

Robin McGonigle
University Congregational Church
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“Who Was This Jesus?”

Matt. 4:23-25

On one of the shelves in my office, there are a series of books with titles like

- “Jesus at 2000”
- “Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time”
- “Jesus, A Revolutionary Biography”
- “Jesus and His World”

Much has been written about Jesus as a historical human being since the 1980’s when this emphasis really took hold of a scholarly think tank called the “Jesus Seminar”. Jesus scholars from all over the world came together to talk about what we can really know about the person who was Jesus about 2000 years ago.

One of the first things they acknowledged was that history has done a real number on Jesus. Over the years, stories, fables, conjectures, and layers of tradition have been heaped upon the Jesus tradition to the point that we aren’t completely certain what we can know about him as he was historically, without all the traits attributed to him after his death.

Today, we continue our “Debunking Religion” series with this topic... “Who Was This Jesus?” We started the series with debunking God. We’ll hit on a different topic each week – communion, the Bible, and so forth. Please send me an email or give me a call about a topic of Christianity you would like me to research and then debunk!

This is what the gospel writer of Matthew said of Jesus in Matt. 4:23-25:

“Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.” (NRSV)

At the Church Council meeting at Chalcedon, in 451 C.E., the delegates decided that Jesus was both “fully human and fully divine”. That’s a good decision made by committee! Everyone won. Jesus was a both/ and! Marcus Borg makes the distinction between the historical person of Jesus and what was attributed to him later as the “pre-Easter Jesus” (that’s the human being) and the “Post-Easter Jesus” (the attributes given to him after his death, many of which indicate Godliness or Divinity). Today, I want to focus on the pre-Easter Jesus.

The birth of Jesus. We are told that Jesus was born to human parents - Mary and Joseph - in a normal, human birth. It means that Jesus did not come out of the womb sparkling clean and with a halo around his head. He probably cried when he was born. He was probably born soon before 4 B.C.E. and much of the story around his birth are not historical fact, but written poetically to show that this was a person destined for greatness. He was likely born in Nazareth, a tiny town of between 200 – 1200 people. And he was – throughout his life – a Jewish peasant.

The childhood of Jesus. Jesus had to pass through a process of growth, instruction and maturation, just as all of us do. There were things he did not know and had to learn from his parents and others. The likelihood is that he was illiterate through his adulthood, as were 95-97% of the Jewish populace. He did not have complete knowledge of God beamed into him any more than we have. We are told in the Bible that he “grew in wisdom and in favor with God and with humanity.” As a child, he played with other children, got into trouble (remember his parents’ going back to the temple), and was reprimanded. Like other children, he learned a trade from his father. I can imagine he hit his thumb with a hammer or mallet a number of times, and perhaps he even muttered a choice word when he did it. To be a carpenter of that day indicated a lower-class status. In fact, in the Greco-Roman world, the Greek word translated as carpenter was “*tekton*”, a prejudicial slur used by the upper class.

We’re told by the Bible that Jesus had at least 6 siblings, 4 brothers and 2 sisters. We can assume that he went through normal sibling rivalry and that he said and did mean things to his siblings. They may have even rolled around in the dirt.

Because he was human, we know that Jesus experienced illness, tiredness, anxiety and frustration. He had to make a conscious, personal effort to be good, righteous, and spiritually mature.

Jesus as a “man”. Jesus was born male. Because he was completely human, he would have had masculine traits. I believe he was also a sexual person, with sexual thoughts, feelings, desires, and expressions. We don’t know whether he ever had a girlfriend or a wife or children. But because he was fully

human, we can be assured that he had the need for sexual expression and for human companionship.

Jesus as an adult. In his culture, it was important for a young man to contribute to the financial burden of the family early in his teen years. He likely worked for his dad or at odd jobs. He had the pressure of earning a living and providing for his family.

Beside the gospels, there are other ancient writings that describe Jesus. The earliest reference to Jesus that we know of is from Josephus in his writing *Antiquities*, written in the early 90s. This is how he described Jesus:

“At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus, and his conduct was good, and he was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. And those who had become his disciples did not abandon their loyalty to him. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion, and that he was alive. Accordingly they believed that he was the Messiah, concerning whom the prophets have recounted wonders.”

