

Who Was Jesus?



SABBATH—MARCH 29

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Matthew 16:13–16; John 20:26–28; 1 Corinthians 1:18–27; 1 Corinthians 15:3–7.

MEMORY VERSE: “Jesus went to the area of Caesarea Philippi. There he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say the Son of Man is?’ ” (Matthew 16:13, NIrV).

FROM THE START OF JESUS' WORK, people discussed and argued about Him. It is 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? Where did he get this power to do miracles?’ they asked. ‘Isn't [Is not] this the carpenter's son? Isn't [Is not] his mother's name Mary?’ ” (Matthew 13:54, 55, NIrV).

The Messiah had to come from somewhere. But not from a place so well-known. And certainly not from a family that is almost the same as ours! In one way or another, the same issues brought up by these local townspeople about Jesus have been the subjects of the debate about Jesus throughout hundreds of years. They have increased the mystery around Him.

Who was Jesus? Why was He confused with other famous Jewish leaders? What were the challenges to understanding who Jesus really was in the hundreds of years after the New Testament time? How sure were the Bible writers of Jesus, and why? These are some of the questions that our first week's lesson will examine.

SUNDAY—MARCH 30**NOT THE BAPTIST
(Matthew 16:14)**

Who was Jesus? The question was raised by Jesus' own townspeople (Matthew 13:54, 55). It came up often during Jesus' public ministry (work) when people in different areas of Palestine challenged Him. Jesus was going through the area of Caesarea Philippi with His disciples (followers) about six months before His death on the cross. Jesus felt He needed to test His disciples with this important question: "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" (Matthew 16:13, NIV).



Jesus asked His close followers, "Who do people say that I am?" (Matthew 16:13, NIV, adapted).

What does the disciples' answer in Matthew 16:14 say about their knowledge of the religious questions of their time? Why do you think Jesus wanted to bring up

this issue at this chosen time?

What people were saying about Jesus helps us better understand how different persons and groups experienced His ministry in their own area. How was it possible for some to think that Jesus could be John the Baptist when both were living at the same time? And what parts of Jesus' ministry may have been almost the same as John the Baptist's?

For possible answers think about the following verses: Matthew 3:1–3; Matthew 4:12, 13, 17; Matthew 14:1, 2; Matthew 16:4; Mark 1:1–5.

Today, we cannot fully understand how it was possible to confuse Jesus with John the Baptist. In those days there were no TVs, radios, and newspapers. But there was plenty of secondhand information, rumor, and misunderstanding. The activities (works) of John and Jesus were almost the same, as the verses above show. But those who really knew John should not have had any doubts about Jesus (Matthew 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? How can they help protect us from making the same kinds of mistakes?

MONDAY—MARCH 31**NOT ELIJAH OR JEREMIAH OR
SOME OTHER PROPHET'
(Matthew 23:31)**

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 who issued (made) the Mount Carmel challenge (read 1 Kings 18). He was the one who had the nerve to face Israel's backsliding king and demonic wife. He was the one who stood alone against the combined religious groups in Ahab's kingdom (read 1 Kings 18).

Jeremiah ("the weeping prophet") came upon the scene at a time of great national rebellion (war) and crisis (trouble). He brought a very unwelcome message to his people. And he paid for it, too (Jeremiah 20:1, 2, 7, 8).

Jesus criticized (scolded) the scribes and Pharisees² severely for killing the rest of God's faithful prophets in the Old Testament. He said: "So you give witness against yourselves. You admit that you are the children of those who murdered the prophets'" (Matthew 23:31, NIV).

What important message do you find in the fact that Jesus' fellow workers named Him as one of the

famous persons in Matthew 16:14?

To be named as any of the persons included in Peter's answer in Matthew 16:14 was clearly a high praise. This is because these men were spiritual giants held in high respect in Jewish society. But they were not equal to Jesus. For example, if Jeremiah had said that he was the light of the world, history would have thought of him as crazy. The victory (win) on Carmel was great, but if Jesus had shown fear in the face of threat, as Elijah did, we now would not bow to Him with great respect. The confusion of Jesus with these heroes (prophets) of the past comes short of the real picture shown by the Gospels.³



Elijah, a great man who stood up to King Ahab on Mount Carmel, was not as great as Jesus.

