Introduction

When a Jew Looks at the Sources

The Jesus of History

The Sources

The early Christian Gospels are considered the most important sources for the life of the historical Jesus.[1] The Passion is of course the best documented episode. The earliest of the three Synoptic Gospels, the Gospel of Mark, dates to around 70 CE and is based on earlier sources. The source with the highest degree of authenticity is the so-called Q source where we can read Jesus's words. John's Gospel—the latest of the four Gospels, dated around the end of the first century—has limited historical value because of its post-Easter faith perspective. The non-Christian testimonials (Flavius Josephus, Suetonius, Tacitus) offer us little on Jesus's biography.[2] According to Johann Maier, the first but rather insignificant Jewish reference to Jesus is in the so-called Testimony Flavianum in Josephus *Jewish Antiquities* XVIII, pp. 63f. (cf. XX, pp. 199–203, the martyrdom of James), the wording of which was probably edited much later by Christians.[3] According to Josephus:

> Now about this time arose an occasion for new disturbances a certain Jesus, a wizard of a man, if indeed he may be called a man who was the most

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> monstrous of all men, whom his disciples call a son of God, as having done wonders such as no man hath ever done… He was in fact a teacher of astonishing tricks to such men as accept the abnormal with delight… And when, on the indictment of the principal men among us, Pilate had sentenced him to the cross, still those who before had admired him did not cease to rave.[4]

The Early Years

There can be little learned from the Gospels about Jesus's youth. He came from Nazareth in Lower Galilee and, according to Matthew 1:18,[5] he was the first child of Mary (Miriam), born before the end of the reign of Herod the Great in 4 BCE (Mt 2:1) (presumably a few years earlier). His name, "Jesus," is the Greek translation of the Hebrew "Yeshua" (God helps). The Evangelist Mark writes of at least six children: James, Joses, Judas, Simon, and the sisters of Jesus, who remain nameless (Mk 6:3). Two fictional lists of ancestors (Mt 1–17 and Lk 3:23–38) make Jesus of Nazareth the descendant of Abraham and King David, but like the topic of the virgin birth, they are not intended as historical statements, instead carrying theological significance.

It remains questionable whether Bethlehem near Jerusalem is in fact the birthplace of Jesus or was just associated with him because of God's promise to King David. The hypothesis that Jesus was born in the Galilean Bethlehem (*Beit Lehem Ha'glilit*) near Nazareth rather than in front of the gates of Jerusalem was argued as early as 1922 by Joseph Klausner (1874–1958).[6] He pointed out that the Galilean Bethlehem can be found in the Talmud and in Midrashic literature and excavations prove that it was a significant settlement at the time of Jesus; there is no such

evidence from the Herodian period for a Bethlehem in Judea. The sentence "After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb" (Lk 2:21) makes it clear that the family lived as Jews among Jews. As the firstborn son of a Jewish family, Jesus was redeemed in the Temple; later, Jesus learned his father's trade (Mk 6:3; Mt 13:55). Joseph was a craftsman (Greek τέκτων, often misleadingly translated as "carpenter"), probably involving working with wood, clay, or stones. According to Luke 2:42–48, at the age of twelve, Jesus impressed the scribes in the Jerusalem Temple with his knowledge of the Torah, which points to the possibility that he attended school, but might also be a fictional insertion to identify him as an outstanding teacher of the Torah. Although Jesus's mother tongue was Galilean Western Aramaic he must also have mastered Hebrew as according to Luke 4:16–17 Jesus read from the Torah before interpreting the text. His frequent question to his listeners "Have you never [/not] read … ?" (e.g., Mk 2:25, 12:10, 12:26; Mt 12:5, 19:4) implies reading competence.

Public Appearance

Based on the only clearly indicated date in the Gospels, the appearance of John the Baptist, it is most reasonable, according to biblical scholar Anton Vögtle, to assume a public ministry of around two years, an assumption that is consistent with a probable date of death during Passover 30 CE.[7] According to Luke 3:1 and 3:23, Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his public ministry: "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea." In the twenties of the first century CE, Jesus belonged temporarily to the circle around John the Baptist, who emerged as an ascetic

prophet in Perea, a Transjordanian region near the Dead Sea, and who called for repentance in light of the imminent coming of the Lord and the Last Judgment. "Here John offered the forgiveness of sins in ritual form—independently of the possibilities of the temple in providing atonement. This was a vote of no confidence in the central religious institution of Judaism, which had become ineffective."[8] According to Luke 1:5, John was the son of the priest Zechariah, of the priestly class Abijah, and Elizabeth, from the family of Aaron.

