

WHO?

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INTRODUCTION

This is a New Testament for people who don't read the Bible, or who find its world hard to enter and explore.

It is odd that the Bible is read so little, given that it's the world's best-selling book by quite a margin.

Many imagine that it's boring, untrue and irrelevant – or even repressive: all about rules and regulations designed to stop us enjoying life.

Which again is odd, given that its central character is better known and more admired across the globe today than many others you might care to name.

Those who met Jesus were changed for ever by their encounter. Some of them wrote about their experiences. They talk of finding life in all its fullness and forgiveness for everything they have ever done wrong, which brings them a deep inner peace. They talk about a day when God will straighten out this world and recreate it, but this time with no decay or pain, no disappointment or illness, no death.

Millions of people today are still claiming to meet him.

Which is even more odd, given that he was executed over two thousand years ago in one of the most barbaric ways humans have ever devised.

My aim, like that of the original writers, is to introduce you to Jesus, whether for the very first time or in a fresh way. So I've tried to imagine how these various authors might have written had they been alive today.

If there's even a possibility that the claims Jesus made are true, I hope you will agree that it's worth exploring them for yourself.

I wonder what answer you will give to the question which lies at the heart of all you're about to read...

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The Gospels

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John

As eyewitnesses to the life and teaching of Jesus began to get old and to die, it became important for Jesus' followers to have a permanent written account of what he said and did. So the four lives of Jesus (or 'Gospels') with which the New Testament begins were produced.

The first three Gospels are very similar. Mark seems to have been written first – probably based on the memories of Peter. Matthew and Luke may well then have used Mark as a basis for their own accounts.

John is very different, presenting a far more theological portrayal of Jesus: for example, John includes no parables.

However, the four accounts differ in emphasis and the arrangement of material. These differences are typical of those heard in any courtroom today when a number of eyewitnesses are called upon to testify to what they have seen. Over the course of their accounts, a consistency emerges as a multi-sided picture takes shape, form and colour before our eyes.

The political and religious context in which they wrote

Jesus was a Jew, born at a time when Israel was part of the Roman Empire, which had installed a man named Herod as its puppet-king. Jews called people from any other nations 'Gentiles'.

Everyday Jewish life was controlled by the nation's religious leaders – a small elite of priests, teachers of the Jewish Law, and temple bureaucrats. They were divided into two main parties:

- The Pharisees, whose main focus was to maintain what they believed to be the purity of Jewish worship, even though they themselves had added countless rules and regulations of their own to the original law taught by Moses. They were religious 'conservatives' in every sense of the word.

- The Sadducees, whose main focus was to avoid upsetting the Romans, opting to collaborate with their occupiers for a quiet life. They were religious 'liberals', more concerned with secular survival than welcoming a Messiah who might upset the balance of power. They did not, for example, believe in life after death.

Some of these religious rulers genuinely sought to honour God and serve their people. But many loved to think they were superior to everyone else, and a significant number opposed Jesus' message about God's kingdom from the start. They were the very people who should have welcomed Jesus with open arms, but, sadly, some were more concerned with their own status and privileged position within society than with seeing God's kingdom established.

Jesus challenged their whole view of life, with its 'thou shalt not' insistence on living by a set of rules. Instead, he reminded them of God's compassion and longing to welcome everyone who wanted to see earth look more like heaven.

Each week, the Jews observed a Day of Rest, called the Sabbath, which the religious leaders enforced with a strictness that God himself had never intended, reducing what God had designed to be a blessing for everyone to one long list of rules to keep. You will notice that Jesus regularly found himself on the wrong side of the religious authorities by responding to people's needs rather than respecting their petty rules.

The life of Jesus as told by Matthew

Who wrote this book?

A Jew called Matthew, who'd been a tax collector before becoming one of the first people to leave everything and follow Jesus. Tax collectors were universally hated by their fellow Jews – firstly because they were essentially collaborators, helping the Roman authorities tax their fellow citizens; and secondly because they were notorious for 'skimming' part of each person's payment to line their own pockets. The simple fact that Jesus accepted someone like that to be his follower is a significant statement about the sort of Saviour Jesus understood himself to be, and the nature of the Kingdom he'd come to establish.

