

# The Catholic Companion to Jesus

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PUBLICATIONS

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# 1 Jesus: The Christ

**T**he birth of Jesus signaled the beginning of a new era for humankind. In fact, the new calendar decreed by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582 marked years starting from what was assumed the year of Christ's birth. (We know now that the monk who calculated this date in the sixth century was off by a few years.) Gradually years came to be denoted as B.C. (Before Christ) or A.D. (Anno Domini, the year of the Lord). This was fitting in the West at the time, when almost everyone was Christian and saw Jesus' birth as the most important turning point of history. Today, of course, we are more aware and respectful of other religious traditions, and so the initials B.C.E. (Before the Common Era) and C.E. (Common Era) are increasingly used to indicate dates. But it is interesting that year one of the Common Era is the same year that the Gregorian calendar assigned to the birth of Jesus. (Since this book is aimed at Christians, we will use the more familiar B.C. and A.D. to designate dates.)

## **Jesus as Messiah**

For us Christians, all of Jewish history, as recorded in what we call the Old Testament, was a preparation for the coming of Jesus. The Jews were (and still remain) for us God's chosen people, who received God's promise of salvation and blessing to the entire world, a promise revealed to Abraham, the founder of the Hebrew race. Eventually, the Jews came to believe that a great leader would arise among them and lead them to final victory. Israelite prophets gave insight into this prom-

trivial tidbit...

The chi-rho symbol for Jesus is the merging of the first letters in the Greek for Christ, which are chi (X) and rho (P), to form:



ised one, and Israelite heroes foreshadowed him. The Israelites yearned for him, especially after they were conquered and exiled and conquered again by one nation after another. Most of them felt that this God-sent person would be the descendant of their greatest king, David, and re-establish Israel as the independent country it had been during David's reign. During the time of Jesus, the Jews were being oppressed by Rome and longed especially for just such a liberator.

Israelite leaders—their priests, kings, and prophets—were anointed with oil in rituals that consecrated them for their special tasks. It follows then that the person they were awaiting was thought of as “the anointed one” or Messiah, which in Greek is *Christos*. This title quickly evolved into a kind of surname for Jesus, who today is known as Jesus Christ, which actually means “Jesus, the Anointed One.”

Around the time of Jesus, there were others, such as Judas the Galilean (circa 6 B.C.) and Bar Kochba (Son of the Star, circa 132 A.D.), who were thought by their followers to be the Jewish Messiah as they led rebellions against their oppressors. But all of these “messiahs” were eventually vanquished. When Jesus, the true Messiah, did appear on the scene, he wasn't recognized by the majority of the Jewish people (although all of his original disciples were Jews).

For one thing, Jesus didn't fit the image of the Jewish Messiah. His battles were with a far mightier foe than Rome: They were with evil itself. His kingdom was not “of” this world, but is a spiritual kingdom of peace, love, and justice that Jesus proclaimed had already begun and was “within” us. His followers conquer not by the sword but by love.

Another difference between Jesus and the expected Messiah was that his rule encompasses not only Israel but is meant for “all nations” and the heavens as well. What’s more, Jesus didn’t comply with all the Jewish rules and traditions. For example, he healed on the Sabbath, a day when work wasn’t to be done; he associated with outcasts; and he spoke to women in public, which was taboo. Jesus’ disregard for certain practices sparked the Jewish leaders’ antagonism and contempt. To add coals to the fire, his popularity garnered him their jealousy. And the mobs he drew gave rise to a concern on their part that Rome would clamp down with even fiercer oppression.

So Jesus is the Messiah, at least as far as Christians are concerned, although he is certainly not the one that most Jews were expecting at the time.

## The Name of Jesus

St. Paul wrote that God gave Jesus “the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth” (Philippians 2:9–10). That Jesus was a God-given name is revealed in the Gospels. According to the Gospel of Luke, an angel directed Mary to give her son this name. It is confirmed in Matthew’s Gospel when an angel instructs Joseph to name the child Jesus.

In Aramaic, which has no “J” sound, Jesus’ name would have been *Yeshua*, a common Jewish name at the time. It’s akin to the name of Joshua, the great leader who succeeded Moses and led the people through Jericho into the Promised Land. Both names are short forms of *Jehoshua*, which means “Yahweh is his salvation.” What then could have been a more appropriate

fyi...