1. prophet—a man or woman sent by God to warn us about what will happen in the future.

2. Pharisees—a religious group of Jesus' day who believed a person must keep God's law to be saved.

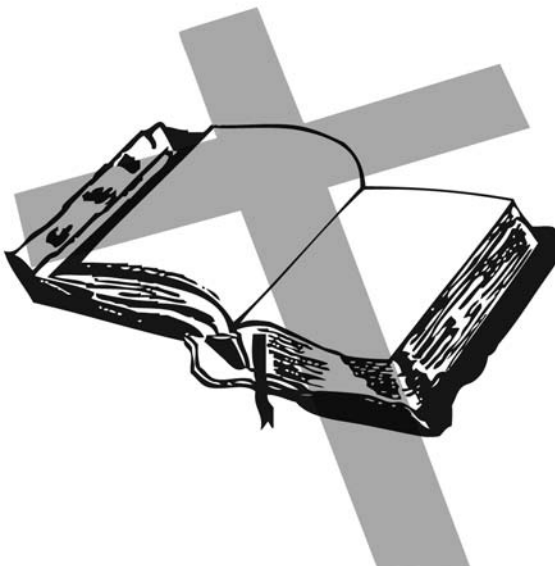
3. Gospels—the four books of the New Testament that tell the story of Jesus' life and His teachings. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are called the Gospels.

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

TUESDAY—APRIL 1

THE FASCINATION (INTEREST) CONTINUES—PART 1 (2 Peter 1:16–21)

The New Testament does not guess about who Jesus is. It just pictures Him as the divine Son of God. It does not answer the many questions about Jesus' life and person that many generations would discuss. But, in all the discussions and arguments, there was a rock-bottom acceptance of Jesus as the true center of the Bible.



The Bible points to Jesus as the world's true Savior.

But the so-called Age of Enlightenment⁴ (of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) would change all that. The Bible would no longer be treated as the foundation (basis) of truth about Jesus. Instead, new methods and tests were developed for studying other documents from the past, along with the Bible. Everything was under close study. And people did not accept the Bible alone as the sole (single) basis of truth. People refused to accept the Bible view that the world was full of sin or that they would need God's help to rescue them. Instead, they believed that man could do everything better than God.

So, their view was so different that many people thought the Age of Enlightenment would bring the end of Christianity. People thought that religion was old-fashioned and worshiped modern thought as their god. The result was that the people did not think of Jesus as their Savior. Instead, they looked upon Him as the *historical Jesus*. To them He was just a man who lived on the earth without being the Son of God as the Gospels and later Christians claimed Him to be. So, according to them, this Jesus was not the Savior of the world.

Think about the following: (1) The Gospel writers were very confident in the truth of what they had written (read 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

4. Age of Enlightenment—a movement of thought in the eighteenth century that taught that all ideas and beliefs, including religion should be based on reason and science.

about was Peter, who himself had to deal with doubters, too (read 2 Peter 1:16–21). Peter is speaking about Jesus as the true Son of God. But how might we use Peter’s method to protect ourselves against the false enlightenment ideas we are discussing here? (3) Paul also needed to defend the issue of Jesus. How did he argue the case? (Read 1 Corinthians 1:18–27; 1 Corinthians 15:3–7).

WEDNESDAY—APRIL 2

THE FASCINATION (INTEREST) CONTINUES—PART 2 (1 Corinthians 1:18)

The false *historical Jesus* movement was based on the belief that we still can find enough proof in the Gospels to accept Jesus as just a historical person, without the early Christian church’s claim that He was the true Son of God. “Modern” thinkers thought that the new method of studying Jesus was very scientific. They felt they were following the mood of the times.

This movement continued until the twentieth century, when new studies helped point out weaknesses of this whole movement. They showed how this *historical Jesus* idea was very unscientific and based on false opinions. Later studies showed the whole movement as a terrible failure.

The *history of Jesus* studies are long and difficult. We do not need to spend further time on them. But we

do need to speak about the *Jesus Seminar*. It is a group of stubborn thinkers who are determined to succeed where others 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, page 39.

Few today take the Jesus Seminar people seriously. (After all, how seriously can you take people who argued that Jesus did not return to life but that He was eaten by dogs?) Today’s Christian position (belief) is that Christianity stands on a firm, historical foundation (basis). After two thousand years of debate, Jesus remains the unbeaten Master of the centuries.

