

Who is Jesus Christ?

The Hook: Who is Jesus ... really?

This Episode will help you:

1. Understand the historical discussion surrounding Jesus and the various portraits of him
2. Understand that Jesus is truly God and truly man, and that his whole life is offered to us as a gift from God out of love.
3. Understand that Jesus is the revelation of who God is and who we are.

Key Points

1. Jesus— An invention?
 - 1.1. “The real Jesus is not the historical Jesus, and the historical Jesus is not the real Jesus” (John Meier).
 - 1.2. Debunking the Myth, the Religious Guru, and the Political Rebel
 - 1.3. The real Jesus is the Jesus of History, and the Jesus of History is the Jesus Christ the Church believes in
2. The Scandal of Jesus
 - 2.1. Point 1: He is God
 - 2.1.1. Buddha, Moses, Mohammed, Socrates, etc., never claimed to be God
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 - 2.3.1. In Jesus’ life, we see both sides of his one story: his human side and his divine side.
 - 2.3.2. How do we make sense of Jesus as truly God and truly man? Jesus’ Life—his whole life—is God’s gift of self-giving love.
3. Jesus is the Revelation of God and Man
 - 3.1. God’s Self-Revelation of Love
 - 3.2. “Who is Jesus?”

Key Words

Real Jesus	Lord	Hypostatic Union
Historical Jesus	Gospel	Son of Man
Jesus of History	Scandal of Jesus	Savior
Historical Method	“I AM” (Yahweh)	Self-emptying
Criteria	Torah	Self-surrender
Jesus	Solidarity with us, sinners	Word of God
Christ (Messiah)	Truly God	Revelation
Jesus Christ	Truly Man	Self-Revelation
Son of God	Incarnation	Love itself (substantial love)

AN ABBREVIATED EXPOSITION OF THE OUTLINE

1. JESUS— AN INVENTION?

No serious thinker or historian could deny that Jesus existed as an historical person. There is too much early and solid evidence to consider any other possibility. Of course, there are people who can cast doubt on anything in history. There's one "scholar" who claims that Charlemagne never existed and that two centuries of history is actually a forgery. But it doesn't mean that such claims should be taken serious or that they're based on historical evidence. The question among serious thinkers therefore is not whether Jesus existed, but *who* is Jesus? Who is this figure? What can we know about him?

1.1. "The real Jesus is not the historical Jesus, and the historical Jesus is not the real Jesus" (John Meier: famous internationally-acclaimed scholar). Fundamental distinctions:

1.1.1. "Real Jesus" — what do we mean when we say, the "real anyone"? It refers to the total reality of a person: everything this person ever said, did, experienced throughout their whole life. This is *not* what historians claim to be giving us when they offer a portrayal of Jesus. Even today, could someone offer an account of the "real you"? Would anyone want that anyways? Accounts of someone's life are always 'highlights' and presentations of major events that define a figure. How do we understand what defines who Jesus is? What is the figure that emerges in this or that portrait?

1.1.2. The "historical Jesus" refers to "the Jesus which can be recovered, reconstituted, reconstructed, by applying the modern tools of historical research to ancient sources." The historical Jesus is reconstructed based on *criteria*. "Criteria" refer to "rules for judgment regarding what counts for evidence and how that evidence is to be weighed." Criteria are the main point of divergence in the different portraits of Jesus.

1.2. **Debunking the Myth, the Religious Guru, and the Political Rebel:** There are two main ways of applying the historical method: (1) Initially, the enterprise of constructing a purely historical Jesus, which began in the Enlightenment, derived from the guiding philosophical assertion that there can be no such thing as God made man. This idea guided the definition of 'criteria.' Inevitably, this resulted in pieces of floating evidence (whatever fit their criteria), without a unifying figure emerging from that evidence. In most cases, the figure they "read out of" whatever evidence fits their criteria reflects the scholar (E.g., the existentialist Bultmann found that, after applying his criteria, Jesus was an existentialist; the pacifist liberal Harnack found that, after applying his criteria, Jesus was a pacifist liberal, etc). This approach continues today among certain "scholars" and in popular venues, like the History Channel (now, rebranded "History"), where a Jesus who was born and raised in New York appears in the Middle East in the first century for the series, then gladly returns home after the show to take a cruise paid for by the networks' \$20+ Billion in earnings. The tail wags the dog in these cases because their philosophy determines the criteria, the criteria determine the portrait, and the portrait reflects their philosophy.

