

Who Was Jesus of Nazareth?

After seeing Gibson's film, "The Passion of the Christ", you are probably wondering just who this person was. The man portrayed certainly was not like ordinary men. Though he never wrote a book or led an army, this peasant man has changed our world more than any other man in history. Who was Jesus? There are many opinions today about who He was, but first hand accounts of that day give us more accurate information than opinions of people who live two thousand years later. Let's look at who this man was from three different perspectives: the historical view, his followers' views, and His own expressions in regard to himself.

Historically

If Jesus was such an amazing man, why isn't there something written about him? Actually, there are a few secular writings of the time. Perhaps the reason that more was not written from historians is that he never made a political power play. He was never a serious threat to Rome.

Josephus was a Jewish historian. His accounts of battles and political events of the time are often referred to as historical fact. Though he did not consider himself a convert to Christianity, he wrote the following about Jesus of Nazareth.

"Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man; for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. He was [the] Christ. And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, (9) those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for he appeared to them alive again the third day; (10) as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him. And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day." Complete Works of Josephus Antiquities of the Jews Book XVIII chapter 3

And this from the Roman historian Tacitus:

Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, call Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome ... Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind.

From Annals by Tacitus, 15.44

Four Accounts from Followers

The writers of the New Testament stories about Jesus did so from first hand observations and second hand accounts. They copied portions of one another's writings. Each added his unique portions and emphasis. They did differ in the

details of their accounts, which shows lack of conspiratorial effort. Every person sees an event from a different perspective.

Mark is believed to have written first. Because portions of Matthew have been found that were written in a style of Greek that is wasn't used after 50 AD, we can assume most of these accounts were written within a few decades after Jesus' crucifixion. People who witnessed the events were still alive at the time. If the events were fabricated or distorted, surely the witnesses would speak out against them. Historically, we find the opposite to be the case. Even a large number of religious leaders joined this new movement.

Another fact to consider is the life of the authors. All but one of them died as a martyr. Had they been distorting the facts and making up events, they would surely not have the conviction to face painful deaths for refusing to deny the validity of their claims. Who would give their life for a fabrication?

So what exactly did those who lived with Jesus believe about Him? It is one thing to see a man occasionally and continue to have a good opinion about him, and quite another to camp with him for three years and still consider him worthy of giving your life.

Mark was the first Gospel to be written. Mark was a relative of Jesus' leading disciple Peter. It is believed that most of his writings are Peter's accounts of what took place. In one sense then, this gospel is more what Peter had to say about Jesus than Mark's personal opinion.

¹ The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Mark 1:1 (NIV) He calls Jesus the Christ or Messiah and the Son of God. It was possible for a person in that day to believe someone to be a messiah and yet not be divine.

¹¹ And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." Mark 1:11 (NIV)

He records that the voice of God spoke audibly from heaven telling Jesus that He was pleased with Him.

²³ Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out,

²⁴ "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are--the Holy One of God!" Mark 1:23-24 (NIV)

He wrote that demons recognized him as the Holy One of God.

Without quoting all the things that Mark wrote let me sum up by saying that he wrote that Jesus had power over illness and demons, the power to forgive sin, power to heal paralysis, calm storms with a word, raise the dead, multiply food, restore sight, and predicted his death burial and resurrection. He reported Jesus as saying that he had come to give his life as a ransom for many. He also recorded that Jesus prophesied his return in power.

Mark records the account of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus that you saw in the movie. Jesus is said to have then told his followers to go tell the good news to the whole world.

Matthew and Luke tell the same stories and sayings and add more that they personally recalled. They differ in a few details that may be due to memory or personal perspective. Matthew emphasizes that Jesus was the fulfillment of the promises of a Messiah. He was a disciple of Christ and wrote from first hand information. He had been a tax collector for Rome before Jesus called him.

Luke was a physician who obtained his information from Mary and the other disciples. His is the most historical in format and nature. He was the most noted historian of the accounts of the early church. His gospel was followed by the history of the early church. In his gospel, he emphasizes Jesus' ability to heal all illnesses and his compassion for those that were not as fortunate. These were things that a doctor would naturally focus on.

