

# **Why Jesus?**

**John Blanchard**



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Registered Office: 140 Coniscliffe Road, Darlington, Co  
Durham DL3 7RT

admin@epbooks.org

www.epbooks.org

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JPL Books, 3883 Linden Ave. S.E., Wyoming, MI 49548

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# Introduction

Religion has had a long shelf life, and in one form or another is here to stay. This is because as human beings we instinctively want to believe that our lives are not completely futile, and that we are part of something bigger, something that can give us purpose and value.

Yet anyone who wants to find the right religion is faced with a bewildering array of choices: Islam gets most of today's headlines, Hinduism and Buddhism draw millions, and Christianity is still growing. Most religions have a focus on a personality: Muslims acknowledge various leaders though no-one approaches the status of Mohammed; the Buddha's teaching is the foundation of the movement that takes his title and Christianity's fundamental focus is on a first-century Jew (Jesus) who died a criminal's death. Christianity claims that only through this man can our deepest religious needs be met, and that only through him can we get right with God.

*Why Jesus?*

This book will answer that question ...

# 1 Back to the Future

At first glance, the answer to the question at the end of the introduction seems far from obvious. One philosopher wrote, 'Historically, it is quite doubtful whether Jesus ever existed at all, and if he did we do not know anything about him,' but as he was an atheist he had a vested interest in writing that. Not surprisingly, the well-known atheist Richard Dawkins took more or less the same line and went no further than to say that 'Jesus probably existed.'

Turning from guesswork to certainties, nineteen celebrated authors in the first and second centuries, with no religious axes to grind, recorded more than 100 facts about Jesus, giving details of his birth, life, teaching and death, all without the slightest hint that he was not a real historical person. These writers included the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus; Suetonius, the official historian of the Roman imperial house; Cornelius Tacitus, another eminent

historian who was also Governor of Asia; and Pliny the Younger, a Roman proconsul in Bithynia in Asia Minor and prolific letter writer. Their confirmation that Jesus was a real person and not a religious myth is all the more remarkable as they all rejected the main thrust of his teaching. As someone has said, the argument that Jesus never existed has been 'demolished' ... by 'the march of historical research'.

Almost all the data we have about Jesus is in the Bible and this will be our database from now on. The Old Testament records events before Jesus was born, and the New Testament takes over just before his birth. He was born about 2,000 years ago into a working-class Jewish family living in Nazareth, Israel. This meant that he started his earthly life on the wrong side of the tracks, not just because it was a small community in the backwoods of what was then part of the Roman Empire, but because of its very bad social reputation. It was so despised that somebody of Jesus' day asked a friend, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' (John 1:46). In those days Nazareth (more a village than a town) was a small agricultural settlement with no trade routes, and so of no economic importance. It is not even mentioned in the Old Testament, which covers many centuries of Israel's history, so we can assume that nobody of national significance had any links with it.

Jesus was not actually born in Nazareth, but in Bethlehem, about seventy miles to the south, while his parents were there for a Roman census to be taken. When they got there, the town was so crowded that there was no normal accommodation available, and they had to make do with some kind of outhouse or stable. It was in these primitive surroundings that Jesus was born, the family returning to Nazareth soon afterwards. About two years later

they emigrated to Egypt to escape a massacre of all male children in the neighbourhood under two years of age which was ordered by the ruthless (perhaps paranoid) King Herod, a puppet of the Roman Empire. After Herod died in Jericho in 4BC, Jesus' family returned to Nazareth and settled down there. From then on, other than an incident at a Jewish festival in Jerusalem when Jesus was twelve years old, the trail goes cold for about eighteen years; there is no record of anything he said or did during that time. Suddenly, everything changed...

## The bombshell

The day the tide turned began quite normally when, as a devout Jew, Jesus attended a Sabbath day worship service in his local synagogue. During a typical service a passage of the Old Testament would be read, and on this occasion Jesus was invited to read it. When an attendant handed him a scroll containing part of the book of Isaiah he read these words:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. (Luke 4:18-19)*

So far so good; the Jews saw the Old Testament as not just a record of their nation's history, but God's word to them as his chosen people, and through them to the rest of humankind. Central to all of this was the promise that one day God would break into history by sending a great Jewish

king who would meet man's deepest need and establish the kingdom of God. In the Old Testament one prophet after another spoke of a coming Messiah ('anointed one'), and the last of them, Malachi, repeated God's promise by writing that *the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come* (Malachi 3:1).

The words Jesus read from the scroll prophesied what the coming Messiah would say about himself, and the worshippers in the synagogue would have been familiar with them. When Jesus finished reading, it might have been expected that one of the leaders of the service would make some comments on it—perhaps assuring his listeners that although 400 years had passed since the last Old Testament prophecy, God remained true to his promise and Messiah would come. However, when he had finished reading Jesus sat down. Doing this would mean nothing to us today, but in the context of synagogue worship at that time it was a signal that he intended to say something else. This explains why suddenly *the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him* (Luke 4:20).

Then came the bombshell ... Instead of the kind of pious platitudes his hearers may have heard many times before, Jesus announced, *Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing* (Luke 4:21). Nobody could possibly miss the point: Jesus was claiming that when Isaiah wrote about the coming Messiah he was referring to him. As he developed his claim and pressed home some of its implications his listeners were outraged, and eventually became so furious that they bundled him out of the synagogue and tried to throw him over a cliff. Somehow he escaped, and as far as we know he never returned to Nazareth.

This incident launched his public career, and we next read of him teaching in a synagogue in Capernaum, a fishing