Jesus's baptism in the Jordan River complies with the standard practice of the *tevilah,* the traditional full-body immersion for ritual purification. The meeting with John marked a decisive turning point. Jesus returned to Galilee to follow his own calling and in the spring of 28 or 29 CE he began his work as an independent charismatic itinerant preacher. He resided at Capernaum on the northeast end of Lake Gennesaret [Sea of Galilee] where his sphere of influence included the Jewish area north and east of the lake. At the time Galilee was considered an unruly region. The local Jewish population was isolated from the religious center in Judea and was threatened by pagan influence. Capernaum was right on the border between the territories of Herod Antipas and Philippus.

Jesus apparently found little support in Capernaum itself. From there, he moved on to the surrounding area with his first companions, Shimon, Andrew, Levi, and Mary Magdalene. He ordered his disciples to abandon parents, children, and the usual daily activities and to follow him: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple" (Lk 14:26). The Evangelist John writes of three years in which Jesus appeared in public, while the three Synoptic Evangelists mention only one year and also only one journey to Jerusalem. His specific itineraries cannot be definitively re-

constructed. Indeed, many locations listed in the Gospels were later additions and reflected the spread of Christianity at the time of their editorial revisions.

Jesus's Message

Based on the historical evidence and the scriptural sources available, one may very well ask just how can we summarize Jesus's teachings succinctly. Theissen attempts just this when he argues:

> At the centre of Jesus's message stood Jewish belief in God: for Jesus, God was a tremendous ethical energy which would soon change the world to bring deliverance to the poor, the weak and the sick. However, it could become the "hell-fire" of judgment for all those who did not allow themselves to be grasped by it. Everyone had a choice. Everyone had a chance, particularly those who by religious standards were failures and losers. Jesus sought fellowship with them.[9]

Jesus's style of preaching and argumentation was essentially rabbinic; his parables[10] (Hebrew: *meshalim*) followed biblical figurative language and the imagery was taken from the everyday lives of farmers and fishermen: the sower, the mustard seed, the fisher of men, the "calming" of the storm. His first disciples called him "Rabbi" (e.g., Mk 9:5, 11:21, 14:45; Jn 1:38, 1:49, 3:2, 4:31) or "Rabbouni" (Jn 20:16). This Aramaic title means "my master" and corresponded to the Greek διδασκαλς, or "teacher." It expressed respect and accorded Jesus the same rank as the Pharisaic scribes (Mt 13:52, 23:2, 23:7). According to Mark 6:1–6, Jesus's teachings were rejected in his hometown and he was said never to have returned there. But ac-

cording to Luke 8:2–3, Mark 1:31, and Mark 15:40, women from around Jesus's home supported him and his disciples. According to Mark 15:41, they remained with him to his death.

Like Hillel (30 BCE–9 CE), Jesus accorded the commandment "love thy neighbor" the same importance as fear of God and consequently placed them above all other Torah commandments (Mk 12:28–34). Based on a Christian lack of knowledge or misunderstanding of Judaism at Jesus's time, many believed, for a long time, Jesus represented an interpretation of halakha which could not be derived from Judaism. However, acknowledging the pluralist nature of Judaism at that time, this passage is now read as an inner Jewish interpretation of the Torah. For Joseph Klausner, the Gospels describe Jesus as an observant Jew:

> As much as the Synoptic Gospels are filled with hostility toward the Pharisees, they cannot avoid describing Jesus as a Pharisaic Jew in his attitude toward the law. Accordingly, he demands that sacrifices be offered at various occasions (Mk 1:44; Mt 5:23–24), he also does not object to fasting and prayer, if it is done without arrogance (Mt 6:5–7, 6:16, 6:18). He himself follows all ceremonial laws, wears tassels (Mk 6:56 and parallels), pays the half shekel for the temple, makes the pilgrimages to Jerusalem for Passover, says the blessing over wine and bread, etc. He warns his students against contact with Gentiles and the Samaritans; he answers the request to heal a pagan child in a spirit of ultra-nationalism.[11]