The monogram for Jesus, *IHS*, derived from the Greek spelling of Jesus, dates from the seventh century and was popularized by St. Bernardine of Siena. Later the letters were interpreted to stand for the Latin *Iesus Hominum Salvator* (Jesus, Savior of Mankind). This monogram surmounted by a cross and above three nails constitutes the logo of the Society of Jesus, or Jesuits, the largest male religious order in the Church:



for your spiritual  
health...

To honor Jesus you might adopt the custom of bowing the head at the name of Jesus and avoid using his name disrespectfully.

short prayer...

Simply saying the word *Jesus* is a powerful prayer. The Church encourages saying the name of Jesus at the hour of death. This is what St. Joan of Arc did. While being burned at the stake, in a loud voice she repeatedly called, "Jesus."

name than *Yeshua* for the savior of the world? Today we use the Latin translation of the Greek word for Yeshua, which is "Jesus" in English and Spanish (where it is pronounced "heyzoos").

When Jesus lived so many people had the same names that they were distinguished by linking them to their hometowns or their fathers. Jesus, then, would have been called Jesus of Nazareth as well as Jesus bar Joseph. "Bar" is Aramaic for "son of," and Joseph was the name of Jesus' earthly father.

### **Holy Name**

Jews believed that names were closely identified with the people who bore them. Consequently, out of awe they never pronounced the word *Yahweh*, God's personal name, revealed to Moses at the burning bush. Instead, they used a substitute that we translate "Lord." Christians too acknowledge the unity of a person and his or her name and so are insulted when someone mocks our name. That is why it is truly sad that it has become common to use the name of Jesus casually and carelessly to express strong emotion (both positive and negative). The Church has long celebrated a day called the Holy Name of Jesus, which is an optional memorial on January 3.

There is also a litany, a long prayer with responses, in praise of the Holy Name of Jesus. And an ancient prayer gaining in popularity is the Jesus Prayer, which is repeated over and over: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

## What Did Jesus Look Like?

We have no image of Jesus as he really was because for the Jews images were like idols and therefore forbidden. (Deuteronomy 5:8 commanded, “You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.”) Neither has anyone found a physical description of Jesus written by those who knew him. The Gospels are silent in this regard. Some people interpret the prophecy of the suffering servant to mean that Jesus was unattractive: “He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him” (Isaiah 53:2). Nevertheless, we can claim with Vasily Vasil Yevich Rozanov: “Jesus is certainly more beautiful than anything in the world or even the world itself. When He appeared, then, like the sun, he dimmed the stars.”

Although we lack evidence of Jesus’ physical appearance, we can make some educated guesses. Coming from a Mid-Eastern country, Jesus probably had the dark complexion and dark eyes of Arabs today. (One poet said he had his Father’s eyes.) Hours under the hot Palestine sun would have kept Jesus tanned. Most Mid-Eastern men have hair that is thick, dark, and curly. Some propose that because Jesus was a descendant of David, who was a handsome man with auburn hair, Jesus might have inherited these traits. Recent scholarship indicates that men of his time (unless they were Nazarenes under vow) kept their hair rather short, not the flowing-over-the-shoulders style seen in most religious art depictions of Jesus. In fact, St. Paul states, “If a man wears long hair, it is

### quick quote...

*The name of Jesus is  
honey for the mouth,  
music for the ear, and  
gladness for the heart.*

St. Bernard of Clairvaux

### trivial tidbit...

The Society of the Holy Name of Jesus, or the Holy Name Society, active in many Catholic parishes, has for its primary purpose the promotion of love and reverence for the name of God and Jesus.

fyi...

A picture of Christ in the Vatican collection is the image of Edessa, called “Mandyllion” by Orthodox Christians. One legend holds that the holy face was imprinted on cloth after Jesus visited King Agbar in Edessa in the first century. The earliest reference to this cloth is by St. John Damascene in the sixth century. The cloth vanished during the Crusades and again during the French Revolution. Many copies of the image were produced as icons. Some think that the original Mandyllion is the Shroud of Turin folded so only the face shows.

degrading to him” (1 Corinthians 11:14).

Many Catholics, however, get their picture of Jesus from the image on the Shroud of Turin, the purported burial cloth of Jesus, or from the Veil of Veronica, the cloth that supposedly was used to wipe the face of Jesus on the way to the cross. Neither of these has ever been verified by the Church, although they are still a source of popular piety.

Whether Jesus had a beard is also debatable. The earliest depictions show him beardless, and some historians think that Jewish men of the time might not have worn a beard, especially when younger. On the other hand, a prophecy in Isaiah refers to soldiers “plucking my beard.” Moreover, a beard was a sign of virility, and shaving it off was a way to humiliate captives and slaves.