Because this is a neutral reporting of a man not known in Christian circles, it is an invaluable look at the historical Jesus.

Scholar Marcus Borg says of Jesus: *“Jesus was a peasant, which tells us about his social class. Clearly, he was brilliant. His use of language was remarkable and poetic, filled with images and stories. He had a metaphoric mind. He had a zest for life. There was a sociopolitical passion to him – like a Gandhi or a Martin Luther King, he challenged the domination system of his day. He was a Jewish mystic, for whom God was an experiential reality. As such, Jesus was also a healer. And there seems to have been a spiritual presence around him, like that reported of St. Francis or the present Dali Lama. And I suggest that as a figure of history, Jesus was an ambiguous figure – you could experience him and conclude that he was insane, as his family did, or that he was simply eccentric or that he was a dangerous threat – or you could conclude that he was filled with the Spirit of God.”*

In referring to himself, Jesus almost always called himself the “Son of Man.” He is recorded to have called himself that 80 times in the Bible. Only 4 times is he recorded as referring to himself as the “Son of God.” In fact, he went out of his way to deny that he had no special power – that the power people saw coming from him was God’s power, not his. He did not claim to be able to do miracles, or cure people. He attributed these works to God.

The core of the gospels is Jesus as the miracle worker, Jesus as a man who made a deep impression upon those who he came in contact with, his ability to attract large crowds, his ability to attract a dedicated core group of disciples, and then a much larger group of people who saw him as someone special. After all,

there were many Galilean teachers or preachers in the first century. And there were many who were executed by Rome as trouble makers or people who were threats to the social order. There were many wandering “holy men” around Judea and even the Roman Empire. But this man was clearly special. He made a mark, left an impression. He was someone you couldn’t forget. He had power in a social sense. He knew how to attract, enchant, recruit and hold a large group of people’s attention.

He was a holy man, a miracle worker, someone who got in trouble with the authorities – Pharisees, scribes, priests, elders. He was constantly defiant and argumentative with them. He was a free-spirited individual. Such a restive individual simply could no longer be tolerated by the powers that be.

Jesus’ Death. The crucifixion story is the ultimate record that proves Jesus’ humanity. He prayed for God to save him from having to go through the agony. Jesus’ final suffering and death were those of a human being. To Jesus, it was a terrible reality, loaded with uncertainty and fear, just as is suffering and death is to us. We are told that he was truly a “man of sorrows and acquainted with grief”.

To deny Jesus’ humanity is to deny Easter. No humanity - No resurrection. Many of the Easter experiences affirm the bodily Jesus. Really human – with wounds and scabs. Jesus invited the startled disciples to touch him and see his wounds. He was not a ghost.

How does this apply to us? The humanity of Jesus is encouraging and reassuring to every member of the human race! In our struggles, we walk the same path as Jesus. He didn’t always have the answers he wanted. He knew what it was like to “pray and supplicate with strong crying and tears”, to be “oppressed with fear and anxiety”. (Heb. 5:7-9) He knew what it was like to endure, to fight, to weep, to pray, to suffer and toil, to agonize and plead as he did in the garden. He depended on the same God that we do.

I was asked, recently, at an event where the discussion had been about the history of Christianity and the poor historical record Christianity has in terms of oppression, violence & war, subjugation of slaves, women, and others, “are you a Christian because of your culture and upbringing?” The follow up question was, “Knowing all the bad things that have happened because of Christianity, why have you chosen it as your religion?” My answer was that I am a Christian in part because of culture. However, that I chose Christianity as my faith tradition because of the historical man named Jesus. I believe that his ideas and ways of life are so powerful that I want to use them in my own life. It’s not that I think other religions are wrong; it’s that I fell in love with his peaceful teachings, his dealings with people, his teachings of God, and his zest for life.

Or, as Borg says, “Jesus was a manifestation of the sacred, God with a human face.”

Borg, Marcus, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Harper Collins, San Francisco, 1995

Writing contributions by Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, Alan Segal, Houston Smith, Karen Jo Terjesen edited by Marcus Borg, *Jesus at 2000*, Westview Press, Boulder, Co., 1997

John Dominic, Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, Harper Collins, San Francisco, 1995