

A humanist discussion of... JESUS

Humanists are agnostic (a-gnostic = without knowledge) because they think that we cannot know for sure the answers to some of the big questions about life, including whether God exists or not. And because there is no evidence for the existence of God or for an after-life, humanists live their lives as atheists (a-theist = without god), and find other reasons for living good lives. So humanists do not believe that Jesus was the son of God, or divine. And because humanists tend to be sceptical about the paranormal and supernatural, they do not believe the supernatural claims (of miracles, for example) about Jesus.

Did Jesus exist?

Some academics and scholars - for example, Professor Michael Martin (Boston University) and emeritus Professor George Wells (London University) - believe that Jesus was entirely mythical because there is not enough evidence that he existed. Jesus may have been viewed by early Christian leaders as a "spiritual" Son of God, not a real historical person, similar to figures from other religions of that era.

Many other scholars believe that Jesus did exist as a historical figure in the first century CE in Palestine. A believable account is that he was a wandering teacher or preacher who challenged many of the traditions of the Jewish hierarchy, such as the power of the Temple and the use of sacrifice, and who acquired a following. His moral teachings were broadly humanistic, in contrast to the stark absolutes promoted in the world around him. His death in Jerusalem was probably ordered by the high priests of the Temple. Perhaps Jesus was a charismatic teacher, but it is unlikely he was "god on Earth".

How much is myth?

There are no relevant documents written during Jesus' probable lifetime (around 7 BCE to 33 CE). After his death stories about him were elaborated and passed on by word of mouth. By the time the gospels were written, some time afterwards, it was politically convenient to attribute Jesus' death to the Jews, and useful to the missionaries of the new Christian religion to fill out what they had heard about his life with miracles and wonders.

Features of a typical hero's life were added to his biography: the supernatural prediction of his birth, the miraculous conception, the escape from attempted murder as an infant, the demonstration of precocious wisdom, the receipt of a divine commission, the defeat of demons, the winning of popular acclaim, being hailed as a king, then the betrayal, unpopularity and lonely execution, and heavenly reward.

Some scholars have speculated that many of these features occur in accounts of other "man-gods", and early Christians may have adapted them straight from Mithraism, a competing religion in the Roman Empire. The entirely unearthly Mithras was worshipped as the "Good Shepherd", "the Way, the Truth and the Light", and as a redeemer, saviour and Messiah. Mithras was supposed to have been born to a virgin on what is now 25 December, and was visited by shepherds and Magi. He travelled and taught, cast out devils, made miracle cures, held a last supper, was killed, buried in a rock tomb and rose again after three days, at the time of the spring equinox in March (equivalent to the Christian Easter). Mithraism included baptism and Sunday worship, with a Eucharist and sacraments. Yet no one today considers Mithras to be anything other than fictional. Adopting features of Mithraism would have made the beliefs of the early followers of Jesus more attractive to pagans. St Augustine even said that the priests of Mithras worshipped the same God as he did.

The teachings and legacy of Jesus

More books seem to have been written about Jesus than about any other individual. The largest ever religion has been built up around his legacy. His teachings, and those of his followers, are endlessly interpretable and have given rise to thousands of different denominations, a great deal of practice and dogma that Jesus would not recognise, many acts of intolerance, cruelty, or violence, and countless acts of kindness and compassion. It seems that readers of the New Testament can find more or less what they like in the life and sayings of Jesus, and they often choose to ignore the more unpalatable or difficult teachings (such as "Sell all you have and give it to the poor...and come and follow me." Matthew 19,21, Mark 10,21, Luke 18, 22.), and suggested that "the man who has shall be given more; but the man who has not will forfeit even what he has." Luke 19,26. Much of what he said had been said before, either in his own religion of Judaism, or other religions such as Buddhism. But he did sometimes explain things in a fresh and memorable way that challenged what people already believed and made them take notice. For example, 'The Golden Rule' is found in many religions and cultures (Jesus' version was "Always treat others as you would like them to treat you", Matthew 19,19, Matthew 22,39, Mark 12,31), but Jesus in addition told people to "Love your neighbour as yourself". His story of the "good Samaritan" (Luke 10, 29 -37) emphasised that anyone (even someone from a hostile group) could be your neighbour, and both the story and that extra idea were, perhaps, new.

