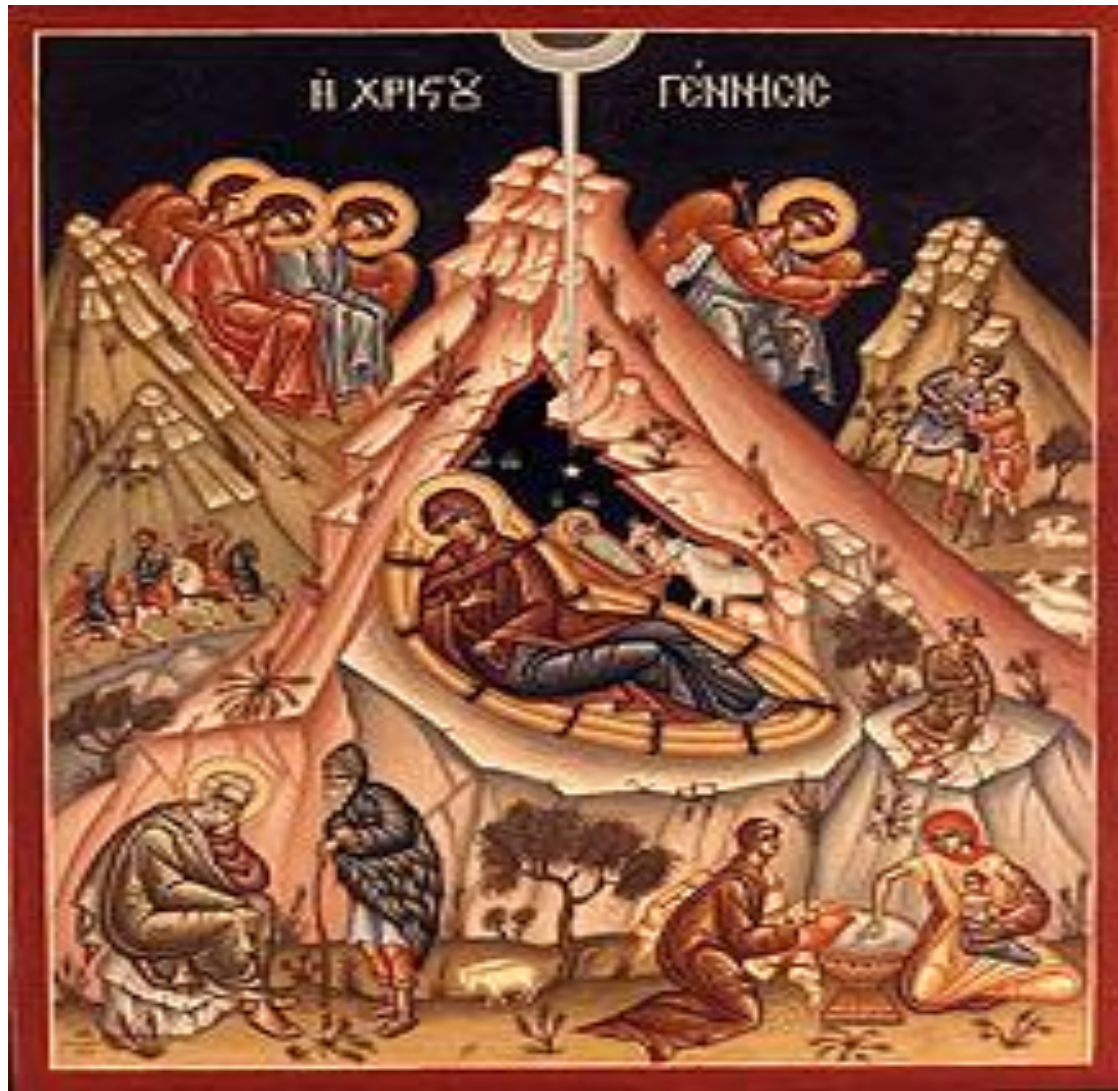


Roots of Christianity

II. Who is Jesus?

Kenneth Alonso, MD, PhD



Nativity

Who is Jesus?

