visitors had arrived; God was told to wait while Abraham attended to the guests who had arrived first.

Even when Jerusalem was flooded with pilgrims during the feasts, Jews were expected to take in as many guests as possible. Rabbi Nathan described Jerusalem as a city where "No man ever said to his fellow, 'I haven't found a bed to sleep on in Jerusalem . ...' No payment for a bed is accepted there—Rabbi Judah says, 'Not even payment for beds and coverings.'"

So at Passover, Jesus and his disciples used a furnished upper room for the meal (for which no payment was mentioned as part of the arrangement). There were also hostels next to synagogues where travelers could spend the night. Those who came to Jerusalem after the rooms were full would spend their nights in tent camps located on the Mount of Olives.

The expected generosity of a host must have been a virtue not without problems. For centuries rabbis hammered out the details of hospitality: setting priorities for receipt of such charity, limits of responsibility, and duties of the host and guest. The details included practical suggestions for handling a burdensome guest not anxious to leave. Such hospitality, however, was not ordinarily extended to non-Jews, who used instead commercial inns.

AAA Guide to Palestine

Travelers could purchase travel guides and maps. Publishers flourished in Rome, such as Dorus or the Sosii brothers, whose shop was located at the exit of the Forum behind the Temple of Castor. They produced itineraries including lists of inns, way stations, and taverns along various routes, including the distances between them. They indicated natural obstacles, such as rivers (with bridges marked) and mountains with their passes indicated.

Other maps indicated stopping places as well as their amenities. Sometimes commenting on the quality of food and accommodations, the handbooks provided an early rating system for hotels and restaurants.

The ***Tabula Peutingeriana***, an eleventh-century copy of a third-century Roman map, shows all the military roads from Britain to the Euphrates drawn in six colors and includes symbols that indicate supply depots, taverns, cisterns, barracks, and temples.

Where to go

Jesus' journeys between Galilee and Jerusalem have been the most misunderstood travel accounts in the Bible. Josephus's reference to a Samaritan attack on a group of Galilean pilgrims going to Jerusalem has often been taken to explain that Jesus' route through Samaria was unusual and risky. Many have asserted that Jews refused to travel through Samaria at all, crossing the Jordan to the east in order to avoid the area they regarded as "unclean."

This notion is a myth. The Samaritan attack Josephus referred to happened in A.D. 52, and no such attack had occurred before or during Jesus' lifetime. Even Josephus says, "It was the custom of the Galileans, when they came to the Holy City at the festivals, to take their journeys through the country of the Samaritans." The route from Galilee to Jerusalem via Samaria remained the shortest and easiest route, a journey that took only three days.

Pilgrims from Galilee passed through the Herodian royal estates in the Jezreel Valley to Ginae, spending the night in the last city in Jewish territory. The next day they walked across the rolling hills and valleys of Samaria to Anuathu Borcaeus, the first Jewish city of Judea, or further if daylight and weather permitted. The third day was spent walking along the ridge route of the mountains of Judea up to Jerusalem.

The direct route through Samaria was not, however, the only way from Galilee to Jerusalem. It was also possible to follow the Jordan River to Jericho, then ascend the Jericho road to Jerusalem. This route was not only 23 miles longer, but also considerably hotter, with a steeper ascent to Jersualem. The bulk of the 3,400-foot change in elevation—Jericho lies 812 feet below sea level and Jerusalem towers 2,600 feet above sea level—occurs within a distance of 15 miles. The steep road winds through a desolate wasteland of barren rock with twisted canyons and cliffs.

Pilgrims went up to Jerusalem for the three required feasts: Unleavened Bread, Weeks (Pentecost), and Tabernacles. Jesus also went to Jerusalem during Hanukkah (the Feast of Dedication), even though there was no commandment to go to Jerusalem for the celebration.

Pilgrims from the entire civilized world—from Rome to Mesopotamia, from Pontus to Arabia—came to celebrate Pentecost in Jerusalem. Josephus records 256,000 sacrificial lambs offered at Passover in A.D. 66, a figure implying over 2 million participants, an enormous even if somewhat exaggerated number. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus made their pilgrimage from Nazareth to Jerusalem at Passover with a company of relatives and acquaintances large enough for Jesus' absence not to be noticed for a full day's journey.

