



The Historical Jesus: Vindication, Witness, and the Development of Early Christological Understanding

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Abstract

This article addresses the “quest for the historical Jesus” by examining Jesus of Nazareth via historical and theological lenses. It posits that any realistic reconstruction of Jesus must account for the dual nature of the evidence: historically placed traditions in the canonical Gospels and interpretive claims moulded by early Christian belief in Jesus' divine vindication. The study places Jesus in first-century Second Temple Judaism and examines the quick rise of a movement that reinterpreted his life, death, and resurrection as salvation. The research examines Jesus' vindication through resurrection, non-Christian verification, theological content of the four Gospels, and pedagogical and ethical teachings. It explores love, grace, and discipleship, as well as the Matthean narrative's silence on his early life. The study emphasises the conflict between historical reconstruction and theological meaning-making, showing that Jesus cannot be reduced to historical or doctrinal categories without distortion. The article finds that Jesus is best understood as a historically grounded figure whose significance was rapidly reinterpreted within early Christian communities, reshaping his identity and legacy. This interaction between historical memory and theological development continues to shape contemporary studies and the search for the historical Jesus.

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Introduction

The historical Jesus is crucial to modern biblical studies, theology, and history. It attempts to separate historical reconstructions of Jesus of Nazareth from early Christian theological interpretations. Because materials are intricately entangled with faith-based convictions, retrospective interpretation, and literary-theological shaping, this process is difficult and contentious. Any attempt to find the “historical Jesus” must balance historical-critical study with confessional assertions in primary texts.

This investigation is tense methodologically. Historians use multiple attestation, contextual plausibility, and coherence with first-century Second Temple Judaism to reconstruct previous occurrences. In contrast, the canonical Gospels portray Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, whose life, death, and resurrection are salvific. The sources are early Christian theological narratives, making historical reconstruction difficult.

Thus, to find the historical Jesus, one must critically examine the canonical Gospels, non-canonical traditions, and Greco-Roman and Jewish historiography. Each account reconstructs Jesus' life and impact differently. External sources provide little but valuable evidence of his presence and execution under Roman power, but the Gospels provide the most detailed stories, drawn from post-resurrection faith. This raises fundamental problems concerning historical reliability, authorial purpose, and early Christian memory and belief.

The distinction between historical occurrence and theological meaning is another aspect of this study. Even while Jesus' baptism, affiliation with John the Baptist, declaration of the Kingdom of God, and crucifixion are historically probable, their meaning is still debated. These events were revelations of divine involvement in history for early Christians. Reconstructing history must account for both the events and the interpretive frameworks used to understand and convey them.

The issue also centers on Jesus' identity. Was Jesus a Jewish teacher, apocalyptic prophet, social reformer, or the incarnate Son of God, as subsequent Christian belief claims? distinct scholarly traditions have stressed distinct parts of his life and teaching, resulting in diverse Jesus images in modern scholarship. This diversity of interpretations reflects the complexity of the evidence and the methodological assumptions used to investigate the historical Jesus. This article examines Jesus' historical and theological portrayal, including his vindication in early Christian belief, external historical references, the Gospel narratives, his teaching methods, the content and purpose of his message, and early Christian tradition's doctrinal implications. It

also examines Gospel narrative gaps, particularly in his early life, and their theological implications.

The study integrates historical-critical insight with textual and theological research to give a coherent framework for understanding Jesus' historical and theological interpretation. Instead of reducing Jesus to a historical construct or treating the Gospel texts as uncritical historical reportage, the goal is to examine how history, memory, and belief shaped early Christian identity.

Vindication of Jesus: From Condemnation to Resurrection Faith

The earliest narratives about Jesus of Nazareth show a transition point between his public ministry, his judicial execution, and the rise of a post-crucifixion movement centred on his importance (Andrews, 2022). Certain Second Temple Judaism religious authorities accused Jesus of theological dispute and challenges to divine unity, legal authority, and covenantal integrity. Some considered his claim of deep familial relationship with God, authority to forgive, and implicit elevation of his status in the divine system offensive. Such arguments could be interpreted as undermining God's single sovereignty, inviting blasphemy charges in a monotheistic religion.