When Christians first began to portray Jesus in art, they did so only in symbols: a lamb, a fish, and a shepherd. The earliest known picture of Jesus as a person, a grown man, dates back to 235 A.D. It was found by archaeologists in 1921 on a wall painting in a house church in Syria. This painting illustrates the healing of the paralytic as well as Jesus and Peter walking on the water. Jesus appears as a teacher with close-cropped hair. It wasn’t until the mid-fourth century that Jesus was first shown with long hair parted in the middle and usually with a beard, perhaps modeled on the Greek and Roman gods. Eastern Church icons depicted Jesus in this style, which may have shaped the modern conceptions of him. Incidentally the earliest halos around Jesus’ head appeared at 340 A.D. Halos as an artistic symbol were borrowed from the pagans, who drew them around their gods and deified emperors.



As for Jesus' build, a man who worked as a carpenter and in construction as he probably did, who could fast for days and pray all night, and who spent months living outside as he journeyed from town to town surely had a tough, muscular body and good health. The mysterious image imprinted on the Shroud of Turin is of a man about six feet tall. This height is considered tall for men of the first century. Jesus must not have been too tall, though, because he was able to slip into a crowd and disappear.

Through the centuries artists have portrayed Jesus to reflect their own culture and beliefs. You might see him depicted as resembling a Native American, a Japanese, a Kenyan, and even a woman. This variety in images serves to emphasize the universality of Jesus. He is truly a person for all peoples.

## **Parents and Extended Family**

The Church believes that Jesus is the Son of God, miraculously conceived in Mary (Miryam) by the power of the Holy Spirit with her consent. Mary, the Mother of Jesus, is therefore the "Mother of God," as the Church proclaims. Based on the story of the virgin birth, Jesus would have drawn all his humanity from his mother. Although Catholics believe God was the Father of Jesus, Mary's husband, Joseph (Yosef), was assumed by everyone at the time to be his physical father. It was Joseph who was the head of the household and who, as the legal father and guardian, brought up Jesus to be the man he was, taught him the Jewish faith, and trained him in his trade as a carpenter or construction worker. Religious art depicts Joseph as an old man. This may be because in the *Protoevan-*

a cool website...

To view 100 images of Jesus through the centuries, go to [www.religionfacts.com](http://www.religionfacts.com) and click on "Jesus" and then on "Jesus Image Gallery."

trivial tidbit...

In the twelfth century, art began to depict Jesus as dead instead of alive on the cross. Recently, some crosses have begun to show the risen Christ on the cross. Technically, a cross with a corpus (body) on it is called a “crucifix.”

*gelium of James*, an apocryphal (not canonical or official) gospel, Joseph claims, “I am an old man.” This may have been an attempt to emphasize and make understandable Mary’s virginity. Or, Joseph could have been a widower much older than Mary. But for the most part first-century Jewish men married around the age of twenty, and most likely Joseph and Mary were married when he was in his twenties and she was a young teen, as was the custom. We assume that Joseph died when Jesus was a teenager or young adult because Scripture doesn’t mention Joseph after the story of Jesus being lost in the Temple at about age twelve.

Although the Gospels refer to Jesus’ brothers (James, Joses, Judas, and Simon) and two sisters (unnamed), the Catholic Church holds that his mother, Mary, was always a virgin. Several possible explanations for the “brothers and sisters” in Scripture have been proposed. These words could be translated as “cousins,” for Aramaic has no word for this. Or they could be understood in a general sense, as when a preacher addresses the congregation as “my brothers and sisters.” The six “siblings” might have been Joseph’s children from a previous marriage or children of other close relatives. If Mary actually had so many other children, then it’s odd that as Jesus was dying he would entrust her to “the beloved disciple,” someone outside the family.

Mary’s parents are known as Joachim and Anne, even though they are not mentioned in the Bible. Their names are found in the *Protoevangelium of James*. Like most grandparents, they probably doted on Jesus. The Gospel of John mentions that “his

mother's sister" stood near the cross. So perhaps Jesus had at least one aunt, or maybe this woman was Mary's cousin.

According to the Scriptures, Jesus never married or had children. Bachelorhood was rare in his culture, for the Jews believed in following God's command to Adam and Eve, "Go forth and multiply." But the single life is understandable for someone who wanted to give himself one hundred percent to a cause or work. Jesus chose to sublimate his sexual energy and focus on his mission. He is the prime example of his teaching that some forego marriage for the sake of the kingdom (see Matthew 19:10–12).

