Jesus the Jew

by Thomas Dalton, Ph.D.

IT’S HARD TO BELIEVE in the present day, but yes, it’s true, there are still a lot of Christians out there in the world. According to some estimates, they number around 2.4 billion or about 30% of humanity. In terms of sheer numbers, the US technically has the most: about 245 million, representing around 75% of the country — although many of these undoubtedly are so weakly religious (“Christmas and Easter Christians”) that they would barely pass any theological litmus test. The next three largest Christian populations are hardly an honor roll (Brazil, Mexico, and Russia), and the countries that, percentage-wise, are the most Christian, are mostly laughable: East Timor, Armenia, New Guinea, Haiti, and Paraguay, among the Top Ten.

Obviously, there is a huge variety in specific beliefs among these millions of Christians. The World Christian Encyclopedia infamously notes that, globally, there are some 33,000 “distinct denominations” of the Church, including 242 Catholic, 9,000 Protestant, and over 22,000 “independent.” We can only imagine the variation in beliefs among these groups — and of course, only one (at most!) can be right. I’d hate to pick the wrong one! (Do I hear, “Going to Hell,” anyone?)

But presumably they all must share at least a few core beliefs, simply in order to call themselves Christian. We can guess what these might be: (1) there exists a personal, moral God who loves us; (2) believers will prosper in the afterlife and non-believers will suffer; and (3) Jesus is the son of God and humanity’s redeemer and personal savior. Likely there are others — the Bible (or at least part of it) is the word of God, the Gospels (whichever ones we include) record Jesus’ life and teachings, and so on — but I will set these aside for now). Here I will focus on “the Man”: Jesus of Nazareth (or is it Jesus of Bethlehem? Those darn Gospel writers can’t seem to keep their story straight.)

First, I should note that there is a high likelihood that no such man ever existed. We can say this with confidence because there is no — literally, zero — contemporaneous evidence for his existence, either as a miracle-working Son of God, or even as a rather ordinary rabbi. We can understand the latter case — most ordinary rabbis from 2,000 years ago are lost to history — but not the former. If Jesus was anything close to the miracle-worker that the Bible describes, there would be a mountain of testifying evidence: documents, carvings, engravings, letters, etc. And these would exist from his followers, his skeptics, his critics, and the Romans who ruled the region. There would be a vast and well-documented account of a man who walked on water, raised the dead, healed with a touch, calmed storms, and fed thousands with “five loaves of bread and two fish.” These testimonies would all date to the time of his alleged ministry, roughly, 27 to 30 AD. And yet, from that time period, we have… nothing.

In fact, nothing even close. In fact, nothing for literally decades. According to conventional dating, the earliest reference of any kind is in the letters of Paul, the earliest of which — Galatians and First Thessalonians — date to around 50 AD, two full decades after our man got crucified. The rest of Paul’s letters, intermixed with a few fraudulent ones attributed to him, appear between 50 and 70 AD, by which time (a) Paul had died, and (b) the Jews were defeated in Jerusalem by the Romans, and their temple destroyed.

Only then did some other Jews — presumably followers of Paul — decide to write about Jesus’ life and sayings in their “gospels.” The gospel writers are formally anonymous; we know nothing about who they are, their motives, or the circumstances. The names attached (Mark, Matthew, Luke, John) mean nothing; it would be like saying “Bob’s Novel” or “Joe’s Cookbook.” But based on textual evidence, scholars can roughly date the Gospel of Mark to around the year 70; Matthew and Luke to 85; and John to 95. We can only imagine how much veracity they contain, given that they claim to quote Jesus precisely and cite details of his life, 40, 50, or 60 or more years after his death. The obvious answer is: not much!