By the time Paul began preaching, Roman roads extended into Palestine, and established routes were constantly improving. In A.D. 56, Nero began placing milestones in Palestine at every Roman mile (4,862

feet), and indicating the distance to the next town.

Given the demands of travel in those days, the Jesus portrayed in many paintings—a fair-skinned, scrawny wimp—may be quite inconsistent with a man who traversed such demanding, dangerous paths so frequently.

Merilyn Hargis is an archaeologist and director of the Excel Degree Completion Program at San Jose Christian College, San Jose, California.

Approximate Distances on Roads Used in the First Century

• Jericho to Bethany	14 miles
• Bethlehem to Jerusalem	5.5 miles
• Nazareth to	
Jerusalem via Jericho	97 miles
Jerusalem via Samaria	75 miles
Capernaum	20 miles
Cana	9.5 miles
Nain	8 miles
• Capernaum to Jerusalem	106 miles
Caesarea Philippi	34 miles
Magdala	7 miles by land, 3 by boat
Gergesa almost	6 miles by boat
Bethsaida	4 miles
Chorazin almost	2 miles
• Jacob's Well (Shechem) to Jerusalem	39 miles

More resources:

There are considerably more travel guides to the Holy Land than there were in the days of Dorus and the Sosii brothers. One of the better ones we've used is The Holy Land: The Indispensable Archaeological Guide for Travellers, by Jerome Murphy-O'Connor.

Links:

Here's a part

of that Tabula Peutingeriana.

The Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs has created an excellent exhibit about the history of Jerusalem in Old Maps and Views.

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem has a similar exhibit.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 59: Life & Times of Jesus of Nazareth

The Life & Times of Jesus of Nazareth: A Gallery - Select Circle

What do we know about those closest to Jesus?

Stephen Miller

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."

Stephen Miller is a free-lance writer and former editor of* Illustrated Bible Life*. He is an editorial adviser for* Christian History*.

More resources:

Stephen M. Miller is a freelance writer and former editor

of Illustrated Bible Life. He is an editorial adviser for ***Christian History.***

Stephen Miller is also the author of How to Get Into the Bible and the evangelistic guide Misguiding Lights.

Links:

Interested in Mary? No matter what denominational background you have, check out Jaroslav Pelikan's Mary Through the Centuries. The first chapter is available online.

A Roman Catholic perspective on Mary, Peter, John the Baptist, James and John is available at the Catholic Encylopedia page.

The Ecole Glossary also has articles on these characters.

It's nonsectarian, but the entries are much shorter. (Mary, Peter, James, and John)

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 59: Life & Times of Jesus of Nazareth

What Happened to Jesus' 'Brothers'?

The post-Gospel lives of the disciples.

Stephen Miller

According to the Gospels, Jesus had several "brothers and sisters" (see "Mary" for possible meanings), but James and Jude are the only ones mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament—James as a leader of the early church in Jerusalem, and Jude in the short letter bearing his name. Originally, Jesus' family was skeptical of his ministry: "Even his brothers did not believe in him," says John's Gospel. Apparently the Resurrection changed their minds, because they joined Mary and the disciples in the Upper Room to wait for the Holy Spirit.

James, probably the oldest of Jesus' brothers, made the decision at the Jerusalem Council that Gentile Christians did not have to obey ancient Jewish laws. He may have lived an ascetic life and was reported to have spent so much time in prayer that his knees "were like those of a camel." Jewish historian Josephus reported that Jewish leaders stoned James to death. Eusebius said he was thrown from the top of the temple and beaten to death with a club. It is unclear whether this James or another wrote the epistle bearing his name.

Jude's letter of warning about impostors who had infiltrated the church suggests that he, too, became a respected church leader and perhaps a traveling missionary who saw such problems firsthand.

The other disciples

After the Gospels, the New Testament rarely mentions the disciples. For further details, we have only legends—some dubious.

Peter's brother, **Andrew**, reportedly preached in Asia Minor, Thrace, and Greece before being crucified on (according to a tenth-century account) an X-shaped cross. He was regarded as the founder of the church in Constantinople and may have been associated with writing the Gospel of John. The apocryphal Acts of St. Andrew (from the second century) claims he was imprisoned for advocating an ascetic life.

Philip was from Zebedee's home town of Bethsaida. He supposedly became a missionary to Turkey, where he died a martyr.

