

There is an ancient figure that nearly all children in Britain (and elsewhere) learn about in school. The teachings that carry his name are imparted to them, yet scholars are not even sure that they were his teachings. The earliest written evidence about this man was produced centuries after he lived and some question whether he even existed. Children learn about an idea named after him without the opportunity to question if he was really responsible for it. This ancient figure is Pythagoras. The idea is Pythagoras' Theorem. Several scholars suggest that Pythagoras was not responsible for the theorem named after him. They argue that it had already been developed and understood by others. Some of the ideas associated with Pythagoras are thought to have originated with the 'Pythagorean School' that existed after his own time. A number of historians argue that we cannot really know anything about Pythagoras at all. I don't expect that mathematicians who write about the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle are sent angry emails from people arguing that they are wrong to attribute the theorem to Pythagoras. Those scholars who write about Jesus, however, frequently receive comments from people denying his existence. Most scholars of ancient history accept that we have more evidence about Jesus than about Pythagoras. The earliest surviving references to Pythagoras were written centuries after he is said to have lived. In the case of Jesus, the gap is about ten to twenty years. I am not arguing that everything written about Jesus is true

The New Testament is made up of 27 books, some of which draw on earlier writings or oral traditions. Most or all of it was written in the Middle East, southern Europe or south-west Asia. It was written in Greek, a language that was often used for international communication in that part of the world. As Jesus spoke Aramaic, some of his teachings were translated into Greek. There are some things on which the writers agree and there are other issues on which they seem to have different views — such as the precise meaning of Jesus.

What can we know about Jesus? Some scholars believe that most of the material in the gospels is broadly true, though not every detail is true. Others are prepared to accept only the most solid facts about Jesus' life: that he was a controversial figure, was known as a healer and teacher, was involved in a conflict about the Jerusalem Temple and was crucified by the Romans. There are several areas, however, on which most scholars agree. Some of them are particularly worth bearing in mind in this season of Lent which in itself commemorates the time when Jesus sought to see his mission unfold. Who am I he asked Who is he? We ask. What did he say? what did he do?

- Jesus was a Jew. This is the most certain fact of all — and the one that has caused the most inconvenience in a way. Christian rulers persecuted Jews over centuries, often backed up by church leaders. They struggled to explain away the awkward reality that Jesus was Jewish. We have little chance of understanding Jesus if we do not recognise this. His life, faith and ethics cannot be separated from his Jewishness. His arguments with other Jewish groups were not attacks on Judaism but debates within it.

- Jesus was initially a follower of John the Baptist. Jesus seems to have started out- as a follower of John the Baptist, who lived in the wilderness and called on people to repent of their sins, apparently inspired by the Jewish prophets of the past. John offered baptism as a sign of

repentance and forgiveness. Jesus was baptised by John. However, he later became the leader of his own movement. John was executed before Jesus' movement reached its height. Scholars are divided over whether Jesus saw himself as continuing John's movement or taking a step away from it. Anthony Le Donne, argues that Jesus' commitment to non-violence separated him from John. Jesus was known as a healer and teacher and socialised with outcasts.

Jesus acquired a reputation for teaching, for healing people and for exorcising people possessed by demons. He was also known for socialising with outcasts. Some of this reputation reflects the language and understandings of the culture in which Jesus lived. We don't tend to talk much about 'casting out demons' today, although mental and physical suffering remain very real. When reading about things like this, we need to avoid two temptations: taking everything literally or assuming that the understanding of our own culture is superior. Jesus' words cannot really be separated from his actions; the two went together. Many of his teachings were spoken in the midst of action. Sometimes no opportunity for considered reflection in the constant maelstrom set around him. Jesus taught in several ways, including parables (brief stories designed to make particular points and encourage listeners to think). He said that the two most important requirements are to love God and to love our neighbours. Phrases that come up several times in his teaching include the saying 'the last will be first and the first last' (or variations on it). Central to Jesus' teachings was the announcement of a new reality termed the 'kingdom of God' or 'reign of God'.