## Family Tree

The Hebrews traced a person's lineage through the father. Scripture provides two genealogies for Jesus through Joseph. In the Gospel of Luke, the family tree of Jesus extends all the way back to "Adam, the son of God" (see Luke 3:23–38). The Gospel of Matthew presents Jesus' lineage back to Abraham, the ancestor of all Jews (see Matthew 1:1–16). This latter genealogy is constructed of three sets of fourteen generations: Abraham to David, David to the Exile, and the Exile to Jesus. In Hebrew thinking, fourteen was twice the perfect number seven. Also, in the Hebrew numbering system for letters, the letters in the name David add up to fourteen. Some of the names in the two Gospels' genealogies don't match. But both Luke and Matthew include King David, which was meant to emphasize that Jesus was of royal blood and of the tribe of Judah. Because Mary was related to the priestly family of Zechariah and Elizabeth, and priests

trivial tidbit...

In order to make Jesus an Aryan, the Nazis claimed that he was the son of a German legionnaire and Mary!

quick quote...

*Jesus Christ is the center of everything and the object of everything, and he who does not know him knows nothing of the order of nature and nothing of himself.*

Blaise Pascal

were Levites, some deduce that Mary belonged to the tribe of Levi.

The ancestors of Jesus—like many of ours—include some skeletons in the closet. For example, the childless widow Tamar posed as a prostitute so that she could bear a child by her father-in-law, Judah. Rahab, who assisted the Jews in conquering the Promised Land, actually was a prostitute. The widow Ruth was a Gentile who followed her mother-in-law's advice to place herself in a compromising position in order to snare a new husband. Solomon was David's son by Uriah's wife, with whom David committed adultery. And when Solomon became king, he let his pagan wives lure him away from the true God. The point of these stories, and the reason the Scripture writers included them, is that God acts through real people to produce the Messiah. If these flawed people had not acted when and as they did, there would have been no Jesus. And no Jesus means no salvation.

## **Native Country**

Jesus spent his life in what is now called Israel when it was occupied by Rome, and apparently he never ventured more than several miles from it. In the first century the Romans named his country Palestine, perhaps after the Philistines, its former inhabitants. Today we call it the Holy Land because of its famous citizen. Israel was the Promised Land of Canaan to which Moses led the chosen people after they escaped from slavery in Egypt. The country was about the size of Rhode Island (150 long and 50 or 60 miles wide) at the time of Jesus and was divided into three main provinces: Galilee, Judea, and Samaria.

fyi...

In the north was fertile Galilee, a small territory about fifty miles long and twenty-five miles across, where Jesus carried out most of his ministry. Galilee was clothed with wheat and barley fields, grapevines, fig trees, and olive trees. It alternated between two climates: a hot, dry summer and a cool, wet winter. In his teaching, Jesus drew his images from rural Galilee rather than from city life. He spoke of vineyards, sowers, mustard seeds, mother hens, treasures in fields, and yokes. Galilee was referred to as “land of the Gentiles” because many Gentiles lived there and because it was crossed by a main trade route. This foreign influence and the fact that Galilee was some distance from the Temple, the heart of Judaism, made Galileans rather laid back when it came to following the prescriptions of Jewish law. Galilee was the location of the village of Nazareth, known as Jesus’ hometown, and also Capernaum, where Jesus lived during much of his ministry.

On the east border of Galilee was the Sea of Galilee, and therefore fishing was a major industry there. This sea is thirteen miles long and seven miles wide and lies 600 feet below sea level. It is also called the Sea of Tiberias and Lake Gennesaret (which means harp) because of its shape.

In the south of Palestine was Judah, the location of both Bethlehem, Jesus’ birthplace, and Jerusalem, which was the capital known both as the Holy City and the City of David. This province was named for the tribe of Judah, which dwelt there until they were exiled in 587 B.C. Judah, a mostly rocky and dry land, was bordered by the Dead Sea on the east and the desert on the south. Greeks and Romans rereferred to

Jerusalem is 2500 feet above sea level; hence the phrase “Go up to Jerusalem.” The city Jesus knew is buried beneath twenty centuries of rubble about twelve feet under the present city. A wall with eight sets of gates surrounds Jerusalem, which is two and a half miles in circumference. The Golden (or Beautiful) Gate, on the eastern wall is traditionally considered the one Jesus would have entered through on Palm Sunday. Because Jewish tradition holds that the Messiah will pass through this gate, Muslims walled it up in the sixteenth century. Facing this gate on the Mount of Olives are Jewish tombs.

trivial tidbit...

