

The Jesus FAQ

*what you can know
even if you're not sure
how much to trust the Bible*

by Glen Davis
glenandpaula.com
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This little essay has a lot of footnotes. Where possible, I have referenced primary sources or web-accessible documents written by credible scholars. In rare cases I cite a document not available on the internet rather than quote some random blog.

The documents I cite from antiquity are all available online – you can generally read them at perseus.tufts.edu and you can find useful background information on them at livius.org (or Wikipedia depending on your level of trustfulness).

In A Nutshell

The man we call Jesus Christ was known as Yeshua bar Yosef¹ to his countrymen. He was born in the Israelite village of Bethlehem sometime in the winter that spanned 5 B.C. and 4 B.C.² He labored in anonymity most of his life, apparently serving as a construction worker in Nazareth. In his thirties he began traveling around Israel telling people to repent and believe in him. This went on for about three years, and then he was executed by officials of the Roman Empire for treason around 33 A.D.³ Today he is worshiped as God by 1/3 of the human population.⁴

Is there any record of Jesus outside the Bible?

Yes. Both Roman historians who lived before 200 A.D. who wrote about this time period and this region mention Jesus.⁵

¹ Yeshua can be brought into English as either Joshua or Jesus. We prefer to use Jesus in English because it comes to us by way of the Latin *Jesus*, which is an adaptation of the Greek Ἰησοῦς, “bar Yosef” (sometimes seen as “ben Yosef”) means “son of Joseph” On occasion you may see ancient Jewish authors refer to Jesus as Yeshua Hanotzri, meaning “Jesus of Nazareth” or “Jesus the Nazarene.” There has been a surprising amount of ink spilled on this subject. A good launching point is Anthony Maas’ article “Origin of the Name of Jesus Christ” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 8. (1910) which is available online at newadvent.org

² There are very good explanations of this (both the idea that Jesus was born in the winter as well as the idea that Jesus was born around 5/4 BC) by Dan Wallace at “The Birth of Jesus Christ” <http://bible.org/article/birth-jesus-christ> and by Andreas Kostenberger “When Was Jesus Born, and When Did He Die?” at <http://www.biblicalfoundations.org/bible/when-was-jesus-born-and-when-did-he-die>. Wallace and Kostenberger are both highly respected New Testament scholars.

³ This date is more certain than the date of birth, mostly owing to the fact that Jesus was crucified on the Passover. There are enough clues in the gospels to allow us to narrow down the range of possible dates to either A.D. 30 or A.D. 33, and for a variety of reasons A.D. 33 is preferable. See Kostenberger’s article above for a more detailed explanation.

⁴ The most recent estimates are that 2.2 billion people identify as Christian. You can learn more about this statistic at adherents.com

⁵ In addition, there are some mentions from non-historians such as the Roman governor Pliny the Younger in *Letters to Trajan* X.96 writing in A.D. 111 who says, “[The former Christians] asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food.” Also Lucian of Samosata in *The Passing of Peregrinus* 11-13 (around 150 A.D.) tells of a philosopher named Peregrinus who temporarily became a Christian. He mentions “that other, to be sure, whom they still worship, the man who was crucified in Palestine because he introduced this new cult into the world.... The poor wretches [Christians] have convinced themselves, first and foremost, that they are going to be immortal and live for all time, in consequence of which they despise death and even willingly give themselves into custody; most of them. Furthermore, their first lawgiver persuaded them that they are all brothers of one another after they have transgressed once for all by denying the Greek gods and by worshipping that crucified sophist himself and living under his laws.” Galen the famous physician in *De pulsuum differentiis* (around 180 A.D.) speaks of “the school of Moses and Christ” in 2.4 and 3.3 (by which he means the way Jews and Christians thought) and in Arabic quotations of his summary of Plato’s Republic we read, “Most people are unable to follow any demonstrative argument consecutively; hence they need parables, and benefit from them...just as now we see the people called Christians drawing their faith from parables [and miracles], and yet sometimes acting in the same way [as those who philosophize]. For their contempt of death [and its sequel] is patent to us every day, and likewise their restraint in cohabitation...” (see Richard Walzer, *Galen on Jews and Christians* - 1949) and sometime around 150 A.D. Mara Bar-Serapion, a Stoic philosopher, wrote “What advantage did the Athenians gain from putting Socrates to death? Famine and plague came upon them as a judgment for their crime.

Tacitus (A.D. 55-117) was a Roman Senator who became interested in writing history in his old age.⁶ Unfortunately, much of Tacitus' work has been lost through historical accidents,⁷ and one of the missing bits is about years we are quite interested in (29 to 32 A.D.). Nonetheless, in his *Annals* 15.44 we read: "Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called 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 Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular." Tacitus goes on to describe the tortures that the Christians endured under Nero in 64 A.D.