In one of his most thoughtful answers to the best thinkers of his day, Paul drove home a very important point of Christian thought: “The message of the cross seems foolish to those who are lost and dying. But it is God’s power to us who are being saved” (1 Corinthians 1:18, NIV). Why is the message of the Cross so important for us today, too?

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

THURSDAY—APRIL 3**MESSIAH, SON OF GOD
(John 17:3)**

Who Jesus was is not a religious question for debate. No, we are dealing here with the faith of countless believers over the centuries. If Jesus is not really what those believers have believed Him to be, then they have all been holding to false stories. If the stories are false, these people 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 disgusting hoax (lie) in the history of the world.

How do Matthew 1:22, 23; Matthew 11:2–6; Matthew 22:41–45; Mark 14:61–64; John 20:26–28 get at the heart of the issue?

The disciples were very impressed when they witnessed the miracle of the calming of the storm (Matthew 8:23–27). We should be, too! The disciples said, “ ‘What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!’ ” (verse 27, NIV). On the night of Jesus’ arrest, the high priest put a direct question to Jesus and forced Him to answer under oath. The high priest asked, “ ‘Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.’ ‘Yes, it is as you say,’ Jesus answered” (Matthew 26:63, 64, NIV). And in Pilate’s judgment hall, the governor (ruler) had his own question: “ ‘Are you the king of the Jews?’ ” Jesus’

answer was the same: “ ‘Yes, it is as you say’ ” (Matthew 27:11, NIV).

These were two extra special answers. Only Jesus, the Son of a humble carpenter from Nazareth, could be so bold as to answer Yes to Pilate’s question about being the king of the Jews. He clearly was thinking how real heaven is. And that is what we saw in His answer in the high priest’s palace: “ ‘In days to come, you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One. You will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven’ ” (Matthew 26:64, NIV).

So, the Gospels (and the rest of the New Testament) make it clear: In Jesus we have in human⁵ flesh the Son of the Living God. He is the only one qualified (able) to make this special invitation: “ ‘Come to me, all of you who are tired and are carrying heavy loads. I will give you rest’ ” (Matthew 11:28, NIV).



Only Jesus can take the heavy loads we carry in life and give us rest.

5. human—of, or concerning, men, women, or children.

FRIDAY—APRIL 4

ADDITIONAL STUDY: On the issue of who Jesus was, read Ellen G. White, “‘Is Not This the Carpenter’s Son?’” pages 236–243, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“People asked questions about who Jesus was. He who had claimed for Himself the glory of the Messiah was the son of a carpenter. He had worked at His trade with His father Joseph. They had seen Him working up and down the hills. They knew who His brothers and sisters were. . . . They had seen Him grow from childhood to youth, and from youth to manhood. Jesus’ life had been spotless. But they would not believe that He was the Promised One.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, page 237. “People would not admit [accept] that Jesus, who had been poor was not a common man.”—Page 239, adapted.

“A man who was just a man and said the same things Jesus said . . . would either be crazy . . . or 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 be foolish to think that He was just a great

human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not plan to.”—Adapted from C. S. Lewis, “The Shocking Alternative [Choice],” in *Mere Christianity* (New York: McMillan-Collier, 1960), page 56.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ❶ Is it easier for us (who live two thousand years after Jesus) to accept Him as the Messiah than it was for those who lived at Jesus’ time to accept Him? If so, what makes it easier? At the same time, what makes it harder?
- ❷ Doubts about Jesus will continue as long as time shall last. For you, what is the best proof of the truth about Jesus and His saving grace?⁶ How could you share this proof with others in a way that could help them to believe, too?
- ❸ We looked this week at how the scientific reasoning of the Enlightenment had been used as a weapon against faith. What are some other kinds of philosophy⁷ or philosophies in your own culture⁸ that work against faith, too? Most important, how can you meet these challenges?
- ❹ What message is Paul giving that is important for all of us to remember in 1 Corinthians 1:18–27?

6. grace—God’s gift of forgiveness and mercy that He freely gives us to take away our sins.

7. philosophy—the study of human thought about the meaning of life, how mind relates to matter, and the problems of right and wrong.

8. culture—the ideas, skills, arts, tools, and way of life of a certain people at a certain time; civilization.