(2) This first tradition has rightly been criticized (cf. the famous critique of Albert Schweitzer). Today, certain responsible usages of the historical method develop universal and objective criteria for ancient sources. What we find when applying the historical method objectively is that Jesus as myth, religious guru, and/or political rebel falls flat because it leaves too much evidence unaccounted for. How did this "pacifist religious guru" get himself crucified, for example? How did this "political rebel" have such an impact by his death, so as to create such an historical 'splash' that Christianity spread to the corners of the Roman Empire within a few decades, etc.? And so forth. The figure that emerges from a responsible and objective use of the historical method is someone who presents us with insurmountable tensions that cannot be explained within the boundaries of the historical method alone. If we integrate all the evidence objectively, we find that the "historical Jesus" has irreducible tensions that points beyond himself towards the "Jesus of history," or the "real Jesus," which remains beyond the methodological scope of a strictly historical method.

1.3. **The real Jesus is the Jesus of History, and the Jesus of History is the Jesus Christ the Church believes in:** The portrait of Jesus offered in the New Testament is the only way to make sense of all the evidence available; it's the only way that Jesus makes any sense at all. Only there does he have the greatness needed to explain how he could be the originator of the explosive impact and events that he triggered, such as the

explosive faith and response of the early Church, among others. What this means is that a responsible use of the historical method points beyond itself to a figure that cannot be fully understood within the scope of that method, but which can be received by faith, since Jesus, as presented in the Gospels, is not merely an historical figure, but is himself *God's "Good News" to mankind* (the very meaning of the word "Gospel"). To summarize: the 'real Jesus' is the 'Jesus of history' (the one who lived in history, who really existed, who really had an impact in history, as distinct from "the historical Jesus" – i.e. a reconstruction, etc.), and it is *this* Jesus that is presented to us in the Gospels and which is proclaimed in the Church.

2. THE SCANDAL OF JESUS

But now the gaping question faces us. Now that we can't comfort ourselves with the 'neat' compartmentalizations of Jesus as a guru, religious revolutionary, and so forth, Who is this Jesus? Who is the figure that emerges from the Gospels?

2.1. Point 1: He is God

While I wouldn't start here in a traditional Christology course, this is the place to start with popular culture since this is the main point that everyone misses. Jesus is God. Take that in for a moment. That's the most astonishing claim ever made.

2.1.1. Buddha, Moses, Mohammed, Socrates, etc., never claimed to be God

No religious founder or founder of a philosophical school has ever claimed to be the Absolute in person. Buddha claimed to discover the path to enlightenment; Moses claimed to be the messenger of the Lord's Word; Mohammed claimed to be the prophet who guides the people in the revelation God made to him through the angel. These figures claim to be a guide towards the Truth, or to have received a message from the Truth. But none of them claimed to be *the* truth itself.

2.1.2. Jesus says: "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6). I'm using this line representatively, since Jesus' life abounds with disclosures of his divine identity. I want to make sure you understand the magnitude of this kind of claim. *Imagine a big scale.* On one side of the scale, I want you to picture the entire universe, the world, everything. Then, I want you to not just picture the universe as it is now, but I want you to include in it the universe from its very beginning—all of history, the entirety of the past, *all that is or ever was*. How much does that weigh? Wait! We're not done yet. Now, I want you to add the weight of the entire future: *all that will be*. How much does it weigh now? — Jesus is saying that if we put him on the other side of the scale, like a stone, the full weight of that scale would tip over to his side. Yes, Jesus—an infinitesimally small "speck" in this ever expanding universe, who lived on this earth (of all places!), in Palestine (of all regions!), in the first century (of all times!)—is claiming to 'weigh' more than the world. He is claiming to be the *Truth of God himself*. You see, Christianity is not about a specific view of the world or of truth. It's the breath-taking claim that *this person* is the "truth" in his very person. That He is the Absolute, in stark contrast to all that is relative. That He is the very One who sustains all things, the very source of all that is. Jesus claims that his human "I" is the very "I" of God himself, of Yahweh, the God of Israel (the great "I AM" of Exodus 3:14). No human being has ever made such an astonishing claim. Who can coherently say such a thing?! ... except God himself? (And, as if by humor, in the face of such shocking claims, we hear Jesus say: "They hated me without cause," Jn 15:25)!

2.1.3. He is the Messiah (Christ) and Lord. We don't just get Jesus making these kinds of astonishing claims in the Gospel of John, as if John penned them in; no, they abound in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), and in every aspect of Jesus' life; the difference is that they're typically presented in a different 'sign system' that reveals his identity to a Jewish audience, and in the language of Israel's Scriptures. Take, for example, Mark 2, when Jesus *forgives the sins* of a paralytic. This is a *scandal*! We hear: "Why does this man speak this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mk 2:7). To forgive sins is to reconcile someone with God himself; and so the Scriptures are clear: *only* God can forgive sins (e.g., Ex 24:7; Is 43:25, 44:22, etc.). *But that's the point!* — Or again, elsewhere: Jesus places himself above the Torah as the sovereign authority on the meaning of God and of creation. The Torah—that is, the first five books of the Bible which contain the Law that God gave Moses—is the highest authority that the Jewish people have. It is the Word of God which,

