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Y-JESUS

ARTICLE 1:

# BORN IDENTITY

WAS JESUS A REAL PERSON?



# Born Identity

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

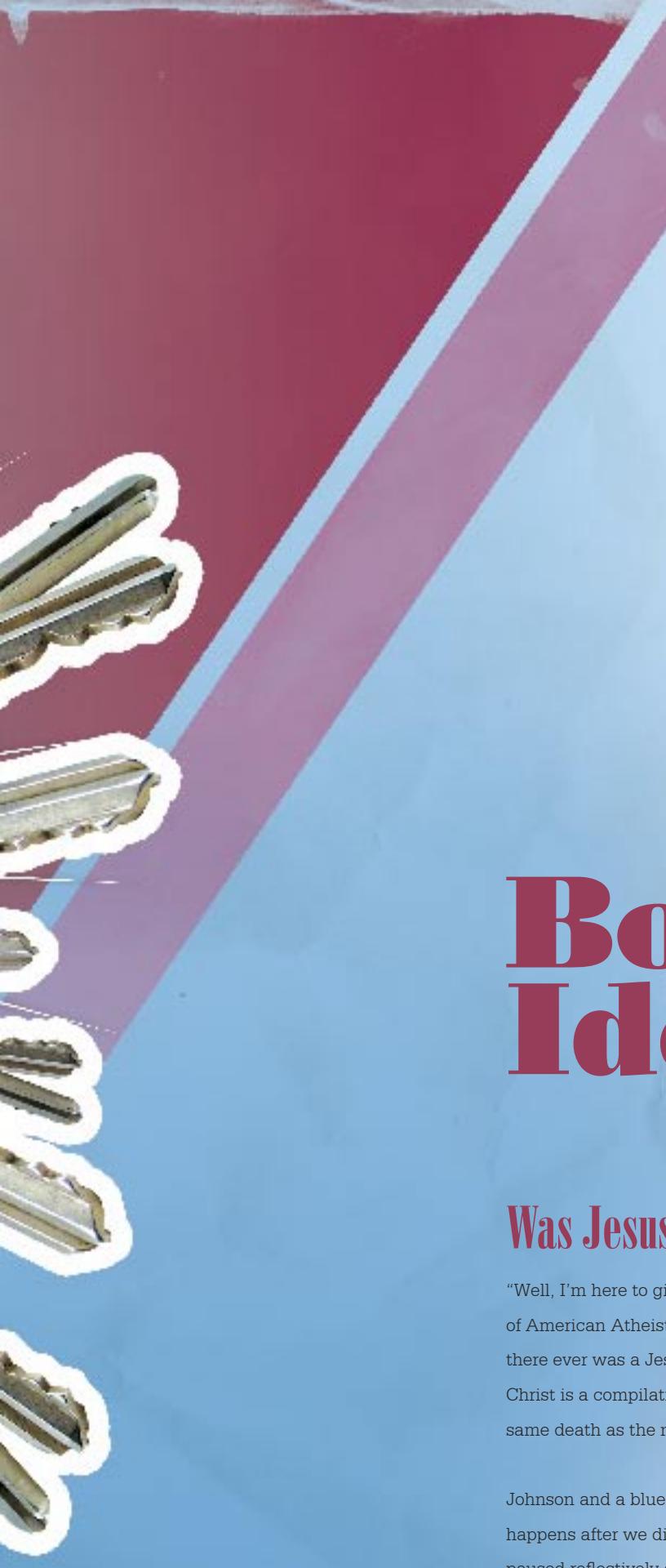
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Larry Chapman





# Born Identity

## Was Jesus a real person?

"Well, I'm here to give the reality point of view, I guess," declared Ellen Johnson, president of American Atheists. "Because the reality is, there is not one shred of secular evidence there ever was a Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ and Christianity is a modern religion. And Jesus Christ is a compilation from other gods: Horas [sic], Mithras, who had the same origins, the same death as the mythological Jesus Christ."

Johnson and a blue-ribbon panel of religious leaders were discussing the question, "What happens after we die?" on a *Larry King Live* CNN broadcast. The usually unflappable King paused reflectively and then replied, "So you don't believe there was a Jesus Christ?"