• Jesus was crucified by the Roman authorities. Jesus was sentenced to death by Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea. He seems to have been accused of claiming to be the rightful king of Judea, thus challenging the authority of the Roman Emperor. The Roman-backed Jewish authorities in Judea seem to have colluded in his arrest and execution, perhaps playing a leading part in it. However, it is difficult to determine who was responsible for what. Some of the gospels were written in the midst of Christian conflict with Judaism and some were keen to put most of the blame for Jesus' death onto Jewish leaders. The tendency has continued. For centuries, 'the Jews' have been accused of killing Jesus. They did not. Jesus was killed by the Roman Empire. Even -if a number of Jews were involved in his death, this was most likely to have been Jewish leaders who had an interest in preserving the status quo. Jesus was as Jewish as his opponents. To blame Jesus' death on 'the Jews' is as bigoted as blaming terrorism today on 'the Muslims', even when there are Muslims among the victims and most Muslims reject terrorism.

• Jesus' followers believed he had risen from the dead. A belief in Jesus' resurrection developed quickly after his death. This was based on the experience of a number of his followers. This was a genuine belief: people don't allow themselves to be martyred for something they have made up. You might believe that Jesus' resurrection occurred as an objective event. Or you might think that those who experienced it were undergoing a purely internal psychological experience. Despite the efforts of certain people on both sides of the debate, historical evidence cannot lead us to conclusions about the truth or otherwise of the resurrection. People continue to experience Jesus today. What you make of these experiences is, of course, up to you.

• Jesus lived at a time when politics and religion could not be separated. It is often said that Jesus' message was 'spiritual' rather than 'political'. There is a basic problem not only with this claim but even with this language. 'Religion' and 'politics' are our categories, the way we describe life in the twenty-first century. In Jesus' society, there was not a section of life labelled 'religious'. Religion concerned the whole of life. It was a public matter. Prior to the seventeenth

century, there was effectively no concept of separating religion from politics. Was Jesus' teaching religious or political? Imagine asking this question to Jesus' disciples, his opponents, the High Priest, Pontius Pilate or the passers-by who heard him speaking. They would not have understood what you were talking about.

For the best part of two thousand years, Christian churches have produced neat statements and triumphant declarations, setting out their views of the world in finely structured formats. Often, they have forced others to accept these beliefs, bullying, bribing, beating and burning people who disagreed. They have justified this behaviour in the name of Jesus. At times, they have discouraged people from opening the New Testament and reading the words of Jesus for themselves. Jesus' teachings are challenging, provocative and awkward. They don't fit into neat categories and well-structured theories. In the pages of the Bible, you can find a Jesus who socialised with outcasts, criticised the rich and powerful, broke the sexual conventions of his day, was rude to his own mother and was a frequent cause of confusion even to his followers. He almost never gave a direct answer to a question, often answering with another question and coming at issues sideways on. His teachings were designed to make people think, not to shut down thinking; to encourage questions, not to provide every answer; to challenge basic assumptions and to encourage his listeners to look differently at their lives and how they related to others. He's like a socially awkward guest at a respectable dinner party, making people feel uncomfortable but too important to be asked to leave. Jesus spoke with people in the midst of their everyday lives. He talked about their concerns: food, friendship, money, marriage, love, work, morality and prejudice. He lived in a culture vastly different to our own in many ways, but in which people felt many of the same emotions, doubts, conflicts and struggles that are part of our own lives. Today, people who might have a very polarised argument about whether Jesus is the son of God can have a much more productive discussion about the content of his teachings. I am convinced that Jesus' teachings can still speak to people from all walks of life, regardless of whether they are religious or whether they have academic training. Of course, we have a great deal to learn from academics, particularly those who can tell us about the historical back-ground and the culture in which Jesus taught. But the Bible does not belong to scholars, just as it does not belong to clergy or even to Christians. It is up to you to decide how to take on board what you have read and — if you want to do so — how to apply it in your own life. , We all need to look at Jesus' teachings by beginning with the insights of people reading them for the first time. These can come as a shock to people who are used to hearing the passages in church and who assume that a particular interpretation is the 'obvious' or 'common sense' one. We need shocking.