

The Birth and Death of Jesus

When Was Jesus Born?

It is widely known (or it should be) that Jesus was not born on December 25. That day was chosen by church leaders in the 4th century to coincide with existing pagan celebrations of the winter solstice.

But the winter solstice is December 21/22, not 25. Why the discrepancy? On the 21st/22nd the sun reaches its southernmost orbit. But it doesn't immediately reverse course. The sun's orbit remains unchanged for 3 days, then it begins its northward climb on December 24/25. That's the reason for the pagan celebrations on the 25th.

So we don't know the day Jesus was born, but we don't even know the year! Most people logically assume he was born in the year 1 CE (common era). Not so. According to the Matthew gospel, Jesus was born in 4 BCE (before the common era). Luke's gospel, however, seems to place Jesus' birth in 6 CE.

Clearly, the New Testament is not a reliable source of history about Jesus or anything else. Other than the Bible, there's no record of his birth, and there's no reliable historical or archeological proof that he lived at all.

If he did live, he was, according to the synoptic gospels, a Jewish apocalyptic prophet who never claimed to be divine. Paul's portrait of Jesus as Christ was not based on any first-hand account of Jesus' life, because the apostle never met Jesus, and he deliberately avoided the other apostles for at least three years. Paul's theology is based on nothing but hearsay and his own imagination.

The same is true of John, the author of the gospel by that name. Whoever he was, he was not a disciple of Jesus. No gospel author was a disciple of Jesus. The gospel writers were all well-educated Greek-speaking men who lived in countries other than Israel and wrote decades after Jesus' death.

Jesus' disciples were all Aramaic-speaking, illiterate Jewish peasants who did not think Jesus was divine.

So, Christianity is not based on Jesus. It is based on stories that began circulating shortly after Jesus' death, designed to make him into something he was not. Christianity as we know, it is a tangled web of lies and deceit. Christianity is a fraud.

When Did Jesus Die?

Jews mark time a bit differently than we do. Since Biblical times, the Jewish day begins at sundown. Their week begins at sundown on Friday, making Saturday their Sabbath.

In Jesus' time, the annual Passover festival was the most important celebration for Jews. It marked their escape from Egyptian captivity and the wicked Pharaoh, who, even after suffering through nine horrible plagues, still refused to let Moses and the Israelites leave Egypt. The tenth plague was the one in which every Egyptian firstborn child and animal was visited by the angel of death. To give the death angel a heads-up on which houses belonged to Israelites, Jews sacrificed a lamb and used some of the blood to spread on their doorposts. If the angel saw that signal, he bypassed that residence and went on to the next Egyptian household to do his dirty work.

Does it strike you as odd that the omniscient, omnipotent God, who had just performed the most amazing freaks of nature in the form of

plagues, couldn't figure out which households held Jews? The same God who was about to part the Red Sea couldn't distinguish between Jewish and Egyptian houses without a visual aid for his angel of death? The same God who had no trouble distinguishing between Egyptian and Jewish animals in the fields during the fifth plague (Exodus 9:4) needed help during the tenth plague? Did God also furnish his angel of death with a good flashlight and some of those Energizer batteries that keep going and going?

Anyway, back to the Passover. This Jewish system for marking time is important in understanding exactly when Jesus died. We have two different versions of that crucial event, and they directly contradict each other.

John 19:14:

It was the day of Preparation of the Passover; it was about noon.

It was Passover Eve, the day when preparations were made for the meal which was to take place sometime after sundown, the beginning of Passover. Jesus, according to John, was crucified just hours before Passover.

Mark 14:12-16:

On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb, Jesus' disciples asked him, Where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover? So he sent two of his disciples, telling them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him. Say to the owner of the house he enters, 'The Teacher asks: Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there." The disciples left, went into the city and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover.

Jesus and the disciples ate the Passover meal (the "Last Supper"), after sundown, the beginning of Passover Day. Then they went to Gethsemane to pray, Jesus was arrested, he was taken before the Sanhedrin, and Jesus appeared before Pilate early the following morning (still Passover). He was crucified that day.