Why should I read it?

This account of the life of Jesus acts as a sort of bridge between the 'Hebrew' scriptures of the Old Testament and the 'Christian' scriptures of the New Testament. It helps to connect what we read in the pages of the Old Testament with God's activity in the New.

Matthew wrote for a primarily Jewish readership, making extensive use of the Hebrew scriptures (and especially the prophet Isaiah) to demonstrate that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, or Saviour, for which his people had waited with such longing over so many centuries, and to back up the claims the first Christians were making about Jesus.

But Matthew's gospel has a universal flavour and appeal, not least in his major theme of the 'Kingdom of heaven.' Everyone, according to Jesus – even those most despised within any society – can become citizens of this kingdom through faith in him.

Matthew's 'gospel' is 'good news' indeed.

One

¹ Many hundreds of years before Jesus was born, God had promised his people that he would send a saviour to our world. This promise was recorded and written down by messengers to whom God revealed the future. The saviour would be called 'Messiah' or 'Christ'; both words mean 'Chosen One'. Part of the promise was that he would be descended from David, Israel's greatest king, and that's exactly what the family tree of Jesus Christ shows. In fact, his ancestors go right back to Abraham himself.

² Here's the lineage –

Abraham

Isaac

Jacob

Judah (and his brothers)

³ Perez (and Zerah – their mother was Tamar)

Hezron

Ram

⁴ Amminadab

Nahshon

Salmon

⁵ Boaz (whose mother was Rahab)

Obed (whose mother was Ruth)

Jesse

⁶ King David

Solomon (whose mother Bathsheba had been Uriah's wife)

⁷ Rehoboam

Abijah

Asa

⁸ Jehoshaphat

Jehoram

Uzziah

⁹ Jotham

Ahaz

Hezekiah

¹⁰ Manasseh

Amon

Josiah

¹¹ Jeconiah (and his brothers at the time of the exile to Babylon).

¹² After the exile to Babylon – Shealtiel

Zerubbabel

¹³ Abihud

Eliakim

Azor

¹⁴ Zadok

Akim

Elihud

¹⁵ Eleazar

Matthan

Jacob

¹⁶ and Joseph.

Joseph's wife Mary was the mother of Jesus, who is called 'Saviour.'

¹⁷ So there were fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen after David to the time of the exile and fourteen from the exile to the birth of Jesus.

¹⁸ It all began with a young couple called Mary and Joseph, who were engaged to be married. [In their culture, engagement was a year-long binding pre-marital contract, during which the couple behaved as husband and wife without actually living together.] They were enjoying all the excitement of planning their future, when Mary discovered she was pregnant. ¹⁹ Joseph was a godly and caring man, and did not want to shame Mary publicly; so he decided to break off their engagement with a minimum of fuss.

*'Name him
Jesus, because
he will rescue
everyone'*

²⁰ But after reaching his decision, an angel appeared to him in a dream. 'Joseph,' the angel said, 'Mary is to be your wife. She's done nothing wrong. Her pregnancy is unique, created by God's Holy Spirit. ²¹ She's going to have a boy. Name him Jesus, because he will rescue everyone from all the wrong things they have done.' [Jesus means 'God saves'.]

²² This had all been predicted by one of God's messengers some 800 years beforehand.

²³ A virgin will have a baby boy, and people will call him Immanuel, because in that child God himself will live on earth.

²⁴ Joseph took God at his word, and married Mary. ²⁵ But he did not consummate their marriage until her son was born – and he named him Jesus.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem during the reign of King Herod. Sometime later, travellers from the East arrived in Jerusalem. ² They were experts in studying the stars, and asked, 'Where's your new king? His star appeared in our night sky far away, and we've followed it all the way here, so that we can worship him, the Lord of the stars.'

TWO

³ Their questions became the talk of the city, and Herod soon heard about it. Deeply alarmed, ⁴ he began some research of his own, asking the Jewish religious leaders where they believed the Saviour would be born. ⁵ 'In Bethlehem, down in Judah,' they replied. 'The ancient prophecy reads:

⁶ "Bethlehem, your future holds a wonderful promise, for you will produce a ruler to shepherd God's people."

