

Scripture **from** Scratch

A popular guide to understanding the Bible

JESUS THE MAN FROM NAZARETH

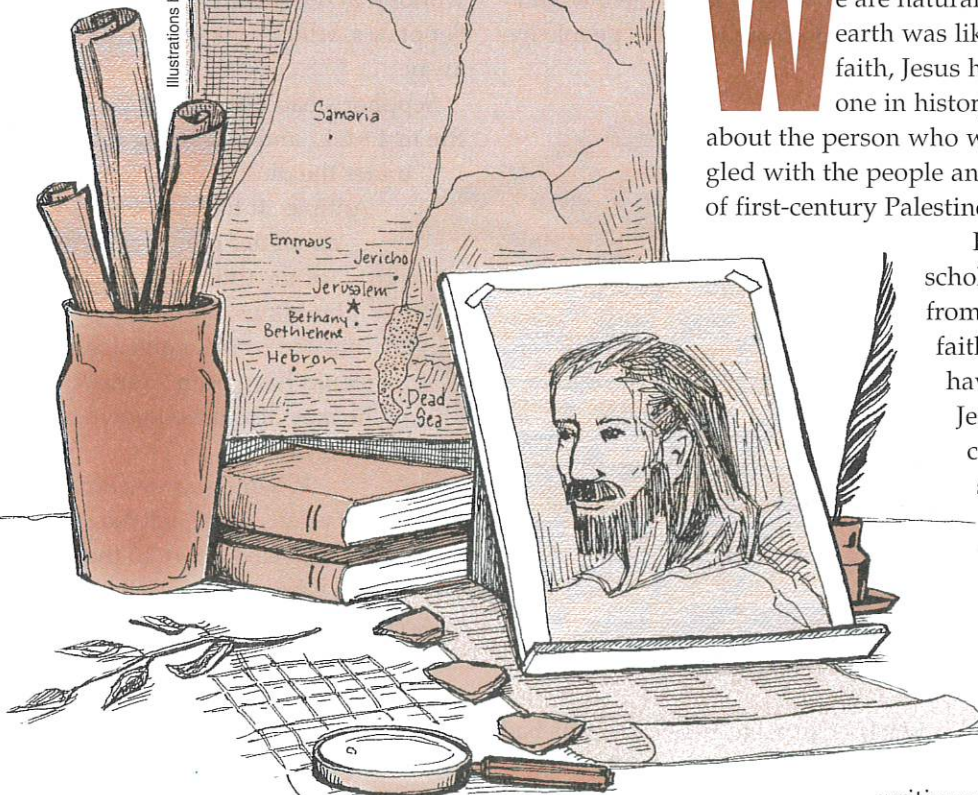
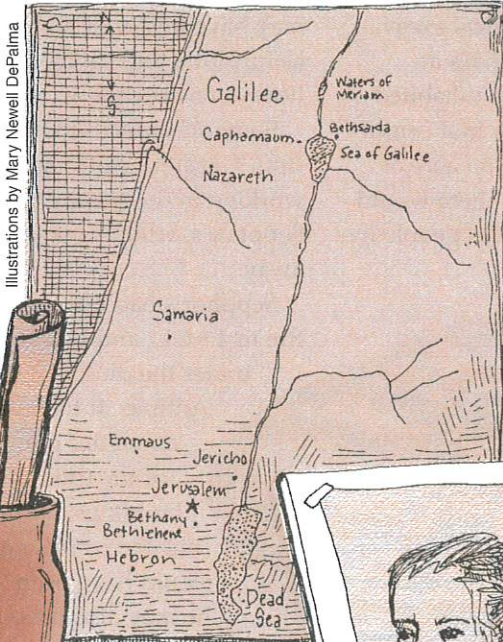
by Elizabeth McNamer

We are naturally curious about what Jesus' life on earth was like. As the center of the Christian faith, Jesus has had more impact on us than anyone in history, and yet it seems we know little about the person who walked, talked, ate, drank, intermingled with the people and observed the customs and rituals of first-century Palestine.