Jesus' crucifixion under Roman rule was political and religious (Buzguța, 2024). Most Roman crucifixions were reserved for public order, revolt, or sedition threats. The collaboration between Jewish authority and Roman administration in Jesus' execution shows religious concern and imperial control. Jesus' death can be seen in the context of Roman judicial practices and local religious disputes, not an independent theological event. The meaning of this tragedy changed drastically in early Christian societies. The resurrection provided the basis for reassessing Jesus' death. The crucifixion changed from divine rejection or judicial defeat to a vital part of a divinely designed salvific story (Margan, 2025). Early Christian witness describes the resurrection as a declaration that God had clearly confirmed Jesus' identity and purpose. Theologically, resurrection believing reversed human authorities' verdict. Vindication is God's recognition of Jesus' power and identity over human judgement (Verster, 2023). Early Christian proclamation constantly presents the resurrection as God's acceptance of Jesus, overturning crucifixion's condemnation. This interpretation shifts Jesus from a failed claimant to one whose apparent failure creates the ground for exaltation, which is important for understanding early Christology. The resurrection myth turns historical tragedy into religious triumph.

This is linked to early Christian belief in Jesus' elevation. Jesus is elevated to divine authority and glory in early tradition, rather than being a crucified prophet or martyr (Jones, 2025a). This exaltation language shows Jesus' theological participation in divine sovereignty. It marks a change from remembering Jesus as a historical teacher to confessing him as Lord. This is crucial to early Christian identity and worship.

Pentecost traditions in early Christian communities are seen as experiential proof of Jesus' presence and authority (Lecompte, 2024). The announcement that supernatural spirit activity followed the resurrection suggests that Jesus' movement spread through perceived divine empowerment. In this context, the early Christian community saw itself as living with Jesus' vindication.

External (Non-Christian) Sources and Historical Corroboration

Beyond Christian literature, Jesus of Nazareth history is studied. The canonical Gospels provide the most full account of his life and work, while first- and early-second-century non-Christian sources provide chosen attestations. These references put Jesus and the early Christian movement within Roman and Jewish historiography, verifying baseline historical claims and revealing external perception restrictions.

Jewish historian Flavius Josephus is regularly quoted. Late in the first century, Josephus mentions Jesus in his *Antiquities of the Jews*. One verse depicts Jesus as a smart man who did tremendous deeds and Pontius Pilate executed him. Numerous critical investigations agree that Josephus made a basic allusion to Jesus, however altered, notwithstanding scholarly disagreement about Christian interpolations. According to Andrews (2024), Jewish historiography recalls Jesus as a significant figure who died under Roman power. Tacitus' *Annals* mention Christus, the founder of Christianity, and places his crucifixion under Pontius Pilate under Tiberius. Its harsh tone and clear difference between Roman historiography and Christian belief make Tacitus' account important. His reference reveals that early second-century Roman elites believed Christianity emanated from a Judean figure executed and whose adherents survived imperial persecution.

The letters of Bithynia-Pontus governor Pliny the Younger to Emperor Trajan about Christian legal treatment provide more proof. Christian groups worshipped Christ and made ethical commitments, according to Pliny. Pliny did not directly describe Jesus, but his evidence demonstrates the movement's rapid growth and Roman province devotional habits.

These external sources establish that Jesus was a real Judean figure, that Pontius Pilate executed him, and that a movement using his name formed swiftly and endured. Theological concerns like resurrection and Jesus' life are not covered in these writings. Thus, they are better for verifying Jesus' existence and execution than reconstructing his biography or doctrine. These limited and indirect sources highlight the methodological challenge of discovering the historical Jesus. Roman and Jewish historiography rarely documented provincial religious teachers unless they had a large political or social impact. These brief anecdotes should not be taken as a critique of Jesus' significance, but as a sign of ancient historiography's biases. Early Jewish objections to Christianity were often interpretative rather than historical. Some traditions accuse Jesus of deception or illegitimacy, but early Christians affirm his innocence and heavenly vindication. Jesus's confluence of historical memory and theological conviction led to immediate controversy.

Jesus' influence is indirectly shown by the Christian movement's survival and growth during Jewish and Roman persecution. The sudden development of a community that considered a crucified figure divine requires a major event. External sources support Jesus' historical momentum and early interpretive frameworks but not theology.

