

A Bare-Bones Account of Jesus' Life

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Sources

There is no written story of Jesus' life from ancient times that even tries to be an objective biography. Below, what I say about the details of his life come from the *New Testament*, from the first four "books" named "Matthew", "Mark", "Luke", and "John". These "books" are not intended to be objective biographies of Jesus, but are rather intended to provide a theological interpretation of what Jesus' life meant. These four "books" are called the "gospels," meaning that they are designed to convey good news to people, based on their interpretation of Jesus' life. These writings nevertheless include quite a few claims about various specific events in Jesus' life and various things he said; that is what I will focus on.

It is not known who actually wrote these accounts, or exactly when they were written, although scholars who study such things generally agree that the earliest possible date is somewhere around the year 60, with most that I have heard about opting for later dates, such as somewhere around the year 70. There seems to be agreement that the gospel of John was written much later – at least sometime after 100. So, these books were not written by people who were contemporaries of Jesus, assuming that Jesus was a genuinely historical, flesh-and-blood person. Probably the gospels were assembled from various written and oral stories that had been circulating in the Christian community for decades.¹

We have copies of a few other "gospels" about Jesus besides those found in the *New Testament*. These give rather different views about what Jesus' life meant, and about who he was. These, too, were apparently written decades after Jesus died, and again were intended not as objective biographies, but as theological interpretations. For the first three hundred years or so after Jesus died, the Christian community wrestled with how to deal with the competing "gospels" that were being promoted by various groups of people, ultimately rejecting all of them except the four that were accepted for inclusion in the *New Testament*. The test that the community leaders announced for deciding on the acceptability of a "gospel" was simple: does the "gospel" present the meaning of Jesus' life in a way that is consistent with the views that can be traced back to Jesus' closest associates (the "Apostles")? This means that in the early centuries, the ultimate authority in the Christian community was their leadership's understanding of the "Apostolic tradition", because the community relied on that understanding to guide the creation of the *New Testament*. The account below does not use anything from those "gospels" that were rejected by the early church. Additionally, there are some independent historical records regarding the cultural and political surroundings in which the Jesus' story takes place. I have used some of those materials as well in constructing the story.

¹Probably the earliest writings in the *New Testament* were written by St. Paul as letters to various groups of Christians scattered around the Mediterranean. St. Paul would have been a contemporary of Jesus, although there is no suggestion that they ever met, and he does not tell stories about events in Jesus' life. These letters are not to be confused with the gospels.

Purpose

The intent of this account is to provide some basic information for students who might otherwise lack it. As much as possible, all theological interpretation of Jesus as “savior” of the world, or as somehow divine, has been stripped away, leaving just a bare-bones account that lacks theological punch. In that regard the story may seem to some to be rather lacking in punch. But the claims about Jesus as savior or as divine are built around this story. Exactly how that is to be done remains a matter of theological interest and dispute. So, there is a point to telling the story without building into it those theological elements.

I am not claiming that this is an historically accurate picture of actual events. I am simply summarizing a story told in the Bible. For my purposes here, it does not matter whether the story is historically accurate; what matters is that students know the story. The theological meanings that have been given to the story can then be considered separately. The theological ideas won't make any sense without the story; so that is why it is important to know the story.

The story

The setting for Jesus' life

Jesus (whose Jewish name really should be translated as “Joshua”) was born under exceedingly difficult circumstances about 2000 years ago. We don't know the exact year. At the time, the Jewish homeland had been conquered and made part of the Roman empire. The Jewish people chafed mightily under the Roman occupation, even though they were allowed to keep their religious center, the Temple, in Jerusalem, and they were allowed to continue to practice their religion. They yearned for independence, and many expected that independence would come when their God would provide a great leader, a messiah, to organize a military victory over the Romans and vindicate the Jewish nation.