- There are no contemporary accounts of Jesus' life.
- The earliest information comes from the Epistles of Paul (45-65 AD) and the Gospel of Mark (70 AD).
- Passion accounts in all the Gospels reflect independent sources.
- Mark is the source for Matthew and Luke.

Birth and death

- Born ca. 4 BC, based on data given in Luke. Augustus was Caesar. The world, at peace, was Hellenized. A non-Jew sat on the throne of Israel.
- Died March 25, 30 AD, based on the account in John. It is the only date in the time frame given in the Gospel that is compatible with the concurrence of Passover and the Sabbath.

Major strains of Judaism

- Sadducees: priests and scribes who accepted priority of the Torah and ascribed a time-conditioned role to the Prophets and Writings. Hellenized.
- Pharisees: accepted as equally authoritative the Oral and Written Law. Both were given to Moses at the same time at Sinai.
- Essenes: Sadducees who rejected the Hasmonean priesthood, regarding Temple services as blasphemies.
- Zealots: conservatives who also opposed Rome.

Midrash, Mishnah, Talmud

- Midrash is interpretative commentary. A text may be allegorical but the interpretation cannot do violence to the plain text (historical reading).
- Mishnah (200 AD) is a collection of rabbinic law passed on orally from Moses, protecting and specifying the written law by determining what is actually demanded and by ensuring that practice did not infringe the written law.
- Talmud (600 AD) presents an ideal Judaism with Temple worship at its center and a pure people living in the holy land.

The fence around the Law

- To mitigate transgressions of the Law, the Pharisees built a fence around the Law. All conclusions of the Law were from Moses, thus from God who gave the Law at Sinai.
- God commanded one should not eat flesh torn in the field (the Law).
- What if it is torn in the city? If the animal is slaughtered, is it not torn? How is the blood returned to the earth? What type of knife is to be used in the slaughter? (the fence around the Law).

Repentance

- Neither Sadducees nor Pharisees denied the need for repentance.
- Moses preached repentance.
- The Law itself provides for expiatory sacrifice.
- The Day of Atonement concretizes the communal act of repentance.

Resurrection

- The idea is not found in the Torah, and is rejected by the Sadducees. The idea surfaces in 2 Macc 7 (2nd Century BC).
- Man is a living being, whole and undivided. In death he returns to the earth.
- There is a final judgment. At the end of days the righteous will be resurrected. The unrighteous will not be; they are written out of the Book of Life.

Jesus' family

- Mother from a priestly family (Lk 1); by Tradition, a seamstress.
- His father was not known (Jo 8:19).
- The committing of Mary to the care of the Apostle John at the Cross indicates Mary had no other family to care for her. (Jo 19:26-27)

Jesus' family

- Mary's spouse is righteous, of Judah (genealogies of Matthew and Luke), a carpenter; by Tradition, a widower with a family.
- Both are observant Jews: they circumcised Jesus, redeemed Him as firstborn, and made pilgrimage to the Temple for major feasts (Lk 2).
- They are poor.



Betrothal of Mary and Joseph
Church of Mary Magdalene, Paris

John the Baptist

- At age 30 (the age associated with insight gained from life experience), John begins his mission to Israel.
- His message is apocalyptic; he preaches repentance; his following is significant.
- He is executed for reproaching the behavior of the king.
- John has a major impact on the psyche of Israel.

Jesus' mission

- Jesus is baptized by his cousin, John (accepting John's apocalyptic vision).
- He then begins His public ministry, a period that lasts about one year.
- His early companions were disciples of John (Jo 1:35).
- His family questions his mission (Mk 3:21, 31; Jo 7:3; Mt 12:46; Lk 8:19). Later, others of His family follow Him.

Language spoken

- Jesus was a layman who probably spoke and preached in Aramaic, the language of the countryside.
- He probably spoke Greek as well as his home area in Galilee was a site of major public works activity in His lifetime.
- He could read Biblical Hebrew (Lk 4:16).