⁷ Herod called the stargazers to meet him secretly, and persuaded them to tell him when exactly they first saw the star. ⁸ 'Go to Bethlehem,' he told them. 'Search out this child, and let me know when you find him. You can be sure I want to pay him homage, too.'

⁹ So they set off, and the star led them to the very place where Jesus and his parents were staying. ¹⁰ They were overjoyed when they realised their journey had reached its end. ¹¹ When they entered the house and saw Jesus, they bowed low in worship. Then they presented the gifts they'd carried with them – gold, incense and spices. ¹² Then, warned in a dream about Herod's true motives, they quietly slipped out of the country without reporting back to him.

Herod called the stargazers to meet him secretly

¹³ After they had left, an angel once again visited Joseph in his dreams. 'Get up! There's no time to lose. You've got to get Mary and Jesus out of here now. Go to Egypt and lie low until I tell you. Herod's going to try to kill the boy!'

¹⁴ Again, Joseph followed the angel's instructions to the letter, and they escaped to Egypt in the nick of time. ¹⁵ They stayed there until Herod died, fulfilling what God had spoken through the prophet Hosea:

Out of Egypt I call my son.

¹⁶ Realising he'd been tricked, Herod exploded with rage, and ordered his soldiers to kill every little boy aged two and under in Bethlehem and its region. ¹⁷ Long ago, the prophet Jeremiah had predicted this:

¹⁸ Listen to the voices crying out in the agony of grief; the screams of mothers looking in vain for comfort, for their sons are all dead.

¹⁹ Time passed, King Herod died, and Joseph dreamt again. ²⁰ 'You can go home now,' the angel said. 'The danger is past.' ²¹ So

Joseph took Mary and Jesus back to their own land,²² but when he learnt that Herod's son was now king, he was afraid to return to Bethlehem.²³ So he, Mary and Jesus settled quietly in a little town called Nazareth in a region of the north named Galilee. Again, one of the messengers of old had predicted that the Saviour

will be called a Nazarene.

Years later, Jesus now a man, his cousin John began to preach to crowds who gathered to him out in the southern desert.² His message was simple: 'Wake up! Change your hearts and minds. Turn your back on your selfish ways. God is about to establish his Kingdom on earth in a new way. Start living in a way that pleases him.'³ Long ago, God's messengers had predicted:

a voice in the desert, 'Get ready for God to visit; put out the red carpet to welcome him into your hearts.'

I'm just the warm up for the main act'

Three

⁴ John lived a life of simplicity, his clothes and food taken from whatever the desert provided.⁵ People flocked to him from the entire region, from Jerusalem and its surrounding villages.⁶ They responded to his message, and as a sign of their change of heart and life, John baptised them in the River Jordan. This earned him the nickname 'John the Baptist'.

⁷ When John saw some Pharisees and Sadducees, members of the ruling religious elite, coming to find out what was going on, he rounded on them. 'You den of snakes!' he shouted. 'Who warned you about the coming storm?'⁸ A true change of heart is shown by a change of life.⁹ Don't think your pedigree is going to save you. "We've no need to change", you say, "we're descended from Abraham". Let me tell you, God decides who Abraham's real children are.¹⁰ You're like a tree whose fruit is rotten. Mend your ways or the axe is going to fall. Only trees whose fruit is good will escape.'

¹¹ John told the crowds to expect the coming Saviour. 'I'm just the warm up for the main act,' he told them. 'I can put you into water as a symbol of your desire to turn away from your old ways and start a new life, but I can't give you that new life itself. Look for the one to come. He'll fill everyone who accepts and trusts him with God's Holy Spirit, which will burn like fire inside you.'¹² He will separate out those who believe and those who don't. Those who believe and trust in him will be filled with a fire which will burn

off all impurity and give them fresh energy to live God's way; but those who don't will be consumed in the blaze.'

¹³ One day, Jesus came to the River Jordan, and asked John to baptise him. ¹⁴ 'Surely not,' said John. 'It should be the other way round! You've no need to admit to any wrong at all.'