Some accounts say **Bartholomew** (probably actually named Nathaniel Bar-Tholomai, meaning "son of Tholomai") was a companion of Andrew and martyr among the Parthians (in modern northeast Iran). More commonly, he is said to have taken the gospel to India, where he was tortured and beheaded. Eusebius mentions that someone found Matthew's Gospel in India, which may have been left there by Bartholomew.

Or maybe it was left there by **Thomas**, whom Gregory of Nazianzus and the Acts of Thomas say preached in India and was martyred there. The Syrian Christians of Malabar (in southwest India) are still convinced they were evangelized by Thomas. In any event, he likely would have preferred his first nickname, "the twin," to his more modern "doubting Thomas." He is associated with Syriac Christianity, and (if he didn't go to India) is also reported to have taken the gospel as far as Parthia and Persia.

Matthew is credited with writing the Gospel bearing his name and is said to have ministered in Ethiopia, Macedonia, Pontus, or Persia before dying a martyr.

Simon the Zealot and **Judas** the son of James (also called Thaddaeus) are said to have gone to Persia together, where they were martyred. **James** the son of Alphaeus (who may have also been "James the Less") disappeared from history.

More resources:

Stephen M. Miller is a freelance writer and former editor of Illustrated Bible Life. He is an editorial adviser for ***Christian History***.

Stephen Miller is also the author of How to Get Into the Bible and the evangelistic guide Misguiding Lights.

The Catholic Encylopedia has lengthy articles on all 12 apostles, from a Roman Catholic perspective, of course.

If you'd rather have a nonsectarian look, check out the Ecole Glossary. Unfortunately, its entries

are much shorter.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 59: Life & Times of Jesus of Nazareth

Fishers of Fish

The maritime life of Jesus' headquarters in Galilee

Gary M. Burge

Jesus' move from Nazareth to Capernaum (Matt. 4:13) was a strategic decision. Capernaum was on the main highway through Galilee. Both Roman and temple taxes were collected there, likely because it was the eastern outpost of Galilee (the cities further east were Hellenized). The city had royal officials as well as a contingent of Roman soldiers.

By some accounts, the town may have had a population of 10,000 to 15,000 and may have been larger than Nazareth. Though it was not among the largest or most influential of Galilee's cities, it was at a crossroads. Miracles, exorcisms, and healings accomplished there would enjoy a wide report throughout the country. It was also a fishing village, one of over a dozen small fishing anchorages along the Galilee seacoast. It shouldn't surprise us, then, that much of Jesus ministry and teaching were shaped by the culture of lakeside Galilee.

Rich metaphor

The Gospels contain many stories about life on the lake. When there was danger of a crowd overwhelming Jesus, the disciples had a boat ready for a quick departure. A boat also provided restful solitude. He was so comfortable in boats, he taught from them to crowds on the beaches of the sea. At one point, he even joined the disciples on their boat when they were at sea—and he walked on water to them.

The fishing trade provided Jesus with raw materials for parables as well as a job description for his apostles ("I will make you fishers of people"). Fish stories abounded in his ministry: he described the kingdom of God as a great haul of fish, and when he fed the 5,000, he provided fish along with bread. He even located money for taxes in a fish's mouth.

Net results

Net fishing was the stock-in-trade of the people who lived on the lake, and the Gospels point to Jesus' knowledge of this. Hook-and-line fishing was known but used far less since it yielded fewer fish, but Jesus once told his followers to catch a fish using a single line (Matt. 17:24-27). Mendel Nun, a lifelong fisherman at the Israeli kibbutz Ein Gev, and a student of ancient fishing practices, argues that there were three types of net fishing in the first century: the drag net, the cast net, and the trammel net.

The drag net was the most ancient form, dating from the third millennium B.C. in Egypt. A wall-like net, with weights on the bottom and cork on the top, was first pulled along the coast. Then the lead rope was swept across the sea by boat and pulled back to shore, pulling in fish as it came. The fish were then sorted and distributed to the workers. The drag net is mentioned nine times in the Old Testament, and Jesus used this image to symbolize the day of judgment (Matt. 13:47-48).

The cast net was circular and measured about 15 to 20 feet across. It had lead weight sinkers attached to its edges, and was tossed into the sea by a lone fisherman. It landed on the water like a parachute, sinking and catching unwary fish. The fisherman then either dove into the water to pull the fish out

individually or to lift the entire net into his boat. Ancient Egyptian paintings depict this method, Matthew's and Mark's Gospels refer to it by its proper name, and Ezekiel 32:3 may refer to it as well. Simon and Andrew were using cast nets when Jesus called them.