There was a complex arrangement for governing the region during the Roman occupation. Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea (the southernmost province of Palestine that included the historic Jewish capital city, Jerusalem). Pilate was a brutal, unprincipled fellow who cared far more about his political fortunes than about justice. He controlled a garrison of Roman soldiers that could be deployed to stamp out trouble, and he apparently liked to crucify people suspected of rebellious plans. In addition, there was a brief succession of puppet quasi-Jewish kings, referred to as Herods, roundly despised by most Jews. It appears that Herod the Great was king when Jesus was born (which means that Jesus was born prior to the year 4 BCE). His son, Herod Antipas, replaced him and was king of Galilee (the northern part of Palestine) during all of Jesus' life except the beginning year or so. The Herods trusted no one, and maintained control by brutality and by appointing the chief Jewish priest, the so-called “High Priest”, to serve so long as the priests used their position so as to keep the people peaceable. Herod Antipas lived in magnificent palace fortresses on top of various mountains scattered around the region. His continued kingship depended on his being subservient to Roman interests, and he enjoyed using his Roman connections to maintain a lavish lifestyle completely out of sync with Jewish law, and at the terrible expense of the Jewish people. And, finally, there was a third governing force, namely, the system of Sanhedrins – Jewish religious law courts. In Jerusalem, there was the Great Sanhedrin, the highest court in the Jewish religious law system. Naturally, the High Priest was a leader of it. Each town also had its own Sanhedrin, to handle local matters. The Great Sanhedrin had members drawn from the

religious establishment of the day – including the leading permanent, full-time priests who ran the ritual activities of the Temple, and the most senior pharisees, who were basically legal scholars or lawyers. (Keep in mind that traditional Jewish law was all religious law based on the Torah.) The Jews were allowed by the Romans to continue operating under their traditional law so long as they indicated their subservience to Rome by paying their heavy taxes, and didn't cause trouble. The implication is that the Great Sanhedrin operated only because Rome allowed it to operate, so that the religious leaders could continue to hold positions of authority only so long as they helped keep order and didn't subvert Roman authority. Some significant portion of the Jewish population wanted a much more militant and defiant response to Roman occupation and had a very negative view of the religious establishment's position as clients of Rome. On the other hand, the religious establishment could make the argument that the only way God would ever once again favor the Jewish nation with independence was to be obedient to God's law, participate faithfully in the Temple rites, and pray for redemption. Lashing out at Rome would only bring destruction. The religious establishment presented its approach as the only way to hold the Jewish people together so as to wait for God's favor.

This legal and religio-political setting is important for understanding Jesus' life, for he was a Jew, born into this setting, and the significance of his life is interpreted in the *New Testament* by reference to this setting.

Early years

The birth occurred in the Jewish town of Bethlehem where Jesus' very pregnant mother-to-be, Mary,² had been forced to go by the fact that her fiancé, Joseph, was a descendent of the revered Jewish King David of long before. Bethlehem was King David's home town; apparently families were supposed to go to their ancestral homes for the census. The trip from Nazareth where Mary and carpenter Joseph lived must have been just awful for her, and when they got to Bethlehem, there were no rooms available for them to stay in. The best shelter they could find was an animal barn, and apparently not long after they arrived Mary went into labor and gave birth right in the barn. This dangerous, messy, and stinky affair would not have been the peaceful, lovely event that gets depicted on Christmas cards. According to the gospel accounts, neither Joseph nor Mary believed that Joseph was the father of the child; both had earlier mystical religious experiences in which they were told things by messengers sent from God that led them to see the birth as the miraculous doing of God that would bring about good results. Joseph's experience came in a dream, and was the only thing that had kept him from angrily dumping Mary for having turned up pregnant.

(Note: unlike the many myths circulating in other cultures at the time regarding unnatural, miraculous births due to divine activity, there is no implication in the gospel accounts that God had sex with Mary to impregnate her. The Jewish conception of the divine at that time was not that of a physical man who could have sex, unlike the Greek conception of Zeus. However, in all the mythologies in which divine power makes a human woman pregnant, including the gospel accounts, the meaning is always the same: the resulting child is not a normal human being, but is rather a mixture of the human with the divine. This would have been clear to hearers of the story at the time.)

²It would be more accurate to call her Miriam.