In 1342, the pope made the Franciscan Order of Friars Minor the official custodians of the Holy Land. They safeguard the Christian presence there and care for the major shrines and biblical sites. Each year on Good Friday a collection is taken up worldwide to support them in this work.

a cool website...

Take a virtual tour of the Holy Land at [www.ffh.org](http://www.ffh.org), a site run by the Franciscans, who are entrusted with the care of the Christian places. Another tour is available at [www.mustardseed.net](http://www.mustardseed.net).

Judah as Judea. Judeans looked down on Galileans as “country bumpkins.”

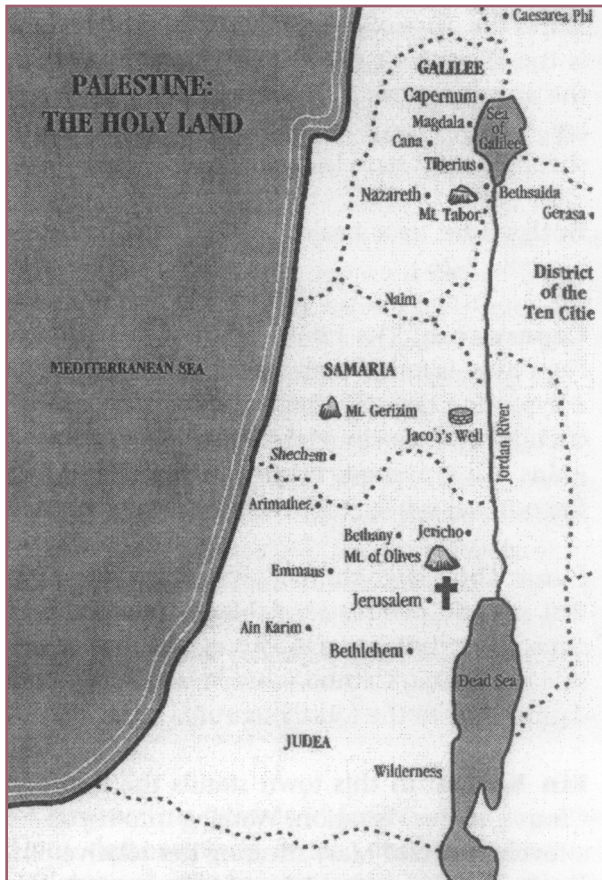
Locked between Galilee and Judah lay Samaria, home to the Samaritans, who were longtime enemies of the Jews. The Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea are connected by the Jordan River, which, because of its serpentine path, travels 166 miles to cover the 66-mile distance between the two seas. The Jordan River is the east boundary of Israel. Its name is from the Hebrew for “descend” because the river flows to the Dead Sea, which at 1,300 miles below sea level is the lowest point on the Earth.

Like other towns in those days, towns in Palestine were surrounded by walls for security and were accessible only through gates, which were locked every night and guarded.

Alexander the Great had conquered Israel in 66 B.C., and so Greek (Hellenist) influence permeated Palestine’s culture and economic practices. In fact, the Jewish Temple was constructed with Greek columns, and the New Testament was written entirely in Greek.

## **Jesus’ Hometown**

Jesus was so identified with his hometown that he was referred to as “the Nazarene” (see Matthew 2:23; Mark 14:67, 16:6). Nazareth, a village in Galilee of about two hundred people, was so obscure that there is no mention of it in any documents other than Scripture. Galilean Jews with their northern accent were scorned by the Judeans, who had an expression “as stupid as a Galilean.” When the apostle Nathanael first heard about Jesus being the one Scripture fore-



## Holy Land site...

Excavations in Capernaum under a fifth-century octagonal church uncovered a first-century house thought to be St. Peter's house where Jesus stayed. It is identified as such by Egeria, a fourth-century pilgrim. Fishhooks and graffiti seemingly left by second- and third-century Christians were discovered there. The large room (twenty feet by twenty feet) had been plastered three times, although no other Capernaum houses have been found with plaster. Jars and lamps were in this room, but no household pottery. These two facts suggest that this room had been an early house church. Today a modern Franciscan church stands over the site.

told, he scoffed, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). Even in his origins, Jesus already aligned himself with the underdogs.