Then there is Suetonius (70-160), a man who served the Roman record-keeping bureaucracy at very high levels.⁸ In the *Life Of Claudius* 25:4 he says, "Because the Jews at Rome caused constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he [Claudius] expelled them from the city [Rome]." This expulsion is also recorded in Acts 18:2, where one of the early Christian leaders named Paul meets Aquila and Priscilla in Corinth "because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome". Apparently, Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome in 49 A.D. because those Jewish believers following Christ were somehow making trouble—probably by refusing to worship the state gods.

Most impressively, we have the Jewish historian Josephus⁹ (37-100?) who in his *Antiquities* 18.3.3¹⁰ wrote: "Now, there was about this time Jesus, a wise man,¹¹ for he was a doer of

What advantage did the men of Samos gain from burning Pythagoras? In a moment their land was covered with sand. What advantage did the Jews gain from executing their wise King? It was just after that their Kingdom was abolished. God justly avenged these three wise men: the Athenians died of hunger; the Samians were overwhelmed by the sea; the Jews, ruined and driven from their land, live in complete dispersion. But Socrates did not die for good; he lived on in the teaching of Plato. Pythagoras did not die for good; he lived on in the statue of Hera. Nor did the wise King die for good; He lived on in the teaching which He had given". As incidental literary references these quotations have important but limited historical value: they tell us much about early Christian beliefs but little about the historical Jesus. But for the narrow purposes of this footnote their value is enormous: they mention Jesus.

⁶ There is an excellent overview of the life and writings of Tacitus at <http://www.livius.org/ta-td/tacitus/tacitus.html> - it is a revision of a previously published article in *Ancient Warfare*.

⁷ This is normal for ancient authors. We only have the partial output of most Greek and Roman authors. Many survive only in the quotations/refutations of others, so Tacitus was quite fortunate.

⁸ Suetonius was what we might call today a research librarian who worked for the government as an archivist (the technical titles for his positions were *a bybliothecis*, *a studiis* and *ab epistulis*). He had access to very high-level documents. <http://www.livius.org/su-sz/suetonius/suetonius.html>

⁹ Josephus was a defeated Jewish general who collaborated with the Romans. <http://www.livius.org/jo-jz/josephus/josephus.htm>

¹⁰ The version cited is from *The Works of Josephus* as translated by William Whiston (Hendrickson Publishers, 1987). This is one of the most contested passages in ancient literature. Google for "Testimonium Flavianum" and prepare to invest several hours. My perspective is that the passage has an authentic core but was altered by scribes somewhere along the line (this is the position of most scholars). As Alice Whealey says in "The Testimonium Flavianum Controversy from Antiquity to the Present" (a paper available at <http://pace.mcmaster.ca/media/pdf/sbl/whealey2000.pdf> that was presented at the Society for Biblical Literature in 2000: Whealey has her Ph.D. from UC Berkeley), "[In recent years the general] attitudes of Protestant, Roman Catholic, Jewish and secular scholars towards the text have drawn closer together, with a greater tendency among scholars of all religious backgrounds to see the text as largely authentic." The best overview of the *Testimonium Flavianum* is in John Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (Doubleday, 1991), Vol I, pp. 56-88.

wonderful works.¹² He drew over to him both many of the Jews, and many of the Gentiles. He was [said to be the]¹³ Christ; and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him,¹⁴ and the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.”

Josephus mentions Jesus again in passing in *Antiquities* 20.9.1 “...so he assembled the sanhedrim of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others; and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned.”¹⁵

So from non-Christian sources we learn the following:

- Jesus was reported to have performed amazing miracles
- Some thought he was the Jewish Messiah (known as the Christ in Greek)
- He was crucified by the command of the Roman governor Pontius Pilate
- His followers were initially intimidated after Jesus was killed
- His followers were then reanimated to the point that Christians were willing to be martyred for their faith less than 30 years after Jesus was killed

This is remarkable since none of these historians believed in Jesus. They were, in a sense, like hostile witnesses who nonetheless concede key points in a trial. Of course, for any interesting details about Jesus we need to look to the writings of his earliest followers, who were the only ones who wanted to preserve the details of what he did and taught.¹⁶ These writings eventually became known as the New Testament, part of the Bible.

Looking to their writings does not require that you assume that the Bible contains the very words of God or anything like that – it merely requires that you recognize that Jesus’ earliest followers had a strong interest in preserving his legacy and that these writings are at least as reliable as other ancient accounts.¹⁷

¹¹ The actual quote adds “if it be lawful to call him a man”, but most scholars reject this as an alteration of Josephus’ original words.

¹² The actual quote adds “a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure”.

¹³ Most scholars do not believe that Josephus actually said that Jesus was the Christ and so I have inserted the words in brackets as a plausible reconstruction.

