

Chapter 1

Meeting the Man from Nazareth

In This Chapter

- ▶ Exploring the Jesus stories in the gospels
 - ▶ Questing for the evidence behind the stories
 - ▶ Entering the world of the historical Jesus
 - ▶ Tracking 2,000 years of talk about Jesus
-

Jesus is one of the best-known people in the world. Millions revere his name, his ethics inspire imitation, his teachings continue to challenge, and the biblical stories about him have been perennial bestsellers. Not bad for an uneducated, Jewish carpenter from a poor province of someone else's empire!

So who was this man from Nazareth who lived from approximately 6 BCE to 30 CE? And who has he become in the 2,000 years since? In this chapter, you discover not only who Christians think he is today, but also who historians think he was during his life.

Telling the Good News in the Gospels

Christians call the stories of Jesus “the good news,” or *gospel* (from the Old English word *godspel*). This reference may surprise you if you know that Jesus gets executed in the end. But for Christians, the story *doesn't* end there. In Christian belief, Jesus rose from the dead. His followers had an experience that convinced them not only that Jesus was still alive, but also that he had somehow defeated death itself. And that was *very* good news indeed.

This gospel message is the faith that followers began to preach all over the Mediterranean region and even to Persia and India. It's the faith that permeates their stories of Jesus after they set them down

Exposing the hidden books

If you want to read the books that didn't make it into the Bible, check out the Noncanonical Literature page at *Wesley Center Online* (wesley.nnu.edu/biblical_studies/noncanon). The Web site categorizes the books by Testament (the Old Testament or the New Testament) and by the type of work (*apocrypha*, which are hidden books, or *pseudepigrapha*, which are writings intentionally attributed to a "false" or ancient author). Scholars use print versions with more updated translations, but this Web site is fine for beginners.

on parchment. In the following sections, I introduce you to the main stories that give the good news — the gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John in the Bible (Chapter 2 has the full scoop on these stories) — as well as to other versions of the story you won't find in a Bible.

Sorting through the gospel versions

The gospel message of the earliest preachers was passed on orally for several decades after Jesus's death. People probably recorded parts of the message right away, but our first evidence of written material dates to the 50s CE, which is 20 years after Jesus's death. The earliest complete gospel, Mark's story of Jesus's ministry, execution, and resurrection, didn't come out for another 15 to 25 years. The other three gospels in the Bible — Matthew, Luke, and John — followed within a few decades.



Dozens of other gospels were written, but they were judged to be too unorthodox or written too late to make the canonical cut. A *canon* in Greek is a measuring stick; the term is used for books that "measure up" in some group's judgment and in turn become the measure for the worth of other books. (See Chapter 5 for more about the concept of canon.) These other gospels are worth studying because they reveal interesting evidence of early Christian thought and practice and may have some early material (see the nearby sidebar "Exposing the hidden books"). But by and large, the four gospels in the Bible remain our best and earliest sources for the historical Jesus, even if they aren't transparent histories themselves.

Revealing the gospels' message

When they set their quills to parchment, the gospel authors didn't write abstract philosophical reflections about Jesus's divine nature. They told the story of a Jewish laborer who ate and breathed and

walked around, who got angry and felt compassion for people, and who suffered and died, like so many prior Jewish prophets. These authors weren't church officials writing doctrine, and they weren't scholars writing sophisticated tomes. Instead, they were average Joes writing stories in the common language that everyone could understand. They infused these stories with their faith.

Because the gospels are about a man, modern folks are going to ask historical questions about their main character, Jesus. But at the same time, the gospels complicate any easy quest for answers because they aren't neutral. They're *evangelistic*, which means that their goal is to persuade you to believe their stories (*evangelos* is Greek for "good news"). So, if you want to get the historical facts, you can't take these texts at face value.



The gospels were written fairly close to Jesus's life — somewhere between 35 and 70 years after his execution. However, you have to remember that this many years is a significant time gap to a historian. Preachers, teachers, and prophets had been interpreting Jesus's teachings and deeds and the significance of his death for all those decades, and their later reflections inevitably crept into the stories they wrote of his life. For a believer, this later reflection isn't necessarily a problem; in fact, it's even a rich resource, because modern Christians stand on the faith of those first followers. But for the historian who wants to uncover the historical Jesus, those later additions have to be identified and peeled away.

If that's true of the gospels, it's even truer of all the additional beliefs about Jesus that have developed over the past 2,000 years. So, this book about Jesus won't just fill you in on the Jewish carpenter, but also on who he's become since. Think of Jesus as a 2,000-year-old building that everyone has been adding on to in every era. Right now, you see the whole building. But after you can identify the construction styles of each generation and how the building is framed, you'll be able to see its foundation more clearly.