The third type was the trammel net (the only type still used today). This was a compound net, built from three "layers" connected at the top by a head rope (with cork) and a foot rope (with lead weights). The outer nets were identical, with wide openings. The inner net was finely meshed and loose, flowing easily in and out of the outer nets. The net was spread in the water in a long line (generally at night) and held while other fishermen scared the fish toward it with splashing. The fish entered the first net easily, entangling themselves hopelessly between the fine mesh and the third outer net.

Hauling the net ashore, disentangling the fish, sorting them, and repairing the many breaks during the day took a lot of work. The Old Testament uses the image of these "entangling nets" to describe the futility of humanity (Eccles. 9:12; Job 19:6-8).

In the story of the miraculous catch of fish (Luke 5:1-7), the men had already fished all night and were repairing their trammel nets. Jesus told them to set sail again and drop the net once more. This was a genuine act of faith! "When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break." A daytime catch without effort! The sea has yielded thousands of net sinkers from antiquity as remarkable testimony to livelihood of fishing.

Forbidden catfish

Jesus, though a carpenter, learned about fishing because his first converts knew the art well, and he seems to have known the types of fish in the sea. On one occasion, Jesus said, "If your child asks for a fish, will you give him a snake instead?" Jesus was likely referring not to a snake but to the Hebrew Sfamnun fish (a catfish). Because it had no scales, it was unlawful to eat.

This is another indication that if we are to understand the teachings and stories of Jesus, we cannot neglect to understand the fishing culture of first-century Galilee.

Gary Burge is professor of New Testament at Wheaton College (Ill.) and author of a commentary on the Gospel of John (Zondervan, 1998).

More resources:

Gary Burge is the author of The NIV Application Commentary on The Letters of John, Interpreting the Gospel of John, and Who Are God's

People in the Middle East?

Links:

Mendel Nun's Kibbutz Ein Gev, along with its museum about the history of Galilee fishing, is online.

Gary Burge recently wrote a fascinating article for ***Christianity Today*** titled "Indiana Jones and the Gospel Parchments."

He also wrote a recent cover story for ***Christianity Today***, asking "Are Evangelicals Missing God at Church?"

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 59: Life & Times of Jesus of Nazareth

Mistrial of the Millennium

How those in power bent the rules to ensure the outcome.

Craig S. Keener

Less than a generation after Jesus' trial, Joshua son of Hananiah began prophesying judgment against the temple, shouting, "A voice from the east, a voice from the west, a voice from the four winds, a voice against Jerusalem and the holy house, a voice against the bridegrooms and the brides, and a voice against this whole people!"

The priestly aristocracy, who controlled the temple establishment, angrily arrested him. They dragged him before the Roman governor, Albinus, who had Joshua scourged with a ***flagellum***—a leather whip with pieces of bone or metal embedded in its ends—reportedly "till his bones were laid bare."

But there the similarity between Jesus' trial and Joshua's ends; Jesus went on to be crucified; Joshua was released. Why?

Joshua, unlike Jesus, seemed harmless: Josephus reports, "Albinus took him to be a madman, and dismissed him," allowing Joshua to walk the streets for seven years shouting, "Woe, woe to Jerusalem" until he was killed in the siege of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

Jesus, on the other hand, was charged with claiming to be a king—a claim that in Rome's eyes constituted high treason. When this charge was prosecuted by means of a series of improper procedures, Jesus' fate was sealed.

Historical problems

Jesus' trial was anything but typical. In fact, the Gospels' descriptions of the trial stray so far from the Mishnah (an early third-century A.D. collection that explains Jewish law) that some scholars have doubted the Gospels' reliability.

Here are some of the legal principles that the Gospels' descriptions seem to contradict:

- Judges must conduct and conclude capital trials during daylight.
- Trials should not occur on the eve of a Sabbath or festival day (though executions provided their greatest impact in such public settings).
- The Sanhedrin should not begin its meetings in the high priest's palace but in a more formal setting.
- A day must pass before a verdict of condemnation is issued.
- If testimony fails under cross-examination, it is to be discarded.

