

Osher Lifelong Learning Institute

WHO WAS THE HISTORICAL JESUS

PROFESSOR CATHERINE MURPHY

Did Jesus exist?

1. silence is not positive evidence of non-existence
2. gospel genre is not meant to be "history"
3. specificity of the accounts
4. development does not equal whole-scale invention
5. if Christians invented Jesus, why didn't Jews and pagans critique them for *that*?
6. problems with Roman sources don't make them useless
7. agenda of deniers is not objective
8. no credible alternative explanation for the rise of Christianity

Class 1

SOURCES, QUESTS & METHODS

Outline

- What sources do we have for reconstructing Jesus' life?
- How does an historian sift through all this evidence?
- What has the quest for the historical Jesus found?
- What are the major views today of who Jesus was?
- Is the quest for a historical Jesus necessary for a person of faith?

Question 1

WHAT SOURCES DO WE HAVE FOR RECONSTRUCTING JESUS' LIFE?

The Greek & Roman Authors Pliny the Younger (61–120 CE)

- What did he write? Book 10, Letter 96
- What did he say?
- What were his sources? Reports early Christian tradition, not something about the historical Jesus
- Is his testimony reliable for reconstructing the historical Jesus? Information was extracted under torture, so it's unreliable

The Greek & Roman Authors

Suetonius (70–130 CE)

- What did he write? *Lives of the Caesars*: Claudius
- What did he say?
- What were his sources? He often stoops to scandals and rumor-mongering, which makes him unreliable
- Is his testimony reliable for reconstructing the historical Jesus? Is instigator of a rebellion in Rome in 49 CE, "Chrestus," some other man of "Christ" misspelled? No Christian scribe fixes it...

The Greek & Roman Authors

Tacitus (55/56–120 CE)

- What did he write? *Annals* 15.44
- What did he say?
- What were his sources? Careful use of sources (Roman archives?)
Never stoops to scandal
- Is his testimony reliable for reconstructing the historical Jesus? Powerful writer with moralizing impulse
This (alone) is important external testimony to Jesus' death

Jewish Sources

The Dead Sea Scrolls Online

The Dead Sea Scrolls

as resources for reconstructing the historical Jesus

- They do not provide direct testimony about Jesus or any other figure in the New Testament
- They do tell us a great deal about Jewish society in Jesus' time
- Essene beliefs and practices overlap somewhat with the way Christians interpreted the (shared) Jewish scriptures; both groups
 - used similar genres and forms (beatitudes, parables)
 - were associated with healing and ritual washing
 - shared communal meals and property in common
 - awaited messiahs and believed in the resurrection
 - imagined an end-time battle in the near future

Flavius Josephus

Jewish Historian (37–c.100 CE)



- **Background**
 - Educated Jew
 - Rebel leader 66-68
 - Surrendered to Rome, prophesied the general's rise to emperor, rewarded with adoption into the imperial family ("Flavius")
- **Writings**
 - *The Jewish War* (75 CE)
 - *Jewish Antiquities* (94 CE)
- **Writings about Jesus**
 - *Jewish Antiquities* 20.9.1
 - *Jewish Antiquities* 18.3.3 = *Testimonium Flavianum*

Testimonium Flavianum

Jewish Antiquities 18.3.3

Around this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he was one who did surprising deeds, and a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. He was the Messiah. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing among us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who in the first place came to love him did not give up their affection for him, for on the third day he appeared to them restored to life. The prophets of God had prophesied this and countless other marvelous things about him. And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, have still to this day not died out.

Testimonium Flavianum

Jewish Antiquities 18.3.3

Around this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he was one who did surprising deeds, and a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. He was the Messiah. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing among us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who in the first place came to love him did not give up their affection for him, for on the third day he appeared to them restored to life. The prophets of God had prophesied this and countless other marvelous things about him. And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, have still to this day not died out.

Testimonium Flavianum

Jewish Antiquities 18.3.3

Around this time there lived Jesus, a wise man., if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he was one who did surprising deeds, and a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. He was the Messiah. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing among us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who in the first place came to love him did not give up their affection for him. for on the third day he appeared to them restored to life. The prophets of God had prophesied this and countless other marvelous things about him. And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, have still to this day not died out.