At 1250 feet above sea level, Nazareth offers a commanding view of the surrounding territory. From the hills of Nazareth, Jesus could see snowcapped Mount Hermon and, in the far distance to the west, the blue Mediterranean Sea. Because there were no electric lights, at night the starry sky must have been a spec-



### **The Parable of the Two Seas**

Two seas lie in Palestine. In the north is the Sea of Galilee. Its fresh, blue waters teem with fish; trees spread their branches over it and stretch out roots to sip its waters; along its shores children play. Jesus could look across its silver surface as he taught. People build their homes near it, and birds their nests; and every kind of life is happier because it is there. It's been called the most beautiful sea in the world. The Jordan River makes this sea with sparkling water from the hills.

The Jordan River flows on south into another sea. Here there is no splash of fish, no fluttering leaf, no song of birds, no children's laughter. Travelers choose another route. Dead trees coated with salt jut out of it. The air hangs heavy above it, and no creature drinks its brackish waters filled with mineral deposits. It is the lowest point on the earth's surface.

What makes the difference in the seas? The Sea of Galilee receives but does not keep the Jordan. For every drop that flows into it another drop flows out. The other sea gives nothing. It is named the Dead Sea.

(Author unknown)





tacular sight.

Jesus' base while he was ministering in Galilee, however, was not Nazareth but Capernaum. Matthew calls it "his own town" (Matthew 9:1). This fishing village on the shore of the Sea of Galilee was ideal for Jesus' work because it was on a main highway, the Via Maris. The black basalt synagogue built by a Roman centurion, where Jesus taught, is still slightly visible under the ruins of a fifth-century limestone synagogue.

### Jesus' Language

Israel was a multilingual country at the time of Jesus. Recall that the inscription Pilate had posted on the cross ("This is the king of the Jews") was written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. Jesus would have been at least bilingual. His native tongue, the one he spoke at home, was Aramaic, the language of the Aramaeans, Abraham's people. Jesus also would have used Aramaic in his ministry, because that is what all Jews spoke. However, Jesus would have had the thick accent of the Galileans: Aramaic is still spoken in isolated parts of the Mideast, and several Eastern rite Catholic and Orthodox churches use it in liturgy. Since the Hebrew Scriptures were written in Hebrew, Jesus must also have had command of that language. He probably knew a smattering of Greek too from engaging in commerce with the Gentiles in Galilee, and maybe he even picked up a little Latin from the Roman soldiers stationed in Palestine at the time.

trivial tidbit...

Galileans apparently dropped opening sounds, much like people who speak Cockney English do. A derisive joke from Jesus' time was about a merchant who taunted a Galilean customer, "You stupid Galilean, do you need something to ride on (*hamar*, 'a donkey') or something to make a dress with (*'amar*, 'wool'), or something for a Temple sacrifice (*immar*, 'lamb')?"

trivial tidbit...

To view or hear the Lord's Prayer in Aramaic, type "Lord's Prayer Aramaic" in any Internet search engine.

trivial tidbit...

*"Shalom aleichem"*  
(Peace be with you)  
was the usual Jewish greeting, along with a kiss on both cheeks instead of a handshake, in Jesus' time. The peace wished in *shalom* is tantamount to "fullness of life." A similar greeting, *"Assalamu alaikum"* is used by Muslims.

quick quote...

*By a Carpenter mankind was made, and only by that Carpenter can mankind be remade.*

Desiderius Erasmus

## Jesus' Social Status, Education, and Work

The fact that Jesus' family didn't own their own land probably put them in the lower middle class. They were peasants, but they weren't necessarily poor. In other words, they were like most of the Jews in Israel at the time.

Beginning at age three, boys were taught at home by their fathers, so Joseph would have instructed Jesus. At age six the boys, but not the girls, went to the synagogue in their town, where they learned to read and write (although this wasn't mandatory until 65 A.D.). Their sole textbook would have been the Torah (the first five books of Hebrew Scripture, also called the Law). Jesus, therefore, was literate, but his mother, Mary, was not. Because Jesus had studied Hebrew Scripture intensely and had memorized it, he was able to quote and refer to it often as he taught.

Like his father, Joseph, Jesus was a blue-collar worker, a *teklon*. This Greek word means a worker not only in wood but in stone and metal. Thus, the two men were most likely not just carpenters but construction workers. Their job description would include making farm tools, furniture, and boats as well as helping to erect buildings in Nazareth and in nearby towns. Sepphoris, for example, had been destroyed in 3 A.D. and was being rebuilt by Herod only two and a half miles away. Most likely Jesus and his friends and cousins would have worked on projects there. Construction was hard work, especially considering the crude tools that were in use and the hot climate. The hands of Jesus had to be rough and callused from wielding hammers and saws and shaping wood. He knew firsthand what it meant to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow.

