

Who Was Jesus?



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: Matt. 16:13–16, John 20:26–28, 1 Cor. 1:18–27, 15:3–7.

Memory Text: “When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say the Son of Man is?’ ” (Matthew 16:13, NIV).

From the earliest days of His ministry, there was discussion and debate about Jesus. How interesting that those discussions continue, even today. They began with the people of His own times and from His own town. “‘Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?’ they asked. ‘Isn’t this the carpenter’s son? Isn’t his mother’s name Mary . . . ?’” (Matt. 13:54, 55, NIV).

It is what might be called *the scandal of the particular*: The Messiah had to come from somewhere, all right, but not from a place so familiar to us, and certainly not from a family that is just like the rest of ours! In one form or another, the same fundamental concerns expressed by these local townspeople concerning His identity have framed the debate about Jesus across the centuries, heightening the mystique around Him.

Who, indeed, was Jesus? Why was He confused with other prominent Jewish characters? What were the challenges to Jesus’ integrity and identity in the centuries following the New Testament era? How convinced were the Bible writers of His identity, and why? These are some of the questions that our first week’s lesson will examine.

*Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 5.

Not the Baptist (*Matt. 16:14*)

The question raised by Jesus' own townsfolk (*Matt. 13:54, 55*) came up repeatedly during His public ministry, and in a variety of ways, as people in the different areas of Palestine encountered Him. Thus, as He went through the region of Caesarea Philippi with His disciples, some six months or so before the final showdown of His life, He felt the need to draw them out on the critical question of the day: "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" (*Matt. 16:13, NIV*).

Read the disciples' response in Matthew 16:14. What does this say about their familiarity with the theological questions of the day? Why do you think Jesus wanted to bring up this issue at this specific time?

The report on what people were saying about Jesus probably provides insight into how different individuals and groups experienced His ministry in their own setting. How was it possible for some to think that Jesus could be John the Baptist when the two were contemporaries? And what aspects of Jesus' ministry may have resembled that of the Baptist?

For possible answers, consider the following passages:
Matt. 3:1–3; 4:12, 13, 17; 14:1, 2; Mark 1:1–5.

Today, of course, we hardly can understand how it was possible to confuse Jesus with John the Baptist. But given the absence of mass communication in the first century and the abundance of secondhand information and rumor, confusion came easily. After all, the ministries of John and Jesus were not without parallels, as the passages above show. But those who had actually encountered John should have been left with no uncertainty (*Matt. 3:11, 12; Mark 1:6–8*).

It is easy to look back at the mistakes of others and wonder how they could have done what they did. What lessons can we learn from watching these mistakes that can help protect us from making the same kinds of mistakes?

Not Elijah or Jeremiah or Some Other Prophet

Read again Matthew 16:14. That people should mistake Jesus for John is one thing. But for Elijah? Or Jeremiah? Or some other Old Testament prophet? Where did such ideas come from?

Elijah was the fearless prophet of Mount Carmel fame, the firebrand who had the temerity to confront Israel's recalcitrant king and demonic wife. He was the one who held forth alone against the combined religious establishment in Ahab's corrupt regime (*see 1 Kings 18*).

Jeremiah ("the weeping prophet"), coming upon the scene at a time of intense national ferment and crisis, conveyed a message to his compatriots that could not have been more unwelcome to the national mood—and he paid for it, too (*Jer. 20:1, 2, 7, 8*).

As for the rest of God's faithful prophets in the Old Testament, Jesus in His scathing woes upon the scribes and Pharisees left Israel's treatment of these godly stalwarts for the last, as if to suggest that it was the central point He wished to make: " 'So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets' " (*Matt. 23:31, NIV*).

What significance do you see in the fact that Jesus' contemporaries identified Him with these particular personalities?

To have been mistaken for any of the characters included in Peter's response in Matthew 16:14 was clearly a high compliment. These were spiritual giants whose sterling character held deep resonance in Jewish society. But however flattering, such comparisons (as we have come to know) fell utterly short of truth. If Jeremiah had said, for instance, that he was the light of the world, history would have considered him demented. And however spectacular the victory on Carmel, had Jesus quailed in the face of threat, as did the ancient hero of Carmel, we now would not be falling at His feet in reverence. The confusion of Jesus with these ancient stalwarts, however gratifying and intriguing, falls completely short of the reality portrayed in the Gospels.

What is the main difference between Jesus and all these other prophets, and why is that difference so important to us? (See John 1:1–5, 17:5, Heb. 1:1–3.)