The Four Gospels as Theological-Historical Narratives

In the study of the historical Jesus, the canonical Gospels are narrative accounts, theological interpretations, and communal testimonials of faith (Jipp, 2024). They are not chronological chronologies like modern historical biographies. Instead, they are well-structured literary works moulded by early Christian communities' theological and pastoral concerns. This makes them essential and methodologically difficult for historical reconstruction. Gospel literature emphasises interpretation. Each Gospel writer picks, arranges, and frames Jesus's material according to theological emphasis rather than chronological order (Blomberg, 2022). Their historical relevance is not diminished, but it requires great methodological discernment to distinguish between underlying traditions about Jesus and their interpretive lenses. The Gospels are mediated historical memory, therefore theological interpretations are inseparable from recalled events.

The Matthew Gospel emphasises Jesus' fulfilment of Jewish scripture and prophetic expectation. Its narrative structure often links Jesus' life to older Hebrew traditions, placing him in a continuous redemptive history. According to Menn (2025), Jesus is the fulfilment of Israel's

covenantal tale. In this perspective, Jesus is portrayed as a messianic figure whose identity is understandable within Jewish eschatological hope but has more meaning. Mark's Gospel, the oldest written, is more urgent and dramatic. It shows Jesus as a powerful character who suffers and is rejected. Conflict, misunderstanding, and secrecy lead to the crucifixion. This framework gradually reveals Jesus' identity, culminating in the passion narrative. Mark emphasises the conflict between heavenly power and human rejection, making the crucifixion crucial to Jesus' message (Margan, 2025).

Luke's Gospel is more universal. It places Jesus in a historical and social context and emphasises compassion, inclusivity, and marginalised communities. The tale shows Jesus' socially transforming message through contacts with marginalised people. Luke also includes a second volume that traces the early Christian movement, linking the historical Jesus to the church's growth (Blomberg 2022).

The style and theology of John's Gospel vary. It uses expanded discourses and symbolic language to reflect and explain Jesus' identity. Instead of parables or aphorisms, it highlights revelatory "signs" and unambiguous statements about Jesus' connection with God. This Gospel shows Jesus as divine in a more developed Christological view. The narrative framework emphasises religious content over chronology.

The four Gospels portray a complex picture of Jesus (Jo,2022). They represent early Christianity's various interpretive frameworks and overlapping traditions. This variety affects historical approach. On one side, several distinct traditions support certain essential components of the Jesus tradition. However, theological structuring of these narratives demands serious scrutiny to avoid confounding interpretation with historical reporting. Thus, acknowledging that the Gospels are biased is methodologically crucial. They come from communities that believed Jesus was the risen Lord, and their accounts reflect this. The resurrection belief organises how Jesus' early existence is remembered and presented (Jones, 2025b). This does not make the Gospels historically worthless, but rather requires a sophisticated analysis that considers their historical and theological importance. This makes the Gospels narrative-theological constructs based on remembered tradition. The memories of Jesus' sayings, deeds, and experiences are preserved and interpreted in light of post-Easter beliefs. This interpretation echoes early Christian belief that Jesus' historical events could only be completely understood in light of their divine significance (Groothuis, 2022). The Gospels provide historical data and insight into early Christianity's interpretation.

Jesus' Teaching Methodology

Teaching is one of Jesus of Nazareth's most distinctive public ministry activities and provides important insight into his communicative style and social influence. He used adaptability, vivid imagery, and strategic engagement with varied audiences rather than a fixed pedagogical structure. His methodological flexibility allowed him to approach people of many social classes, educational backgrounds, and religious beliefs, making his message more memorable. Jesus taught mostly via parables. These short narratives from agriculture, household labour, business, and social connections were both illustrative and explanatory. Parables were typically multifaceted and required contemplation and interpretation. Their ability to link familiar experiences to moral and religious concepts made them powerful. This strategy made abstract concepts like divine governance, ethical behaviour, and human responsibility accessible without reducing them.

Besides parabolic discourse, Jesus used hyperbole and stunning rhetoric. These comments were meant to disturb cognition and morality, making listeners rethink their beliefs. Exaggerated language is meant to stress ethical urgency, not be taken literally. These ideas shattered complacency and encouraged radical rethinking of personal and societal values by increasing moral demands rhetorically.

Another important part of his instruction was rhetorical inquiry. Jesus typically asked contemplative questions to frame moral and existential dilemmas rather than giving plain didactic advice. This method made hearing an active process of discernment by giving the listener interpretive responsibility. This questioning helped students internalise ethical concepts rather than just comply.