Eventually, the family returned to the town of Nazareth where Joseph presumably plied his carpentry trade, probably teaching Jesus how to be a carpenter. Perhaps that is exactly what Jesus did during his teens and twenties – the gospels don't tell us anything about this. However, there is one hint that already at the age of 12 Jesus was particularly interested in talking about religious matters.

At about the age of 30, Jesus becomes an itinerant prophet (i.e., preacher/teacher/reformer) beginning in Nazareth, but wandering about Galilee with a group of close disciples, preaching and performing miracles of healing and comfort. It is unclear for how long this activity went on; if the gospel of John is used as the source, it appears that it went on for about three years. But then John has Jesus also leaving Galilee and going to Jerusalem (south of Galilee, in Judea) more than once, while the other gospels mention only one trip to Jerusalem, at the end of Jesus' life. Using the other gospels as a source, some think that the ministry of Jesus lasted only one year.

Jesus' teaching

Any summary of what Jesus taught during his brief period of preaching and teaching is bound to be controversial because it will be theologically loaded in virtue of what the summary emphasizes and what it leaves out.

Moreover, an accurate interpretation of the gospel accounts also requires knowing a good bit about ancient Jewish culture. Contemporary folks generally miss this element and are likely to misinterpret as a result. Let me give one example to illustrate: Jesus is quoted as saying that if a person is sued in court for their outer garment, they should give not only their outer garment to the one who is suing, but also their inner garment. So, does this mean that Jesus was teaching that people should be doormats and allow just anyone to take everything they have? Perhaps not. Apparently, the typical Jew of the day wore just two garments – an inner one and an outer one. If a Jew were to go to court for a hearing on a lawsuit in which someone were suing him for his outer garment, and just hand over both garments to the plaintiff without arguing about it, that would leave the Jew with no clothes on at all. He would be standing naked in the court. This renders both the judges and the plaintiff ritually unclean under Jewish law. Given this bit of information, then, should we say that Jesus was recommending that if someone is trying to do you dirt in court, you should respond not by yelling and protesting and fighting, but by silently proclaiming the whole process as unclean – through a simple dramatic act? Not exactly the doormat message; instead, a kind of quiet defiance that has a chance of calling for the whole situation to be rethought and settled in a different way? So, what did Jesus really mean with his advice about the garments?

Nevertheless, one central theme of Jesus' teaching seems quite clear: the "kingdom of God" is coming quickly for the Jewish people, but it will not come in the way that the religious establishment has led everyone to expect. The "kingdom of God" probably refers to the idea that God's favor and presence will be felt strongly once again among the people. The story of Jewish history in the Hebrew Scriptures at the time is told in terms of a series of exiles and returns, in which exile signifies being distanced from God and return signifies that all is well again and God is back in the lives of the people. The exile is often not just spiritual, but physical – the Jewish people are forced away from their homeland, and the return is often just as physical. But under the Roman occupation, the Jews were in their homeland and yet felt as though they were in exile. The return they imagined was not physical in the sense of moving to a new place, but rather physical in the sense of a political and military victory in which the Romans were tossed

out, and the Jewish people would live independently under the Jewish law and all would then be much better and they would feel like God was with them again.

So, when Jesus talks about the coming kingdom of God, he may very well mean the return from the exile that the Jewish people are in. However, he does not see that return as political or military. He sees it as a return to a close relationship with God. He thinks he himself is bringing about that return through his own life, for anyone who responds and “gets” it. So, as I see it, he is saying that the kingdom of God is at hand because he is opening the door to it. He yearns for the Jewish people to see that a genuine return is not about getting rid of Romans; it is about personally getting close to God. He displays himself as one who is close to God.