Recently there has been an effort by scholars to sort out this "historical" Jesus from the Jesus Christ we know through faith and tradition. Their task would have been a great deal simpler had Jesus left a diary, or if archaeologists could find a sign that said "Jesus slept here." As it is, they (and we) are left to solve the mystery from a few clues.

We can look to sources aside from the Gospels to recreate the times and places in which Jesus lived. The Torah, for example, gives us an understanding of the laws that most Jews observed. The

writings of Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian, mentions a few names and events also recounted in the Gospels. The topography of the land itself supports the settings for the Gospel stories. The Dead Sea Scrolls show us the diversity that existed in Judaism at the time. Finally, archaeology provides us with material evidence of how people lived. But the man himself does not emerge from these sources.



The Gospel of the Lord

The four Gospels are our primary source not only for understanding Jesus the Christ, the center of our faith, but also for the information we have about his life on earth. The problem is that the Gospels were not written until at least 40 years after Jesus' death.

The Gospel writers saw Jesus' life from the overwhelming perspective of the Resurrection. Although the Gospels do contain historical facts, the evangelists wrote statements of faith, not historical or even biographical documents. Such details were not their main concern.

We see this, for example, in discrepancies among the Gospel accounts on seemingly key facts such as when Jesus was born. Matthew and Luke both tell us that Jesus was born in Bethlehem while Herod was still alive (Matthew 2:1; Luke 1:5). We know from historical documents that Herod died in 4 B.C.E. Luke, however, also tells us that Jesus was born when a census was conducted by Quirinius, governor of Syria (Luke 2:2). But historians have determined that this census was not taken until 6 C.E.—10 years after the death of Herod.

Matthew tells us that Herod ordered the slaughter of the innocents, and that the holy family fled into Egypt (Matthew 2:16-18). No historical sources, however, say anything about such a slaughter by Herod, though Josephus' description of his character would suggest he was perfectly capable of such an outrage.

The evangelists wanted to communicate the message that Jesus was the "Lord," the Son of God, the expected Messiah of the Jews, the Word of God who had existed from the beginning. To the evangelists, the details of his life on earth were significant only insofar as they furthered this message.



Praying With Scripture

- Take any incident in the life of Jesus—a time at home with his family, his baptism, his calling of the disciples, his trial before Pilate. Concentrate on the event and make it as real as possible in your imagination. How does Jesus act in each of these situations? Let his words and actions influence your behavior in similar situations.

Hometown Boy

Scholars agree that Jesus lived most of his life in Nazareth in Galilee. Archaeological excavations done in the 1970's at Nazareth show that it was inhabited from about the turn of the first century B.C.E. and occupied about an acre of land. At the time of Jesus there would have been no more than 120 people living there.



Mark's Gospel tells us that Jesus had brothers and sisters (Mark 6:3). Catholic teaching holds that Mary was and remained a virgin. The words we translate as "brother" and "sister" could also have referred to more distant relatives such as cousins. Saint Jerome (who lived in the fourth century) says that they were cousins. The Greek Orthodox tradition suggests that these were possibly children of Joseph

by a former marriage.

Joseph and Jesus were carpenters (in Greek a *tekton*, someone who worked with wood or stone). Scholars say this may have involved making items such as furniture and cabinets or doing heavy construction work.

Some scholars think that a carpenter from Nazareth could have also been working in the nearby towns such as Sepphoris, which was about two miles away.

Sepphoris had been destroyed by fire in 4 B.C.E., and was being rebuilt under the direction of Herod Antipas. It had all of the amenities of a Greek town of the time, sumptuous buildings, baths and a theater. Jesus' native language would have been Aramaic, but he may also have known some Greek.

When Jesus was around 30 years old, he left Nazareth and traveled down to the Jordan to where John was baptizing.