Question 2

**HOW DOES AN HISTORIAN SIFT
THROUGH ALL THIS EVIDENCE?**

How Does an Historian Sift the Evidence?

- Understand the problems posed by the evidence
- Develop a chronology of gospel composition
- At the same time, theorize the gospels' relationships to each other
- Design criteria against which to test the evidence

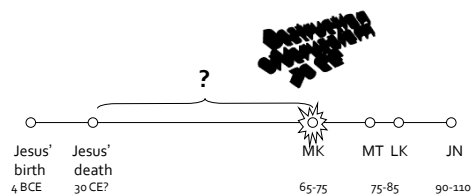
Christian Sources:

Understanding the problems posted by the evidence

The gospels aren't transparent records of what Jesus did

- Developing beliefs affect the telling of the story
- Historical events after Jesus affect the telling too
- The gospels conflict with one another
- The gospels are sometimes identical, suggesting they aren't independent
- The authors are biased, and they admit it


Christian Sources: Developing a Chronology



Christian Sources:

Theorizing the Relationships of the Gospels

- The Synoptics vs. John
 - VERY different stories and style
 - VERY little overlap
- Matthew-Mark-Luke in relation to each other
 - These three are very similar, SO similar that they must share some sources in common
 - How are they related?

 *This question is called the synoptic problem*

Christian Sources:

Designing Criteria to Test the Evidence

Material in the gospels is more likely to be historical if:

- | | |
|---|----------------------|
| ✓ It is awkward or embarrassing | awkwardness |
| ✓ It is reported in multiple, independent witnesses | multiple attestation |
| ▪ The saying matches oral style and forms Jesus likely taught in | orality & form |
| ✓ It differs from later Christian beliefs, and perhaps from known Jewish belief/practice | discontinuity |
| ▪ It matches the early first-century context, not the late first century, and is consistent with Jesus' crucifixion | plausibility |

The Synoptic Gospels: The Evidence

Case 1

Some material is shared by Mark, Matthew and Luke.
This is called the Triple Tradition.

Matthew 9:18-19	Mark 5:22-24	Luke 8:41-42
While he was thus speaking to them, behold, a ruler came in and knelt before him, saying, "My daughter has just died, but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live." And Jesus rose and followed him, with his disciples.	Then came one of the rulers of the synagogue, Jairus by name, and seeing him, he fell at his feet, and besought him, saying, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live." And he went with him.	And there came a man named Jairus, who was a ruler of the synagogue; and falling at Jesus' feet he besought him to come to his house, for he had an only daughter, about twelve years of age, and she was dying. As he went, the people pressed round him.

The Synoptic Gospels: The Evidence

Case 2

Some material is not in Mark at all, but is identical in Matthew and Luke. This is called the Double Tradition.

Matthew 10:37-38

"He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

Mark

Luke 14:25-26

Now great multitudes accompanied him; and he turned and said to them, "If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple.

The Synoptic Gospels: The Evidence

Case 3a

Some material is only found in Matthew.

Matthew 25:31-40

³¹"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?' ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?' ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' ⁴⁰And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

Mark

Luke

The Synoptic Gospels: The Evidence

Case 3b

Some material is only found in Luke.

Matthew

Mark

Luke 15:11-32

And he said, "There was a man who had two sons, and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.' And he divided his living between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger!...'

The Synoptic Gospels

The Consensus Solution: The Two-Source Hypothesis

The theory that the authors of Matthew and Luke used two shared sources for their gospels

- Q (a list of sayings of Jesus)
- and the Gospel of Mark,

in addition to their own unique material. The theory is one way of accounting for the synoptic problem.

The Synoptic Gospels

Why It's the Consensus View

1. Markan Priority

- The style and theology of Mark's gospel is rough. It's easier to explain how later authors "cleaned up" Mark than to argue that Mark abbreviated the other gospels and created an inferior narrative.
- Matthew and Luke have all of Mark except 3 verses, and largely follow Mark's order. Meanwhile, there's a lot in Matthew and Luke that doesn't appear in the other or in Mark.