¹⁴ The actual quote adds “for he appeared to them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him”, but most scholars reject this as an alteration of Josephus’ original words.

¹⁵ This passage is much less controversial. The version cited is from *The Works of Josephus* as translated by William Whiston (Hendrickson Publishers, 1987)

¹⁶ This is similar to saying that the only people interested in recording the details of chess matches are chess aficionados. It is not surprising that those who dislike chess hardly ever write anything about it. In the same way, we should take it as the most reasonable thing in the world that to find the words of Jesus we must look to the writings of his followers. Who else would record them? His opponents thought he was a raving, blasphemous madman. In this connection, it is worth noting that it is chess-lovers’ passion for the subject which drives them to be as accurate as possible when recording something such as the moves of a match or the game philosophy of a chess master.

¹⁷ Many people act as though the only options are to treat the Bible either as divinely inspired or as a pack of lies. This is a false dichotomy. In this essay, I will assume that you are willing to grant the Bible the same level of credibility as other ancient works but that you reserve judgment concerning miracles and other extraordinary claims.

What did Jesus look like?

We know little about his looks, although an ancient prophecy about Jesus suggests that he was expected to look unremarkable. In Isaiah 53:2 we read, “He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.” This, of course, is only informative insofar as you accept that ancient prophets might have foreseen the future.

In an interesting corollary, however, we notice that when the Roman soldiers came to arrest Jesus they had to have Judas point him out to them – Jesus did not appear so distinctive that they could be given a verbal description of him, “Just arrest the guy with a halo of angelic radiance.”

Given what we know about typical Galilean peasants of the first century, Jesus would have been somewhere between 5’ 1” and 5’ 4” with dark frizzy hair and a medium skin tone.¹⁸ Most people today would probably say Jesus looked Arabic.¹⁹

Where did Jesus live?

Jesus grew up in the village of Nazareth. It is impossible to know the population of Nazareth in those days, but one scholar guesses 200²⁰ (around the same size as Bethlehem²¹). Nazareth was not as remote as its small size suggests – it was only an hour’s walk (four miles) from Sepphoris, the largest city in Galilee with a population of around 10,000.²²

When he was around 30 years old²³ he left his home and began roaming around the region known as Galilee, staying at the homes of friends at some times and apparently living in the wilderness at others.²⁴

What did Jesus do for a living?

Mark 6:3 tells us that Jesus was “the carpenter’s son”, which would imply that he also was a carpenter. That’s the way it was in the ancient world – sons did what their fathers did before them. The word traditionally translated as carpenter is broad and could also refer to a stonemason or more generally to a builder. It is more likely that he worked with stone and mud since wood

¹⁸ Many scholars and websites repeat these claims (about height, hair, and skin), but none of them cite any sources.

¹⁹ If you want to see a forensic reconstruction based on a first-century Jewish skull, read the fascinating article “Real Face of Jesus” by Mike Fillon in the December 2002 issue of *Popular Mechanics*. The article is from a non-scholarly magazine, but it’s reporting the work of Richard Neave, a former academic (University of Manchester) now in industry.

²⁰ R. Riesner, “Archeology and Geography” in *The Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, edited by Joel Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall. InterVarsity Press (1992) page 36. J. Strange estimates “a maximum of 480” in his article “Nazareth” in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

²¹ “estimates of the population of Bethlehem in the reign of Herod seldom exceed 1,000” – R. T. France, “Herod and the Children of Bethlehem” *Novum Testamentum* Vol. 21, Fasc. 2 (Apr., 1979), pp. 114.

²² The best estimates seem to be based on an analysis of the size of the city combined with research about ancient population densities. See Jonathan Reed, *Archaeology and the Galilean Jesus: A Re-Examination of the Evidence* (2002) pages 79-80 and Richard Horsley, *Galilee: History, Politics, People* (1995) page 166.

²³ Luke 3:23 reads, “Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry.”

²⁴ In Luke 9:58, Jesus said “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head” – implying that he did not have a permanent home. He does seem to have made Capernaum (a fishing village of around 1,000-1,500 people) a base of operations for a season. Matthew 4:13 tells us that after “leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum” and Matthew 9:1 calls it Jesus’ “own town”. From what we can tell, he stayed at Peter’s house (Mark 1:29).

was relatively scarce in the Ancient Near East. In modern terms, he was a cross between a general contractor and a day laborer.

The nearby city of Sepphoris was destroyed by war and then rebuilt in Jesus' adolescence, and since he was a builder by trade it is quite likely that he participated in its reconstruction.²⁵

After he left his home and began his ministry, Jesus was a traveling rabbi who was supported by patrons.²⁶ He roamed throughout the northern part of Israel and journeyed briefly into two adjacent regions (Samaria and the Decapolis). He did this until his death about three years later.