According to Luke's Gospel, Jesus and John the Baptist were relatives (Luke 1:36-45). They may have met as children, although the gospels only tell us of their meeting at the time of Jesus' baptism. According to John's Gospel, Jesus' baptism was a great revelation for John the Baptist, who said he did not recognize Jesus.

After being baptized, Jesus began his public ministry. When Jesus returned to Nazareth he preached in the synagogue and proclaimed to his people that he fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah

61 (Luke 4:6-30). The Nazoreans thought he was crazy and tried to throw him over a cliff. Jesus left and went to Capernaum.

According to Mark, even some of Jesus' relatives thought that he was out of his mind (Mark 3:21).

At Capernaum Jesus called together disciples, most of whom were fishermen. Fishing was the main industry in Galilee. The fish were sold right off the boats; any that were not sold were sent to Magdala (six miles downstream) to be smoked or pickled, then packaged and exported to various parts of the Roman Empire.

Religious Life

There were three main sects within religious Judaism at this time, Sadducees, Essenes and Pharisees. All three groups accepted the Torah or Book of Laws, but each had different interpretations of the Law.

The Sadducees, who were the priestly aristocracy, put particular emphasis on Temple worship and sacrifice. They did not believe in the resurrection of the dead and felt that God gave out all rewards in this life.

The Essenes disapproved of Temple worship. They no longer offered sacrifice but used ritual bathing as a way to be cleansed of sins. They had a few

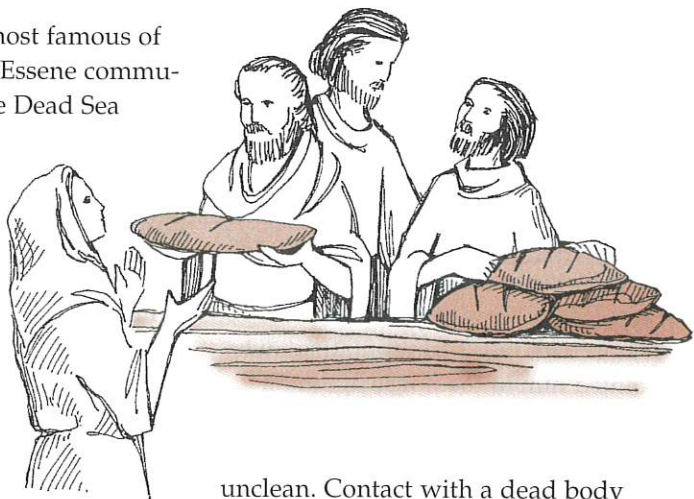
monastic centers, the most famous of which is Qumran. The Essene community there produced the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The third group was made up of Pharisees (the word means "separate ones"). They were strict observers of the written laws and surrounded these laws with numerous oral laws in order to safeguard them. They were also trying to adapt the Law to their own times. Sometimes some of them got too rigid. But some, even most, were good religious people.

Jesus does not seem to have belonged to any of these sects, though he held some beliefs in common with both the Pharisees and the Essenes.

He often had his own interpretation of the Torah, as the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) demonstrates. Jesus observed the Law, but he had a deep insight into its true spirit and was able to see when the Law must give way to a higher demand.

The legal system in Jesus' day was so complicated that ordinary people often did not know what was expected of them. There were clean and unclean foods. Women were ritually unclean at the time of their menstrual periods. Tax collectors and prostitutes were



unclean. Contact with a dead body (even inadvertently) rendered a person unclean. Illness made people ritually unclean.

Jesus' mission was to free and to liberate, and he was more concerned with healing people than worried about becoming ritually unclean by associating with them.

The Kingdom of God

The focus of Jesus's preaching was the kingdom or reign of God. Many believed that the kingdom of God was near and was making its presence felt. For many people, this meant that Israel would again return to its position of autonomy and power.

The Essenes saw the arrival of God's kingdom as the forces of light overcoming the forces of darkness. We find some of this imagery in John's Gospel (for example, John 1:5). Many believed that astronomical events would mark God's breaking into history to change things.