And so one gets close to God not through Temple rituals as the priests would have the people believe. He sees the Temple rituals as having been corrupted by cynicism and power plays by the priestly class (and presumably because he, like everyone else, knows about the process by which the High Priest gets appointed). And one gets close to God not through proud, extremely detailed following of the exact letter of the law, without paying any attention to what the law is really about, as he claimed the legal scholars and lawyers (i.e., the pharisees) would have the people believe. Rather, Jesus preached that one should approach God humbly, and with purity of heart, seeking God’s mercy and forgiveness, not relying on externals such as the fact that one is Jewish and thus automatically a member of the people of God, or that one has given money to the poor, or that one has tried more than most to follow the law. Genuine repentance is needed, in which one acknowledges that things are not perfect, and one commits to trying to change for the better. And one does not get close to God by killing Roman soldiers or seeing oneself as better than others. One gets close to God by following the path of love of God and other people that Jesus was demonstrating. Jesus clearly claimed that the right way to live is to care about the welfare of all other people with whom one has contact, even those who are enemies, seeing others as having equal claim to status in God’s kingdom. The miracle stories, in which ordinary, sinful people are dramatically helped in various ways, illustrate that it works – God’s life-enhancing force comes into play for everyone when one follows Jesus’ path of connection with God.

Jesus’ last days

Given the nature of this message, it is not surprising that Jesus went over better with ordinary people than with the Jewish religious leadership. After all Jesus was implying the leadership (and its interpretation of the Jewish religious tradition) had it all wrong – they didn’t really understand what the Torah – the Way of God – was all about, and they were misleading the people. However, Jesus was not advocating that there be a revolt against Rome. He was challenging the *theology* of the establishment, not its failure to organize a revolt. Tensions with that leadership began to boil as Jesus felt compelled to travel with his message to the religious center, Jerusalem and its Temple, for the time of the biggest religious festival of the year, Passover, so that he could make his point in the most dramatic way and signal the depth of the difference between what he stood for and what the establishment saw as the proper Way. His arrival created quite a stir among some of the citizens, with loud chants of support for him from people who must have heard something about him. Perhaps we are to understand that the cheering crowd expected him to organize an Jewish uprising and bring about the kingdom of God that he had been talking about, but understood in their own political and military way. When he then went to the Temple and

caused an uproar over the incursion of money-making businesses into the Temple, that had been set up there with the consent of the priests (who were probably getting kickbacks), he may have fanned the expectations of a genuine revolution, a real house-cleaning. But this is not at all what Jesus had in mind. He wanted a revolution, but a spiritual one, not a political or military one. He wanted a change of heart, not a change of the guard.

He apparently went to Jerusalem knowing full well that by doing so in the very public way that he did it, he would become marked for elimination by the religious establishment. And that is exactly what happened. The *motivation* of the Jewish leadership in going after Jesus and seeking to get him executed is not described in any detail in the gospels. Theories on this point abound, but in fairness to the Jewish establishment I think it important to at least mention that it is consistent with the gospels' story to suppose that the plan to get Jesus eliminated had at least some potentially noble motives (although the gospel writers see the effort as horribly wrong). Probably the leadership genuinely believed that Jesus was misleading the public into believing dangerous things that would lead them away from the true path that Jews should be following as they wait for God to once again bless them as He had done centuries before. Perhaps they believed that by undermining their religious and legal authority, Jesus was promoting chaos or anarchy, which would bring the wrath of Rome down on the Jewish people. (The gospels suggest that something like this was one of the factors they had in mind – the argument at Jesus' trial: it's better for one person to die than for everyone to die.) Perhaps the leadership was convinced that Jesus had been claiming to actually be divine – thus implying that he should be worshiped like a god, and since as far as they were concerned he obviously was a human being and thus not God, his claim amounted to usurping the place of God, and would be genuine blasphemy, worthy of death.