Did Jesus have a family?

Jesus was raised by Mary and Joseph, although Joseph was not his biological father.²⁷ Jesus himself never married.²⁸ He did have at least four brothers and at least two sisters. His brothers were James, Joseph, Judas (later called Jude for obvious reasons), and Simon.²⁹ It is unclear whether Jesus was the oldest brother (in which case Mary was their mother) or whether Jesus was the youngest brother and that these children were Joseph's from a previous marriage.³⁰ Jesus' family at first thought he was crazy,³¹ but later came to believe in him; in fact, his brothers went on to become influential leaders in the early church.³² Jesus also had a famous cousin³³ named John the Baptist, a prophet who was beheaded by the Tetrarch Herod.³⁴ John's baptism and endorsement of Jesus marked the beginning of Jesus' public ministry.³⁵

²⁵ For details on the destruction and reconstruction of Sepphoris and for the speculation that Jesus may have worked there, see Shirley Case, "Jesus and Sepphoris" *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 45, No. 1/2 (1926), pp. 17-18.

²⁶ Luke 8:1-3 reads "After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means."

²⁷ There are two explanations offered for this: the one offered by Jesus' earliest followers is that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and that Mary was a virgin when Jesus was born (Luke 1:26-35, Matthew 1:18, Galatians 4:4). The other possible explanation is that Jesus was illegitimate. As far as we can tell, this suggestion was first made by the Roman writer Celsus in the 2nd century who calls Jesus the bastard son of the Roman soldier Panthera (as cited in Origen's *Against Celsus* 1:32). Which option you prefer, of course, depends on what you believe about the possibility of Jesus being God in the flesh.

²⁸ He seems to have refrained from marriage to have more time to devote to God's purposes – see Matthew 19:10-12.

²⁹ See Matthew 13:55; Mk. 6:3. Richard Bauckham, "The Relatives of Jesus" in *Themelios* 21.2 (Jan 1996): 18-21. Available online at http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/article_relatives_bauckham.html

³⁰ These views on Jesus' birth order have very fancy names. The Helvidian view is that Jesus was the oldest child and that all his siblings were the offspring of Mary and Joseph (the belief of most Protestant churches). The Epiphonian view is that Joseph was a widower and that Jesus was the youngest child in the family (the belief of Eastern Orthodox churches). The Hieronymian view is that these are all Jesus' cousins and this is a big linguistic misunderstanding (this is the Roman Catholic belief).

³¹ Mark 3:21, John 7:3-10.

³² Acts 1:14, 1 Corinthians 9:5, Galatians 1:18-20.

³³ Luke 1:5-80.

³⁴ Matthew 14:3-12, Mark 6:14-29. Interestingly, Josephus also describes John the Baptist in *Antiquities* 18.5.2: "a good man [who] commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism." He also says, "Herod slew him."

³⁵ Matthew 3:13-17, Mark 1:9-11,

What did Jesus teach?

Jesus teaching is often summarized in the Bible as “preaching good news”, “preaching repentance” and “preaching about the Kingdom of God”³⁶. A typical summary is Mark 1:14b-15, “Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!’”

This is not an entire sermon, of course. This is Mark’s summary of the content of Jesus’ sermons. These are the themes Jesus emphasized repeatedly: the “good news” is that “the kingdom of God” is “near” and we must “repent” and “believe” this good news. Exploring these five phrases (good news, kingdom of God, near, repent, and believe) will take us to the heart of Jesus’ message.

Good News: “Good news” (or gospel) is the translation of an ancient Greek word (*ευαγγελιον*) usually used to describe military victories, the reign of a new emperor, or Caesar’s birthday. As such, it had imperial overtones (“Good news, citizens: Carthage is defeated!”). One of the most famous ancient uses of the word is in the inscription at Priene, speaking of the emperor Augustus in 9 B.C.: “the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the good tidings (*ευαγγελιον*) for the world.”³⁷

Kingdom of God: The “kingdom of God” sounds strange to modern ears, because most of us don’t live in kingdoms anymore (and most modern kingdoms aren’t really kingdoms in the ancient sense of the word). But the phrase itself is not that hard to understand: a kingdom is wherever the will of a king is done. If I am in the kingdom of Arthur I must do as King Arthur commands upon penalty of death, but if I am in the neighboring republic then I may show him honor but I do not need to obey him. When Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of God he is speaking of the place where God is treated as King – where God’s will is done.

Near: And the final piece of the puzzle is “near.” Jesus did not mean “near” spatially, as in “The Kingdom of God is over yonder hill” or even “the Kingdom of God is going to be established on this soil upon which I stand.” This is crucial. When the Roman ruler Pontius Pilate asked Jesus about his political agenda, Jesus replied “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my servants would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish authorities. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here”³⁸. In fact, when offered political power he rejected it, “Then Jesus, because he knew they were going to come and seize him by force to make him king, withdrew again up the mountainside alone”³⁹.

