

The Jesus of History: A Speculative Portrait

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Who was the flesh-and-blood man behind the icon who, for two millennia, has been seen almost exclusively through the eyes of faith?

The individual we know as Jesus would not have answered to that name. He was called Yeshua (accent on SHU), which is the Aramaic version of the Hebrew Yehoshua (in English, Joshua). He came to be known by the shortened form of his name, Yeshu. The Gospels, written in Greek, rendered this as Iesou and, because the name was masculine, added an “s” to the end. Languages other than Greek often rendered the “I” as a “J,” and he became known in English as Jesus. No contemporary description of him has survived. Even later writers, informed by communal memories, only noted that he was ordinary physically.

The Gospels disagree on the year of the birth of Jesus. Matthew maintains that he was born toward the end of the reign of Herod the Great, who died in the year 4 BCE (Matthew chapter 2). Luke is specific that Jesus was born in the year Quirinius was sent from Rome to administer Syria and oversee the census of the region, which most scholars agree was the year 6 CE (Luke chapter 2).

Jesus’ hometown was Nazareth, some 65 miles north of Jerusalem, although he was born in Bethlehem, about a two-hour walk south of Jerusalem. Matthew states that the parents of Jesus settled in Nazareth only after a sojourn in Egypt. Regardless, Mark 6 calls Nazareth Jesus’ hometown, and the locals speak as though he spent his youth among them.

Jesus had six siblings. Mark 6:3 and Matthew 13:55 identify four brothers—James, Joses, Juda, and Simon (Ya’acov, Yoseh, Yehuda, and Shimon). Since three of his twelve closest disciples were named James, Juda, and Simon, some scholars believe that three of his brothers



were among the disciples. James and Juda became prominent in the early church, and the New Testament includes letters written by them. For decades after Jesus was crucified, “James the Just” was the leader of his movement. The Apostle Paul, who met and interacted with James on visits to Jerusalem, specifically refers to James in Galatians 1:19 as “the Lord’s brother.” James survived until early in the year 62. Contemporary historian Flavius Josephus records James’ unwarranted trial, conviction, and execution in Book 20, Chapter 9.1 of *Antiquities*.¹ While James was a lifelong celibate, Juda married and had a family. Early church historian Eusebius wrote that Emperor Domitian (who reigned from 81 to 96 CE), disturbed by the growing popularity of the Christian movement, had Juda’s grandsons brought before him for questioning.²

Jesus also had two sisters—Salome and Mary (Shalom and Maryam)—according to Epiphanius of Salamis in his book, *The Panarion*.³ It is possible that Salome is mentioned in the Gospels without being identified as a sibling of Jesus—in Mark 15:40-41 and 16:1—while Mary is actually named as such in the non-canonical Gospel of Philip 1:36.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, died 11 years after the Crucifixion, according to Hippolytus of Thebes.⁴ Of Joseph, Mary’s husband, nothing is known after the infancy accounts of Jesus, with the exception of a reference in an anecdote many scholars doubt is historical (Luke 2:41-48).

To explain certain references in Bible passages, Professor James Tabor and other liberal scholars surmise that Joseph felt pity for the impregnated Mary and married her, but died before they had any children of their own.⁵ As required by the Jewish Torah, his brother Clopas, or Cleophas (rendered into Greek as Alphaeus), took her as an additional wife. The two had children, thus James and the others would have been half-brothers and half-sisters to Jesus, raised with him in the same family.

The question of the paternity of Jesus is, of course, a thorny mystery. Matthew 1:24-25 states that Mary and Joseph wed before Jesus was born but did not consummate their marriage until afterward. Luke 2:5-7 states that they were only betrothed. In Mark 6:3, it is a noteworthy break with the custom of the time that when Jesus returns to Nazareth as an adult, the locals refer to him not as “the son of Joseph” but “the son of Mary.”

Professor Tabor reports in *The Jesus Dynasty*, page 330, note 8, that three ancient sources—the Palestinian Tosephta (*t. Hullin* 2.24; the Babylonian Talmud (*b. Avodah Zarah* 16b-17a); and the Midrash (*Ecclesiastes Rabba* 1:8:3)—link a notable healer named Jesus to a father named Pantira or Pandera, or some variation.⁶ Other Bible scholars (including John P. Meier in *A Marginal Jew*, Vol. 1, p. 96, and Bart D. Ehrman in *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, p. 63) mention second-century Jewish allusions to Jesus as the son of a soldier in the Roman army whose name was Panthera.⁷

In 2005, Professor Tabor traveled to western Germany to examine a tombstone discovered in 1859. This was inscribed, in Latin:

Tiberius Julius Abdes Pantera
of Sidon, aged 62
a soldier of 40 years' service,
of the first cohort of archers,
lies here.