The Mishnah, however, reflects the way Pharisaic rabbis thought the Jerusalem Sanhedrin ***should*** have operated, and then more than a century after the Sanhedrin ceased to exist. The Sanhedrin was likely more pragmatic and flexible than the Mishnah description.

The Mishnah also differs from the Gospels because it reports legal ethics whereas the Gospels report violations of those ethics. Many of the Mishnah's rules represent legal standards widely accepted in the ancient Mediterranean world. Later rabbis sought legal safeguards to prevent hasty trials

and miscarriages of justice—the very sort of injustices that took place at Jesus' trial.

The picture of the Sanhedrin's activity in the Gospels is much closer to Josephus's first-century description: the powerful Sadducees were hardly interested in following Pharisaic ethics and probably did what they had to do to get the job done. Their primary responsibility as Jerusalem's aristocracy was to keep peace for Rome, and Jesus appeared to be a threat to Rome's power and to their own authority.

If Jesus had challenged their authority by overturning tables in the temple and had attracted a following, some of whom believed he was the promised Davidic king, he potentially threatened the peace.

To preclude a riot, the Sanhedrin came to a quick decision at night in time to hand Jesus over to Pilate by morning. An informal hearing to decide the case would be much faster than a formal and lengthy trial. For Jerusalem's aristocracy, then, the outcome mattered more than the rules.

Conflicting testimony

The testimony of the witnesses focused on Jesus' apparent opposition to the temple. Joshua ben Hananiah had been punished for merely prophesying against the temple, but this Jesus had reportedly promised to tear it down himself! But in such a rushed trial, the witnesses contradicted each other, forcing the high priest to take another approach.

Jesus had recently made implicit claims in public about his identity as "Son of God." The title, at least in some early Jewish circles (like the sect who owned the Dead Sea Scrolls), was akin to claiming to be the Davidic Messiah. So the high priest asked Jesus a question he couldn't avoid: "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?"

"I am," Jesus said. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." The response weaved together Old Testament passages that suggested he considered himself the eternal ruler and "Lord." A simple "yes" would have caused plenty of trouble, but Jesus' response, combining claims to heavenly and earthly power, was, some would say, the worst move to make. (On the other hand, Jesus knew his "hour had come" and was in control of the situation, deliberately provoking his own execution.)

The high priest immediately denounced Jesus' response as "blasphemy," and, in Jewish tradition, tore his garment. To the priest, Jesus had desecrated the divine name by inappropriately associating himself with it. His colleagues agreed.

Execution policies

A group of Jerusalem leaders apparently held a brief but more formal hearing at daybreak to ratify the night's work. They also needed to bring Jesus before the Roman governor because, though they were allowed to pronounce death sentences, they were forbidden from carrying out executions.

Rome allowed its client kingdoms to execute criminals without Roman approval only rarely (perhaps for a more flagrant desecration of the temple than the high priests had proved Jesus guilty of)—otherwise local governments might execute Roman loyalists behind the empire's back! Illegal lynchings still occurred, but in this case, none would be necessary: it was in Rome's own interests for Jesus to die.

Pilate, however, was reticent to execute Jesus. When Jesus spoke of kingship and of "truth," he reminded Pilate not of a revolutionary but of a harmless wandering philosopher. Many philosophers claimed the right to reign as kings, but many who made such claims were also apolitical and posed no real threat to the authorities.

Then again, Pilate could not afford to alienate the Jerusalem authorities. He had a long history of provoking local officials, and they had forced him to back down before.

One of his first official acts as governor was to order his soldiers to bring the imperial standards into Jerusalem under cover of night. But after throngs of Jews bared their necks, saying they would rather die than allow the standards depicting emperor worship, Pilate backed down.

Under the increasingly paranoid emperor Tiberias, a refusal to prosecute anyone charged with treason might call into question one's loyalty to Caesar. Pilate was no political fool. For the Roman governor, like the Jerusalem aristocracy, political expediency held a higher claim than justice, so he approved the execution of Jesus.

Disturbing "justice"

Moving forward 2,000 years can help us appreciate the emotions such flagrant misuse of power may have engendered among those loyal to Jesus. In our day, we've seen in the news—and maybe experienced in our own lives—violations of justice and we recoil at them.

But few modern cases can match the miscarriage of justice in the hasty and unethical trial of Jesus. It broke ethical guidelines, railroaded an innocent man, and demonstrated a flagrant misuse of power. Readers of the account, both Jewish and Gentile, would have been deeply disturbed, if not furious.

