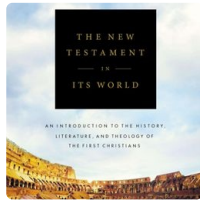


# OpenTheo

## Who is Jesus?

February 23, 2021



### **Delving Into The New Testament In Its World - Eternity News**

Welcome to the second episode in a six part series delving into the benchmark book *The New Testament In Its World*.

Co-author Michael Bird takes us through the text he wrote with N.T. Wright, this episode examining the identity of Jesus as an historical figure.

On the chopping block are important questions like,

- \* Is there a difference between studying the Jesus of the Bible and the Historical Jesus?
- \* Who did Jesus think he was?
- \* Did Jesus ever claim to be God?

You can buy a copy of *The New Testament In Its World* [here](#).

If you're following along with *The New Testament In Its World*, this episode covers key issues in Part II: *The World of Jesus and the Early Church*, and Part III: *Jesus and the Victory of God*:

1. The Jewish context of Jesus and the Early Church
2. The Greco-Roman context of the Early Church
3. The Study of the Historical Jesus
4. Who did Jesus think he was?

## **Transcript**

*The New Testament In Its World* With Mike Bird We've got to get away from the view that Jesus kind of rocked around Galilee and Judea saying, "Hi, I'm God. I'm going to die for your sins shortly." But before we do that, we need to fill in some time. So let me tell you some really good Sunday school stories and eventually we'll even make videos with

acting vegetables.

Welcome to The New Testament In Its World, a super series based on the brilliant book by the same name. My name's Mark Hadley and I'll be leading us through the brain of one of the authors, Dr. Michael Bird, Lecture and Theology at Australia's Ridley College. Along with Tom Wright, Mike has written this book and in fact has actually written 30 books on his own in the fields of Septuagint, Historical Jesus, the Gospels, some Paul, biblical theology and systematic theology, which means he's more than qualified to chat to us today.

First, before we get going, we've had a little bit of a chat in the background. Mike, I understand that you are completely opposed to the concept of coffee. I am opposed to coffee.

I believe it is creating mass addiction, a type of slavery and I am the new Moses, the new Martin Luther King, the new Luke Skywalker leading people to be free from the bean. In fact, you just want a different sort of slavery though, don't you have a European aficionado? I don't want slavery to tea. I want people to enjoy tea because it's there to be enjoyed.

It makes life easier, makes life better and it doesn't have all the negative consequences or that pungent odious odor that coffee had. Okay, well, look, my tea of choice this morning is Lapsang Sushong because I'm also a bit of a tea Nazi. I like any tea that tastes like a smoky bacon sandwich.

What's your favorite for today? Mine, I'm having Melbourne breakfast tea, which is tea with a slight suggestion of vanilla and a whole lot of snobbery. Okay, we should probably get to our top again hand, which is who was Jesus. So let's begin, Michael.

Before we talk about Jesus in particular, can you give us a bit of a sketch of the Jewish world of his time? Okay, so you've got to remember that the Jewish world really is the intersection of three or four or five different cultures. The Persians had dominated Judea, or the Greater Palestine area for a number of centuries, then with Alexander the Great coming in and sweeping through with this Macedonian juggernaut and conquering all the various regions that led to the acute hellenite. The colonization of this region where Greek language suddenly became far more prevalent and even dominant through this region.

Now that didn't extinguish all the local indigenous cultures, but it kind of created this massive overlay, particularly amongst the elite classes. And it came to commerce, or it came to the military or politics. There was this Greek overlay put on everything.

And then after the Alexander the Great's Empire collapses, or it kind of ends, it divides in four and different Greek kingdoms, which is a terrific control of Palestine, but eventually

the Romans come in and they take over as well. And they allow the region to stay in its sort of Hellenistic element, its Greek element, but they also want to put their own stamp on it. So, they're now appointing the various local rulers, or in some cases in Judea, they appoint a prefect or a local governor to run things.

And the Romans are not there because this is a really valuable piece of real estate. It's not like they're there for the oil or anything there, they're there because it's a land bridge, largely between Asia Minor, which is kind of like the World Trade Center and Egypt, which is the breadbasket because that's where all the grain comes from. So they're occupying it largely because of its strategic significance, and it's also kind of a buffer zone between what is further east with the Parthian Empire and that type of thing.

And this is largely an agrarian society. We've got all these farmlands, particularly up in Galilee. It's dominated by the Jewish religion.