The honored soldier died in the mid-first century, during the period when the Romans fought numerous battles with Germanic tribes along the Rhine River. Tiberius and Julius were cognomens, which indicated that Pantera was a slave who earned his freedom by serving in the army of Rome. However, his given name, Abdes, was a Latinized version of an Aramaic name meaning “servant of God,” identifying him as Semitic and possibly Jewish. Even more interesting, his unit—the first cohort of archers—is known to have been redeployed to Dalmatia (modern Croatia) from Sidon in the year 6 CE.⁸ That is the very year, of course, that Luke said Jesus was born. If Abdes Pantera of Sidon entered the Roman army that year, he would have been 22 years of age, and his death in Germany would have come in the year 46.

In Mark 6:3, the former neighbors of Jesus refer to him as “the carpenter.” But was Jesus really a craftsman? If so, where did he acquire his phenomenal ability as a healer?

The four Gospels record 23 specific instances of Jesus healing people—performing six exorcisms; curing four people of blindness; curing four of paralysis; curing two each of fever and leprosy; and curing one each of dropsy, spinal deformity, deafness, hemorrhage, and the reattachment of a severed ear. In addition to these specific anecdotes, there are repeated allusions to many other successes—so many that his fame spread throughout the region... and beyond. Early church father Eusebius tells of the ruler of Edessa—some 500 miles north of Capernaum—becoming aware of Jesus and his astounding deeds and sending a messenger to plead with Jesus to come and heal his malady.⁹

The foremost healers of that place and time were the Essenes, one of the three main branches of Jewry, according to Josephus (the others being the Sadducees and the Pharisees).¹⁰ The origins of this mysterious group are hazy; but apparently, in the second century BCE, distressed by what they saw as the pollution of the Holy Temple,

many pious Jews left Jerusalem and moved to the countryside. Josephus describes the Essenes as scattered throughout the region, but other writers place the largest population at the northern end of the Dead Sea in the community known as Qumran. Devoted to religious purity, the Essenes kept apart from the general population. But Josephus writes that, in cases of an especially challenging disease or infirmity, city- and town-dwellers would appeal to the Essenes for help, and they would come and apply their expertise.¹¹

In Book 2, Chapter 8, of his *The Wars of the Jews*, Josephus outlines the viewpoint of the Essenes: “Despisers of riches,” they gave all of their possessions to the order and owned everything in common.¹² A brother could set out for another community of Essenes with nothing but the clothing on his back, knowing that he would find everything he needed at his destination. Essenes were devoted to studying scripture and healing the afflicted, and they refused to swear oaths, considering their word their sacred bond. Not only are these beliefs echoed in the portrait of Jesus painted in the Gospels, but his early followers, just like the Essenes, were known by the epithets “People of the Way” and “Sons of Light.”

A strong indication that Jesus was an Essene, or at least lived among them for a period, comes from a pivotal moment in his mission. John the Baptist, a prisoner of Herod in the fortress of Machaerus, keeps hearing reports of Jesus and his great success up north in Galilee, so John sends envoys to ask Jesus, point-blank, if he is the Messiah: “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” (Luke 7:18-20).

Jesus responds, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor” (Luke 7:22). His reply references Isaiah, verses 35:4-6 and 61:1, which were interpreted to foretell the coming

of God’s anointed and list miracles by which he would be identified. So, in effect, Jesus answers John with a cryptic “Yes.”

While five of the signs pointing to the anointed one do occur in those two passages of Isaiah, neither mentions raising the dead. Where that miracle *does* appear in the list is in a document known as the *Messianic Apocalypse*, part of the Dead Sea Scrolls. These were the ancient scrolls discovered at Qumran, which many experts identify as the chief community of the Essenes.¹³

To speculate, perhaps Jesus, coming of age in Nazareth, felt a call to go join the spiritually pure brotherhood of Essenes, of which his older relative John was already a member. (The site where John would establish his first camp on the Jordan River was only a three-hour walk from Qumran.) Based on their interpretation of scripture, the Essenes believed that the God who had allowed his Chosen People to be dominated by Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, and Romans was on the verge of coming back to rescue them. He would first send his anointed one. Soon after would follow a war between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness, in which the forces of good would triumph under the leadership of the Messiah. Perhaps John felt a call to leave the cloistered existence of Qumran to prepare wayward Jews for this conflict and the new kingdom to follow. He went out one day to the point on the Jordan where the Israelites, arriving from Egypt, had crossed westward into the Promised Land. There he began his mission—ritually cleansing Jews who felt that they had strayed from their faith and sending them back into Judea. Evoking the great Elijah, he wore a garment of camel’s hair cinched by a leather belt. Perhaps Jesus, after having spent a decade or so in the brotherhood, felt a call to support this inspired relative who arose like a prophet of old (Matthew 11:11: “Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist...”).

For whatever reason, after his baptism by John, Jesus began a mission to redeem Jews to make them worthy of the Kingdom of Heaven. At first, he supported John in Judea, baptizing Jews in the same way John had baptized him. Before long, he moved north to Galilee and worked out of Capernaum.

