

Jesus was executed as a type of political criminal, distinct from the type possibly represented by the two bandits who were crucified with him and whose banditry, having had a political aim, may have been insurgency. After being tried by the high priest and his counselors, he was turned over to Pilate with the charge of having claimed to be "king of the Jews."

After his death, his followers, to their surprise, experienced him as yet alive and were convinced that he would soon return and that in him God had acted to save humanity. Thereupon they gathered in Jerusalem to await his coming as the viceroy of God's kingdom, which was expected soon. In the process of believing this and living it (including dying for it), they created a movement that in many ways went beyond the movement called into being by Jesus and his message. Their movement grew and spread, and "delay" in the Lord's returning led to important developments in theological reflection. Having become the center of a new religion, Jesus also became a theological figure. He was not just the historical founder of the new religious movement, but someone whose person and work were themselves the subject of theological thought. For almost 2,000 years most Christians have regarded his teaching and other activities during his lifetime as less important than his role in God's coming kingdom and the significance that God Godself attributed to his life and especially to his death, which they have understood as a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world.

Of course, Jesus himself had theological ideas, as did his followers. But those who developed and transmitted the traditions about him, including the authors of the gospels, also gave him a distinctive role in their understanding of God's action in the world, and hence in their theology. Thus there were continuities as well as changes and developments between what Jesus himself thought and what his disciples thought after his death, and thence between what they thought and what Christians in the centuries after them came to think.

Nothing survives that was written by Jesus himself. More or less contemporary documents, apart from those in the New Testament, shed virtually no light on his life and death, even if they reveal a good deal about the social and political context. The main sources for our knowledge of Jesus

himself, the gospels in the New Testament, are tainted by the fact that they were written by people who intended to glorify him. They report his sayings and actions in a language that was not his own, and they place each piece of information, not in its setting in his own life and work, but in a setting devised by his followers, usually by his followers at one remove. Even if we could know that we have his own words and deeds, we could never rule out the possibility that they were quoted or described out of context.

That Jesus has been so widely approved and admired, even by those who have not become adherents of the new religion, is a measure of the success that the authors of the gospels have enjoyed. In writing as they did, they intended for people to turn to Jesus, to admire him, and to believe that he was sent from God and that, by following him, they should have eternal life. Of course, in their view, admiration of Jesus and belief in him went together. They would not have appreciated having his teaching—in the Sermon on the Mount, say, or in the parable of the Good Samaritan—separated from their own belief and witness that God sent him to save the world. But the way in which they composed their gospels allows readers to pick and choose, and many readers have done exactly that, admiring Jesus even while disagreeing with Christian theology. Even in these cases, at least some of the evangelists' aims have been fulfilled.

In the course of trying to persuade others to put their faith in Jesus, his followers and their followers in turn gave him various titles, including "Anointed" (in Hebrew "Messiah," in Greek "Christ"), "Lord," "Son of God," and so on. These titles indicate that, as the decades passed, Jesus' followers and their converts developed various views of his relation to God and of his significance in God's plan for Israel and the world. Their new movement finally separated from Judaism and became the Christian church. But when the gospels were written, christology (theological reflections on the person and work of Jesus) was still at a relatively early stage, and Christianity's separation from Judaism was not yet complete.

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When Jesus was executed, his followers fled or hid, but their disappointed hope was revived when they experienced him as alive again after his death. They became convinced that the kingdom of God whose coming Jesus had announced would arrive soon and that he himself would return as God's viceroy. Thereupon they settled down in Jerusalem to wait. While waiting, they sought to convince others that Jesus was the Messiah of Israel and that he would soon return to establish God's kingdom. But they did not sit together, collectively search their memories, and write a biography of Jesus. Because they thought that he would soon be back, the question of how best to preserve knowledge of him for future generations simply did not arise.