Charting a Path Back to the Historical Jesus

Even though the gospels aren't exactly objective and historically accurate (see the previous section for details), it is possible to use them (as well as other evidence inside and outside the New Testament) to construct an account of the historical Jesus. You just need to know a few ground rules that you can use when reading the sources. I explain these rules in the following sections.

Adopting a critical distance

For the most part, this book follows the conventions of historical criticism to recover the historical Jesus. These conventions require you to bracket any beliefs you may have so that you can enter Jesus's world as a virtual visitor.

You can never completely set aside your beliefs (and some would say that you can't do it at all!), because there's really no way to read anything without bringing your life experience to bear. You interpret every word, every character, and every social, political, and economic issue with your own vocabulary, relationships, experience, and knowledge. If you've ever traveled to a foreign country, you know both how your presuppositions are unavoidable and how they can get you into trouble!



If you want to really experience a foreign culture — or, in our case, the historical Jesus — you need to assume that there's a difference between this other world you're entering and your own world. Scholars call this *critical distance*. *Critical* here doesn't mean nit-picky or mean-spirited; it means that you're aware of the differences and you're open to thinking about them.

Telling the difference between faith and fact

One important thing you have to do to sketch the story of the historical Jesus is to get a working idea of what the gospel writers believed (I introduce the gospels and their authors earlier in this chapter). It's pretty clear that they believed Jesus rose from the dead and is the son of God. But did anyone believe that during his life? Did they expect that he would rise from the dead? Did they call him the messiah? Those of you familiar with the gospels know that the characters in the stories do say these things about Jesus during his life. But did they really say this, or did the later gospel writers introduce *their* faith, *their* debates with the Jews, and *their* attitudes toward the Roman Empire into their stories of Jesus's life? To answer that question, you have to be able to tell the difference between biblical statements and historical facts.

This is tough for people who believe that the Bible is inerrant because they trust that the biblical stories don't err in matters of faith or history. For them, if you say the Bible is "true," that means its words correspond directly to objective reality. Because our era identifies "truth" with scientific or historical facts, the Bible must be scientifically and historically factual if it's "true." But unlike scientific method, this view starts with a conclusion rather than a

hypothesis: The Bible is true, which is why it must be factually true. (Earlier eras had more expansive notions of what “truth” was because they often distinguished between the literal, ethical, and spiritual meanings of a text.)

Scientists, on the other hand, prefer to put every notion to the test. For them, no “truth” is privileged in advance. All notions have to be tested against the evidence, and the results have to be reproduced by many people to reduce the possibility of bias and error.



After the Enlightenment, many biblical and literary critics tried to follow the scientists. They performed close studies at the literal and historical level and analyzed how texts shaped and were shaped by their cultures. This analysis was the spirit behind the whole quest for the historical Jesus (see Chapter 4 for details about scholars’ different quests). The ethical implications of the Bible and the issues about the deeper, enduring truths in scripture were largely left to theologians and pastors. However, remember that I’m oversimplifying a good bit here, because a lot of people tried to keep one foot in each world.

In the last century, this whole historical quest and the “science” of objective inquiry on which it was built have come under scrutiny. Nowadays, many people realize that science and belief aren’t the mutually exclusive categories that the Enlightenment imagined, and that the pictures we paint of the past often say more about the painter than the subject (thank you, Sigmund Freud!). Nevertheless, we do have evidence from past eras, and we have to find ways to deal with it, especially when it concerns a figure as important to world history as Jesus of Nazareth.

Applying a few important rules to the evidence

A good deal of evidence about Jesus exists, and it doesn’t all come from Christians. For instance, there are Jewish and Roman records from the first couple of centuries that speak about Jesus briefly (see Chapter 5). These sources are biased, too, but not in the same ways as the gospels. So, they not only provide important confirmation of some basic facts, but they also provide some interesting additional evidence to boot.

On top of the literary evidence, a limited number of archaeological artifacts related to the historical Jesus exist as well. Very few have been found that are directly tied to Jesus, but those that have been discovered shed light on the Jewish world at the time. They also confirm the major players and the basic historical timeline that the gospels presuppose.