With an air of certainty, Johnson responded, "There was not. It is not what I believe; there is no secular evidence that JC, Jesus Christ, ever existed."

King had no follow-up and went to a commercial break. No discussion of any evidence for or against Jesus' existence was forthcoming. The international television audience was left wondering.<sup>1</sup>

Fifty years earlier, in his book *Why I Am Not a Christian*, atheist Bertrand Russell shocked his generation by questioning Jesus' existence. He wrote: "Historically it is quite doubtful whether Christ ever existed at all, and if He did we do not know anything about Him, so that I am not concerned with the historical question, which is a very difficult one."<sup>2</sup>

Is it possible that the Jesus so many believe to be real never existed? In *The Story of Civilization*, secular historian Will Durant posed this question: "Did Christ exist? Is the life story of the founder of Christianity the product of human sorrow, imagination, and hope—a myth comparable to the legends of Krishna, Osiris, Attis, Adonis, Dionysus, and Mithras?"<sup>3</sup> Durant pointed out how the story of Christianity has "many suspicious resemblances to the legends of pagan gods."<sup>4</sup>

So, how can we know for sure that this man, whom many worship and others curse, was real? Is Johnson right when she asserts that Jesus Christ is a "compilation from other gods"? And is Russell right when he says that Jesus' existence is "quite doubtful"?

## MYTH VS. REALITY

Let's begin with a more foundational question: What distinguishes myth from reality? How do we know, for example, that Alexander the Great really existed? Supposedly, in 336 B.C., Alexander the Great became king of Macedonia at 20 years of age. A military genius, this handsome, arrogant leader butchered his way through villages, towns, and kingdoms of the Greco-Persian world until he ruled it all. In a short eight years Alexander's armies had traversed a total of 22,000 miles in his conquests.

It has been said of Alexander that he cried when he ran out of worlds to conquer. (I'm thinking, this is not the person I want to play Monopoly with.)

Before he died at age 32, Alexander reportedly accomplished greater military deeds than anyone in history, not only of the kings who had lived





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before him, but also of those who followed, down to our own time. But today, other than cities named Alexandria, a boring film by Oliver Stone, and a few books, his legacy is all but forgotten. In fact, the name Colin Farrell had more drawing power at the box office than Alexander's.

In spite of the box office flop, historians cite three primary reasons they believe Alexander really existed:

- written documentation from early historians
- historical impact
- historical and archaeological evidence

## HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS ABOUT JESUS

The historicity of Alexander the Great and his military conquests is drawn from five ancient sources, none of whom were eyewitnesses. Although written 400 years after Alexander, Plutarch's *Life of Alexander* is the primary account of his life.

Since Plutarch and the other writers were several hundred years removed from the events of Alexander's life, they based their information on prior accounts. Of the twenty contemporary historical accounts on Alexander, not one survives. Later accounts exist, but each presents a different "Alexander," with much left to our imagination. But regardless of the time gap of several hundred years, historians are convinced that Alexander was a real man and that the essential details of what we read about his life are true.



Keeping Alexander as a reference point, we'll note that for Jesus there are both religious and secular historical accounts. But we must ask the question, were they written by reliable and objective historians? Let's take a brief look.

## THE NEW TESTAMENT

The 27 New Testament books claim to be written by authors who either knew Jesus or received firsthand knowledge of him from others. The four Gospel accounts

record Jesus' life and words from different perspectives. These accounts have been heavily scrutinized by scholars both inside Christianity and outside it.

Even New Testament critic John Dominic Crossan of the Jesus Seminar believes that Jesus Christ really lived.

The consensus of most historians is that the Gospel accounts give us a clear picture of Jesus Christ. Whether the New Testament accounts are trustworthy is the subject of another article (See "Jesus.doc").

To confirm Jesus' existence we need to hear the opinions of non-Christian historians during Jesus' time as well as today. We also need to measure the historical impact of his life.

## EARLY NON-CHRISTIAN ACCOUNTS

So, which first-century historians who wrote of Jesus did not have a Christian agenda?

First of all, let's look to Jesus' enemies.

