

Biography of Jesus

By Peter Walker

He was born in an obscure village. Mostly he worked as a carpenter, but he became a traveling preacher. During his short life he never had his own home or raised a family. While he was still a young man, people grew to hate him. He ended up in the hands of his enemies and was put on trial and, although innocent, was found guilty. He was sentenced to death and died on a cross between two thieves. One friend had pity on him and placed his bruised body in a borrowed tomb...

The life-story of Jesus of Nazareth, when set out in this way, cannot explain how a major world religion began. Yet take away the story of this mysterious figure from the ancient world and there is no Christianity. So what do we know about Jesus' life? And why do Christians see it as so significant?

For greater details on Jesus' life we must turn to the four accounts of Jesus known as the 'canonical Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). To be sure, there are other non-Christian sources which mention Jesus in passing, thereby confirming that Jesus was a historical person. For example, the Romans historian Tacitus (AD 55-120) recounts that Jesus 'underwent the death penalty in the region of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate' (Annals 15:44); and Josephus, a Jewish historian (writing AD 90), says much the same describing Jesus as a 'wise man', 'a teacher', 'a worker of incredible deeds' and the one who brought into existence the 'tribe of Christians'.

But we are most indebted, not unnaturally, to those writers who consciously chose to write up Jesus' story. If we take their accounts at face value, the outline of Jesus' life looks something like this.

- He was born in Bethlehem (10km or 6 miles south of Jerusalem) around 6 BC - the monk who worked out the dates in the sixth century got the year slightly wrong! - and was raised in the tiny village of Nazareth in the hills of western Galilee.
- He started his public, itinerant ministry around Lake Galilee when in his young 30s (soon after his cousin John had called people to be 'baptized' in the River Jordan) and quickly gathered around him a special people of twelve men (his disciples', later known also as the 'apostles').
- His reputation as a teacher and healer spread far and wide, with many seeing him as inspired uniquely with God's Spirit or as a prophet (similar to Old Testament prophets such as Elijah).
- He certainly seemed to have extraordinary powers over disease and natural forces, even raising one or two people from death.
- His own teaching was focused on the long-awaited kingdom of God, announcing that through his ministry God was becoming king in a dramatic new way.
- Drawing on images from the Old Testament, he identified himself as 'the Son of Man' (in the book of Daniel this figure was a glorious one who represented God's people before God's throne), but he also gave clear hints that he was the Suffering Servant (foretold in Isaiah) and the long awaited King of Messiah.

- Although he had been there before, he eventually set out purposefully towards Jerusalem, presenting a prophetic and royal challenge to the city and its leaders, and performing a symbolic act in its Temple (turning over the tables, which pointed to his own authority over the Temple and its imminent destruction)
- One of his disciples (Judas Iscariot) then betrayed him to the religious authorities; they arrested him after midnight in the garden of Gethsemane, tried him on various charges and then presented him the next morning before the Roman governor, who ordered his execution by crucifixion.
- All this seems to have been foreseen and even intended by Jesus; he had spoken of his approaching 'hour', had attempted on three occasions to warn his friends that he would be 'rejected and killed', and on the evening before his death he had taken some bread and wine (an integral part of the traditional Passover celebration) and given them a wholly new meaning; they were his body and blood.

Put like this, these ingredients (most of which are largely uncontested by modern scholars) indicate that there may be more to this 'solitary life' than we first imagined: if Israel's God was becoming king through Jesus, who then was Jesus? Where did he get his evident authority from - in word and deed? And why did he seemingly orchestrate his own death? What could that possibly achieve?

And what happened 'on the third day' after his death? Christians are those who are convinced that the story did not end here, but instead that Jesus was raised from the grave by the power of God. All the Gospels end with this dramatic resurrection-claim: Jesus came back from the dead and in due course returned to God in heaven, where (as the Creeds say) he is seated in glory as the 'right hand of the Father'.

The earlier creed (or 'confession') amongst the first Christians was 'Jesus is Lord' and they spread his 'good news' around the world. In the light of his resurrection they now began to unpack the true identity of this Jesus: not just the messiah and the king of Israel, but one greater than Abraham, Moses, and David; not just the Suffering Servant, but the lamb of God and the true high priest; indeed not just human being, but someone who could be identified with the very God of Israel as his 'Son', as his eternal and preexistent 'Word', as the 'Lord of Glory'. In a Jewish culture, rooted in ardent monotheism, these claims for Jesus were extraordinary - and remain so. They point us to the 'incarnation' as the hallmark of the Christian church: the belief that in Jesus, God himself has come amongst us.

And, if so, then Jesus' death takes on a new meaning - as the moment when God gave himself to meet us at our point of deepest need, as the place where divine judgment was removed and the door opened to God's mercy and forgiveness - 'God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us' Romans 5:8. Now perhaps we understand why the poem concludes:

...Nearly two thousand years have passed. Yet he still remains the figure at the very heart of the human race. All the kings, rulers, and powers that have ever been, all the armies that have ever fought, indeed nothing since time began, has had so great an effect upon humanity as has that one solitary life. - One Solitary Life, Author Unknown