2. "Q" (Q stands for Quelle, the German word for source)

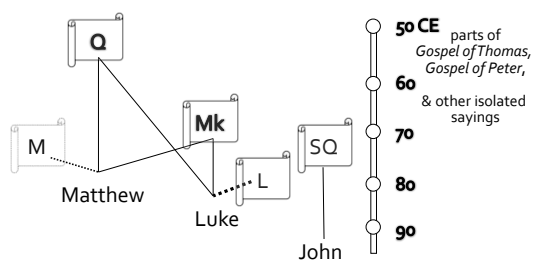
- It's reasonable to imagine that a list of Jesus' sayings would have circulated.
- We've never found it, but the Gospel of Thomas is like it.

The Formation of the Gospels:

A Sketch for all Early Material

Canonical Gospels & their sources

Non-canonical Gospels



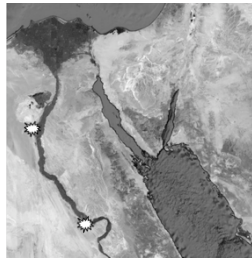
Apocryphal Christian Sources about Jesus

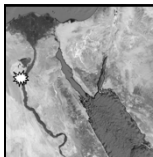
Canonical NT	Examples of Apocryphal Works
• Gospels	<i>Egerton Papyrus, Gospel of Peter, Infancy Gospel of James, Infancy Gospel of Thomas</i>
• Epistles or letters	<i>Epistles of Barnabas, Clement, Ignatius</i>
• Acts of apostles	<i>Acts of Paul and Thecla, Acts of Andrew, Acts of Peter</i>
• Apocalypses	<i>Apocalypse of Peter, Apocalypse of Paul</i>

The Great Discoveries

Oxyrhynchus
1895–1930
50,000+ fragmentary Greek mss,
some of them Christian

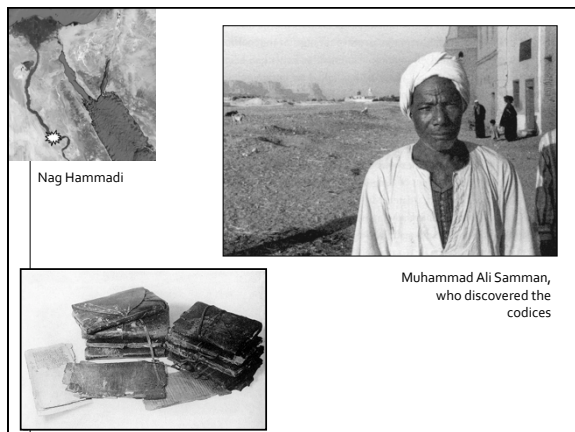
Nag Hammadi
1945
13 books with 52 separate "tractates" —
4th century copies of earlier gnostic works

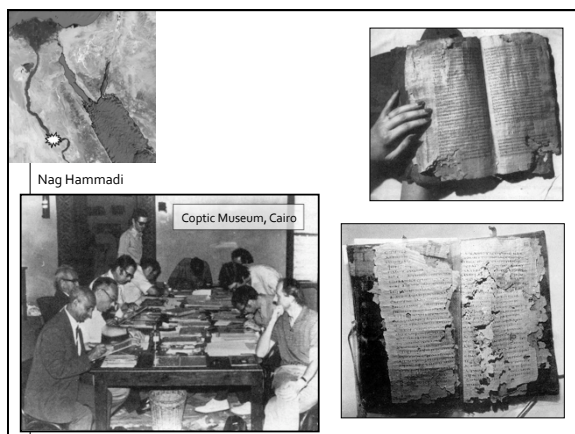




Oxyrhynchus







Paul as Source for the Historical Jesus

- Writes many letters – 7 survive in the NT
- Writes c. 50-mid-60s CE
- What does he say about Jesus?
 - Not too much! He didn't know the historical Jesus; cares more about the risen, living Jesus.
- What is his portrait of Jesus?
 - last supper (1 Cor 11:23-25)
 - prohibition of divorce (1 Cor 7:10)
 - disciples should get living by gospel (1 Cor 9:14)
 - love of enemies? (Rom 12:14, 17-20)
 - the twelve (1 Cor 15:5)
 - Jesus of Davidic descent (Rom 1:3)
- Is it reliable for reconstructing the historical Jesus?
 - one of our earliest sources
 - material is second- or third-hand (but from eyewitnesses)
 - but it's shaped by his belief in the risen Jesus