Marital status

- No explicit statement as to His marital status. As there are a number of references to father, mother, brothers and sisters, the total silence about a wife may be taken as an indication Jesus was not married.
- The prophetic vocation was understood to include celibate status.

Message

- Jesus proclaimed the good news of the coming of the Kingdom of God (end of days, Is 61:1 quoted at Lk 4:16).
- He emphasized the unrestricted love of God (neighbor, Mk 12:28; Mt 5:38, 7:12; Lk 10:25; enemy, Lk 6:27).
- His words and actions are coherent. The Kingdom of God is to come and yet is already present.

Miracle worker

- Feeding the 5000 and the 4000
- Raising from the dead the widow's son, the daughter of the synagogue leader, and Lazarus
- Healing the disabled and blind
- Healing by His word alone
- His followers worked miracles in His name (Lk 10:17).

Miracles questioned

- The Name of God (YHWH) is powerful and was uttered (muffled) by the High Priest only at the Day of Atonement.
- Jesus is accused of misusing the Name of God and that his miracles are not from God. His opponents want a sign from Heaven (Mk 3:22; Mt 8:11, 12:38, 16:1; Lk 11:29).
- To deny God's actions is to blaspheme (Mk 3:29).

Ethical teaching

- The Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7) and the Sermon on the Plain (Lk 6:20) are the distillation of the Law.
- The lure of money and power are condemned.
- The rich are condemned for their behavior (Mk 10:17; Mt 19:16; Lk 18:18) and threatened with exclusion from the Book of Life (Lk 16:19).
- The poor woman is commended for her generosity (Mk 12:41; Lk 21:1).

Oral Tradition

- The emphasis on the Oral Tradition is questioned by Jesus (Mk 7:1; Mt 15:1, washing) for adherence to ritual detail and ignoring the compassion behind that Tradition. (See also Mk 3:14, fasting; Mk 3:23; Mt 12:1; Lk 6:1, grain).
- The teachings on divorce reflect both the ritual detail and the compassion for mankind, for example (Mk 10:2; Mt 5:31, 15:31; amplified by Paul at 1 Co 7:12).

Political impact

- He claimed no earthly kingdom (Jo 18:36).
- He condemned the powerful (Mt 23:1).
- He condemned the rich (Lk 6:20).
- His announcement of the Kingdom at Lk. 4:16 echoes Dt. 15 regarding cancellation of debts.
- He attracted Gentiles.
- Women attended His ministry.
- He assumed authority over the Temple (Lk19:45) but never claimed to be the Messiah (Mt 16:20).