So, why does Mark say Jesus died on Passover day and John say Jesus was crucified the day before Passover?

Is it a significant detail? Apparently so. John says nothing about the preparation or the Passover meal itself, which is highly significant in terms of the bread becoming a symbol of Jesus' body, and the wine becoming a symbol of his blood. That's much too important to have just slipped John's mind or for him to consider it not important enough to mention. Especially when we consider that John is concerned enough with details to tell us that it was about noon the day before Passover when the crucifixion scenario started to play out. Are we to believe the time of day was important, but the Last Supper was not? Was not the crucifixion important enough to make sure John got the date correct? Where was the Holy Spirit that was purportedly guiding the Bible authors, making sure the finished product was truly the infallible, inerrant Word of God?

What is evident to Bible scholars is that John (or whoever the author of the Gospel of John was) deliberately changed the date of the crucifixion in his version of events. But why? John was the last of the Gospels to be written. What its author wanted to convey is that Jesus was the sacrificial lamb. On the day when virtually all Jews sacrificed a lamb in preparation for the Passover meal, Jesus became God's sacrificial lamb. The symbolism was too important to let facts spoil a good story. What's the harm in changing the day by 24 hours or so? Nobody gets hurt, and John's version of events gets a huge boost of

symbolism. Maybe the Holy Spirit put him up to it.

The problem is that if that's the way God wanted the story told, why didn't God have events unfold that way? Why include Mark's contradictory version at all? If the whole purpose of the Bible is to help us understand God and Jesus, would God have been so careless and sloppy with details? What other details have been changed in the Bible? How can we be confident that any of them are truly accurate?

The Easter story is riddled with contradictions and inconsistencies. Is that because the Gospel authors decided to make up their own version of what happened, shaping it and shading it to give it just the right message according to their particular slant on things? Maybe Jesus wasn't resurrected at all. Maybe some guys got together and decided to just add that part because it made such a great story. So what if it didn't really happen? Telling a little white lie like that serves a greater purpose, and therefore a smidgeon of dishonesty is fully justified.

Well, that's how religions get started. That's how Islam got started. How's that for a greater purpose?

Who Killed Jesus?

Here is Mark's account of the events leading up to Jesus' crucifixion.

Mark 15:1-20:

Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, made their plans. So they bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate.

"Are you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate.

"You have said so," Jesus replied.

The chief priests accused him of many things. So again Pilate asked him, "Aren't you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of."

But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed.

Now it was the custom at the festival to release a prisoner whom the people requested. A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising. The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did.

"Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate, knowing it was out of self-interest that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead.

"What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked them.

"Crucify him!" they shouted.

"Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate.

But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!"

Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers. They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. And they began to call out to him, "Hail, king of the Jews!" Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to

him. And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

Here is John's version of events:

John 18:28-19:18:

Then the Jewish leaders took Jesus from Caiaphas to the palace of the Roman governor. By now it was early morning, and to avoid ceremonial uncleanness they did not enter the palace, because they wanted to be able to eat the Passover. So Pilate came out to them and asked, "What charges are you bringing against this man?"

"If he were not a criminal," they replied, "we would not have handed him over to you."

Pilate said, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law."

"But we have no right to execute anyone," they objected. This took place to fulfill what Jesus had said about the kind of death he was going to die.

Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

"Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?"

"Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. "Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?"

Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place."

"You are a king, then!" said Pilate.

Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into

the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

"What is truth?" retorted Pilate. With this he went out again to the Jews gathered there and said, "I find no basis for a charge against him. But it is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Do you want me to release 'the king of the Jews'?"

They shouted back, "No, not him! Give us Barabbas!" Now Barabbas had taken part in an uprising.

Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe and went up to him again and again, saying, "Hail, king of the Jews!" And they slapped him in the face.

Once more Pilate came out and said to the Jews gathered there, "Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no basis for a charge against him." When Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, "Here is the man!"