So when Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God was near, he was not making a political pronouncement; rather, he was using a political metaphor to communicate a religious truth.

³⁶ Matthew 4:17, Matthew 4:23, Matthew 9:35, Matthew 11:5, Luke 4:18, Luke 4:43, Luke 7:22, Luke 8:1, Luke 16:16, Luke 20:1.

³⁷ This inscription was made in 9 B.C. and is available online and also in the standard references OGIS 458 or SEG vol IV no 490. Search the internet for “Priene Inscription” and you can even see a picture of it.

³⁸ John 18:36, NET

³⁹ John 6:15, NET

“Now at one point the Pharisees asked Jesus when the kingdom of God was coming, so he answered, “The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed, nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ For indeed, the kingdom of God is in your midst.”⁴⁰

In other words, God’s kingdom – the realm in which God’s will was accomplished – is invisible (not coming with signs to be observed) and relational (in your midst).

Jesus further taught that he was the rightful ruler of this kingdom. He entered Jerusalem like a king and did so in deliberate fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy about the coming king of the Jews,⁴¹ and he refused to pay the temple tax with his own money (citing royal prerogative).⁴² Most tellingly, he referred to the Kingdom of God as his own kingdom.⁴³ Others recognized this: at his birth he was given royal gifts,⁴⁴ many called him the son of David⁴⁵ (who was Israel’s greatest king), and one of Jesus’ earliest followers makes it explicit, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel!” (John 1:49).

Jesus taught that to enter this kingdom one must **repent** and **believe**. These words are linked: when Jesus said “repent” he was telling people to begin thinking in a new way. The word that we translate as the very religious word “repent” was actually an everyday word for “changing your mind.”⁴⁶ And so we must repent – stop thinking in wrong ways – and believe – start thinking in a right way. In other words, Jesus challenged people to stop seeing the world as they always had, but instead to view it from God’s vantage point.

In so doing, Jesus taught, they would inevitably begin to change their behavior in light of their new perspective. Jesus expected that this paradigm shift would result in his followers exhibiting a love of strangers⁴⁷ and enemies⁴⁸, forgiving others⁴⁹, showing compassion for the poor⁵⁰, praying consistently⁵¹, and imitating Jesus’ own mission of proclaiming the good news⁵² - and

⁴⁰ Luke 17:20-21, NET

⁴¹ Matthew 21:1-11.

⁴² Matthew 17:24-27.

⁴³ Matthew 13:41; Matthew 16:28; John 18:36

⁴⁴ These were brought by strangers simply described as “wise men from the east”. They were apparently Zoroastrian priestly astrologers (magi). See Matthew 2:1-12 – and note their rationale for bringing them in Matthew 2:2, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”

Christmas carols usually assume the presence of three wise men (sometimes called kings), but there is no reason to suppose that they were kings nor that there were precisely three. The notion of three wise men is rooted in the fact that they brought three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

⁴⁵ Matthew 1:1; 1:20; 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30-31. Mark 10:47-48; Luke 3:32; 18:38-39.

⁴⁶ The Greek word is *metanoia*. Josephus even went so far as to tell a rebel general who was engaging in a disastrous course to “μετανοήσῃν καὶ πιστῶς ἐμοὶ γενήσεσθαι” – “repent and come to believe in me” (*Life of Josephus* 110). In other words, Josephus was saying, “You have a bad plan that will end in destruction– change your mind and adopt my way of thinking about this and you will live.”

⁴⁷ Luke 10:25-37 (the parable of the good Samaritan), Matthew 22:38-40

⁴⁸ Luke 6:27-28, Luke 6:32-35, Luke 5:43-45

⁴⁹ Matthew 6:14-15, Mark 11:25, Luke 6:37-38, Luke 17:3-4, Matthew 18:21-35 (the parable of the unmerciful servant)

⁵⁰ Matthew 5:42, Matthew 6:2-4, Luke 14:12-14, Luke 11:37-42, Matthew 19:21, Luke 12:32-34, Matthew 25:31-36

⁵¹ Matthew 6:5-15, Matthew 5:44, Luke 22:40, Matthew 26:41, Luke 18:1

⁵² Matthew 28:16-20, Mark 3:14, John 13:20, John 17:18, Matthew 9:38, Luke 10:1-16, Luke 9:1-3, Matthew 10:40

that in doing this and other such righteous acts they would fulfill God's will (and hence manifest God's kingdom). Perhaps most importantly, seeing the world from God's vantage point includes recognizing that spiritual health matters more than anything else.⁵³

And so now we can make better sense of the passage that launched this section, "Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!'" (Mark 1:14b-15, NET). Jesus was announcing that anyone who shifted their ultimate allegiance to him would enter into a new way of living that was congruent with God's plan – and that this was very good news.