Arguably, he did so after—and because of—John’s arrest by Herod Antipas. Jesus had family and friends in Galilee and knew the territory well; and in Capernaum, he was only two or three miles from Gaulanitis—a region ruled not by Herod but by Philip the Tetrarch. In Herod’s eyes, baptized Jews comprised a secret army, one that did not recognize him as the ultimate authority and might rise against him at any time. For his own protection, Jesus stopped baptizing and began to teach by means of parables, cloaking his points in allegorical imagery—“He who hath an ear, let him hear” (Matthew 11:15 and several verses).

The Gospels indicate that most of Jesus’ mission took place around the Sea of Galilee, particularly the northern and eastern shores. Along the eastern shore, south of Gaulanitis, lay the Decapolis, another territory outside of Herod’s control. Jesus did once visit the coastal city Tyre, about 35 miles northwest of Capernaum as the crow flies, taking the road through Gaulanitis. From there, he ventured another 22 miles up the Mediterranean coast to Sidon.

Jesus’ mission focused on errant Jews. In Matthew 10:5, he tells the disciples he is sending out, “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans”; and in Matthew 15:24, before changing his mind out of pity, he rejects a non-Jewish Canaanite woman who appeals to him: “I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

Healing did not mean the same to first-century Jews as it does to us today. In their view, sickness and affliction were signs that Satan had entered the body. They were signs of sin. A sufferer was

expected to pray and repent, and the healing involved as much spiritual improvement as physical. When Rabbi Jesus healed, he was cleansing the person of impurity and preparing him or her for the approaching kingdom of God on earth.

Jesus evaded the clutches of Herod Antipas for approximately two years, healing and teaching, stirring up the common folk, but never giving the tyrant a solid reason to arrest him. When holy days came, he traveled south to Jerusalem—situated in Judea, which was under the direct rule of the Romans. Technically, Jesus was beyond the reach of Herod there, but the Romans preferred a pacified countryside and were inclined to mollify Herod and the Temple authorities if it did not go against Rome’s interests. During a December visit just prior to his final journey to the holy city for Passover, Jesus narrowly escaped arrest for some provocative comments on the Temple Mount.

That history-altering Passover is customarily dated as taking place anywhere from the year 30 to the year 33 CE. For reasons too complex to recount here, I believe it occurred in March of year 36 CE. In whichever year it occurred, Jesus spent the Saturday night before the holiday on the outskirts of Jerusalem. On Sunday, he fulfilled the messianic prophecies by riding into the holy city from the east on the back of a donkey, surrounded by followers who hailed him as the Son of David and spread cloaks and palm fronds across his path while shouting, “Hosanna!” (Matthew 21:7-9). On Monday, he disrupted the Temple moneychangers, rousing the masses and challenging the authorities to take action against him. This they did on Wednesday night, arresting him on the Mount of Olives; and early Thursday morning, he was taken before the chief priests.

Historians disagree about whether there was an official trial of Jesus by the Sanhedrin. However, it is clear that the Temple authorities wanted him executed; and the Roman in command, Pontius Pilate, had the authority to do it and ordered

him crucified as a message to other disturbers of the peace. Jesus died on the cross that same afternoon, shortly after three o'clock.

Whether Jesus survived death is not a question historians can answer. The four Gospels were not published for 35 to 60 years after the events. They were based on oral reminiscences, and the authors remained anonymous. If, after rising, he had visited either Pilate or Caiaphas, Roman or Jewish scribes might have written

a contemporary account that could serve as verification.

What is certain is that because of his dazzling success as a healer and teacher, as well as his personal charisma, Jesus had an extraordinary impact on those who knew him. Following his disappearance from the scene, his brothers and sisters, his followers, and even enemies such as Saul of Tarsus, fostered a view of him that would lead to the birth of a new religion.

NOTES

1. Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, <https://josephusonline.weebly.com/antiquities.html>.
2. Eusebius, Church History, <https://eusebiusonline.weebly.com/>.
3. Epiphanius of Salamis, *The Panarion*, https://ia801202.us.archive.org/21/items/EpiphaniusPanarionBksIIII1/Epiphanius%20-%20_Panarion_%20-%20Bks%20II%20%26%20III%20-%20I.pdf.
4. Rainer Riesner, *Paul's Early Period: Chronology, Mission Strategy, Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), 120.
5. James Tabor, *The Jesus Dynasty* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2006).
6. Ibid, 330.
7. John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus: The Roots of the Problem and the Person* Vol. 1 (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1991), 96; Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2001), 63.
8. Tabor, 64-72.
9. Eusebius.
10. Josephus.
11. Ibid.
12. Flavius Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, <https://gutenberg.org/ebooks/2850>.
13. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 33-38. [Ω](#)