His Jewish opponents had the most to gain by denying Jesus' existence. But the evidence points in the opposite direction. "Several Jewish writings also tell of His flesh-and-blood existence. Both Gemaras of the Jewish Talmud refer to Jesus. Although these consist of only a few brief, bitter passages intended to discount Jesus' deity, these very early Jewish writings don't begin to hint that he was not a historical person."<sup>5</sup>

Flavius Josephus was a noted Jewish historian who began writing under Roman authority in 67 A.D.. Josephus, who was born just a few years after Jesus died, would have been keenly aware of Jesus' reputation among both Romans and Jews. In his famous *Antiquities of the Jews* (93 A.D.), Josephus wrote of Jesus as a real person. "At that time lived Jesus, a holy man, if man he may be called, for he performed wonderful works, and taught men, and joyfully received the truth. And he was followed by many Jews and many Greeks.

**"Regardless of what anyone may personally think or believe about him, Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in the history of Western culture for almost twenty centuries...."**

**Jaroslav Pelikan,  
Yale historian**

He was the Messiah."<sup>6</sup> Although there is dispute about some of the wording in the account, especially the reference to Jesus being the Messiah (scholars are skeptical, thinking that Christians inserted this phrase), certainly Josephus confirmed his existence.

What about secular historians—those who lived in ancient times but weren't religiously motivated? There is current confirmation of at least 19 early secular writers who made references to Jesus as a real person.<sup>7</sup>

One of antiquity's greatest historians, Cornelius Tacitus, affirmed that Jesus had suffered under Pilate. Tacitus was born around 25 years after Jesus died, and he had seen the spread of Christianity begin to impact Rome. The Roman historian wrote negatively of Christ and Christians, identifying them in 115 A.D. as "a race of men detested for their evil practices, and commonly called Chrestiani. The name was derived from Chrestus, who, in the reign of Tiberius, suffered under Pontius Pilate, Procurator of Judea."<sup>8</sup>

The following facts about Jesus were written by early non-Christian sources:

- Jesus was from Nazareth.
- Jesus lived a wise and virtuous life.
- Jesus was crucified in Palestine under Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius Caesar at Passover time, being considered the Jewish king.

- Jesus was believed by his disciples to have died and risen from the dead three days later.
- Jesus' enemies acknowledged that he performed unusual feats they called "sorcery."
- Jesus' small band of disciples multiplied rapidly, spreading as far as Rome.
- Jesus' disciples denied polytheism, lived moral lives, and worshiped Christ as God.

Theologian Norman Geisler remarked, "This general outline is perfectly congruent with that of the New Testament."<sup>9</sup> All of these independent accounts, religious and secular, speak of a real man who matches up well with the Jesus in the Gospels. *Encyclopedia Britannica* cites these various secular accounts of Jesus' life as convincing proof of his existence. "These independent accounts prove that in ancient times even the opponents of Christianity never doubted the historicity of Jesus."<sup>10</sup>

## HISTORICAL IMPACT

An important distinction between a myth and a real person is how the figure impacts history. For example, the Olympic Games originated on Mount Olympus in Greece, home of the temple of the Greek god Zeus. But Zeus has not changed governments, laws, or ethics.

The historian Thomas Carlyle said, "No great man lives in vain. The history of the world is but the biography of great men."<sup>11</sup> As Carlyle notes, it is real people, not myths, who impact history.

As a real person, Alexander impacted history by his military conquests, altering nations, governments, and laws. But what of Jesus Christ and his impact on our world?

The first-century governments of Israel and Rome were largely untouched by Jesus' life. The average Roman didn't know he existed until many years after his death, Roman culture remained largely aloof from his teaching for decades. It would be several centuries before killing Christians in the coliseum became a national pastime. The rest of the world had little, if any, knowledge of him. Jesus marshaled no army. He didn't write a book or change any laws. The Jewish leaders hoped to wipe out any memory of him, and it appeared they would succeed.

Today, however, ancient Rome lies in ruins. Caesar's mighty legions and the pomp of Roman imperial power have faded into oblivion. Yet how is Jesus remembered today? What is *his* enduring influence?