coming from God alone, is the authoritative interpretation of God and creation. For Jesus, who was a faithful Jew, to place himself on equal or higher footing than the Torah is to claim equal footing with the God who gave them the Torah. We hear: “What is this? A new teaching with authority! (Mk 1:27).” It is precisely his quality of divine power and authority that leaves people in amazement, wonder, and shock (Cf. Mt 7:28f, etc). — Another important example is when in Mark 4, we find Jesus calming the storm: “Peace! Be still! And the wind ceased, and there was great calm” (Mk 4:39). As tremendous as this miracle is, the point here is not the miracle itself, but the attention it calls to Jesus’ identity. The disciples became awestruck by this and said: “Who then is this, who calms the winds and the waves?” (Mk 4); the reference would be clear to any first century Jewish reader, because commanding the wind and the sea is reserved for God alone in Israel’s Scriptures, as exhibited (among other places) in Ps. 107:17-30, in language that the evangelist surely has in mind as he tells the story of the disciples “crying to the Lord in their distress” (Ps 107:28) and Jesus awakening and “hushing the storm” while “the billows of the sea were stilled” (Ps. 107:29). When understood in the context of Israel’s Scriptures about God, it’s perfectly clear that Jesus is claiming: “I am He—the One who created you and sustains your very being!”

2.2. Point 2: He is Man

2.2.1. Solidarity with us, sinners: Throughout the Gospels, there is always a tension at play. On the one hand, we see one who commands the authority and power of God—indeed, who is God; but on the other hand, we see him identify himself with sinners and the outcast. We see him emptying himself to be in solidarity with them, even to the point of needing to pray for his own life. The disciples had to face the paradox that the one who commanded the seas was brought to his knees to pray for his life. *Who is this?!* In his baptism, we see this tension at play in a special way. On the one hand, the Father reveals that this is his beloved Son, and the Holy Spirit descends upon him — it is an epiphany of God as Trinity, a manifestation of Jesus’ divine identity; on the other hand, he is baptized with the rest of sinners, not because he is a sinner himself (‘like us in all things except sin,’ Heb. 4:15), but in order to descend into solidarity with us sinners; in order to identify himself with us, with our plight.

2.2.2. Reduced to Prayer: the Garden of Gethsemane

The tension reaches another climactic point in the Garden of Gethsemane, when we see Jesus pray for his life, while nonetheless following the Father’s will to the very end. How can he be God and yet be reduced to praying for his life? *Who is this?!* And if he is God, who is he praying to? Is this prayer play-acting? The Gospels don’t offer us a solution in the form of a theological treatise (if they did, we probably wouldn’t read it anyways!). It gives a response in narrative terms. In Jesus, we find a character who is *divine enough* to personally work what only God can work, and *yet*, exists among us in a state that we recognize as completely human — a state, we could say, of self-emptied solidarity (self-emptied of his power, of his divine majesty) that he, like us, can be reduced to prayer for his life and be resigned to one’s prayer not being heard (at least seemingly). Again, we are prompted to ask: *Who is this?!*

2.3. Point 3: The Cross is the Focal Point of Jesus’ Life

The Gospels make clear that the Cross is the focal point of Jesus’ life. Everything leads to the Cross, and receives their definitive meaning in the Cross. It’s the reason he was sent by the Father. Why? Because on the Cross we understand that Jesus’ life—his whole life—is God’s gift of love to us, a gift which is greater than death, a gift that defines what life itself means.

2.3.1. In Jesus’ life, we see both sides of his one story: his human side and his divine side. On the one hand, Jesus was hungry, was tempted to sin, grew in stature and wisdom. Jesus wept. He is as truly human as you and me. On the other hand, he was entrusted with the whole task of saving the world and was sent into the world by the Father in order to save it. And only God can bear the weight of the world. Only God can save us. And so he is not only called “Son of Man” “Son of David” and so on, but also “Son of God” and “My Lord and my God” and “Savior” and so on. The eternal Son of God truly became a human being in Jesus Christ, without ever ceasing to be the Son of God. His

body is truly God's body. Jesus' beating heart is truly the beating heart of the eternal Son of God. In Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God—who, as God, is beyond space and time, omnipotent, etc.—suffered as man.