Jesus taught through dialogue, especially with individuals and small groups. Personal, moral, and theological issues were addressed in these contextual relationships. Teaching in such situations was relational, reacting to students' life experiences and enquiries. Compared to official rabbinic training, this method shows pedagogical sensitivity and a customised approach to communication.

Another significant part of his strategy was object lessons. These used physical activities or observed conditions to convey symbolic meaning. Such behaviours were enacted parables that taught from experience. Tangible displays boosted verbal instruction and interpretation by activating numerous sensory and cognitive capabilities. This integration of action and speech

shows a holistic approach to communication that conveys meaning through word and behaviour. When analysing its social impact, Jesus' teaching's accessibility is crucial. His message resonated with rural labourers, fishermen, women, and children while upsetting religious professors and legal authorities. Its accessibility and profundity made it popular with ordinary people and controversial with religious authority. Simple expression hid intellectual depth that required sustained contemplation.

This teaching style works because it combines clarity and complexity. The teachings were initially understandable in familiar cultural circumstances. They encouraged serious theological and ethical reflection. The teachings provided instant moral advice and lasting interpretive involvement in early Christian communities due to their dual structure.

Jesus' Teaching Goal

Jesus' teaching was more than just imparting moral or religious precepts. He used his teaching to reshape first-century Jewish society's religious consciousness, ethical orientation, and communal identity. His teaching centers on the "Kingdom of God," a contemporary reality and eschatological expectation.

Jesus' message centers on the Kingdom of God. It symbolises the perceived in-breaking of supernatural authority into human history, threatening religious, social, and moral foundations. This statement is performative, requiring repentance, reorientation, and a new lifestyle. Immediacy and proximity suggest that the Kingdom is a current transformational reality that requires ethical and spiritual alignment.

A significant aspect of this teaching purpose is the critique of formalised religiosity when it becomes detached from ethical substance. Jesus' interactions with religious elites frequently expose tensions between external compliance with legal codes and internal dispositions of justice, mercy, and sincerity (Tambiyi, 2025). The concern is not with the law itself but with its distortion through performative or hypocritical practice. In this respect, the teaching function serves a corrective role, calling for a return to the foundational ethical intent underlying religious tradition.

Closely related to this is the redefinition of righteousness. Rather than being grounded primarily in ritual observance or institutional affiliation, righteousness is presented as an inward orientation characterised by integrity, compassion, and relational fidelity to God and others (Stack, 2024). This shift represents a significant reconfiguration of moral discourse within the

Jewish context of the time. The emphasis on interior transformation suggests that ethical life cannot be reduced to external regulation but must emerge from transformed intention and disposition.

The pedagogical aim of Jesus' teaching also extends to the formation of a distinct community of followers (Sciberras, 2024). His instruction is not directed solely at individuals but at the shaping of a collective identity marked by shared values and practices. This emerging community is characterised by mutual responsibility, forgiveness, humility, and service. The teaching therefore functions as a formative mechanism through which disciples are prepared for sustained participation in a mission-oriented movement that extends beyond his immediate presence.

In addition, Jesus' teaching contains an implicit eschatological dimension that shapes its urgency (Youvan, 2024). References to judgment, accountability, and future consummation of divine purposes introduce a temporal tension between present ethical action and future divine evaluation. This eschatological horizon reinforces the seriousness of moral decision-making and situates human action within a broader framework of ultimate significance. The teaching thus operates within a worldview in which present conduct carries enduring consequences.

Another important dimension is the self-referential character of Jesus' teaching (Máhrík & Králik, 2024). Unlike purely prophetic figures who direct attention exclusively to divine authority, Jesus frequently positions his own person as integral to the understanding and reception of his message. This does not necessarily imply later doctrinal formulations but indicates that his identity is closely linked to the message he proclaims. Responses to his teaching are therefore simultaneously responses to his person, blurring the distinction between message and messenger.

Ultimately, the purpose of Jesus' teaching can be understood as transformative rather than merely informative (Campbell, 2025). It seeks to initiate a reorientation of human life in relation to God, others, and the moral order of existence. This transformation involves cognitive, ethical, and communal dimensions, encompassing belief, behaviour, and belonging. The teaching is thus not an end in itself but a means of inaugurating a new mode of life shaped by the perceived reality of divine kingship.

In this sense, Jesus' teaching functions as both proclamation and formation. It announces a new reality while simultaneously shaping the type of individuals and communities capable of

embodying that reality. The integration of ethical instruction, theological vision, and communal formation underscores the comprehensive scope of his pedagogical intent.