- More books have been written about Jesus than about any other person in history.
- Nations have used his words as the bedrock of their governments. According to Durant, "The triumph of Christ was the beginning of democracy."<sup>12</sup>
- His Sermon on the Mount established a new paradigm in ethics and morals.
- Schools, hospitals, and humanitarian works have been founded in his name. Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Oxford are but a few universities that have Christians to thank for their beginning.

- The elevated role of women in Western culture traces its roots back to Jesus. (Women in Jesus' day were considered inferior and virtual nonpersons until his teaching was followed.)
- Slavery was abolished in Britain and America due to Jesus' teaching that each human life is valuable.
- Former drug and alcohol dependents, prostitutes, and others seeking purpose in life claim him as the explanation for their changed lives.
- Two billion people call themselves Christians. While some are Christian in name only, others continue to impact our culture by teaching Jesus' principles that all life is valuable and we are to love one another.

on history, he replied, "By this test Jesus stands first."<sup>13</sup>

Documentary evidence and historical impact point to the fact that Jesus did exist. If Jesus did really exist, we also would expect to discover his footprints imprinted within the details of history. Myths don't leave such confirming details.

## TANGIBLE EVIDENCE

Despite the scrupulously historical film *Elf*, a trip to the North Pole quickly puts the myth label on Santa Claus. And in spite of Tom Hanks's assertions of Santa's reality in the movie *Polar Express*, all there is at the North Pole is ice. No reindeer or toy factories. No little men in red suits. The evidence of confirming details just isn't there. (Please keep the contents of this magazine away from minors.)

Remarkably, Jesus made all of this impact as a result of just a three-year period of public ministry. If Jesus didn't exist, one must wonder how a myth could so alter history. When world historian H. G. Wells was asked who has left the greatest legacy



The details of Alexander's life, however, are chronicled by Plutarch and other historians, providing evidence of his existence. The aftermath of his conquests resulted in more than 70 cities being named Alexandria.

Names of his generals, places he conquered, and other details known to history paint a picture of a real person.

Yet the extensive details surrounding the life of Jesus Christ far surpass those of Alexander. The following details have convinced most scholars that Jesus did exist:

- historical New Testament sites
- confirmation of New Testament characters
- suddenness of Christianity's rise

One skeptic who thought Jesus was a myth was British journalist Malcolm Muggeridge. But on a television assignment to Israel, Muggeridge was faced with evidence about Jesus Christ that he didn't know existed. As he checked out historical places—Jesus' birthplace, Nazareth, the crucifixion site, and the empty tomb—a sense of Jesus' reality began to emerge.

Later he stated, "It was while I was in the Holy Land for the purpose of making three B.B.C. television programmes on the New Testament that a ... certainty seized me about Jesus' birth, ministry and Crucifixion. ... I became aware that there really had been a man, Jesus, who was also God."<sup>14</sup>

Some German higher-critical scholars in the 18th and 19th centuries had questioned Jesus' existence, stating that such key figures as Pontius Pilate and chief priest Joseph Caiaphas in the Gospel accounts had

never been confirmed as real. No rebuttal was possible until the mid-20th century.

Archaeologists in 1962 confirmed Pilate's existence when they discovered his name included in an inscription on an excavated stone. Likewise, the existence of Caiaphas was uncertain until 1990, when an ossuary (bone box) was discovered bearing his inscription. Archaeologists have also discovered what they believe to be Simon Peter's house and a cave where John the Baptist did his baptizing.

Finally, perhaps the most convincing historical evidence that Jesus existed was the rapid rise of Christianity. How can it be explained without Christ? How could this group of fishermen and other working-men invent Jesus in a scant few years?

Will Durant answered his own introductory question—did Christ exist?—with the following conclusion:

That a few simple men should in one generation have invented so powerful and appealing a personality, so lofty an ethic and so inspiring a vision of human brotherhood, would be a miracle far more incredible than any recorded in the Gospels.

