

Life and Teachings of Jesus

Summary: The Christian Bible's New Testament includes the Gospels, four different chronicles of the life of Jesus. These books are foundational for Christian belief and practice, sharing the story of Jesus' birth, baptism, and revolutionary teachings, as well as affirming him as the Messiah.

The story of Jesus, as Christians know and tell it, comes from the part of the Christian Bible called the “New Testament.” The first four books of the New Testament—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—are known as the “Gospels,” meaning “good news.” Written between about 70 and 100 CE, approximately two generations after the death of Jesus, the Gospels are based on accounts of Jesus, told and retold by his followers. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the “synoptic” Gospels, because they present a “common view” of Jesus through many common sayings, parables, and events. Both Matthew and Luke seem to have used Mark’s Gospel as a source in writing their own accounts. John’s Gospel has a distinctive voice, focusing more on the divinity of Christ within a cosmic worldview. The Gospels emerged out of early communities still struggling with their identity as followers of Jesus in a Jewish context. The Gospel of Matthew, for instance, is most conscious of debates within Judaism after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, while the Gospel of John includes signs of Christians being expelled from synagogues. Although these four Gospels differ in their accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry, sometimes in significant ways, the early church did not blend them into one account, but preserved the distinct Gospels with their differences. Together they provide four perspectives on the life and teachings of Jesus.

According to the traditions of Luke and Matthew, Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea in the lineage of King David. There is a story in which the ordinary and the miraculous intertwine. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is said to have conceived Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit while she was still a young unmarried virgin; Joseph, her betrothed, was a carpenter from Nazareth. Luke’s story is familiar to Christians throughout the world: the couple traveled to Bethlehem to be counted in the census and, finding no room at the local inn, had to stay in a stable. Jesus was born that night, his first bed a manger filled with hay. Nearby shepherds with their flocks heard angels singing and hurried to see the newborn child. Matthew says nothing of the stable or the shepherds, but tells of wise men or astrologers, who saw the light of a star and came from the East bringing gifts to honor the child. Mark and John omit the birth

story altogether, with Mark beginning his account with the baptism of Jesus, and John with the creation of the cosmos.

There is little recorded of the childhood of Jesus, except Luke's story of how, at the age of twelve, Jesus' parents found him teaching the rabbis in the temple in Jerusalem. All four Gospels, however, speak of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist. The Gospels do not mention his age, but historians say that Jesus was around thirty years old at his baptism. It was a time of political turmoil and religious expectation, and there were many Jewish movements that looked forward to the long-promised Messiah who would usher in a new age. John the Baptist was one who looked to the new age, preaching a message of radical repentance and transformation while baptizing thousands in the Jordan River. Mark gives this account of John's baptism of Jesus: when Jesus came out of the water, the skies were torn open and the Spirit, like a dove from heaven, descended upon Jesus with the words, "You are my beloved son; with you I am well pleased."

Jesus' baptism marked the beginning of his public ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing. The Gospels describe many miracles performed by Jesus: healing the sick, casting out demons from the tormented, and even bringing the dead back to life. Jesus attracted large crowds as he began to teach throughout Galilee. He was accompanied by a group of followers that included fishermen, who left their nets and their families to travel with Jesus, and women, whose presence can be seen throughout Jesus' ministry.

Jesus' message of repentance and turning to God was coupled with a message of generosity, forgiveness, love, and justice. The Gospels portray Jesus as a powerful teacher, who often taught through evocative parables. In one parable, a man is robbed, beaten, and left on the road. Many pass him by without giving him help, including respected members of his own community. The one who does stop to help him is a Samaritan, a person considered a foreigner and an outsider. Jesus insists that the "great commandment" to love one's neighbor as oneself crosses all ethnic and religious barriers. In his ministry, Jesus himself crossed many social barriers, mingling with the ostracized tax collectors, adulterers, and sex workers, as well as the disabled, the poor, and the sick. He warned against casting judgment, and counseled critics to remember their own imperfections before condemning others.

Jesus taught that the expected Kingdom of God was close at hand. But it would not be an earthly political kingdom, but rather a new reign of justice and liberation for the oppressed. Those who would be included first in the Kingdom were not the wealthy, powerful elites, but the poor, the rejected, and the outcasts. Jesus likened the coming of the Kingdom of God to a tiny mustard seed, growing from within to create a new flourishing reality. His disciples and many who heard him began to speak of Jesus as the long-awaited redeemer, the Messiah, who would make the Kingdom of God a reality. When the term “Messiah” was translated into Greek, the word used was *Christos*, the Christ.