

# Jesus Who?

## Jesus' Fictional Lineage

Although Christians insist that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, both Matthew and Luke go to the trouble of spelling out the details of Jesus' lineage back to David.

- 1) What does that lineage have to do with anything, since Joseph was not Jesus' biological father?
- 2) Even if the lineage were germane, the two versions of it are irreconcilable. How can you claim that the Bible is the inerrant, infallible word of God when you have such a glaring contradiction? They can't both be right. So at least one must be wrong. So how can the Bible be infallible?
- 3) Many of the names in these genealogies are fictitious. Many of the names are not of patriarchs, but older gods. Did the authors of these gospels (whoever they were) really think nobody would check out the details? Where was that holy spirit while these guys were busy making stuff up for the "infallible" word of God?

Christians often claim that one lineage is for Joseph's line, and the other is for Mary's. There is no factual basis for that conclusion. These verses do nothing to establish Jesus' lineage to David. If Joseph was not Jesus' biological father, there is obviously no such lineage.

## Jesus of Nazareth?

Jesus is often referred to in the Bible as *Jesus of Nazareth*. Not because he was born there, but because he grew up there.

It is strange, then, that there was no such place as Nazareth in the Old Testament, or on early maps of the holy land, or in the writings of Josephus, a respected Christian historian of

that era. Nazareth didn't exist until later -- a city near Mt Carmel.

Strange, don't you think?

## Jesus Who

When historians do their research on a historical character or event, they look for as many sources as they can find. Ideally, each source

- lived at the time of the character or event being studied;
- was objective and disinterested (impartial) in his observations, and did not rely on hearsay;
- worked independently of other sources on the subject, without collaboration;
- is consistent with other sources, providing a foundation of reliable information.

What do scholars have to work with in the case of Jesus of Nazareth? Not much.

If Jesus is all he's cracked up to be, no more important character ever walked the face of the earth. Therefore, we should reasonably expect to find plenty of historical information about him. But we don't. What do Greek and Roman sources tell us about this key historical figure during his lifetime and during the rest of the first century (to around 100 CE)? Nothing at all.

We have no birth record of Jesus. We have no records of his trial, his death, his teachings, or his significance. Surely the pagans, who rejected his teachings, would have left some record of discussions about him, attacks made against him, disputes about his religious views, or challenges to his teachings, ideas, and beliefs. Not so. His name is never mentioned in pagan sources during the first century.

There is an abundance of pagan Greek and Roman historical sources from the first century, but they don't mention Jesus. From 112 CE, we have Pliny the Younger mentioning a group of Christians who were meeting illegally, but it sheds no light on Jesus himself. In the year 115, Tacitus, in his history of Rome, mentions the burning of

Rome, noting that Nero, who set the fire, blamed Christians. Tacitus explains that the group got their name from Christus . . . who was executed at the hands of the procurator Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius. Again, that tells us nothing about what Jesus said or did. Prior to the year 130, these two brief passages are all scholars have found among pagan sources in their search for the historical Jesus.

There are also a few non-Christian Jewish sources during the first century. Only one mentions Jesus. Famous Jewish historian Flavius Josephus wrote (about 90 CE) a 20-volume history of the Jewish people. In it he mentions James, the brother of Jesus, who is called the messiah. The only other mention of Jesus is the following passage. To understand it, we need to know a bit about the author.

Josephus was considered a traitor to the Jewish cause in the war against Rome. Therefore, Jews did not copy his writings during the Middle Ages. However, Christians did. But it appears they made a few editorial additions of their own in the process. Those appear in blue.

**At this time there appeared Jesus, a wise man if indeed one should call him a man, for he was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of people who received the truth with pleasure. And he gained a following both among many Jews and among many of Greek origin. He was the Messiah. And when Pilate, because of an accusation made by the leading men among us, condemned him to the cross, those who had loved him previously did not cease to do so. For he appeared to them on the third day, living again, just as the divine prophets had spoken of these and countless other wondrous things about him. And up until this very day the tribe of Christians, named after him, has not died out.**

It is certainly significant that the most prominent first-century Jewish historian knew a few things about Jesus, but it still doesn't offer much help in getting to know who Jesus was, what he said, did, and taught – even with the later Christian embellishment. It doesn't tell us about the circumstances leading to his arrest and death.

That leaves us with the Bible as the only significant source of information about Jesus. And most of the Bible doesn't have

much to offer, either. Paul didn't know Jesus or the disciples personally, so we could hardly expect him to be a wealth of first-hand information. He talks about Jesus' death and resurrection, but offers very little about Jesus before that. He mentions that Jesus was a Jew; he ministered to Jews; he had 12 disciples, and brothers, one named James. He mentions what Jesus said at the Last Supper. He mentions a couple of Jesus' teachings – his followers should not get divorced, and they should pay their preachers.

That leaves the four gospels as our only significant source of information about Jesus. But these authors, whoever they were, fall far short of the ideal sources described above. They were not disinterested, objective eyewitnesses. The gospels were written 35 to 65 years after Jesus' death, based on oral traditions, full of contradictions and inconsistencies, liberally embellished or edited by the gospel authors. The authors spoke a different language than Jesus, and they lived in a different country than Jesus. There was collaboration between the gospel authors, because Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source.

The result is not a reliable accounting of the life and teachings of Jesus, but in the synoptic gospels (Mark, Matthew, and Luke) we have the only source available. Surprisingly, we can learn quite a bit about Jesus from them, in spite of their inconsistencies and contradictions. But its value is literary and religious, not historical.