After two centuries of Higher Criticism the outlines of the life, character, and teaching of Christ, remain reasonably clear, and constitute the most fascinating feature in the history of Western man.<sup>15</sup>

One key for Durant and other scholars is the time factor. Myths and legends usually take hundreds of years to evolve—the story of George Washington never telling a lie was

probably a lie, until two centuries turned it into legend. News of Christianity, on the other hand, took off faster than gossip about Brad and Jen's breakup. Had Jesus not existed, those who opposed Christianity would certainly have labeled him a myth from the outset. But they didn't.

Such evidence, along with the early written accounts and the historical impact of Jesus Christ, convince even skeptical historians that the founder of Christianity was neither myth nor legend. But one expert on myths wasn't so sure.

Like Muggeridge, Oxford scholar C. S. Lewis was initially convinced that Jesus was nothing more than a myth. Lewis once



stated, "All religions, that is, all mythologies ... are merely man's own invention—Christ as much as Loki."<sup>16</sup> (Loki is an old Norse god. Like Thor, but without the ponytail.)

Ten years after denouncing Jesus as a myth, Lewis discovered that historical details, including several eyewitness documents, verify his existence.

Jesus Christ has impacted history's landscape like a massive earthquake. And this earthquake has left a trail wider than the Grand Canyon. It is this trail of evidence that convinces scholars that Jesus really did exist and really did impact our world 2,000 years ago.

## SCHOLARS' VERDICT

Clifford Herschel Moore, professor at Harvard University, remarked of Jesus'



historicity, "Christianity knew its Saviour and Redeemer not as some god whose history was contained in a mythical faith. ... Jesus was a historical not a mythical being. No remote or foul myth obtruded itself on the Christian believer; his faith was founded on positive, historical, and acceptable facts."<sup>17</sup>

Few if any serious historians agree with Ellen Johnson's and Bertrand Russell's assertions that Jesus didn't exist. The extensive documentation of Jesus' life by contemporary writers, his profound historical impact, and the confirming tangible evidence of history have persuaded scholars that Jesus really did exist. Could a myth have done all that? All but a few extremely skeptical scholars say no.

Dr. Michael Grant of Cambridge has written, "To sum up, modern critical methods fail to support the Christ-myth theory. It has 'again and again been answered and annihilated by first rank scholars.' In recent years 'no serious scholar has ventured to postulate the non-historicity of Jesus.' "<sup>18</sup>

Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan declared, "Regardless of what anyone may personally think or believe about him, Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in the history of Western culture for almost twenty centuries.... It is from his birth that most of the human race dates its calendars, it is by his name that millions curse and in his name that millions pray."<sup>19</sup>

## NEWSFLASH

In February, 2006, a legal challenge to Jesus' existence wound up being thrown out of an Italian court. The plaintiff, Luigi Cascioli, 72, had argued his hometown priest and former schoolmate had effectively broken an Italian law by conning the public into believing that Jesus was a real person.

But instead of granting Cascioli his request to bring the case to court, the judge recommended magistrates investigate him for slandering priest Enrico Righi. Cascioli, author of a book called *The Fable of Christ*, said he would appeal to Italy's highest court, and then to The Hague.

# Gospels in Brief

## THE BIRTH

The Gospel writers all anchored their historical narratives in the Old Testament, beginning with messianic passages from the Hebrew prophets. These passages foretold the coming Messiah, using a fulfillment formula stating that "that" is "this." One such passage is Isaiah 9:6-7.

"A child is born to us, a son is given to us. And the government will rest on his shoulders. These will be his royal titles: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His ever expanding, peaceful government will never end. He will rule forever with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David."

(Isaiah 9:6-7, NLT)

Roughly 700 years after Isaiah uttered this prophecy concerning the coming Messiah, the Gospels tell us, the long-awaited announcement is heralded by an angel. This angel came, not to awaiting multitudes, but to a lowly peasant woman, who was told she would birth the Savior, sans husband.

The young woman, Mary, was engaged to a village carpenter named Joseph. But when Mary told Joseph what the angel had spoken, explaining that she was already pregnant with the child, Joseph obviously assumed an illicit relationship and moved to quietly dissolve the marriage.

But the Gospel of Matthew tells us that an angelic messenger related to Joseph, in a dream, that what Mary had claimed

was actually true. In fact, it must have been quite a dream, for it compelled him to believe Mary. In the history of unplanned pregnancies this was probably not the first time such a story was told. It was, in all likelihood, the first time it was believed.