The Fascination Continues: Part 1

The New Testament does not speculate about Jesus. It simply presents Him as the divine Son of God. Nor does it answer the numerous concerns about Jesus' being and person that would occupy succeeding generations. Yet, in all the discussions and arguments, there was a rock-bottom acceptance of the centrality of Scripture and the basic identity of Jesus Christ.

But the so-called Age of Enlightenment (of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) would change all that. No longer would Scripture constitute the foundation of discourse about Jesus. Instead, new methods and criteria being applied to the study of other ancient documents also would be applied to the Bible. With everything now subject to rational analysis and criticism, supernaturalism, a foundational presupposition of biblical faith, was rejected. The traditional biblical view of a human race steeped in sin and needing divine rescue was replaced by humanism, an optimistic belief in human capacity and progress.

The change of outlook was so radical and far-reaching that many thought they were witnessing the end of Christianity. Religion was considered obsolete, and reason, once the handmaid of theology, became its acknowledged mistress. The result was that the focus now shifted from the Jesus described in the Gospels, the Jesus of our salvation, to the historical Jesus, supposedly the real Jesus as He actually existed without the theological baggage superimposed by the Gospels and later Christian piety. In other words, this Jesus, whoever He was, surely was not the Savior of the world.

As you reflect on these developments, consider the following: (1) **The Gospel writers were very confident in the truth of what they had written (see Luke 1:1–4). What does Luke say about what he is writing? Why can we trust it?** (2) **One of those eyewitnesses that Luke speaks about was Peter, who himself had to confront doubters and skeptics (see 2 Pet. 1:16–21). Though Peter is speaking here about issues wider than the single one about Jesus' identity, how might we use his approach to secure ourselves against the Enlightenment onslaught we are discussing here?** (3) **Paul also needed to address the issue of Jesus head-on. How did he argue the case? (See 1 Cor. 1:18–27, 15:3–7.)**

The Fascination Continues: Part 2

The so-called historical Jesus movement was founded on the belief that we still can find in the Gospels sufficient data to reconstruct the portrait of Jesus as a historical figure, notwithstanding the theological tampering by the early church (as alleged by Enlightenment thinking). The new approach to studying Jesus was seen by its advocates as scientific, and thus in keeping with the mood of the times.

The trend held sway until the twentieth century, when new studies helped undermine this whole movement, showing how this historical Jesus idea was utterly unscientific and subjective. Studies exposed the entire rationalistic enterprise as a miserable failure.

The history of Jesus studies are long, winding, and complicated; and they need not detain us further, except to mention the so-called Jesus Seminar, a contemporary group of radical scholars determined to succeed where other historical quests before them failed. Their goal is to “‘rescue Jesus from the spin doctors’ who wrote the Gospels.” —Roy Hoover, in Kenneth L. Woodward, “The Death of Jesus,” *Newsweek*, April 4, 1994, p. 39.

Few today take the Jesus Seminar people seriously. (After all, how seriously can you take people who argued that instead of being resurrected, Jesus, after His death, was eaten by dogs?) Today, the prevailing Christian position insists that Christianity stands on a firm, historical foundation. Notwithstanding two millennia of criticism and controversy, Jesus remains the undisputed Master of the centuries.

In one of his most penetrating rejoinders to the intellectual sophisticates of his day, Paul zeroed in on the essence of the Christian proclamation: “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (*1 Cor. 1:18, NIV*). Why is the message of the Cross so important for us today, as well?

Read also 1 Corinthians 1:18–27. What message is there for us in those verses? What are some of the things we believe that just cannot be explained by the “wisdom of the world” (*vs. 20, NIV*)? In what ways has “God made foolish the wisdom of the world” (*vs. 20, NIV*)?

Messiah, Son of God (*John 17:3*)

Who Jesus was is not simply a theological proposition to be proved or disproved. No, we are dealing here with the faith of untold numbers over the centuries. If Jesus is not what they have believed Him to be, then they have all been clinging to falsehood and fables and are all lost. If Jesus was simply a man who lived two thousand years ago in Palestine, then the Christian church has been involved in the most reprehensible hoax in the history of the world.

How do the following texts get at the heart of the issue?

Matt. 1:22, 23

Matt. 11:2–6

Matt. 22:41–45

Mark 14:61–64

John 20:26–28

The reaction of the disciples as they witnessed the miracle of the calming of the storm (*Matt. 8:23–27*) should be ours, as well: “ ‘What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!’ ” (vs. 27, *NIV*). The night of His arrest, the high priest put a direct question to Jesus and charged Him to answer under oath: “ ‘Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.’ ‘Yes, it is as you say,’ Jesus replied” (*Matt. 26:63, 64, NIV*). And in Pilate’s judgment hall, the governor had his own query: “ ‘Are you the king of the Jews?’ ” Jesus’ response was the same: “ ‘Yes, it is as you say’ ” (*Matt. 27:11, NIV*).