The "beatitudes" attributed to the Q source (Lk 6:20–22; Mt 5:3–11) assure the poor, the mourners, the powerless, and the persecuted that for them the kingdom is already present and certain for their future as a just turn

to compensate them for their suffering. They were the first and most important recipients of the words of Jesus. According to Luke 4:18–21, his "inaugural sermon" consisted only of the sentence "Today, this Scripture [Is 61:1–3] has been fulfilled in your hearing." Thus, the biblical promise of a "Jubilee year" of forgiveness of debt and redistribution of land (Lv 25) was actualized for the contemporary poor. According to sociohistorical studies, the rural Jewish population suffered from exploitation, tax levies for Rome and the Temple, constant Roman military presence, debt slavery, hunger, epidemics, and social uprooting.[12] Jesus's relief for the poor, healing, and the coincidence of prayer and almsgiving were similar to that of the later charismatic miracle worker Hanina ben Dosa (ca. 40–75 CE), a representative of Galilean Hasidim.[13] This is another reason why contemporary scholars of religion, unlike their predecessors, place Jesus of Nazareth entirely within the Judaism of his time and emphasize the similarity of his message to the teachings of the Pharisees.[14]

Arrest and Trial

Even if we combine all four Gospels, they still only really talk about Jesus's final years. The sequence of his entry into Jerusalem, the cleansing of the Temple, arrest, interrogation in the house of the High Priest, delivery to Pilate, interrogation by the Romans, scourging, mockery, his execution by Roman soldiers, and his burial are fairly consistent in many details across all the Synoptic Gospels. The question of who was originally responsible for his arrest, however, is more controversial. For example, David Flusser questions whether the High Council meeting which supposedly condemned Jesus to death ever occurred.[15]

Jesus and his disciples spent the night at the foot of the Mount of Olives in Gethsemane, a rest area for Pass-

over pilgrims. On the night following the final meal shared by Jesus and his disciples, Judas Iscariot reportedly led a crowd armed with "swords and clubs" (Mk 14:43) or a "detachment of soldiers" (Jn 18:3) to arrest them. Paul Winter, therefore, assumed that Jesus was arrested and sentenced not by the Jewish High Council, the Sanhedrin, but by the Romans, accompanied by the armed Jews of the Temple Guard. In this scenario, the occupiers sought to suppress the potential political-revolutionary tendencies that existed among Jesus's followers or could have been stirred up by his message and deeds.[16]

Historians holding both positions assume that both the Romans and the Sadducee ruling class were interested in Jesus's arrest. The "Temple conflict" threatened both the Jewish elites' position of power as well as signifying unpredictable consequences for the autonomy of the Jewish community as a whole. In short, it could have caused long-term political instability.[17] According to this interpretation, Caiaphas's statement, recorded in John 11:50, that "it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed" is plausible.

Two contemporary Jewish legal experts have examined Jesus's trial.[18] Haim Cohn (1911–2002), Supreme Court judge of the state of Israel and legal historian, examined the trial extensively and provided a detailed picture of the most likely events surrounding the Crucifixion.[19] His book was published in 1968 in Hebrew and in 1980 in English. Justice Cohn presents a search for forensic and historical analysis to create a legal, political, and religious context for the events as they might really have happened. Cohn's readers are encouraged to give their own verdict on whether we can actually speak of Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus.

The Hessian attorney general Fritz Bauer (1903–1968) is best known for his legal processing of a number of Nazi

war crimes. His essay "The Trial of Jesus" (1965)[20] is essentially a plea for a more humane legal system. He writes, "Pilate's verdict reflects the human shortcomings of all judgment, the misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the actual events, the excessive demands on the judge by public opinion and its pressure on his verdict."[21] Bauer reminds us that from the religious Christian point of view, the "trial of Jesus culminating in the Crucifixion represented God's judgment and will; it was part of the Almighty's plan for the world; without it there would be no Christianity."[22]

Death

All four Gospels are unanimous that the execution sanctioned by Pontius Pilate as governor of Judea (26–36 CE) took place the day before the Sabbath, thus on a Friday. This was the main Passover holy day for the Synoptics as it followed the Seder and so, according to the Jewish calendar, it must have been the fifteenth of Nisan. In the Gospel of John, however, it was just before Passover—the fourteenth of Nisan. This dating, which attests to the strong narrative and fictional character of this late Gospel, has theological significance: Jesus would have died at the time of the slaughter of the Passover lamb.