The Gospels relate that the child was born in Bethlehem, this being the town of Joseph's origin. Everyone needed to return to their ancestral home to fulfill the requirements of a Roman census. As Bethlehem brimmed with returning pilgrims the family was forced to stay in a barn. Perhaps this was God's plan, or perhaps Joseph just *didn't* plan, but we are left viewing irony itself: Mary gave birth to a son, Jesus, and laid the world's Messiah in a feeding trough for animals.

## THE WONDER YEARS

The childhood of Jesus truly was the "wonder years," for the Gospels, in their silence, leave us to wonder what transpired. Only one story of Jesus' youth is preserved, in which his parents (Joseph and Mary) having lost him, discovered him in the Temple discussing the things of God with the religious leaders—a hint of things to come.

Other than this Temple incident and the details surrounding his birth, many have wondered why the early years in Jesus' life are largely unaccounted for. But the reasons are relatively easy to understand.

Since Jesus' public ministry didn't begin until he was approximately 30 years of age, there would be virtually nothing in his early years of consequence to write about. None of the miracles he performed or sermons he preached occurred until then. Additionally, his apostles, the authors of the New Testament, weren't there to witness his pre-ministry life, not joining Jesus until he began his public ministry.

## PUBLIC MINISTRY

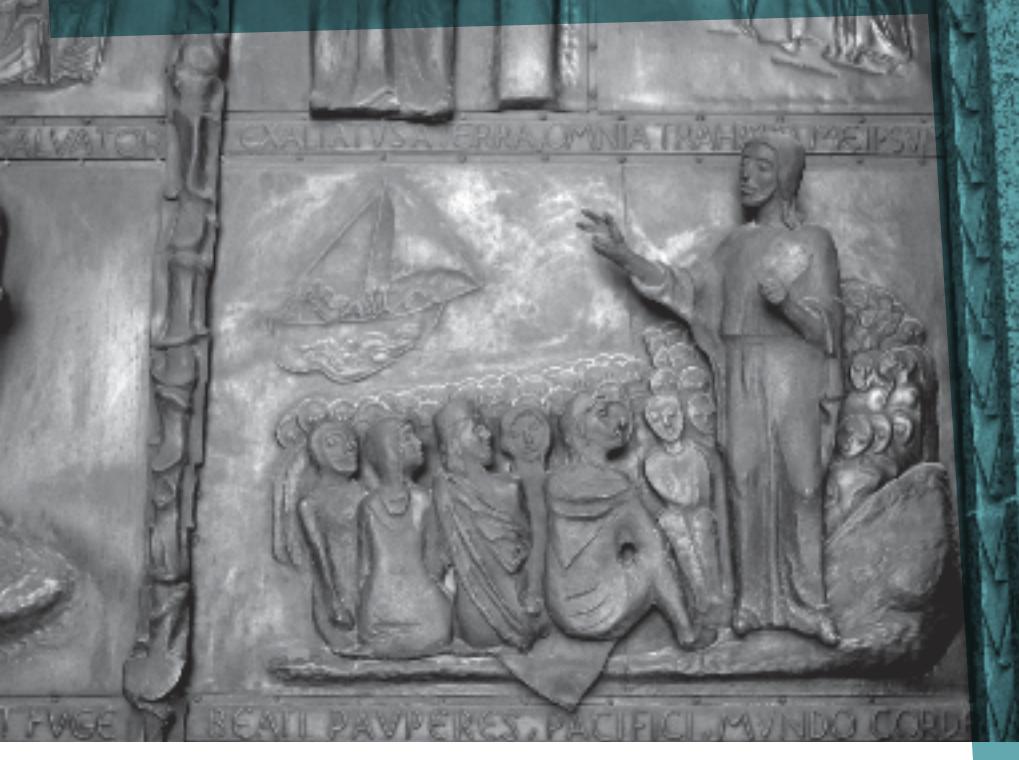
At about the age of 30, Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. As he stood to do the Scripture reading, the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it was written:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
for he has appointed me to preach  
Good News to the poor. He has  
sent me to proclaim that captives  
will be released, that the blind will  
see, that the downtrodden will be  
freed from their oppressors, and  
that the time of the Lord's favor  
has come. (Luke 4:18-19, NLT)