Jesus proclaimed that the kingdom of God had arrived, but that it was not a political kingdom (see John 18:36). He also announced that the kingdom was available to everyone, not only the Jews.

Jesus spent time in Gentile territory, and some scholars think that it was his willingness to include Gentiles in his message of salvation was one of the things that upset the Jewish authorities. Ultimately, though, the charge that led to his death was that of blasphemy.



Living the Scriptures

- **Jesus talks in the Sermon on the Mount about the blessedness of the peacemaker. How can we be peacemakers when we see situations of conflict?**
- **Jesus often found himself at odds with the authorities. What is the appropriate response when we disagree with the authorities or with laws that are wrong?**
- **The disciples fled when Jesus most needed them. How ought we to react when we see injustice done to someone?**

Jesus also seems to have gone beyond the attitudes of his time and culture in his relationship with women. All of the Gospel accounts show Jesus at ease in the company of women.

Luke tells us of several women among Jesus' followers who supported his mission out of their own pockets (Luke 8:1-3). He was gentle with the woman with the "bad reputation" who anointed him in the house of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36-50) and also with the woman taken in adultery (John 8:2-11). He spoke with both the Samaritan woman at the well and Martha of his fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies (John 4:4-37; 11:17-27). He let Mary the sister of Lazarus sit at his feet, the posture of a disciple (Luke 10:38-42).

One Man's Death

The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) tell us that Jesus went to Jerusalem from Galilee for only one Passover celebration during his ministry. John's Gospel, however, suggests three such trips.

Jerusalem is about 80 miles from Galilee and would have been about a five-day journey. Some would have traveled by donkey, but most pilgrims would have walked.

The Gospels tell us that Jesus rode on a donkey into Jerusalem (Matthew 21:1-5; Mark 11:1-11). This may be simply a recorded detail, or it may be the Gospel writers' way of indicating who Jesus was. Matthew's Gospel refers readers to the Book of Zechariah (9:9), which says that the king would arrive in his kingdom riding on a donkey.

Jesus did several things in Jerusalem that would have angered the civil and religious authorities, among them driving the money changers out of the Temple precincts (Mark 11:15-19) and having people who were blind and lame, and thus unclean, come to him in the Temple area (see Matthew 21:14).

The Gospels give conflicting accounts about the celebration of the Passover. John says that Jesus was crucified on the eve of the Passover when the lambs were being slaughtered in the Temple (John 19:14). The Synoptic Gospels put the crucifixion on the day of Passover.

Jesus' enemies could have put Jesus to death by stoning. We know that this was a common, though not necessarily legal, method of execution. Some of the religious leaders were ready to stone the woman taken in adultery. Stephen, as we learn in the Acts of the Apostles, was killed by stoning. But only the Romans could put a man to death by crucifixion.

The death of Jesus of Nazareth may have ended the life of an obscure carpenter from a small town in Galilee. But we believe that the resurrection that followed three days later was only the beginning of a new life for Jesus the Christ and his followers down through the ages. ■

Elizabeth McNamer, one of the general editors of Scripture From Scratch, and a frequent contributor, teaches at Rocky Mountain College. She spends time each summer looking for clues to the historical Jesus at an archaeological site in Bethsaida.

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Talking About Scripture

- **How is your faith affected by knowing more about the historical situation in which Jesus lived?**
- **How do discrepancies in the Gospel accounts, for example the differences in the infancy narratives, change your understanding of Scripture?**



Reading About Scripture

- **Brown, Raymond E. *Introduction to the New Testament*. New York: Doubleday, 1997.**
- **Johnson, Timothy Luke. *The Real Jesus*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996.**
- **Pixner, Bargil. *With Jesus in Jerusalem*. Israel: Corazin Publishers, 1996 (available from Century One Books, 235 Bellesoneie, Pasadena, CA, 91105).**