When Jesus was in his thirties, he had a career change. He became a traveling preacher. He traded the security of a home with Mary and steady work for the uncertain life of the road. From then on he would never know where his next meal was coming from. Jesus journeyed from town to town, now and then with great crowds following him. Peter summed up these years by saying, “He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil” (Acts 10:38). Jesus taught, healed, and announced the kingdom of God throughout Galilee and Judea, sometimes making a foray into neighboring regions such as Decapolis, a cluster of ten cities. He did this for at most three years until his death. During this time Jesus was supported by his disciples, in particular women followers who provided financial support for him and the apostles. In the evenings he relied on people’s hospitality, slept outdoors, or found shelter in caves.

Although Jesus was called rabbi as a title of respect, he wasn’t the kind of rabbi we know today. Originally the title rabbi meant “my great one.” Only between 60 to 80 A.D. did “rabbi” become a technical term for someone authorized to teach. Neither was Jesus a Jewish priest but a layman. In his culture priests were from the tribe of Levi who were descended through Aaron, Moses’ brother, and were in charge of Temple services and sacrifices.

### **A Quick, Creative Mind and Charismatic Personality**

The Gospels give evidence that Jesus had a high IQ and a quick, razor-sharp wit. It requires extraordinary intelligence to weave the memorable stories he told,

trivial tidbit...

To walk thirty miles would take one full day. From Nazareth to Jerusalem was 65 miles.

fyi...

Pope Benedict XVI has written a two-volume work called *Jesus of Nazareth*.

quick quote...

*[We have] very efficiently pared the claws of the Lord of Judah, turning him into a household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies.*

Dorothy Sayers

to come up with the striking aphorisms that were second nature to him, and to field the attacks of his enemies with clever adroitness as he repeatedly did. Over and over the Gospels comment that people marveled at Jesus' teaching. As a man, Jesus wasn't omniscient, but he certainly was gifted.

Jesus is the best of what it means to be human, and he prompted people who encountered him to become their best selves as well. The fact that at Jesus' invitation people left their families, homes, and jobs to follow him into the unknown shows his charisma. Jesus' strong, magnetic personality drew hundreds of people to him when he taught or just walked down the road. The paparazzi of today would have had a field day with him. This ability to attract people enabled Jesus to accomplish much in a short period of time.

Jesus emanated power and authority and showed a bit ofchutzpah, as when he argued with the Jewish leaders or drove the moneychangers from the Temple. He was passionate and capable of holy fury. Yet this man of steel was gentle and showed great tenderness. People, even sinners, felt safe and accepted in his presence. Children, too, who are usually cautious and shy with strangers, weren't afraid of him. And Jesus was affectionate in word and action. He called the paralytic "child," the woman who touched his cloak "daughter," and his disciples "children" and "little flock." Jesus embraced children, touched the sick, and wasn't embarrassed by a woman crying at his feet. Jesus often praised and affirmed people. His disciples, including the women who followed him, must have found Jesus charming.

Judging from Jesus' interaction with individuals

and his presence at parties and dinners, he was definitely a people person, someone who thrived on being with others. Jesus showed a keen sensitivity toward people, be it a blind beggar or a repentant apostle. He empathized with losers like the woman about to be stoned to death, Zacchaeus the despised tax collector, and the dying thief on the cross. He showed compassion for the suffering like the widow whose son had died, the paralyzed man who could never make it to the healing waters on time, and the blind beggar. A hallmark of his relationships is that Jesus was inclusive. He embraced everyone: Jews, Romans and Samaritans, men and women, rich and poor alike. This same universality and equality was to characterize his Church. In it “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

And Jesus obviously liked a good time: His critics accused him of being a glutton and a drunkard (Matthew 1:19). They objected to his hanging out with the “wrong” crowd. Jesus was a person others enjoyed being with. Theologian Edward Schillebeeckx pointed out that you couldn’t be in his presence without feeling joy. On the other hand, Jesus had a kind of aura so that as he walked ahead of the crowd, “they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid” (Mark 10:32).

## Special Friends

Like us, Jesus needed special friends. He singled out three of his apostles—Peter, James, and John—to be his companions at key times in his life. And accord-

fyi...

Jesus’ struggle to overturn social trends that suppress people has led to two contemporary kinds of theology. Liberation theology, which is especially strong in Latin America, is centered on freeing the oppressed. Feminine (or feminist) theology works to change cultural tendencies that subjugate women or treat them as inferiors.

quick quote...