In any case, after a brief trial before (some portion of??) the Great Sanhedrin, Jesus was found guilty of blasphemy and deemed worthy of being executed. The trial appears to have been legally deficient under Jewish law, but perhaps those who organized it thought the situation was an emergency that justified a “special” session. In any case, those involved in the proceedings then proceeded to devise a way to get Pontius Pilate to execute Jesus. (There is some lack of clarity over why they got Pilate involved. Perhaps the Jewish religious courts at that time did not have the authority to order executions; perhaps the leaders who were in favor of the execution wanted political cover.)³

Ultimately, Jesus was handed over to Pilate and Pilate ordered his execution by crucifixion for the crime of sedition against Rome. (To Pilate, the Jewish leadership accused Jesus of claiming to be a king, in order to level an accusation against Jesus that would motivate Pilate to execute him and that had some evidence in its favor from things Jesus had said. They knew Pilate couldn't care less about whether Jesus had blasphemed the Jewish god, so sedition was the complaint they lodged.) Pilate is described as not

³The gospels say it was “the Jews” who instigated the plan to kill Jesus. This phrasing in later centuries was used as a basis in Europe for blaming all Jewish people for killing Jesus. Obviously, the gospels depict the execution of Jesus as unjust, but a fair reading of the gospels does not have them blaming all Jewish people. After all, Jesus and all of his main followers at the time were Jews, as the gospels clearly indicate. The phrase “the Jews” simply refers to those who were involved in the plan. It is Pilate, not “the Jews”, who is depicted as ordering an execution he himself believes to be undeserved.

believing the accusation, but as ordering the execution by crucifixion anyway because it seemed the politically expedient thing to do. He didn't want anyone going to his superiors with a story saying that he had let a pretender to Jewish kingship slip away, or that he had allowed an internal Jewish religious feud to get out of hand. He fairly routinely ordered Jews to be crucified, so this was just one more.⁴ And, presumably with some proud sense of his own cleverness, he turned the execution into an opportunity to "stick it" to the Jewish people, especially their leaders, by putting a sign up on top of Jesus' execution cross that labeled Jesus as the King of the Jews.

Crucifixion was often used by the Romans for political crimes. The idea was to make a public display of what happens to people who have the audacity to think any rebellious thoughts. Crucifixion is a means of slowly torturing someone to death publicly. It normally takes a long time for the subject to die, perhaps days, but in Jesus' case it seems to have gone rather quickly – about three hours of agony – perhaps because he had been so badly beaten up by the Roman soldiers prior to the actual crucifixion.

After his death

Jesus was buried in a cave tomb borrowed from a well-off Jewish leader who was sympathetic to him. On the third day after, some of his female disciples went to visit the tomb and found it empty. Then some of the male disciples ran to check it out and found Jesus' body was not there. There are angels announcing that Jesus is alive again. The gospels report a number of subsequent rather strange and unexpected interactions between Jesus and his followers which led them to be completely convinced that Jesus had risen from the dead. These stories raise a number of interesting questions about the nature of these encounters: The same body that Jesus always had was gone from the tomb, and thus was presumably alive again as Jesus. This fits with one of the encounter stories in which Jesus displays the wounds from his crucifixion to one of his doubting followers. But then on some other occasions Jesus is not recognized by his followers in these encounters, even though he is right there in conversation with them. One story seems to say that Jesus suddenly physically appeared at a gathering of some of his followers, as though he just materialized out of nowhere, and yet he then ate normal food with them. It is difficult to know how to tell these stories since I believe they evidence a certain ambiguity about the character of life after death. But the overall point seems quite clear – Jesus was individually and physically alive again.

The gospel narrative of Jesus' life after his death ends with his "ascent into Heaven". Presumably, the image is of a physical Jesus rising up into the sky until he is gone far enough to get to the place where Heaven is located. This talk of ascending into Heaven fits with the view held at that time that the realm in which God lives is up there somewhere in the sky or beyond the sky, and the earth is a big pancake-like thing spread out below God's watchful eye. The story doesn't say whether Jesus still has his regular body up there, but that seems to be indicated by the description as an ascension. Before he left, Jesus promised to send the spirit of God to be with his followers. In fact, he said that if he didn't leave, then the spirit could not come, almost as though his continued presence was in the way. At least that is the way the story is told. I have no idea what it means. The gospel account of Jesus' life ends with this.

⁴Pilate was so barbaric that he was looked down upon by his superiors in the Roman chain of command, who saw his tactics as counter-productive and distasteful. He never got the promotions he aimed for.