Content of Jesus' Teachings

The content of Jesus' teaching is both thematically coherent and theologically expansive, centring on a set of interrelated ideas that collectively articulate his vision of divine-human relationship, ethical life, and eschatological expectation. At the core of this content is the concept of the Kingdom of God, which functions as the primary interpretive framework for understanding his message. This Kingdom is portrayed not as a purely political or territorial reality but as the active reign of God manifested in transformed human existence, ethical renewal, and anticipated eschatological fulfilment.

Within this overarching framework, ethical instruction occupies a central place. Jesus' teaching consistently emphasises love as the foundational principle governing human conduct. Love for God is presented as the highest commandment, inseparably linked with love for neighbour. This dual command establishes an ethical structure in which religious devotion and social responsibility are not separated but integrated. The neighbour is not defined narrowly by ethnic, religious, or social boundaries, but is redefined through acts of compassion and mercy, thereby expanding the moral horizon of obligation.

Forgiveness constitutes another key component of Jesus' ethical teaching (Umeanwe, 2025). It is presented not as an optional moral virtue but as a necessary expression of participation in divine life. The repeated emphasis on forgiveness underscores its role in restoring relationships and breaking cycles of retributive justice. This teaching challenges prevailing norms of reciprocal justice by introducing a model of moral restoration grounded in divine mercy rather than proportional retaliation.

Closely related to forgiveness is the emphasis on humility. Jesus frequently contrasts social patterns of status-seeking with a redefinition of greatness based on service (Paye, 2024). In this framework, honour is not achieved through dominance or public recognition but through self-giving action oriented toward the well-being of others. This inversion of conventional status hierarchies reflects a broader ethical reorientation in which social value is detached from power and reattached to service.

Justice for the marginalised also forms a significant dimension of his teaching content. Attention is repeatedly directed toward those excluded from social and religious privilege, including the

poor, the sick and socially marginalised groups. This concern is not merely philanthropic but reflects a theological assertion that divine attention is directed toward those at the periphery of social structures. The ethical implication is that participation in the Kingdom of God involves active solidarity with the vulnerable.

Prayer and faith constitute another major thematic area. Prayer is presented not as a performative religious act but as a relational engagement with God characterised by trust and dependence (Bakari & Napbut, 2025). The model of prayer emphasises intimacy with God, reliance on divine provision, and alignment with divine will. Faith, in turn, is depicted as trust in God's reliability and responsiveness, often contrasted with anxiety and self-reliance. Together, prayer and faith articulate spirituality grounded in relational dependence rather than autonomous control.

Eschatological teaching also plays a significant role in the content of Jesus' message (Cadoux, 2022). Imagery of judgment, accountability, and final separation between righteous and unrighteous reflects a worldview in which human actions are evaluated within a larger divine order. These teachings function both as warnings and as assurances, reinforcing moral seriousness while affirming ultimate justice. The use of narrative imagery, such as agricultural or pastoral metaphors, communicates these eschatological realities in accessible yet symbolically rich forms.

In addition to ethical and eschatological themes, Jesus' teaching includes significant self-referential content. He employs metaphorical expressions that associate his identity with essential spiritual realities, such as sustenance, guidance, and life-giving presence. These expressions do not function as abstract philosophical claims but as relational invitations, positioning engagement with him as central to participation in the divine life he proclaims. The integration of identity and message reinforces the inseparability of his person from the content of his teaching.

Collectively, the content of Jesus' teaching presents a coherent vision of transformed existence grounded in divine kingship, ethical reorientation, and relational trust (Reaves, 2024). It integrates personal spirituality, communal ethics, and eschatological hope into a unified framework that challenges existing religious and social structures while offering an alternative vision of human life under divine sovereignty.

The Doctrine of Jesus: Love, Grace, and Discipleship

The doctrinal dimension of Jesus' teaching can be understood as a coherent yet non-systematised framework centred on the reconfiguration of human relationship with God and neighbour. Unlike later theological formulations that sought doctrinal precision and conceptual categorisation, Jesus' teaching is expressed in narrative, aphoristic, and performative forms. Nevertheless, underlying these expressions is a discernible theological logic shaped by three interrelated emphases: love, grace, and discipleship. These elements collectively redefine the basis of religious belonging and ethical life within a first-century Jewish context.