The likeliest conclusion to this mess is that the Jew Paul and the anonymous Jewish gospel writers made it all up: that there was no miracle-working Son of God, no virgin birth, and no resurrection. They did so, not for fame or money, but because they believed that promulgating a pro-Jewish, anti-Roman theology would aid the Jewish cause. (Pro-Jewish, because the Christians are to worship the Jewish God, the Jewish rabbi Jesus, and the Jewish ‘virgin’ Mary; anti-Roman, because “the worldly powers” of Rome are a manifestation of Satan and must be defeated.[1]) And in the end, it did. Judeo-Christianity flourished, ideologically defeated Rome, and then took up residence in Rome itself. “Without doubt, Rome has been conquered,” as Nietzsche said.[2]

But to the point: Although there is no direct evidence for either a miracle-Jesus or a rabbi-Jesus, I suspect that some such man by that description did live, and die, in Judea. And the reason is simply this: Since Paul and friends claimed something as true — a miracle-Jesus — that certainly did not exist, and that they knew did not exist, they were liars. Whether they were ‘noble’ liars or malicious liars, I will leave to another time. But liars they were. And any lie works best with a kernel of truth. Therefore, I consider it likely that an ordinary mortal, the rabbi Jesus, did live, likely did agitate on behalf of the oppressed Jews, and likely did get himself crucified — end of story.

So let’s assume that a mortal Jesus did exist. What, then, do we know about him? Virtually nothing for certain. Apart from a few tidbits from Paul, literally everything that we think we know about him comes from the highly-dubious four Gospels; there simply is no other source. And in the Gospels, we find a striking claim: Jesus was a Jew.

“Wait a minute!” says the Christian, with alarm. “Jesus can’t be a Jew! He’s the original Christian — the ur-Christian, we might say. He can’t possibly be a Jew!” Indeed — many Christians, both in the past and today, have attempted to argue that Jesus was a non-Jew, a Gentile, even an Aryan. They seemingly cannot bear the thought that their beloved Savior might be a Jew, and that therefore they must worship a Jew. And yet, all the evidence says he was.

In fact, the evidence suggests that Jesus was a double-Jew: ethnically and religiously.[3] Let’s first see what it says in the Gospels themselves (which Christians must believe!).

Start with his mother, the “virgin” Mary; she clearly was a Jewess. Mary was a blood relative of Elizabeth, of the tribe of Levi (Luke 1:5, 1:36). When Jesus was born, she, along with Joseph, “performed everything according to the [Jewish] law of the Lord” (Luke 2:39). And she and Joseph attended Passover services in Jerusalem “every year” (Luke 2:41). Since Mary was a Jew, this alone makes Jesus a Jew (on the orthodox reading) because Jewishness is matrilineal, being passed along by the mother; if you are born of a Jewess, you are a Jew.

What about Jesus’ father? Let’s set aside the nonsense about God being his father, which is nothing more than regurgitated Homeric mythology about demi-gods on Earth. Joseph was of the “House of David,” as Luke (1:27) informs us. And as noted above, Joseph rigorously followed Jewish law and attended Passover annually. He was clearly an observant Jew, and (presumably) the biological father of Jesus.

Paul obviously thought Jesus was a Jew. In the early Galatians (4:4) he says that Jesus was “born under the [Jewish] law,” and in Romans (9:5), he declares his own Jewishness (“my kinsmen by race…are Israelites”), adding that “of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ.”

Likewise, the Gospel writers clearly viewed their Savior as a Jew. Jesus is repeatedly called ‘rabbi’.[4] He was circumcised (Luke 2:21) and celebrated Passover (John 2:13). The Gospel of Matthew opens with these words: “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham.” Even the non-gospel Hebrews remarks that “it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah” (7:14). Jesus regularly attended the local synagogue (Luke 4:16). He himself told the people that he came “to fulfill the [Jewish] law and the [Jewish] prophets” (Matt 5:17). And of course, everyone thought of him as “king of the Jews” (Matt 2:2; John 19:3).

It could hardly be clearer: Both by genetic heritage and according to his evident beliefs and practices, Jesus was a Jew. He was a biological Jew — surely embodying all those wonderful Jewish phenotypical characteristics — and he was a religious Jew.

The few Christians willing to engage with this issue and to defend a non-Jewish Jesus typically offer one of two responses. First, “Jesus was from Galilee, and Galilee was a Gentile stronghold.” But this is a persistent myth, propagated by those averse to the notion of a Jewish Jesus. Over 100 years ago, E.W. Masterson wrote of a “Jewish Galilee,” one that was “hemmed in on all sides by hostile [Gentile] neighbors”.[5] More recently, we now have such works as The Myth of a Gentile Galilee (2002) by Mark Chancey, who acknowledges the stubborn idea but notes “how little data there is to support such a claim [of a Gentile Galilee].” Archeological evidence from Nazareth is scarce, but what we do have shows “evidence for Jewish inhabitants at several sites, [but] very little evidence for Gentiles.” Of the major, nearby town of Sepphoris, evidence of Gentiles is “extremely limited” during Jesus’ life; by contrast, says Chancey, there is “ample evidence” of Jews there at that time. In sum, while not denying that some Gentiles lived there, evidence for them is “practically invisible”; and as a confirmation, Chancey notes that Gentiles “are not prominent in literary discussions of Galilee either”.[6]