¹⁵ But Jesus said, 'Do as I ask. If I'm to fulfil my mission, and do it faithfully as a human being, I must be baptised like everyone else.' So John agreed.

¹⁶ When Jesus stepped out of the river, heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit hovered over him in the form of a dove. ¹⁷ A voice rang out: 'This is the son I love and with whom I am delighted.'

FOUR

The Holy Spirit led Jesus into the desert to confront God's Enemy, the devil. ² Days without food left Jesus weak with hunger, ³ and that's when the devil struck, testing his resolve to live God's way. 'If you really are God's Son,' he said, 'why go hungry? Turn these stones into bread and eat.'

⁴ Jesus replied, 'God's Word tells me it's better to have a heart full of God's words than a belly full of bread.'

⁵ Jesus found himself standing on the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem. ⁶ 'If you really are God's Son,' hissed the devil, 'jump! Doesn't God's Word promise that he'll send angels to catch you before you hit the ground?'

⁷ 'Yes it does,' said Jesus. 'But it also warns us not to challenge God to prove himself.'

⁸ So the Enemy took Jesus to a high mountain, from where he could see every human society in all their glory. ⁹ 'It's all yours,' he whispered in Jesus' ear, 'if you will simply bow to me.'

¹⁰ 'Get out of here, Satan!' Jesus ordered. 'God's Word tells me to worship him, and him alone.'

¹¹ The Enemy left, and angels came to strengthen Jesus.

¹² Not long after this, John was arrested and put in prison. Hearing this, Jesus went back to Galilee, ¹³ but rather than return to Nazareth, settled in the lakeside town of Capernaum. ¹⁴ Long ago, the prophet Isaiah had predicted:

¹⁵ Listen, people of Galilee, ¹⁶ those who've been living in the long, dark night of spiritual death are waking to a new dawn, which will draw them out of death's shadow into new life.

¹⁷ From that moment, Jesus began to preach. His message, like John's, was simple; 'The Kingdom of God is only a change of heart away.'

¹⁸ Walking beside the lake one day, Jesus saw Simon and Andrew, two brothers, fishing. ¹⁹ 'Follow me,' he called out to them, 'and help me land a much greater catch.' ²⁰ They left everything, and followed him. ²¹ A little further on, Jesus repeated his call to two more fishermen brothers called James and John. ²² They too responded instantly to his call to follow.

²³ Jesus travelled the region, teaching in synagogues: he proclaimed the good news that God was inviting everyone into his Kingdom, and demonstrated this by healing every sickness and disease. ²⁴ Word spread like wildfire throughout Syria, and soon the sick and suffering were being brought to him from all corners. Jesus healed them all and released those enslaved by God's Enemy. ²⁵ Large crowds followed him everywhere he went.

*The Kingdom
of God is only a
change of
heart away'*

Seeing the size of the crowds, Jesus climbed a hill, ² and he began to teach his disciples the way God sees the world.

³ 'God loves those who realise they have nothing to offer him, but simply rely on his mercy. It makes them a perfect fit for his Kingdom.

⁴ 'God's heart goes out to those who grieve. One day, he's going to wrap his arms around them and wipe away their tears.

⁵ 'God loves those who don't push themselves forward, but put their trust in him. He's got a whole new world waiting for them.

⁶ 'God loves those who ache for right to triumph over wrong, because he wants the same. One day, they'll be able to watch him straighten everything out.

⁷ 'God loves those who copy him by showing mercy. Whenever they need forgiveness, all they have to do is ask. It's guaranteed.

⁸ 'God loves those who don't allow anything rotten to remain in their heart. One day, their eyes will drink in all the wonders of heaven.

⁹ 'God loves those who seek to reconcile those who have fallen out with each other. He knows it's one of the hardest things. Those who do this reflect God's own character, and will be adopted as his children.

¹⁰ 'God loves those who are persecuted for their belief in him. The door to his Kingdom stands wide open for them.'

¹¹ 'God will stand alongside you when you're taunted and falsely accused because you believe in me. ¹² Rejoice when that happens, and remember that this world has always persecuted my faithful people. What's waiting for you in the world to come will far outweigh anything you suffer in this life.'