Question 3

WHAT HAS THE QUEST FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS FOUND?

Origins of the Quest

in the Protestant Reformation (1517–1648)

- Protestant concern to cast off later “tradition” and return to scripture
- Optimism about textual reliability
- An impetus to return to Christian origins for norms of faith

All of this contributes to a concern to “recover” a “true” Jesus

Origins of the Quest

in the Enlightenment (1650–1800)

- Rules of scientific proof began to replace authoritative tradition or pronouncements as appropriate warrants for truth claims
- Application to scripture: Texts, even religious ones, could no longer simply be accepted at face value. Their truth claims about Jesus would have to be evaluated by the same criteria of proof we use in other venues (science, courts, etc.).

Enlightenment Challenges

- A new sense of history
- Impact of religious controversies and wars
- The new astronomy
- Voyages of discovery
- Limits of reliable knowledge

Three Quests

- Quest #1 - 1770s - 1906
- Quest #2 - 1945 - 1970s
- Quest #3 - 1908s - present

The First Quest

H. S. Reimarus (1694–1768)

The Wolfenbüttel Fragments (published posthumously by G. E. Lessing)



- Preaching of Jesus is not the apostles' faith
- Jesus' preaching can only be understood within the context of Judaism
- Jesus' message was about politics, but the apostles' message was about salvation; this was a willful deception by Jesus' followers

The First Quest

H. S. Reimarus (1694–1768)

The Wölffenbüttel Fragments (published posthumously by G. E. Lessing)



- The real Jesus was a revolutionary who preached the end of the world.
- He was wrong, and his followers invented the claim that he rose.
- They believed he would return, and he didn't.
- Thus Christianity is based on two failed *eschatons* (end-times).

The First Quest

D. F. Strauss (1808–1874)

Life of Jesus



- The concept of “myth” (such as in Genesis 1-3) helps us to understand what the gospels are.
- Route in: miracles
 - Neither naïve, supernaturalist credulity nor “sophisticated” scientific explanations appreciate the genre
 - Miracles are myths – poetry with a purpose

The First Quest

D. F. Strauss (1808–1874)

Life of Jesus



- Miracles are impossible; they must have been added by the gospel authors. The gospels are composites of the authors' views intended to convince us that Jesus is the Christ. They do not reflect history at all.

The First Quest Continued

Some scholars continued to try to trace the earliest material in the earliest sources (the gospels), and concluded that Mark's gospel was the earliest and gave us the actions, words, and sequence of events of the life of the historical Jesus.

Other scholars began to write "lives of Jesus," biographies in novel form that reconstructed what his daily life and thoughts would have been like. The books, like Ernst Renan's *Vie de Jésus*, were very popular.

The Collapse of the First Quest

William Wrede (1859–1906)

The Messianic Secret



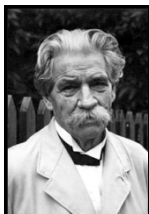
- There is a general historical framework in the "earliest gospel," Mark
- But to it are added dogmatic threads
 - Jesus is a divine being
 - Disciples cannot understand
 - Jesus' enemies are full of evil

The Gospel of Mark belongs to the history of dogma, not to the history of Jesus

The Collapse of the First Quest

Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965)

The Quest of the Historical Jesus



- Jesus was an eschatological prophet, but his zeal was misguided; the end of the world never occurred. He is thus irrelevant to our culture
- The Victorian lives of Jesus that sought its chronology and motives are nothing more than the authors' ideals projected back onto the psyche of Jesus