Despite all this, some on the dissident-right, such as Internet bad-boy Andrew Anglin, who, despite his trenchant and humorous critiques of Jews, periodically displays his (apparently sincere) Christianity, occasionally railing against those who dare assert that Jesus was a Jew. Nick Fuentes dodges the question when put to him, saying “Jesus fulfills the law” and that the Jews “who remain” held on to “old sacrifices and old ways of doing things,” ultimately becoming “Talmudic Jews.” Obviously Jesus had no chance to become a Talmudic Jew, given that the Jerusalem Talmud was not written until the 300s (in Galilee!) and the Babylonian Talmud not until the year 500. Thus, despite the evidence, both men cling to their myth of a Gentile Jesus even as they (rightly) condemn Jewish domination and corruption in present-day society.

The second defense one occasionally sees is both contorted and confused: that the teachings of the Old Testament represent “true” religion and that the Hebrews deviated from this true path, degenerating into a rabbinical and ultimately Talmudic Judaism. But Jesus, they say, adhered to the true, original teachings, to the Law and the prophets — later to be called “Christianity” — thus putting him into conflict with the fallen and erroneous Jews. This essentially admits that Jesus was an ethnic Jew, but that, implicitly, it is irrelevant. Furthermore, it overlooks the fact that the Talmud, and later documents like the Shulchan Aruch, are elaborations on Old Testament teachings, not deviations from them.[7] But the main point is that simply because Jesus (the Jew) had (alleged) conflicts with other elite Jews, this does not mean that he wasn’t an ethnic Jew, and it doesn’t mean that he adhered to any “true” religion distinct from Judaism.

The Consequences

The implications of this short exposé are devastating for Christians and Christianity. Given the total lack of corroborating evidence, we can say with certainty that the miracle-man Jesus did not exist; therefore, Christianity is a farce and the Gospels are at least half fiction. If they contain even a shred of truth, then Jesus was an ordinary Jew whose life mission was to validate Old Testament prophecies and “fulfill the Law,” thus saving his fellow Jews from the evil Romans. In this case, Christians need to admit that they are worshipping a long-dead ordinary Jew who has no ability whatsoever to “save their souls.” Finally, in the case that there was no Jesus character at all, then Paul and the Gospel Jews are flat-out liars and need to be viewed with total contempt.

Any way we look at it, it’s bad news for Christians. Under any plausible scenario, they have been duped into believing in a long-dead Jewish rabbi and his fake sayings — all constructed, years after the fact, by a handful of Jews interested in undermining the hated Romans, and indeed all Gentiles.

“But what would we do without Jesus?” cry the believers. How about this: Build your life and your worldview around basic, universal, and age-old ethical ideals; defend and protect the Earth, which sustains all life; defend human dignity against corrupters, liars, and deceivers; work toward a transparent, human-scale society; spend time with your children and grandchildren; and celebrate the accomplishments of human creativity and the human spirit without yielding to Judaic nonsense.

Just for starters.

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Notes

[1] Yes, there are two or three references to “render unto Caesar” and “pay your taxes” and “love thy enemy”, but these few are far outnumbered, numerically and in theological importance, by rebellious and anti-Roman passages.

[2] On the Genealogy of Morals I.16.

[3] Recall that these are two distinct categories: one can be ethnically (genetically) Jewish yet not adhere to Judaism, or one can be a non-Jewish (Gentile) follower of the Jewish religion.

[4] Mark 9:5, 11:21, 14:45; Matt 26:25; John 1:38, 1:49; 3:2.

[5] “Galilee in the time of Christ,” Biblical World 32(6).

[6] Such as by Josephus.

[7] For a good assessment of both the Talmud and the Shulchan Aruch, see E. Bischoff, The Book of the Shulchan Aruch (2023; Clemens & Blair).

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