*I believe there is no one lovelier, deeper, more sympathetic and more perfect than Jesus.*

Fyodor Dostoevsky

quick quote...

*When I try to bow to  
thee, my obeisance  
cannot reach  
down to the depth  
where thy feet rest  
among the poorest,  
and lowliest, and lost.*

Source unknown

ing to the Gospel of John, he favored one called “the beloved disciple,” who may or may not have been John himself. There were other people with whom Jesus could relax and be himself. He felt at home with Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha, in Bethany. We know that “Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus” (John 11:5). Apparently none of the three was married, which suggests that they might have been teenagers. Bethany is a village outside of Jerusalem where Jesus often stayed. Its name means “house of the poor,” which is appropriate; for Jesus aligns himself with the poor. Last but not least, from the loyalty of Mary Magdalene at the crucifixion and Jesus’ appearance to her first after the resurrection, we can infer that he had a distinct friendship with her.

### **A Heart for the Vulnerable**

It’s said that the moral test of a society is how it treats its most vulnerable members. That also holds true for individuals. Jesus passes this test with flying colors. Reaching out with compassion and help to the poorest, most isolated, most defenseless people in society was arguably the dominant motif of his public ministry. In Jesus’ culture this group included widows, children, and Samaritans. Jesus was definitely on the side of the weak. His loving care encompassed all types of misfits: not only the crippled, the diseased, and the insane, but also sinners, crooks, sluts, and bums. Jesus noticed these poor, most of his miracles were worked for them, and he taught others to care about them. Today he carries out this work through the members of his Church all over the world.

## Jesus' Sense of Humor

Although there is no hard evidence in Scripture that Jesus laughed, how could he not help but smile at seeing the height-challenged dignitary, Zacchaeus, perched in a tree, peering through the leaves to get a glimpse of him? It's also easy to imagine that Jesus laughed heartily at the looks on the faces of the seasoned fishermen when at a "carpenter's son's" direction they lowered their nets and pulled them up loaded with fish, or when Peter tried to walk on the water but began to sink like a stone.

No doubt some of Jesus' illustrations in teaching were delivered with a grin and made people laugh. For example, there's his depiction of a camel trying to squeeze through the eye of a needle as the image of a rich person entering into the kingdom of God. Then there's the image he used of the overly zealous Pharisees straining out gnats from their food but then swallowing camels. Even a few miracles have an element of fun, such as Peter finding money to pay a tax in a fish or devils being sent into pigs and running off a cliff. Also, it's a playful person who gives his friends nicknames. Jesus dubbed James and John "the Sons of Thunder" and Simon "the Rock." Perhaps the ability to play is what Jesus meant when he said that "unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of God" (Matthew 18:3).

### trivial tidbit...

The picture "Laughing Jesus" by Ralph Kozak and others like it combat the myth that Jesus was always somber.

### quick quote...

*No one else holds or has held the place in the heart of the world that Jesus holds. Other gods have been as devoutly worshipped; no other man has been so devoutly loved.*

John Knox

fyi...

For insight into the relevance of the kingdom of God to our lives today, read Gregory Pierce's fine book *The World as It Should Be: Living Authentically in the Here-and-Now Kingdom of God*.

trivial tidbit...

In Matthew's Gospel, the kingdom of God is called the kingdom of heaven (or more literally "the kingdom from the heavens") because Matthew was a Jew, and Jews avoided using the name of God.

## Jesus' Mission: The Kingdom of God

The predominant focus of Jesus' ministry was proclaiming and inaugurating the kingdom of God. In this kingdom, God's will is done and goodness reigns. Consequently it is a utopian kingdom of wholeness and freedom, characterized by peace, love, and joy. The evils of sin, injustice, hate, and violence have no home in it.

Jesus summoned his followers to live as kingdom-minded people. He taught about this kingdom, using stories to describe it, and he ushered it in by his saving acts. The kingdom was present in Jesus himself and in his ministry. Whereas faithful Jews prayed for a Messiah who would establish an earthly kingdom, Jesus the Messiah taught Christians to pray to God "your kingdom come...on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 5:10). He saw God's kingdom as a spiritual reign. This kingdom, in Jesus' mind, is already among us and within us, yet it will not come to completion until some unknown time in the future. He tells his followers, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). In the Gospels, Jesus always proclaimed the kingdom, never himself. In fact, in the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, Luke says that after his death and resurrection, Jesus "presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over the course of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3). Only later did the proclaimer become the proclaimed.