Why was Jesus killed?

Jerusalem's population was close to 80,000 and would swell during religious pilgrimages to 200,000 or 300,000.⁵⁴ Jesus approached Jerusalem like a king during one of the larger religious festivals (the Passover) and began arguing with the religious leaders.

Jesus was already a controversial figure because he announced that he was fulfilling Old Testament prophecies.⁵⁵ He even called himself the Messiah.⁵⁶ But those were not his most outrageous claims. Jesus claimed divine status – that was what really riled his opponents. They thought Jesus was thoroughly blasphemous.⁵⁷

For example, Jesus' favorite title for himself was "Son of Man". At first glance, this seems like a very innocuous way of describing himself, "I'm just another guy." In reality, these words evoked potent images in the minds of his audience. They called to mind a passage from the Old Testament book Daniel 7:13-14, "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. 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."⁵⁸

⁵³ Mark 8:36-37, Mark 9:43-48, Luke 9:23-26, Luke 12:15-31, Luke 16:19-31,

⁵⁴ Scholars are all over the map on this number. In the *The Jewish War* 6.9.3, Josephus estimates, "the number of sacrifices [at Passover] was two hundred and fifty-six thousand five hundred; which, upon the allowance of no more than ten that feast together, amounts to two millions seven hundred thousand and two hundred persons". Josephus gives the same round number in *The Jewish War* 1.9.3, but modern scholars reject his numbers as implausible owing the logistics of sacrificing so many lambs in such a short period of time. They frequently divide his estimates by about 10.

⁵⁵ In Luke 4:21, at the end of Jesus' first sermon, he declares "Today this [Old Testament prophecy from Isaiah] is fulfilled in your hearing." In Matthew 5:17, Jesus explains that he has come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets. In Matthew 13 he explained that he taught in parables the way he did to fulfill prophecy and adds "For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it" (Matthew 13:17).

⁵⁶ For example, in John's gospel we read "The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming' (the one called Christ); 'whenever he comes, he will tell us everything.' Jesus said to her, 'I, the one speaking to you, am he.'" (John 4:25-26, NET).

⁵⁷ Mark 2:7, Matthew 9:3, Luke 5:21

⁵⁸ This is one of those things that scholars fight about, largely because Ezekiel is called "son of man" 93 times in the book that bears his name. In that context it clearly means that Ezekiel is human as opposed to divine. But it is apparent that Jesus means something lofty by this title from the way he uses it in Matthew 26:63-64 and Mark 14:61-62, "Again the high priest asked him, 'Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?' 'I am,' said Jesus. 'And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.'"

And Jesus made even more direct claims to divinity.⁵⁹ Consider John 10:28-33:

“I give [my followers] eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand... I and the Father are one.” Again the Jews picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus said to them, “I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?” “We are not stoning you for any of these,” replied the Jews, “but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God.”

And so ultimately, it was Jesus’ divine claims that angered the religious leaders to seek his death. It’s at this point that the story gets a little complicated: although the Jewish religious leaders wanted to kill Jesus because he claimed to be the Son of God and was thus a blasphemer,⁶⁰ they were forbidden to exercise capital punishment.⁶¹ The Romans reserved that privilege for themselves, and the Roman authorities were unwilling to condemn anyone as part of an internal religious dispute. Since they would not condemn Jesus for blasphemy, his accusers presented him to the Romans as a would-be king in rebellion against Caesar.⁶² Although this was not that hard to do since Jesus spoke about the kingdom of God so frequently, it seems that the Roman authorities realized that this was a disingenuous charge and tried to free Jesus.⁶³ At the end, the religious leaders had to blackmail them into imposing the death penalty.⁶⁴

So Jesus was executed because his opponents rightly thought he claimed to be a king and a god.

How was Jesus killed?

Jesus was crucified.⁶⁵ Crucifixion is an ancient execution technique where criminals were nailed to an upright piece of wood and left to dangle until dead. The eyewitnesses do not describe the crucifixion of Jesus in any detail, and so we are not sure whether he was hung upon a *crux immissa* (the cross shape you probably assume) or on a *crux commissa* (which is shaped like a capital T). The Romans crucified a lot of people⁶⁶, and so they often used variety in their techniques.⁶⁷

(see also Mark 8:38 where Jesus speaks of the Son of Man coming in glory accompanied by angels). He even claimed the prerogative to forgive sins based on his status as the Son of Man (Matthew 9:6, Mark 2:10) – a claim his opponents took to be blasphemous (Matthew 9:3, Mark 2:7).