In the end, though, the best and fullest evidence for Jesus is the gospels. If you're going to recover the historical Jesus, they provide the clearest path. But because the gospels tell stories infused with their present faith, you have to use the following few tricks of the trade, as I explain further in Chapter 3:

- ✓ **Get the earliest testimony:** To do this, you need to figure out the earliest gospel and the earliest parts of the gospels. Ideally, this material would come from eyewitnesses, but that isn't always possible.
- ✓ **Trust the embarrassing stuff:** If something's awkward for an author to tell you and he does anyway, it's likely to be true.
- ✓ **It has to make sense of the crucifixion:** It's undeniable that Jesus died at the hands of the Romans in the gruesome manner of death that's reserved for criminals. So, whatever you say about his life has to be consistent with this kind of death.
- ✓ **Someone has to report it:** If you think it but no early source says it, you win the prize for imagination, but not for history.
- ✓ **The more independent witnesses that report it, the better:** The gospels aren't always independent of each other. Matthew and Luke, for example, probably had Mark's gospel sitting right in front of them when they were writing. But we do have at least four early, independent sources, as Chapter 5 lays out.
- ✓ **If it's different either from earlier Jewish tradition or later Christian teaching, it may be original and authentic:** When some bit of evidence disagrees with these traditions, the story is unusual, which may mean that it's original (see Chapter 5 for the problems with this idea).

These are the rules that scholars have been using for a couple of centuries to sift through the gospel evidence for the artifacts of Jesus's history.

Surveying the Life and Times of Jesus

The challenge of discovering the historical Jesus in the gospels is to paint a portrait of a Jewish man that fits the historical context of Jewish society in first century CE Roman Palestine. Fortunately, archaeological discoveries and surviving first-century books about the region and its history help flesh out the bare bones. In the following sections, I sketch out the regional background for you and fill in some basic facts that we can gather about the historical Jesus from the gospels.

Roman rule in Jewish lands

One common theme in the current quest for the historical Jesus is to appreciate the Palestinian Jewish context and the Roman imperial world in which Jesus lived (see Chapter 3 for more on this quest and Part II for the Roman and Jewish background). Using this type of information helps historians decide on the most plausible portrait of Jesus when they're dealing with conflicting evidence.

For example, we now know that King Herod the Great, the Jewish client king of Rome who probably reigned when Jesus was born, created a lot of prosperity in his kingdom and made Jerusalem a magnificent city and a magnet for pilgrims. But he was also a cruel man, a second-generation convert to Judaism, and a collaborator with Rome. As you can imagine, he wasn't exactly your ideal Jewish king — not with that track record. However, there's no doubt that both his successes and his failures quickened the hopes of the Jews. After all, their prophets had told them to expect a kingdom of true prosperity and justice, and Herod came close.

After Herod's death, his kingdom passed in three unequal portions to three of his sons. Herod Archelaus, ruling in the southern region of Judea, couldn't manage it, so the Romans took over direct control of Judea in 6 CE. They appointed a Roman prefect to run things, and he handpicked the Jewish high priest so that Rome could be sure of a steady ally in the position beholden to them. The prefect during Jesus's adult life was Pontius Pilate. He executed Jesus with the collaboration of Jewish leaders. The reasons Rome and its allies took Jesus out weren't only or even primarily religious, but political: If the Jewish crowd massed behind Jesus, it would mean war, loss of life, and loss of power for those in charge.

So why do the gospels, especially the later ones, blame the entire Jewish people for Jesus's execution? The gospel authors' animosity toward the Jewish people reflects political and religious developments in the late first century, not the circumstances during Jesus's life. This single unhistorical tradition contributed to two millennia of horrific Christian violence against Jews — so there's a lot at stake in trying to set the record straight.

You'll be able to make better judgments yourself after reading Part II. It has the full scoop on the world of Jesus, including a snapshot of Jewish society and the influence of Rome in Palestine.

Leading a godly movement

We don't know much at all about Jesus's birth or childhood. In fact, only two gospels describe it — those of Matthew and Luke — and

their accounts are so different that it's difficult to tell which one is correct (Chapter 9 covers these stories). We do know, however, that Jesus was named Yeshua in Aramaic (Joshua in Hebrew; "Jesus" is the anglicized form of the Greek version).



We also know that as an adult, the historical Jesus was a faithful Jew (see Chapters 7 and 11). He was linked to John the Baptist's movement and received baptism himself. We also know that he gathered male and female followers, and that he likely designated 12 of the men as a kind of inner circle (called the Twelve), symbolizing his vision of the restoration of Israel (centuries before, it had been a unified country of 12 tribes). Jesus taught a strict code of ethics, but he also welcomed the sinner. He judged, but the final judgment was deferred to allow time for mercy. He promoted a law, and its core was Jewish law: The love of God and the love of neighbor extended to the love of enemy. These features characterized the coming reign of God, and he thought that it was coming soon.

Jesus also had a reputation as a miracle worker. Unfortunately, miracles are difficult for our modern minds to grasp because we tend to think that nature operates in predictable patterns, and when it doesn't, it's only because we don't know the pattern yet. Folks in Jesus's time had a different way of viewing the universe, and in that world miracles were possible (see Chapter 12 for details). In Jesus's case, the gospel view is that his healings demonstrate not only his power, but also the kind of kingdom that God wants. And that kingdom, as in Jewish scriptures, is a place where the blind see, the lame walk, and the poor are relieved from their burdens.