As soon as the chief priests and their officials saw him, they shouted, "Crucify! Crucify!"

But Pilate answered, "You take him and crucify him. As for me, I find no basis for a charge against him."

The Jewish leaders insisted, "We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God."

When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid, and he went back inside the palace. "Where do you come from?" he asked Jesus, but Jesus gave him no answer. "Do you refuse to speak to me?" Pilate said.

“Don’t you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?”

Jesus answered, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.”

From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jewish leaders kept shouting, “If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.”

When Pilate heard this, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judge’s seat at a place known as the Stone Pavement (which in Aramaic is Gabbatha). It was the day of Preparation of the Passover; it was about noon.

“Here is your king,” Pilate said to the Jews.

But they shouted, “Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!”

“Shall I crucify your king?” Pilate asked.

“We have no king but Caesar,” the chief priests answered.

Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified. So the soldiers took charge of Jesus. Carrying his own cross, he went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha). There they crucified him, and with him two others—one on each side and Jesus in the middle.

I see four significant contrasts between the two accounts:

(1) Mark’s account is compact, and it gives the impression that all the key players are in the same area, hearing and seeing what is going on. In John’s account, Pilate and Jesus are inside the headquarters, while the Jews are outside. Pilate goes back and forth between the accused and accusers six times during the trial.

(2) In Mark, Jesus has very little to say. Only two words, in fact, in Greek, meaning *you say so yourself*. In John, however, Pilate and Jesus engage in extended dialogue. (Throughout John’s gospel Jesus does a lot more talking than in the synoptics).

(3) In Mark, Jesus is flogged after all the back and forth between Pilate and the Jews. The trial is over, the sentence is pronounced, and the flogging is the first stage of the crucifixion process. In John, the flogging takes place during the negotiations, where it seems oddly out of place.

(4) In Mark, Pilate never declares Jesus innocent. In John, Pilate does so three times. (John 18:38, 19:6, and 19:12.) This is the most significant difference between John and Mark. John is very anti-Jewish. We clearly see that in Jesus’ words . . .

John 8:42-44:

Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I have come here from God. I have not come on my own; God sent me. Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

It makes sense, then, that John would emphasize Jesus’ innocence in the eyes of the Roman officials. If they are not responsible for Jesus’ crucifixion, who is? Jews. That is the point John is stressing in his narrative. While Matthew’s narrative (27:11-26) is similar to Mark, Luke’s account (22:63-23:1-25) is similar to John. Luke also stresses the fact that Pilate and Herod declared Jesus innocent and did not want him to be crucified.

We see a similar contrast in the passages describing what the centurion said when Jesus died.

Mark 15:39:

And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, “Surely this man was the Son of God!”

Luke 23:47:

The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, “Surely this was a righteous man.”

Why is that significant? In the NRSV we see the word *innocent* instead of *righteous*. (When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, “Certainly this man was innocent”). The Greek word is *dikaios*, meaning: *righteous; observing divine and human laws; upright; virtuous; keeping the commands of God; innocent; faultless; guiltless; as one ought to be*.

While Mark’s version is the one best known and most often quoted, Luke’s version is more accurate. Recognizing that Jesus was innocent, in a moral and judicial sense, is not the same as declaring him the true Son of God. Once again, Matthew’s account (27:54) corresponds with Mark. (John’s account doesn’t mention the centurion’s words).

The point of all this is that in these narratives (throughout the New Testament, in fact, and throughout the entire Bible), what we are seeing is the message of a man, not the divinely inspired words of the Holy Spirit. Surely that would have resulted in a narrative (or group of narratives) that are consistent, congruous, and unambiguous. That is not what we have in the Bible. What we have is the thoughts of men filtered through their own perspectives and biases, through their personal, theological, and philosophical passions, persuasions, and prejudices.

Matthew and Mark had a different agenda than Luke and John, who were determined to portray Jesus as an innocent man, the victim of evil Jews. Is that the message God was primarily trying to convey? If so, all good Christians would be virulently anti-Semitic, wouldn’t they?