According to Mark 15:27, Jesus was crucified along with two bandits on the hill of Golgotha (place of the skull) outside Jerusalem's walls and, according to Luke 23:35–37, it was accompanied by the scorn and derision of those present. The pre-Markian Passion narrative provides no additional details and only indicates that Jesus was "crucified at the third hour" and "died at the ninth hour." Calendric and astronomical calculations suggest 30 CE as the most likely year of death.[23]

Notes

1. For a more thorough analysis, see Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1998), 17–124; Peter J. Tomson, *"If This Be from Heaven …": Jesus and the New Testament Authors in Their Relationship to Judaism* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).
2. Cf. Wolfgang Stegemann, *Jesus und seine Zeit* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2009); Jürgen Roloff, "Jesus von Nazareth," in *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart,* ed. Hans Dieter Betz, 4th ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), vol. 4, col. 463f.
3. Johann Maier, *Judentum von A bis Z: Glauben, Geschichte, Kultur* (Freiburg: Herder, 2001), 231.
4. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities: Books XVIII–XIX,* tr. Louis H. Feldman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 48.
5. Unless otherwise specified all biblical references are from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha,* edited by Bruce M. Metzger and Roland Murphy, copyright 1991.
6. Joseph Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth: His Life, Times and Teachings* trans. Herbert Danby (New York: Bloch, 1989; Hebrew ed., 1922), 231f.
7. Anton Vögtle, "Jesus Christus nach den geschichtlichen Quellen," in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche,* ed. Josef Höfer and Karl Rahner, 2nd ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 1986), vol. 5, col. 922ff.
8. Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus,* 569.
9. Ibid., 570.
10. Gary G. Porton, "The Parable in the Hebrew Bible and Rabbinic Literature," in *The Historical Jesus in Context,* ed. Amy-Jill Levine, Dale C. Allison Jr., and John Dominic Crossan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 206–221.

11. Joseph Klausner, "Jesus von Nazareth," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Berlin: Eschkol, 1932), vol. 9, col. 69f. See also Herbert W. Basser, "Gospel and Talmud," in Levine, Allison, and Crossan, *Historical Jesus in Context,* 285–295; Bruce Chilton, "Targum, Jesus, and the Gospels," in Levine, Allison, and Crossan, *Historical Jesus in Context,* 238–255.
12. David L. Balch and John E. Stambaugh, *The New Testament in Its Social Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 102.
13. Bernd Kollmann, "Paulus als Wundertäter," in *Paulinische Christologie,* ed. Udo Schnelle and Thomas Söding (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 95f.
14. Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus,* 571. See also Schalom Ben-Chorin, "Judentum und Jesusbild," in *Neues Lexikon des Judentums,* ed. Julius H. Schoeps (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2000), 400–402.
15. David Flusser, *The Sage from Galilee: Rediscovering Jesus' Genius* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 138–142.
16. Paul Winter, *On the Trial of Jesus,* ed. T. A. Burkill and Géza Vermes, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1974), 44–48, 136ff.
17. Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus,* 468, 571.
18. See also David R. Catchpole, *The Trial of Jesus: A Study in the Gospels and Jewish Historiography from 1777 to the Present Day* (Leiden: Brill, 1971).
19. Haim Cohn, *The Trial and Death of Jesus* (New York: Ktav, 1980).
20. Fritz Bauer, "Der Prozeß Jesu," in *Fritz Bauer: Die Humanität der Rechtsordnung; Ausgewählte Schriften,* ed. Joachim Perels and Irmtrud Wojak (Frankfurt: Campus, 1998), 411–426.
21. Ibid., 424.
22. Ibid., 411.
23. Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus,* 572; Roloff, "Jesus von Nazareth," vol. 4, col. 466.