He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, and sat down. Everyone in the synagogue stared at him intently. Then he said, "This Scripture has come true today before your very eyes!" (Luke 4:20-21, NLT)

This, according to the Gospel of Luke, marked the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. The Isaiah passage from which he read refers to the coming Messiah, and by declaring, "This Scripture has come true," Jesus began his ministry with a gunshot summoning the attention of all Israel and beginning a race that would last roughly three years before it ended in a state-sponsored lynching.

One would assume that Jesus' teaching was quite diverse, addressing all of the many social and moral injustices of his day. This was not the case. With the exception



of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught one primary message: "The kingdom of God is upon you, and I am its king."

The ministry of Jesus was laced with miracles, but every miracle was an object lesson, a 30-second commercial promoting that one central message.

For example, in the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah spoke of the Messiah's coming kingdom, describing it in these words: "In that day deaf people will hear words read from a book, and blind people will see through the gloom and darkness" and "When he comes, he will open the eyes of the blind and unstop the ears of the deaf" (Isaiah 29:18; 35:5). So every time Jesus gave sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf, it was freighted with messianic implications.

Besides telling of his messages and miracles to the masses, the Gospels draw us in to the inner circle of Jesus' most loyal, though flawed, group of followers: the disciples. Jesus assumed not just the role of Messiah, but that of mentor, training the disciples to carry on the proclamation of the kingdom—and its king—once the king had been killed.

## DEATH AND RESURRECTION

The ministry of Jesus ended as abruptly as it had begun. Upon his final visit to Jerusalem for the Passover, Jesus told his 12 closest disciples that he would be betrayed, arrested, and crucified but also that he would come back to life three days later. Jesus' followers were confused, for it seemed inconceivable that the Messiah's reign

should end in death. In fact, Jesus saw his death as inaugurating his reign. But these were details to be worked out later, as upon entering Jerusalem, the mechanisms of betrayal were already in high gear and there was no time left to clarify.

As Jesus predicted, he was betrayed by one of his own disciples—Judas Iscariot—and arrested. In a mock trial under the Roman governor Pontius Pilate (to whom the Jewish leaders brought him since under Roman law they could not carry out their own executions), he was convicted of treason and condemned to die on a cross.

At 3:00 in the afternoon, after hanging on the cross for approximately six hours, Jesus cried out, "It is finished." And with that breathed his last breath.

The Gospels declare that three days later reports began to spread of witnesses who had seen Jesus. As the number of witnesses grew to several hundred, Jerusalem was in an uproar. It was divided and would remain so—Christianity had been birthed.

<sup>5</sup> D. James Kennedy, *Skeptics Answered* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1997), 76. The Gemaras are early rabbinical commentaries of the Jewish Talmud, a body of theological writings, dated a.d. 200–500.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Durant, 554.

<sup>7</sup> Durant, 73.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Durant, 281.

<sup>9</sup> Norman Geisler and Peter Bocchino, *Unshakable Foundations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Bethany House, 2001), 269.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Nelson, 1979), 87.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Christopher Lee, *This Sceptred Isle*, 55 B.C.–1901 (London: Penguin, 1997), 1.

<sup>12</sup> Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy* (New York: Pocket, 1961), 428.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Christian Evidences* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1957), 163.

<sup>14</sup> Malcolm Muggeridge, *Jesus Rediscovered* (Bungay, Suffolk, U.K.: Fontana, 1969), 8.

<sup>15</sup> Durant, *Caesar and Christ*, Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> David C. Downing, *The Most Reluctant Convert* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 57.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in McDowell, 193.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Grant, *Jesus* (London: Rigel, 2004), 200.

<sup>19</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 1.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ellen Johnson and Larry King, "What Happens After We Die?" *Larry King Live*, CNN, April 14, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957), 16.

<sup>3</sup> Will Durant, *Caesar and Christ*, vol. 3 of *The Story of Civilization* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972), 553.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 557.