John wrote his gospel long after Jesus' death. He had time to meditate on all that had been recorded and the significance of Jesus' life. John begins by presenting Jesus as the eternal Word of God who was with God in the beginning and was the Creator of all things. He tells us that Jesus is the Word made flesh. See John 1:1-14

He neatly arranged his story with seven miracles, (some of which are only recorded in John) seven "I AM" expressions, (an expression of divinity) and focused on the discourses of Jesus during the week leading up to the crucifixion. The miracles were specifically chosen to show Jesus had authority over everything in this world so that we could believe. (John 20:31) The "I AM" expressions show that Jesus declared himself to meet every need of mankind. John also tells more of encounters with Jesus after the resurrection than the others gospel writers.

Did these men believe Jesus was God? Certainly John did. Matthew, Mark and Luke did not clearly say that He was God, but do record Jesus' promise to return and reign forever. Peter, the source for Mark, later wrote the expression, "our God and Savior Jesus Christ." (2Peter 1:1) Luke tells of an encounter that two men had with Jesus after His resurrection. In that interaction, Jesus told them that the Old Testament was all about Him. (Luke 24:27) Matthew records Jesus as saying he had come to fulfill, or bring to pass, the Law and the Prophets. (Matthew 5:17)

It may have taken some time before the disciples to all begin to equate Jesus with God. When Thomas saw the wounds on the resurrected Lord, he cried out, "My Lord and my God." Jesus miraculous power showed He was. When He stilled the wind and waves, the disciples should have thought of Psalms 107:29 (NIV) *He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed.* The "He" in this passage is the God of the Jews, Jehovah, the eternal One. When He fed the multitudes He showed Himself to be Jehovah Jireh, The Provider God as the Jews referred to their God. When He ascended He told them He would always be with them. This shows Him to be Jehovah Shammah, The Ever Present God. Another name the Jews used for God is Jehovah Ropha – the Healing God. He certainly demonstrated that He was that. Matthew 8:16 God was also referred to as Jehovah Tsabaoth or the Lord of the armies of heaven. Jesus once said that if he desired he could call 12 legions of angels to rescue Him from His situation. (Matthew 26:3) Another name is Jehovah Rohi – the Shepherd God. (Psalm 23:1) Jesus said, "I am the good Shepherd." (John 10:11) God was also referred to as the Righteous God – Jehovah Tsidkenu – Jesus said, "Which of you convinces me of sin?" (John 8:16) The God of Israel is referred to as their king. Jesus told Pilate he was right in saying He was a king. (John 18:37) Jesus showed Himself to be everything the Jews believed God the Creator to be.

What Claims Did Jesus Make?

The four gospel writers are consistent in the fact that Jesus did not desire to have the stories of what He was doing spread around. He often told people not to tell anyone of the miracle He had done for them. When His closest three saw Him transfigured – shining white and talking to Moses and Elijah, He told them not to tell anyone until He had risen from the dead. This is inconsistent with a charlatan who is tricking people to gain recognition, wealth and power.

During the last months of His ministry, He warned the disciples of the betrayal, suffering, crucifixion, and predicted He would rise in three days. According to the gospel writers, He said this a number of times, but they thought He was speaking in parables.

The Scriptures that Jesus quotes about himself are that of the eternal ruler of the Kingdom of God. (Mark 14:62) The wording came from a prophecy of Daniel. *13 "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. 14 He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.* Daniel 7:13-14 (NIV)

In this passage the Ancient of Days and the Son of Man (Jesus most common way of referring to Himself) are separate, and yet He is given authority, glory and sovereign power. Everyone worships Him. His kingdom is eternal.

In John's Gospel, Jesus declares that He is one with the Father. (John 10:30) He also declared that He was the only way to the Father. (John 14:6) He called Himself "the gate" to safety, the Good Shepherd, the One who lays down His life for the sheep. (John 10) He said He had not come to condemn the world, but that the world might have life through Him. He declared that if we believe in Him we would have eternal life and would not be condemned before God. (John 3) He promises to raise all who believe in Him at the last day. (John 6:40) He declared that He was before Abraham. Some of His expressions were so clear that the Jews wanted to stone Him for blasphemy (calling yourself God). (John 5:18) Jesus knew He came from God and would return to God. (John 17:5)

Someone who says these things is either insane, or the real thing. We can believe that these expressions were made up, but again I have to ask, why would the writers die for fabricated stories? Jesus can't be JUST a good teacher. A good teacher does not lie. He is either who He declared Himself to be or the greatest fraud the world has ever seen.

His teachings have affected the world more than that of any other man. This man was truly unique in all of history. It is worth examining the claims He made of Himself and those His followers made of Him. Jesus asked His followers, "Who do you say that I am?"