In trying to convince others, they sometimes told stories of things that Jesus had said and done. To begin with, this material was presumably not written, but was simply passed on orally. When the disciples used incidents from Jesus' life, they wanted to illustrate points, points that were important to them at the time in doing what they themselves were doing. Besides thus trying to win new adherents, the disciples also instructed one another and their growing number of converts by recalling incidents from Jesus' life. Sometimes they also debated with Jewish teachers who rejected Jesus; and these debates provided yet a third context—in addition to trying to win converts and instructing themselves—in which materials concerning Jesus were used and developed.

In this way, materials from Jesus' lifetime were preserved. But they were preserved in forms that were valuable to Jesus' followers. This means that his words and deeds were taken out of their original context in his own career and set in another context in the disciples' own preaching and teaching.

The years passed, and the Lord did not return. But the faith of Jesus' followers remained strong, and they were persuaded that he still lived as the heavenly Lord. In their evangelism and pedagogy, they began to cite incidents from the lifetime of Jesus in set forms. And at some point, these small units of material were written down and collected into larger groupings.

The years became decades, and some Christians decided that, after all, ~~they~~ they might need connected accounts of Jesus, especially since some of the original disciples had been martyred, while others may have departed on missions to distant lands. Perhaps before our gospels themselves were written, there were something like proto-gospels—works that told a connected story, but not the whole story. Finally, the gospels themselves were composed—probably between 70 and 90 CE.

Withal, the materials concerning Jesus had been continually revised to make them relevant to new audiences in new situations; and the early Christians also created new material by making things up. Believing as they did that Jesus was alive in heaven and therefore could be addressed by them in prayer and also address them in turn, they had good reason to regard what he addressed to them as coming from the same Lord who earlier had lived and died among them as prophet and teacher. The Lord still spoke to them in visions and during prayer, and they did not scruple to add his sayings to those transmitted in the tradition.

Another source of newly created material was Jewish scripture. Christians believed that Jesus was the fulfilment of Hebrew prophecy. Therefore, they could consult the Hebrew scriptures to learn of the things that he must have said and done.

All of the gospels give indication of these pressures on the developing traditions. But the synoptic gospels are to be preferred as our basic source of information concerning Jesus. Of course, their authors too were believers and theologians and were capable of creativity. Just as there can be no absolute alternative between the legendary and mythological apocryphal gospels, on the one hand, and the historical canonical ones, on the other, so we cannot make a clean division between the theological Gospel of John and the historical synoptics, since the synoptics are also the work of theologians. None of our sources gives us the "unvarnished truth," because the varnish of faith in Jesus covers everything. But there can be little question that the synoptic authors revised traditional materials much less thoroughly than did the author of the Fourth Gospel.

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The gospels present Jesus as the person who fulfils the hopes of Israel and through whom God has saved/will save the world. In other words, they place him in the context of the "history of salvation," taken directly from the Hebrew Bible and adapted to the purposes of their presentation.

This explains why the authors of the gospels offer information about Jesus based on the assumption that he fulfilled biblical prophecy. One advantage of their doing this is that they could fill in some of the blank places in the story of Jesus' life and death. The clearest case of their doing exactly this is provided by the birth narratives. But in many other ways as well they seek to convince readers that Jesus fulfilled God's promises to Israel. These promises include the redemption of the people of Israel, but they also include the salvation of the gentiles. Thus the gospels depict Jesus as savior of the entire world, albeit as a universal savior who fits into Jewish salvation history.

But if the gospels place Jesus in the context of the history of salvation, yet a second context is provided by his own career, by his own understanding of his overall mission. Like John the Baptist before him and the early church and Paul after him, Jesus himself believed that the climax of history was at hand and that God would soon bring about a decisive change in the world. He also understood himself to have a central role to play in God's decisive action.

Thus at a very basic level everyone mentioned agreed: John the Baptist, Jesus himself, the early church, Paul, and the authors of the synoptic gospels. What was really going on, they all thought, was that God was up to something very special indeed. The God they all believed in was the God of Israel, the God who had called Abraham, had given the law to Moses, and had elevated David to kingship. That God was now about to bring his work to fruition.