At the foundation of this doctrinal vision is the primacy of love. Love of God is presented as the highest form of religious devotion, encompassing total commitment of heart, mind, and will. This is not conceived as a purely emotional disposition but as a comprehensive orientation of life. It entails loyalty, obedience, and relational fidelity. The inseparability of love for God and love for neighbour introduces a moral structure in which vertical and horizontal relationships are mutually constitutive. Ethical life is therefore not reducible to ritual correctness but is measured by relational integrity expressed through active concern for others (Hauerwas, 2025).

Within this framework, grace emerges as a defining principle of divine action. Jesus' engagement with individuals traditionally regarded as morally or socially marginalised reflects a radical inclusivity that challenges prevailing assumptions about worthiness and exclusion. Tax collectors, sinners, and those deemed ritually impure are incorporated into the sphere of divine concern, not on the basis of prior moral achievement but through responsive openness to divine initiative. This reorientation destabilises systems in which access to God is mediated primarily through status, ritual compliance, or social legitimacy.

Grace, in this sense, functions as an operative principle of divine generosity that precedes human merit (Reaves, 2024). This emphasis has significant implications for understanding religious identity, as it shifts the basis of belonging from achievement to reception. Participation in the divine reality proclaimed by Jesus is thus grounded in responsiveness rather than qualification, and in acceptance rather than attainment.

Discipleship constitutes the practical expression of this doctrinal vision. It is characterised by a radical call to commitment that involves reorientation of priorities, relationships, and identity. Discipleship is not merely intellectual assent to teaching but embodied participation in a way of life shaped by imitation and obedience (Johnson, 2024). The call to "follow" signifies a dynamic relationship in which allegiance to Jesus takes precedence over other social, familial, and

economic ties. This reordering of commitments reflects the transformative demands of the Kingdom framework.

A defining feature of this discipleship is the emphasis on service and humility. Authority within the community of followers is redefined in terms of self-giving action rather than hierarchical dominance. Greatness is measured not by control or recognition but by willingness to serve others (Rachmad, 2022). This inversion of conventional social values represents a structural critique of prevailing power dynamics and establishes an alternative model of communal life.

The doctrine of discipleship also involves a theology of suffering and self-denial (Lim & Yu, 2025). The metaphor of taking up one's cross reflects the expectation that commitment to this way of life may involve opposition, loss, or sacrifice. Rather than avoiding such realities, discipleship incorporates them into its conceptual framework, interpreting them as part of faithful participation in the divine mission. This introduces a realism into the doctrinal vision that acknowledges the cost of transformative allegiance.

Furthermore, the scope of this doctrinal framework extends beyond ethnic and cultural boundaries. The inclusion of Gentiles within the horizon of divine promise signals a universalising trajectory that redefines the identity of the people of God. This expansion does not abolish earlier traditions but reinterprets them within a broader salvific horizon. The doctrinal implication is that divine engagement with humanity is not limited by ethnic or national boundaries but is oriented toward universal inclusion.

(McGrath, 2024). Love establishes the ethical foundation, grace redefines the mode of divine engagement, and discipleship articulates the lived response required of those who participate in this reality. Together, these elements construct a coherent vision of transformed existence grounded in relational fidelity, moral reorientation, and participatory commitment.

The Historical Gap in Matthew 2:1–3:17

The Matthean narrative's long gap between Jesus' infancy and public ministry is significant (Ludwig Schmidt & McCane, 2023). After Herod's death, Jesus returns to Nazareth and is baptised by John the Baptist, leaving his childhood unresolved. This literary omission has interpretive significance for understanding the Gospel tradition and the author's theology. According to historical criticism, the dearth of detail about Jesus' early life reflects the constraints of ancient biographical writing, especially for non-elite persons (Pippin, 2025). Ancient history prioritised public activities, political significance, and social impact over private

development. Thus, Jesus' childhood quiet is consistent with ancient story traditions, not insignificance.

This narrative gap is not neutral in Mattheanist. Theologically rich, the infancy myth places Jesus' birth amid scriptural fulfilment motifs. The attendance of foreign dignitaries symbolises his international significance, while his birth in Bethlehem fulfils prophetic expectation. Jesus' departure into Egypt is thus symbolically linked to Israel's history, completing the covenantal people's journey.