It is all the more telling, then, that Jesus from the cross forgave his prosecutors, who in one sense knew very well what they were doing.

Craig Keener is visiting professor of biblical studies at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary and author of* The IVP Bible Background Commentary *(1993) and Matthew commentaries for InterVarsity Press and Eerdmans.

Other resources:

Craig Keener is written numerous books on Jesus and the New Testament, including The IVP Bible Background Commentary and a volume on Matthew for the IVP New Testament Commentary

Series.

He has also written other topics such as Defending Black Faith: Answers to Tough Questions About African-American Christianity and And Marries Another: Divorce and Remarriage in the Teaching of the New Testament.

Links:

Darrell L. Bock, research professor of New Testament at Dallas Theological Seminary and associate pastor at Trinity Fellowship Church, wrote a similar article for ***Christianity Today***, titled "Jesus v. Sanhedrin: Why Jesus 'lost' his

trial"

The Ecole Initiative, an excellent resource for the history of early Christianity, has a lengthy article on Pontius Pilate and other figures.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 59: Life & Times of Jesus of Nazareth

The Scandal of the Grave

Jesus' humiliation didn't end at the cross.

Byron R. McCane

Jewish funerals almost always took place the same day as the death. The eyes of the deceased were closed, the corpse was washed with perfumes and ointments, its bodily orifices were stopped, and strips of cloth were wrapped tightly around the body—binding the jaw closed, fixing arms to the sides, and tying the feet together. Once prepared, the corpse was placed on a bier or in a coffin and carried out of town in a procession to the family tomb, usually a small rock-cut cave entered through a narrow opening that could be covered with a stone.

After eulogies, the corpse was placed either in a niche or on a shelf, along with items of jewelry or other personal effects. Once in a while, a Jewish funeral might even be a little too hasty: the rabbis told stories of people who were mistakenly buried before they were actually dead!

But the Jewish rituals of death did not end with the burial. A week of intense grieving, called ***shiv'ah*** ("seven") followed, during which family members stayed at home and received the condolences of friends. (Mary and Martha were in this period of grief for Lazarus when Jesus arrived at their home.)

Then came a month of less intense mourning, called ***shloshim*** ("thirty"), during which family members still did not leave town, cut their hair, or attend social gatherings. After ***shloshim***, most aspects of normal life resumed, but the immediate family of the deceased continued to mourn for one year. Then they would return to the tomb for a private ceremony known as "the gathering of the bones." In this secondary burial, the bones of the deceased were collected into a small stone container, called an ossuary.

Finally, the rites of mourning were over and the relatives could return to normal life.

No rest for the wicked

Different burial customs awaited those who had been condemned by order of a Jewish court. Burial in disgrace was well-known from earlier periods in Israel's history. The bodies of some prophets and kings, for example, suffered ignominious treatment after their deaths.

In Jesus' day, shameful burial meant two things: (1) a condemned criminal could not be placed in the family tomb until secondary burial, and (2) a condemned criminal could not be mourned in public. The family was not to observe either ***shiv'ah*** or ***shloshim***. On the contrary, they were expected to agree with the verdict of the court.

It is striking that the burial of Jesus conforms to both these Jewish customs of dishonorable burial. In each Gospel story, Jesus was neither buried in a family tomb, nor did anyone observe the rituals of mourning for him. Even when the women came to the tomb, they came only to "see the tomb" or to anoint the body.

Furthermore, Matthew, Luke, and John each explicitly described Jesus' tomb as one "where no one had yet been laid."

Jesus' humiliation, then, did not end with his crucifixion. Even after he died, Jesus' body was treated as an object of shame—he was buried in disgrace like a condemned Jewish criminal.

—Byron R. McCane, professor of religion, Converse College Spartanburg, South Carolina

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Other resources:

Byron McCane is also the author of Building a Faith to Live By: Programs for Youth.

Links:

Christianity Today ran an interesting article about two Jerusalem tombs claiming to be Christ's: "Where Have They Laid My Lord?"

Those two churches, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and the Garden Tomb, each have several links to them.

Here's a page of links to Holy

Sepulchre sites.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 59: Life & Times of Jesus of Nazareth

The Life & Times of Jesus of Nazareth: Christian History Interview - Galilean Rabbi or Universal Lord?