By any measure, these were two extraordinary responses. If Jesus, only the son (as was believed) of a humble carpenter from Nazareth, could have the boldness to answer yes to Pilate’s question about kingship, He obviously was thinking of realities that transcend this world. And that is what we saw in His response in the high priest’s palace: “ ‘In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven’ ” (*Matt. 26:64, NIV*).

Thus, the Gospels (and the rest of the New Testament) make it clear: In Jesus we have in human flesh the Son of the Living God, the One entitled to extend the exceptional invitation, “ ‘Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest’ ” (*Matt. 11:28, NIV*).

Further Study: On the issue of Jesus' identity, read Ellen G. White, "Is Not This the Carpenter's Son?" pp. 236–243, in *The Desire of Ages*.

"Who is this Jesus? they questioned. He who had claimed for Himself the glory of the Messiah was the son of a carpenter, and had worked at His trade with His father Joseph. They had seen Him toiling up and down the hills, they were acquainted with His brothers and sisters. . . . They had seen Him develop from childhood to youth, and from youth to manhood. Although His life had been spotless, they would not believe that He was the Promised One."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 237. "They would not admit that He who had sprung from poverty and lowliness was other than a common man."—Page 239.

"A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic . . . or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."—C. S. Lewis, "The Shocking Alternative," p. 56, in *Mere Christianity* (New York: McMillan-Collier, 1960).

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What makes it easier for us, we who live two thousand years after Jesus, to accept Him as the Messiah, than it was for those who lived at the same time as Jesus to accept Him? What makes it more difficult?
- ❷ Skepticism about Jesus is likely to continue as long as time shall last. What, for you, is the single most convincing evidence of the validity of Jesus and His saving grace? How could you share this evidence with others in a way that could help convince them as well?
- ❸ We looked this week at how the scientific rationalism of the Enlightenment had been used as a weapon against faith. What are some other types of "isms," or philosophies or ideologies, prevalent in your own culture that work against faith, as well? Most important, how can you meet these challenges?
- ❹ As a class, go back over 1 Corinthians 1:18–27. What message is Paul giving that is important for all of us to remember?

Miriam's Stubborn Faith

Miriam (not her real name) is a teenager living in a polygamous family in Ibajiland, Nigeria. Because of her family's religion, she knew little about Christianity until some Global Mission pioneers came to conduct concentrated outreach. The pioneers hired Miriam's aunt to cook for them, and Miriam went along to help.

Miriam overhead the pioneers tell stories of Jesus that stirred her heart. She left the cooking pots and listened to the pioneers teach about Jesus. In time she gave her heart to Christ and asked to be baptized.

Word of Miriam's decision spread to her family, and fellow villagers tried to prevent her from being baptized. But they failed.

Her baptism triggered hostility, and Miriam was forced to leave her father's home. She found refuge with an Adventist teacher in her village, but militant religious leaders tried to kidnap her and force her to renounce her new faith, even if that meant killing her.

The pastor managed to help Miriam escape to safety, but angry religious leaders turned on the Adventist community, threatening to burn the church down.

In order to prevent a religious crisis in the region, the local king called a meeting of the two religious groups involved. The family's religious leaders insisted that the only peaceful solution was for the Adventists to produce Miriam. The king finally agreed and ordered the Adventists to return Miriam to her family.

Reluctantly the pastor sent word for Miriam to return home. She was taken to the king's palace, where she exhibited great boldness for a young girl. She told those present that she was not interested in returning to her parents' religion, but wanted to continue to follow Christ.

Some members of Miriam's family, seeing her strong conviction, were willing to allow her to follow Christianity, but the religious leaders demanded that she return to her father's faith and have no contact with Adventists. The pastor told the council that if Miriam wished to worship with the church members at any time, she would be welcome and the church would never send her away.

Miriam returned home with her father, who tried to force her to worship with them. But Miriam is determined to remain true to Christ and finds ways to share her faith with others. She must remain under her father's control until she finishes high school, but then she will worship as she wishes. Her brothers have seen Miriam's faith, and though they cannot openly say it, they too wish to leave their father's religion and follow Jesus.

Pray for Miriam, and give your mission offerings so that those who are searching for the truth may find it, no matter where they live.