Going to the cross and rising from the tomb

One of the most certain facts about the historical Jesus is that he was crucified on the cross by the Romans in collaboration with a small group of leading Jewish aristocrats. Why he was targeted for this particular death penalty is the subject of Chapters 13 and 14.

After showing Jesus's execution, the gospels end with the story of his resurrection from the dead. On Sunday, the first day of the Jewish week (Sunday is the first day of the week because the Jewish week ends on the Sabbath, which is Saturday), Jesus's disciples begin to experience Jesus alive again. The accounts differ and the details seem contradictory: Jesus can be touched, but he can also pass through locked doors; he speaks and eats, but he can also suddenly disappear. But the testimony of multiple independent witnesses, the awkwardness of the conflicting testimony, and the sheer fact that his followers become bold enough to preach suggest that something momentous happened after his death.

Traveling through 2,000 Years of Beliefs in Jesus

Over 2,000 years and in so many different cultural contexts, beliefs in Jesus have changed and grown, as you see in the following sections.

Debating Jesus's divinity in late antiquity

In the first few centuries of Christianity, as the faith spread from the Jewish milieu into the Greek- and Syriac-speaking East and the Latin West, the central issues regarding Jesus were related to his nature and his relationship to God (Chapter 15 spells out this issue). As belief in Jesus's divinity developed, it raised a philosophical problem: How can the divine become human and stay mixed? Sure, the Greeks and Romans had traditions of gods morphing into humans and vice versa, but at any given time they were pretty much one or the other, and they were either on earth *or* in the heavens. Christians, on the other hand, were saying that Jesus was divine and human fully and simultaneously — while he was on earth and even still today.

As if the human versus divine issue weren't enough, Christians also had to work out Jesus's relationship to God. After all, Christians didn't want to be polytheists; they didn't believe that there were two gods (or three, if you count the Holy Spirit). But if they were going to believe that Jesus was God, they needed language that made it clear that there was still only one God. They found that language in the doctrine of the Trinity — the mutual indwelling of three persons.

These debates are just a few of the controversies about Jesus in the past 2,000 years (see Chapter 19 for more).

Identifying with Jesus's humanity in the Middle Ages

The challenge of the earliest centuries was to figure out how Jesus could be divine and human at the same time, but the emphasis shifted in the Middle Ages. During this time, folks instead focused on the humanity of Jesus. The awakening of humanism led to a deep affection for the God who entered human flesh (see Chapter 16 for more on the human Jesus in the Middle Ages). Art and piety followed suit, and soon were focused on Jesus's vulnerability at

birth in the crèche, his mother's suffering, and his agony on the way to the cross. (Chapter 17 covers the topic of Jesus in art.)



This cultivation of empathy was a style of prayer as much as it was a way of making sense of human suffering. People consciously tried to imitate the life of Christ through their actions and devotional practices. This lifestyle and prayer style was practiced by many believers who set out to walk in Jesus's steps on pilgrimages to the Holy Land (see Chapter 20 for some of these pilgrimage sites). The great passion plays dramatizing Jesus's death also began during the Middle Ages. These plays had a huge impact on the films about Jesus in our own time (Chapter 18 goes through more than 100 years of Jesus in film).

Subjecting Jesus to scrutiny

The Reformation of the 16th and 17th centuries was built on the medieval humanists' goal to get back to the sources from antiquity. Martin Luther had the same goal for the Bible. What he found was that all sorts of differences existed between what Jesus had taught and what Christianity had become. His effort to purge the Christian tradition of all those "add-ons" and get back to scripture — along with the subsequent Enlightenment interest in the objective study of things — shaped the historical Jesus quest in our time (see Chapter 4 for details on today's quest).

Connecting with Jesus today

Today Jesus is a global phenomenon. People know about him around the world, whether they're Christian or not. Chapter 16 touches on how Jesus is viewed in other countries where people don't necessarily share the Western history of faith. Many of these groups of people met Jesus through colonization, when Christianity came hand in hand with the military forces of European empires. That's quite a turnaround, given that Jesus was himself a subject of Rome and was executed by the empire of his day.

Because many people today meet Jesus in art and in film, this book covers the arts as well (check out Chapters 17 and 18). Thousands of pieces of art are dedicated to the Jesus story and more than 120 films have been produced about his life in the short history of cinema (cinema has been around only since 1895, which means more than one Jesus film a year so far!). You have many opportunities outside this book to encounter the man from Nazareth, and I hope that this book will be a helpful guide.