Despite earlier failings, the quest for the historical Jesus still matters.

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.

More resources:

N.T. Wright's latest two books cover both ends of the scholastic spectrum. Jesus and the Victory of God is a 740-page survey of the historical

record and the historical criticism of the life of Jesus; sticking very close to the biblical record, he sets Jesus in a very Jewish context and highlights his prophetic ministry. He then took many of his main points from that book and created, for a more popular audience, The Original Jesus: The Life and Vision of a Revolutionary. It's a personal, illuminating look at Jesus and the Gospels.

Links:

Wright recently wrote an article for ***Christianity Today*** on the importance of the resurrection. The article is titled "Grave Matters."

Christianity Today also ran a lengthy review of ***Jesus and the Victory of God*** titled "Reconstructing

Jesus."

Wright is very interested in Jesus' Jewish world, as are many other recent scholars. One scholarly but well-designed site devoted to such inquiry is The Jewish Roman World of Jesus. James D. Tabor, professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, provides information on a variety of topics including Hellenistic/ Roman religion and philosophy, archaeology and the Dead Sea Scrolls, Christian Origins and the New Testament and ancient Israel.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 59: Life & Times of Jesus of Nazareth

The Life & Times of Jesus of Nazareth: Recommended Resources

The Life & Times of Jesus of Nazareth

editors

There are also many other things that Jesus did," wrote the author of John's Gospel. "If every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written."

Well, book publishers everywhere are certainly giving it a try.

Hundreds of thousands of books about Jesus are in print by the major publishers alone—not bad for someone for whom every primary source can be read in an afternoon.

The Man

N. T. Wright's latest two books cover both ends of the scholastic spectrum. ***Jesus and the Victory of God*** (Fortress, 1996) is a 740-page survey of the historical record and the historical criticism on the life of Jesus; sticking close to the biblical record, he sets Jesus in a very Jewish context and highlights his prophetic ministry. He then took many of his main points from that book, stripped them of footnotes and academic references, and published ***The Original Jesus: The Life and Vision of a Revolutionary*** (Eerdmans, 1996). It's a personal, illuminating look at Jesus and the Gospels.

Another excellent look at today's Jesus research, written from an evangelical perspective, is ***The Jesus Quest*** by Ben Witherington III (IVP, 1997). From the Jesus Seminar to N. T. Wright, Witherington examines and critiques the many ways scholars have interpreted Jesus.

For those interested in a traditional evangelical approach to Jesus' life, Robert H. Stein's ***Jesus the Messiah*** (IVP, 1996), is a very readable survey.

The Times

Among the many Bible dictionaries available, the most in-depth in dealing with Jesus is the ***Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*** (IVP, 1992). The term ***dictionary***, however, may be misleading. The 177 entries, from ***Abiathar to Zechariah's Song***, average more than five pages each.

When it comes to Jesus' times, it's nearly impossible to find a topic a Reader's Digest book hasn't covered. Our favorite for this issue was the appropriately named ***Jesus and His Times*** (1987).

Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus by Joachim Jeremias (Augsburg, 1979) has been around for a while, but Jeremias's eye for detail ("chickens were forbidden in Jerusalem because ... ") makes it a must-own for anyone interested in New Testament life.

Two other classic works: F.F. Bruce's ***New Testament History*** (Doubleday, 1971) covers the larger political history of the era (and it's readable!), and C. K. Barrett's ***New Testament Background*** (HarperSanFrancisco, 1995) reprints primary documents that help reveal the first-century world.

Films, Videos, and Online

There seem to be as many films on Jesus, both depicting and analyzing, as there are books. N. T. Wright hosts the new Christian History Institute six-part video series ***Jesus: The New Way*** (1998). One of our favorite narrative films is ***The Gospel According to Matthew*** (Visual Entertainment, 1996), starring Bruce Marchiano.

The works of Josephus and other primary sources are available for free at the Christian Classics Electronic Library (***http://www.ccel.org/***). Other links are available at Christian History online (***http://www.christianhistory.net*** or AOL Keyword: CH).

Also, with animations and ***Biblical Archaeology Review*** articles, Focus on the Family's ***Jesus CD-ROM*** is a model of simplicity and historical depth.

Back Issue

This is the earliest period ***Christian History*** has explored. But we've come close in a similar issue: ***Paul and His Times*** (Issue 47) is available by calling (800) 806-7798.