⁵⁹ For example, he claimed to have existed over 2,000 years before he was born to Mary (John 8:58). And he does this using very special language. He says, “Before Abraham was born, I am.” Jesus is recorded as using “I am” statements other times in the gospel of John: “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35-51), “I am the light of the world” (John 9:5), “I am the gate” (John 10:9), “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11), “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25), “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), “I am the true vine” (John 15:1). Each of these is a divine claim. The name of God in the Old Testament is “I AM” (Exodus 3:14).

⁶⁰ Matthew 26:59-66; Mark 14:57-64; Luke 22:66-71

⁶¹ John 18:31

⁶² Mark 15:26; Luke 23:1-2

⁶³ Matthew 27:15-26, Mark 15:6-15, Luke 23:4-25, John 18:38-40, John 19:6

⁶⁴ John 19:12

⁶⁵ Mark 15:24; Luke 23:33; John 19:18

⁶⁶ For example, in *The Jewish Antiquities* 17:10 Josephus tells us that Varus, a Roman legate, crucified 2,000 Galilean Jews around the time that Christ was born.

⁶⁷ For example, in *The Jewish War* 11:1, Josephus reports that during the siege of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, “So the [Roman] soldiers, out of the wrath and hatred they bore the Jews, nailed those they caught, one after one way, and another after another, to the crosses, by way of jest.”

From the eyewitness accounts, we know that Jesus was beaten⁶⁸, that he had pieces of his hair and beard ripped out, that he was stripped naked,⁶⁹ and that he was whipped⁷⁰ before being nailed to a cross. He survived on the cross for about six hours,⁷¹ and then died. This indicates that his beating before being nailed to the cross was particularly brutal⁷², since many crucified people clung to life for days.⁷³

How did Jesus come to be worshiped?

After the Roman soldiers verified Jesus' death,⁷⁴ they removed his corpse and it was placed in a grave donated by a member of the Jewish leadership sympathetic to Jesus.⁷⁵ Soldiers were assigned to guard it.⁷⁶

Following Jesus' death his followers were thoroughly discouraged, so they returned to their former lives.⁷⁷ This was a normal pattern with first century Messianic movements – excitement followed by disillusionment.⁷⁸

But then, three days later, reports began to surface that Jesus' tomb was empty, and so his disciples assumed that the Roman authorities had moved his body.⁷⁹ Soon, however, they began to see Jesus, who had risen from the grave. They were skeptical,⁸⁰ but were soon convinced that Jesus had indeed been resurrected.

⁶⁸ Matthew 26:67-68; Matthew 27:30; Mark 14:65; Luke 22:63-65

⁶⁹ Matthew 27:35; Mark 15:24; John 19:23 – almost all those crucified were crucified naked: it added to the shame of the death.

⁷⁰ Matthew 27:26; Mark 15:15.

⁷¹ Mark 15:25 says he was crucified on the third hour, and Mark 15:34 gives his time of death as the ninth hour.

⁷² This is also implied by the fact that Jesus was too weak following his beating to carry his own cross all the way to the site of his crucifixion. He apparently began (John 19:17), but was unable to finish (Mark 15:21; Matthew 27:32).

⁷³ It took from 3 hours to 4 days for most victims of crucifixion to die, depending upon the severity of the scourging beforehand and the exact method of crucifixion used by the executioners. See "The History and Pathology of Crucifixion" by Retief & Cilliers in *South African Medical Journal* (December 2003) volume 93 issue 12 page 940. PMID: 14750495.

⁷⁴ John 19:31-34

⁷⁵ Matthew 27:57-61, Mark 15:42-47, Luke 23:50-53, John 19:38-41

⁷⁶ Matthew 27:62-66

⁷⁷ John 21:2-3

⁷⁸ Jesus was not the only person who claimed to be the Jewish Messiah. Josephus tells us about Judas son of Ezekias (*Antiquities* 17.10.5, *Jewish War* 2.4.1); Simon (*Antiquities* 17.10.6), and Anthronges (*Antiquities* 17.7). We see an explicit reference to this in the Biblical book of Acts, which tells the story of the early church. In Acts 5:34-39, "a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the [Christian leaders] be put outside for a little while. Then he addressed them: 'Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God'" (NIV). The scholarship on Jewish Messianic expectations is quite involved. Prepare to spend much time digging around if this intrigues you.