Many humanists accept that the stories and teachings of Jesus, selectively read, add to our store of wisdom on how to live and behave well. Humanists would argue that any teachings or stories that inspire people to live better lives and to improve the world in which we live, are a good thing, but that we should not depend on any divine being to help us.

Ultimately, humanists believe that making the world a better place and living good lives depend on our own efforts and our best qualities and ideas: creativity, imagination, courage, fairness, justice, co-operation, tolerance and concern for others. These values may have been promoted by Jesus, but were not unique to him; they have been found and respected throughout history, wherever people have tried to find good ways of living together.

Questions to think about

- Find out all you can about one of your great-grandparents. How much can you be sure is true, and how much is family legend? If you had to make a good story out of their lives, would you have to make up a lot?
- Can an untrue story tell the truth about human nature or how we should behave? Can you think of an example?
- If a great moral teacher were around today, what would s/he try to teach us?

The evidence that scholars are examining

There are no relevant documents written during Jesus's supposed lifetime (around 7 BCE to 33 CE).

The Gospel of Q

A collection of moral teachings, stories, miracles and prophecy transmitted orally and first written down in about 50 CE. It includes no dates for Jesus's life. A case can be made that this gospel was assembled out of sayings from the 1st and 2nd centuries BCE.

New Testament Epistles

Liberal theologians believe that some of these were written as late as 150 CE, up to four generations after Jesus's death. The authors definitely believed that Jesus had existed but did not cite any evidence that he lived in the 1st century. Paul does not describe Jesus as a miracle-worker, healer or teacher. Only the epistles written after Paul's death and ascribed to him (1 Thessalonians and 2 Timothy) blame Pilate and "the Jews" for Jesus's death, when the synoptic gospels had already been widely circulated with this message. However, conservative theologians consider all the epistles to have been written by Paul before his death in the mid-60s CE, and that Paul's mention of James (brother of Jesus) as leader of the Jerusalem Church means that Jesus lived in the early 1st century CE.

The Canonical Gospels

Most theologians believe Mark's gospel was the first written, in about 70 CE. Matthew and Luke were written up to 15 years later. John was written after Luke. None of the authors identified are known. It is unlikely that

any of the authors were eye-witnesses to Jesus's work, but relied on secondary sources and the oral tradition within the church. Conservative theologians date the gospels much earlier, and consider Matthew to have been the tax collector mentioned in that gospel.

The Gnostics

The early Christian movement included Gnostics, Jewish Christians and Pauline Christians. Gnostics denied Jesus's existence as a historical person, as they believed God could never take a human form.

Flavius Josephus

He was a Jewish historian who was born in 37 CE, and he described Jesus as a wise man crucified by Pilate in his book 'Antiquities of the Jews'. But most historians think that this paragraph is at least partially a forgery, inserted by an unknown Christian. Some conservative theologians think the passage is entirely genuine. A second reference is to James; again, experts are divided on whether or not it is a forgery.

Cornelius Tacitus

Cornelius Tacitus - A Roman historian (55 - 120 CE) who wrote a book known as 'Annals' in 120 CE. The references to Jesus could have been derived from Christian material circulating in the early 2nd century: Tacitus could not have known Jesus or his followers.

Suetonius

Author of 'Lives of the Caesars' in about 120 CE, which refers to the expulsion from Rome of Jews who caused disturbances at the instigation of 'Chrestus'. While conservative Christians say this is a misspelling of Christus (Christ), Chrestus was in fact a reasonably common Greek name. Suetonius is probably referring to a Jewish agitator called Chrestus.