Returning to Nazareth complicates interpretation. The fulfilling logic of this settlement suggests that even geographical obscurity is part of a broader religious pattern. Nazareth's low position in Judean and Galilean narratives symbolises humility and hiddenness. This reinforces the idea that divine objectives are achieved in unexpected or minor circumstances. A narrative change from hiddenness to public revelation occurs when John the Baptist enters ministry (Groothuis, 2022). John prepares the way for divine intervention and moral and spiritual rebirth. Jesus' public debut is framed by eschatological expectancy because prophetic speech is reactivated after a perceived stillness.

Jesus' baptism is a crucial narrative and theological event. It marks his public ministry debut and includes symbolic assertions of identity and heavenly approval (Wheatley, 2022). The narrative marks the move from private to public life and from obscurity to mission. This portrayal of heavenly confirmation supports the interpretation that Jesus' identity is established early in his mission.

The “hidden years” between childhood and public involvement have been studied extensively. Some interpretations highlight the possibilities of ordinary human development in a non-reported domestic and occupational milieu, suggesting Jesus' formative experience was integrated in conventional Galilean social systems. Others argue that silence is a literary device that emphasises heavenly intervention rather than human growth. The gap reveals a larger historical reconstruction methodological issue: ancient sources' selectiveness. Less knowledge does not mean less history; it reflects narrative tradition's priorities and constraints. Historians must balance cautious inference and evidential restraint in such gaps.

Narrative silence provides a theological purpose in the Gospel (O'Neil, 2024). It emphasises that heavenly initiative and revelation establish Jesus' identity, not gradual popular recognition. The

path from obscurity to manifestation reflects a theological pattern of secret preparation before public disclosure, harmonising with scriptural themes of calling and commissioning. The historical gap in Matthew 2:1–3:17 blends history and theology. It shows ancient storytelling conventions and theological intent to depict Jesus' identity as divinely revealed rather than socially manufactured. Instead of a gap in knowledge, the lack of detail is part of the narrative approach that forms the reader's view of Jesus' public existence.

Conclusion

The historical study of Jesus of Nazareth reveals a figure whose significance cannot be confined to a single interpretive framework. On one level, available historical evidence—both within Christian sources and in external references—supports the conclusion that Jesus was a real first-century Jewish teacher who was executed under Roman authority. On another level, the earliest traditions concerning him rapidly developed into a theological interpretation in which his life, death, and reported resurrection were understood as events of profound divine significance. This dual dimension ensures that any reconstruction of Jesus must account for both the historical realities of his context and the interpretive meanings attributed to him by his earliest followers.

The canonical Gospels, together with early Christian proclamation, demonstrate that the memory of Jesus was never merely archival or descriptive. Instead, it was shaped by the conviction that his identity could only be fully understood in light of divine vindication and eschatological fulfilment. His teachings, actions, and reported resurrection were integrated into a coherent narrative that redefined categories of authority, righteousness, and salvation. At the same time, external sources confirm that the movement associated with Jesus emerged rapidly and persisted in a manner that demands historical explanation, even when stripped of theological interpretation.

Ultimately, the quest for the historical Jesus involves holding together historical investigation and interpretive tradition without reducing one to the other. Jesus emerges as a figure located within a specific historical setting, yet simultaneously reinterpreted by communities that experienced his significance as transcending that setting. The enduring scholarly challenge lies in critically engaging these layered traditions in a way that acknowledges both their historical grounding and their theological development, thereby preserving the complexity of one of history's most influential figures.

Recommendations

1. Future scholarship should adopt an explicitly integrative methodological framework that systematically combines historical-critical analysis with reception history. This entails treating theological interpretation not as a secondary accretion but as constitutive evidence within the historical process itself.
2. There is a need for sustained comparative analysis between the canonical Gospel narratives and the wider corpus of Second Temple Jewish literature, including apocalyptic, wisdom, and sectarian texts. Situating Jesus' teachings within these contemporaneous intellectual and religious frameworks would allow scholars to more precisely identify patterns of continuity, adaptation, and divergence.
3. Researchers should expand the evidentiary base by incorporating non-canonical writings and early Christian apocryphal traditions into critical analysis. While such texts require rigorous source criticism and careful evaluation of provenance, genre, and theological bias, they remain indispensable for understanding the plurality of early Christian interpretations.
4. Interdisciplinary collaboration should be prioritised, particularly through the integration of insights from biblical studies, classical historiography, and social anthropology. Methodological tools from memory studies, oral tradition theory, and socio-cultural analysis can significantly enhance interpretive precision.

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