2.3.2. Why would God do this? What kind of God is so compassionate, so loving, that he would empty himself somehow of his divine power, and dwell among us as a human being? How do we make sense of Jesus as truly God and truly man? In the earliest Gospel, the Gospel of Mark, we read in Chapter 10, as perhaps the definitive summary statement of the work of Jesus, ***“For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk. 10.42).*** Jesus' Life—his whole life—is presented in all the Gospels as God's loving gift of himself, which receives its definitive fulfillment in the total self-surrender on the Cross. This self-surrender on the Cross is the final act of a life that spent itself in ever greater self-effacing service to all human beings (Lk 22:27; Jn 13:3-17). It is on the Cross—only on the Cross—that Jesus' life makes sense. It is here that we can finally see that his whole life is God's Word of love to us: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (Jn 3:16; cf. Rom 8:32). It is on the Cross, as his final and definitive act of love, that his identity is most loudly expressed. His Resurrection is God's proof to the world that the love he offered on the Cross is truly God's gift of himself. *“Who is Jesus?”* He is the God who became man in order to give his life for us. He is the God-become-man who is so loving that, as Gregory of Nazianzus said, “He is sold, and at a very low price – thirty pieces of silver – but redeems the world, and at a great cost: his own blood” (*Third Theological Oration*, 20).

3. JESUS IS THE REVELATION OF GOD AND MAN

What does everything that we have just said mean? Each of us has asked the big questions: *Why? What does life mean? What's my purpose? Why did this happen? Who am I?* And so forth. Life is a marketplace for searching hearts. It is in this context that we can step back for a moment and more clearly understand who Jesus is. In Jesus Christ, it is not we who, somehow, as if by a spiritual trip to the moon, found a way to wrangle our answers from God; rather, it is God himself who, emptied himself, and revealed to us who he is, and in doing so, revealed to us the answer to our deepest questions about our purpose and who we are. It is for this reason that the Son is also called ‘The Word of God’ in the New Testament (cf. Jn 1). He is the one who was sent by the Father to reveal the depths of God, to reveal God's own heart to us, and in doing so, he reveals to us who God is *and* our very purpose and meaning. In Jesus Christ, God reveals himself to us as he is in the intimate depths of his infinite Being; *and*, God also reveals to us who we are and our meaning. By becoming a human being, the eternal Son of God answers our deepest questions about God and ourselves.

3.1. God's Self-Revelation of Love. I want you to think about God for a moment. God is unique and mysterious, and so I know it will be difficult, but let's try all the same. When we think of God, we acknowledge that he alone exists of himself; that he is truth, plain and simple; that he is pure goodness; that he is pure beauty, and that we should serve and worship him. Okay, good. — But what happens now, however, when God sends his eternal Son to the earth in the form of a Child? How are we supposed to understand this? We must understand what God is saying to us through this. He is telling us something about himself; in all that this Child is and is to become, the youth, the man, the teacher and worker of miracles, keeping silence before the judge, scourged, mocked, rejected, crying out in his abandonment by God on the Cross, buried, and living forever after having risen from the dead—*all this is God revealing himself*. (Read CCC, ##515-516!). All of this is God saying: *this is who I am! This is what I'm like!* All of this is God laying his heart bare before us; it is God giving us the gift of his own interiority, of his very self. Christianity, wrote Leo the Great, bishop of Rome in the fifth century, is a “religion founded on the mystery of the cross of Christ” (Sermon 82.6; PL 54:426). In the Cross, God speaks his loudest Word, precisely because it is there that he most fully reveals who He is and who we are. God reveals himself precisely *as* love poured out to the very end (Jn 13:1). God reveals himself *as love itself* within his own eternal life (cf. 1 Jn 4:16); and, in revealing himself *as love itself*, he pours out that very love for us, so that we can share in his own life.

3.2. “Who is Jesus?” In answering this question, we realize that as this figure emerges before our eyes, he provokes decision (cf. Matt. 10:37-39). There is no way of offering a ‘disinterested’ or ‘merely passive’ response to this question, precisely because long before you asked “Who is Jesus?,” God poured out his whole life out of love for you. And so, as you lift your eyes to him and ask, “Who are you?,” you realize that his eyes have long since (and always have) beheld you in his gaze, and that he looks at you precisely as the one for whom he offered his life. And he returns the question: “Who do you say that I am?” (Matt. 16:15).

[HERE ENDS THE OUTLINE]

DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

REAL JESUS

HISTORICAL JESUS

JESUS OF HISTORY

HISTORICAL METHOD

CRITERIA

JESUS

CHRIST (MESSIAH)

JESUS CHRIST

SON OF GOD

LORD

GOSPEL

SCANDAL OF JESUS

“I AM” (YAHWEH)

TORAH

SOLIDARITY WITH US, SINNERS

TRULY GOD

TRULY MAN

INCARNATION

HYPOSTATIC UNION

SON OF MAN

SAVIOR

SELF-EMPTYING

SELF-SURRENDER

WORD OF GOD

REVELATION

SELF-REVELATION

LOVE ITSELF (SUBSTANTIAL LOVE)