

Did the Historical Jesus Really Exist?

People who gradually come to understand that the canonical Gospels are more myth than history, some skeptics might go a bit further and believe that Jesus, himself, was a myth. In fact there are even a few scholars now trying to make that case.

The Gospels themselves are far removed from the actual history of Jesus, from the land he walked, and the religion—Judaism—that he believed in. The entire *New Testament*, after all, was written by Hellenistic Christians, not by the followers of Jesus. As Hellenists, they wrote in Greek, were influenced by Greek philosophy and were quite familiar with Greek and Roman mythology. Most of the men Gentiles, not Jewish, and they often resisted Jewish influence.

The Gospel authors knew very little about the Hebraic origins of the Jesus movement, and in the end, opposed that movement. The time would come when the Church would label Jewish Christians heretics. The earliest Christian, Paul, opposed the followers of Jesus and, judging by his letters, was not at all interested in Jesus' teachings, since he rarely references them. Paul was not interested in Jesus; his whole cult religion was based on the risen Christ. So, maybe Paul and other early Hellenists simply invented the Christ figure, copying it directly from Greek and Roman myths about god/men who were resurrected.

Yet, there is a problem with that assumption. Paul does make reference to the historical Jesus, if not by name, and he more than aware of Jesus' brother James, the leader of the Jerusalem community of Jesus people. Mahlon Smith of Rutgers University states, "From a historical perspective it is not very easy to defend the thesis that a first-century Hellenizing movement invented and deified a fictional Jewish hero, since totally fictional heroes tend to display traits admired by those who imagined him (or her)." Many stories about Jesus are quite scandalous, and the Hellenists would hardly have invented these. And the greatest scandal of all was the fact that the Messiah was crucified as a common criminal.

This Palestinian Jew from an obscure village called Nazareth in Galilee was, in many ways, an embarrassment to early Christians. Yeshua (Jesus) challenged the accepted standards of social purity, questioned established authority, and overturned the traditions and mores of conventional family life. The Jesus of the Gospels was a serious troublemaker.

All of these factors made it necessary for Christians to reinterpret Jesus' life and teachings in order to make him conform to their Hellenistic mystery religion. They would not have had to do this if Jesus had been a fictional character.

There are many other reasons why the vast majority of all New Testament scholars do not doubt the historicity of Jesus, even if they do consider many of the stories about him to be works of fiction. Indeed, had Jesus never existed, scholars might have saved themselves about two centuries of hard work looking for him.