⁷⁹ Matthew 28:1-10, Mark 16:1-8, Luke 24:1-11, John 20:1-9

⁸⁰ See, for example, "but these words [that Jesus was alive] seemed like pure nonsense to them" (Luke 24:11, NET) and Matthew's offhanded comment that "some doubted" (Matthew 28:17, NIV) and the famous words of Thomas: "Unless I see the wounds from the nails in his hands, and put my finger into the wounds from the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will never believe it!" (John 20:25, NET)

The early Christian authors were emphatic about this – they were quite certain they had not had a hallucination or even seen a ghost.⁸¹ They saw Jesus alive. At the beginning of his story of the spread of Christianity, Luke tells us that Jesus “gave many convincing proofs that he was alive.”⁸² Among other things, they examined the wounds left from his crucifixion,⁸³ they ate with him,⁸⁴ and they had lengthy conversations with him.⁸⁵ In the words of one early witness - “that which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched: this we proclaim.”⁸⁶

And so Jesus’ followers, unlike the followers of every other executed Messianic figure, regathered their strength and continued to proclaim Jesus as Messiah⁸⁷ and began to proclaim him also as God.⁸⁸ His followers were so convinced of this that they underwent painful deaths⁸⁹ rather than recant their conviction that Jesus had risen from the dead and was thereby vindicated as God’s Chosen One.

This is remarkable, because people do not die for what they know to be false. Do not misunderstand me: I grant that people die for lies all the time – but I deny that they die for lies which they know to be lies. People always believe in what they give their life for; indeed, there is no greater testament to certainty. And in this case, the apostles would have been in a unique position to know if they were speaking truthfully or not. And so since they were willing to face persecution and death, then their confidence in their claims must have been quite strong.

Jesus didn’t appear only to those who came to be known as apostles – he appeared to around 500 people⁹⁰ and then stopped appearing forty days after his resurrection,⁹¹ whereupon his disciples saw him ascend into heaven. Luke tells the story like this:

⁸¹ Indeed, they pointed out that they considered this possibility and rejected it. See Luke 24:39.

⁸² Acts 1:3, NIV

⁸³ John 20:27-28, Luke 24:39

⁸⁴ Luke 24:41-43, John 21:9-13

⁸⁵ Luke 24:13-35

⁸⁶ 1 John 1:1, NIV

⁸⁷ This is clearly seen in the first Christian sermon which concludes “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36, NIV). Christ is the Greek word for Messiah.

⁸⁸ You will occasionally see claims that this belief was a late development in Christian theology, but this is patently false. In John 20:28, Thomas calls Jesus “my Lord and my God”. Near the end of the book of Acts (within thirty years) Paul urges church leaders “be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood” (Acts 20:28, NIV). We have early independent (hostile, even) witness to this in Pliny the Younger’s *Letters to Trajan* X.96 written in A.D. 111 which says the early Christians gathered to “sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god.”

⁸⁹ The first apostolic martyr was James the son of Zebedee, whose execution by King Herod is told of in Acts 12:1-2. Eusebius (a fourth-century church leader) describes the brutal death of another James (the brother of Jesus) in *Ecclesiastical History* 23:2-20. And later in 25:5 he tells us that Paul was beheaded by Nero and Peter was crucified (a later author, Origen, adds that Peter was crucified upside down). There is confusion about exactly how each of the apostles died (many of them ventured to remote regions to proclaim the good news about Jesus), but it is clear that some were martyred quite gruesomely.

⁹⁰ 1 Corinthians 15:6

⁹¹ Acts 1:3. In 1st Corinthians 15:3-8, Paul explains that he was the last to see the risen Christ and that even then it was “as to one abnormally born” (i.e., out of the usual timing).

After [Jesus] said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."⁹²

The early Christians seemed quite content that Jesus had stopped appearing to people; in fact, Jesus had even taught them to rejoice in it as a good thing: "it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor [Holy Spirit] will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you."⁹³

And indeed, it was one week⁹⁴ after his ascension into heaven that the Holy Spirit was poured out in Jerusalem. In his sermon, Peter explained, "God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear."⁹⁵

And so Christians believe that modern converts will not see the resurrected Jesus, but that they will encounter the Holy Spirit. This is summed up in a famous conversation between the risen Christ and one of his skeptical followers named Thomas.

Then [Jesus] said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."⁹⁶

And through the ages many have found it to be so. To bring this essay full circle, although only 500 people saw the physical Jesus after his resurrection, more than 2 billion claim to have encountered the power of the Holy Spirit and, like Thomas, call Jesus "my Lord and my God."

You should consider joining their number.

If you enjoyed this essay, you might find my companion piece "Why Jesus?" helpful. This essay tells you who Jesus claimed to be, the other outlines a method you can use to decide whether Jesus' claims are plausible. You can find it at glenandpaula.com

⁹² Acts 1:9-11, NIV

⁹³ John 16:7

⁹⁴ Jesus was crucified on the Passover. Pentecost (the Jewish festival at which the Church was born) occurred 50 days after the Passover. Jesus was in his tomb for three days, then appeared to the disciples for forty days, leaving seven days between his ascension and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

⁹⁵ Acts 2:32-33

⁹⁶ John 20:27-29, NIV