The Aryan Jesus during the Third Reich (1933–1945)

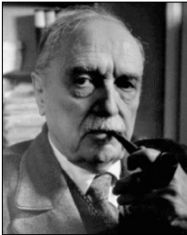


- The “official” story of the historical Jesus quest imagines a gap between Schweitzer (1906) and Bultmann (1941)
- But there was work being done on the historical Jesus during the Third Reich (1933–1945)
 - But among theologians, Jesus’ Jewish identity was erased
 - Jews were made his chief enemies
 - Official Nazi ideology was atheistic

The Collapse of the First Quest

Rudolph Bultmann (1884–1976)

Neues Testament und Mythologie (1941)



- We cannot recover the historical Jesus
a historical conclusion
- We need not recover the historical Jesus
a theological conclusion
 - What matters is not what Jesus did, but what God did in Jesus
 - Thus Christians believe in the Christ of faith, not the Jesus of history

The Second or “New” Quest

Ernst Käsemann (1906–1998)

The Problem of the Historical Jesus (1954)



- The Christ of faith cannot be divorced from the Jesus of history
- A critically ensured minimum of authentic Jesus material can be recovered, if you filter out
 - Anything that looked too Jewish
 - Anything that looked too much like later Christianity
 - Anything that looked too much like human culture

The Third Quest

The Current One

- Aims to study the strands of the textual tradition
- Utilizes new manuscript discoveries to develop a richer portrait of the textual tradition and social world
- Develops the criteria of historicity to filter tradition more effectively than the Second Quest
- Mines archaeological data to build more accurate portrait of social, political, economic context



John Dominic Crossan



Marcus J. Borg



John P. Meier



Paula Fredriksen

Points on which Critics Agree

- Jesus was born late in Herod the Great's reign
- Born and raised in Nazareth by Mary (and maybe Joseph); had brothers and sisters
- Baptized around age 28–30
- Preached a variation of John the Baptist's message
- Associated with social pariahs (and respectable citizens)
- Itinerant preacher and healer who embraced a lifestyle of poverty (he was a "peasant," so already subsistence)
- Encountered opposition from some Jews, Romans
- Crucified

Evaluating Historicity

For Literary Texts

Something in the texts is more likely to be historical if it is

- IN the text (not an argument from silence)
- eyewitness testimony
- embarrassing to the author
- multiply attested in independent witnesses
- coherent with other sayings/actions established as historical
- discontinuous with known Jewish or Christian tradition
- consistent with Jesus' execution

Evaluating Historicity

For Literary Texts

Additional considerations in favor of historicity:

- the author is careful with his sources
- the author has a good reputation; he's not a scandal-monger
- the author is reporting about the historical person or event
- the text itself has integrity: it was not likely changed by a later Christian scribe

Evaluating Historicity

For Archaeological Sites & Artifacts

- Provenance
- Stratigraphy
- Analogy

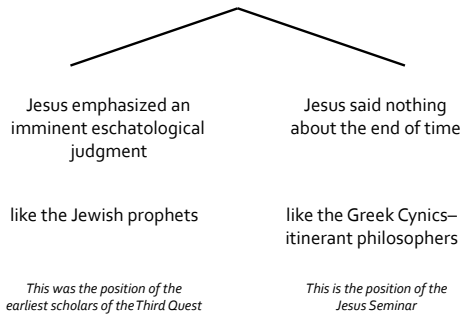
Historical Evaluation of Artifacts

- All artifacts are historical. The question is, what history, or whose history, do they attest?
- Historians doubt the historicity of traditions or artifacts:
 - the later the first report of the artifact's existence
 - the more they match later or developing traditions rather than the circumstances of Jesus' lifetime
 - they amplify the miraculous, or the role of dreams and visions
 - they fill gaps or answer questions in stories
 - they include other and later "scripts"

Question 4

WHAT ARE THE MAJOR VIEWS TODAY OF WHO JESUS WAS?

Points on which critics disagree



Question 5

IS THE QUEST FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS NECESSARY FOR THE PERSON OF FAITH?