Political impact

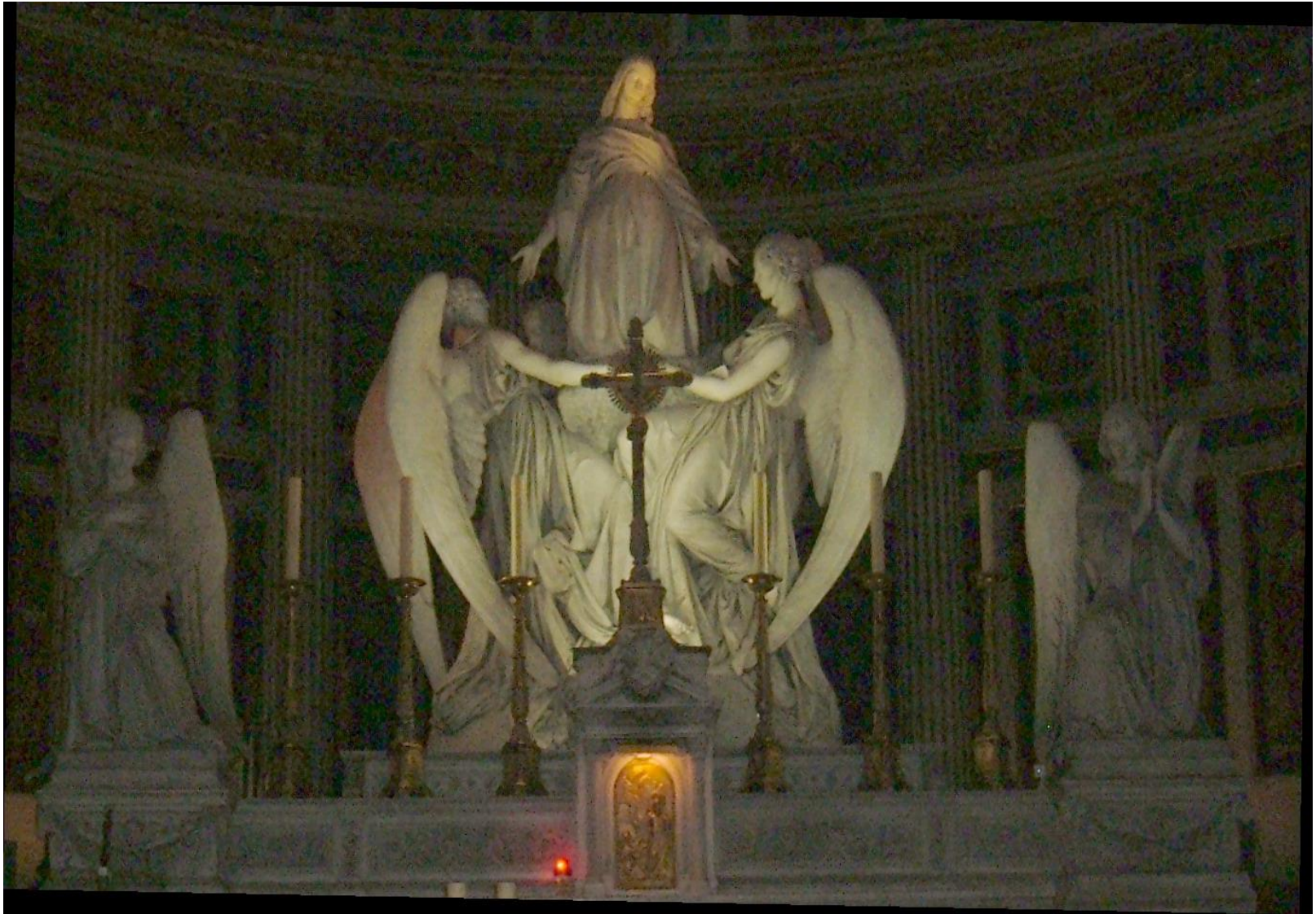
- Eight days before His crucifixion, on a Sabbath, in a town on the outskirts of Jerusalem, Jesus raises Lazarus.
- The next day He enters Jerusalem with much fanfare. (One million pilgrims assembled in Jerusalem for Passover.)
- Jesus cleanses the Temple.
- Betrayed by a disciple who believed this would precipitate the uprising against Rome.

Failed Messiah?

- Jesus was arrested and condemned to death. His followers scattered.
- The Apostle who boasted he would remain faithful until death caved into fear (Mk 15:66; Mt 27:69; Lk 22:54; Jo 18:15, 25).
- Only John remained faithful (Jo 19:16) and believed (Jo 20:8).

But the tomb was empty!

- “If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ ... If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people the most to be pitied.” (1 Cor 15:13-19)



Mary Magdalene, Apostle to the Apostles
Church of Mary Magdalene, Paris

Suggested reading

- Bruce Metzger, Roland Murphy (eds.), **The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha**. New York. 1994.
Probably the best modern translation. It is not the received Greek text, however.
- Raymond Brown, Joseph Fitzmeyer, Roland Murphy (eds.), **The New Jerome Bible Commentary**. Prentice Hall. Englewood Cliffs, NJ. 1990.
Roman Catholic commentary acclaimed for its scholarship and lack of bias.