¹³ Jesus said, 'I want you to be so different that people notice, like salt in food or light in darkness. Like salt, make life taste better for others. Don't lose your edge, or you'll make no impact on the world around you. Salt that goes stale is thrown out.'

¹⁴ 'Brighten people's days by letting God's love shine out of you, so they can see things as they really are. ¹⁵ What use is light if it's covered up? People need light by which to live. ¹⁶ Shine with God's love so that people have the chance to respond and thank him.

'Don't lose your edge, or you'll make no impact on the world around you'

¹⁷ 'I've not come to overturn what God has taught you through his messengers down the ages. Rather, I'm the fulfilment of everything our ancestors longed to see, and I've come to give you the power to put that teaching into practice. ¹⁸ As long as this world lasts, God's Word remains true and trustworthy. ¹⁹ Don't dismiss it, let alone encourage others to ignore it. Practice living according to God's Word, and encourage others to do the same. ²⁰ One thing's for sure: you won't get into God's Kingdom if you settle for what the Pharisees and law teachers think pleases him. They convince themselves that it's enough to be technically on the right side of the Law. But God sees much deeper than that.

²¹ 'Take murder as an example. The Law's pretty clear: "You must not murder". Sounds simple, doesn't it? And as most people have never actually killed someone, it's easy to tick that one off the list. ²² But God meant that law to go much further. God looks right into the heart, and sees the hidden anger there, which can so easily lead on to violence itself. Every evil act begins with a thought. So losing your temper or cursing someone is like stepping onto a dangerous slope. You never know how quickly or how far you might fall. So don't pat yourself on the back because you're not technically a murderer. Look a little deeper. ²³ Have you wronged anyone? Don't think private religious observance is enough. ²⁴ Seek out the one you've wronged and put it right. Then your religious practices will have integrity. ²⁵ Saying sorry now is a small price to pay to avoid things escalating. If someone's got a watertight legal case against you, it's common sense to settle out of court. ²⁶ If you don't, the judge will throw the book at you.

²⁷ 'You've been told that it's wrong to sleep with someone else's wife or husband. Never done that? Good for you. ²⁸ But don't think you're in the clear. What about those lustful thoughts about the man or woman next door, or at work? As far as God's concerned, you've started on the slippery slope which leads to adultery. ²⁹ I'm deadly serious about this. If you were caught in a house on fire and your arm was trapped, better to cut off your arm and escape rather than burn to death. ³⁰ Faced with the choice between eternal life and death, any price is worth paying to ensure you're not left out in the cold.

³¹ 'God gave marriage as a beautiful gift to humanity. But the religious leaders have made divorce so easy and one-sided that a man simply has to serve notice on his wife, and he can throw her out. ³² God meant marriage to be for life, and divorce has to be a last resort. Your casual approach risks making adulterers of you all.

³³ 'You've been told to keep your promises. Well and good. ³⁴⁻³⁶ But don't dress up your promises, swearing by things you can't control. It doesn't say much for your integrity if you have to make extravagant claims to convince people. ³⁷ Make sure you're known as someone whose word can be trusted. Whether it's "Yes" or "No", people should know they can rely on your word.

*"Don't even
hit back when
someone
attacks you"*

³⁸ 'Long ago, God restrained people's thirst for revenge by limiting retaliation to what the attacker had done to them: "an eye for an eye", and so on. ³⁹ But I challenge you to drop the idea of retaliation altogether. Don't even hit back when someone attacks you. ⁴⁰ If someone steals from you, offer more. ⁴¹ If someone forces you to help, do more than they demand. It's never crowded on the extra mile. ⁴² Hold lightly to the things you possess. Give and lend freely to everyone who asks you for something.

⁴³ 'God's commandments tell you to love your neighbour. Over the years, people have added, "and hate your enemy". ⁴⁴ My challenge is to love your enemies too, and pray for God's blessing on those who persecute you. ⁴⁵ That's how you show the world you're God's children. God doesn't have favourites; each day he pours out his blessings on everyone, not just those we happen to like. ⁴⁶⁻⁴⁸ How can God commend you if you simply love those who love you back or those who are like you? Everyone does that. God's standards are so much higher than that, and he calls you to become like him.'