I mean, you've got some gentle settlements on the coast of Palestine and over near the Decapolis and up around Syria, and then you've got also Samaria, right, Bam Smack in the middle, but it's dominated by the Jewish religion. So you've got the temple, things like observance of the Torah, very big focus on the land. And there's also this hope that after being dominated by one pagan kingdom after another, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, that is God going to come and liberate this people because I desire, and then the prophets that make these big promises that God is coming to bring a new exodus, to bring the people out of the exile, not just out of Babylon where they came, whether the Persians allow the people to come back to Palestine, but is he going to bring a new Davidic king with a new temple, a new Torah and a new age and all these blessings? Because as people looked around, we're not exactly living that.

We've got this guy called Herod the Great, who's a native Ida Mann, half Ida Mann, appointed by the Romans. He's not exactly David 2.0. So when are we going to get this new promise? And different groups had different ideas of when that's going to come. So the Pharisees say, look, if we keep ourselves pure, get back to Torah observance, make our country like a kingdom of priests or something like that, then we can bring in the kingdom.

And then there are others who are a little bit more zealously minded. So it's like, okay, in one hand Torah, and the other hand you're sword, so read your Torah and stab you stab stab. That's how you bring the kingdom in.

The Sadducees said, no, let's just collaborate with the Romans and make best that we can do and hopefully God will back you in the end. Then you get other groups like the Essenes who said that the world is so corrupt and evil and even the Jews who are leading us are doing jitties and wrong. So let's just withdraw to the Dead Sea, write a commentary on the book of Habakkuk, baptize yourself three times a day to keep pure and wait for God to send in the angels to wipe all of the lot of them out.

So there are different views of how these great prophetic promises are going to emerge. And it's in the midst of that scene that Jesus emerges, who he's initially attached to John the Baptist and he starts proclaiming the kingdom of God. Sounds very much like we're going to need a full palette of cultures in order to paint whatever background he's standing on.

Look, can I ask a question about the historical Jesus? It's a term that I picked up reading your book. Is there any difference between studying the Jesus of the Bible and the historical Jesus? Are they two separate people? Are they one person two sides? What am I talking about there? The way I think about it is the historical Jesus is the Jesus that we reconstruct as historians. So you've got the Jesus of the Gospels and you've got what I call in the Gospel of Matthew, you've got what I call the fiddler on the roof Jesus.

He's very Jewish. He's got these five major speeches and that type of thing. And Mark is what I call the born identity Jesus.

This sort of dramatic amaze. It's like, wow, this guy is cool. Who is he? It's like a mystery you're trying to solve.

Luke's got what I call the Tolstoy War in Peace. It's this epic narrative about the prophet Jesus and who's also the Lord in the beginning of the early church. The Gospel of John has got his own perspective of the more spiritual, almost mystical Jesus who's been sent from heaven.

So all of the evangelists have their own unique thing. But as historians say, okay, that's all well and good and we can allow them to stay in their place. But if we try just for a moment, maybe just to go behind what they're doing.

And if we had to create one kind of narrative, which is not a kind of, how can I put it? Not kind of like putting all the four Gospels in a blender. But if we had to tell one historical story about Jesus in the context of Roman Judea, okay, in light of all the sources available, both the Gospels and Roman sources and Jewish sources, how did we tell that story? That's largely what the study of the historical Jesus is. It doesn't have to be kind of like the anti-Gospel Jesus or let's get behind the Jesus of the church's faith and go back to him more secular.

It's basically what is the person that caused people to write the type of books about Jesus that we do find? You've raised a really interesting question by sort of characterizing the various Gospels. Is there a core Jesus that sits behind all of the Gospels? Do you feel like there's a United Jesus there somewhere? Or there are only just four different views of Jesus? Oh, no, look, I'd say that there is a lot of similarities between the four Gospels. I mean, they all do have their specific things.

Like I said, Matthew's got his specific thing in Mark Luke and John, but they're not four

different Jesus's. It's more like four different stained glass windows, where they're all portraying the same person, but they're making different emphasis, adding different textures, different colorings in the way that they do it. But behind all of them, there is all the same person.

And what they have to ask is why did people write these four types of books about Jesus? And we know in the second century that people then wrote other Gospels. You get things like the Gospel of Thomas or the Gospel of Mary or the Gospel of Peter. And people kept writing Jesus' books, but the four earliest ones, as far as we know, are these four canonical Gospels.

And what type of a person had such an effect on the early church that these types of books would then be written. And I think there is, although there is a diversity, but also a type of unity across the four Gospels. They all tell the same basic story of Jesus coming into Judea.

He's conflict with the Judean leaders, especially the Pharisees, a type of pattern of teaching about the Kingdom of God, love for neighbor, that type of thing, and how his realm's restoration is going to happen. And he's crucified, he's buried, and they all report his resurrection. So going into those Gospels itself, when Jesus asks the question himself who people say they are, one of the answers that comes back is that he is a prophet, so that a lot of people seem to think he's a prophet.

Was Jesus a prophet? Oh, undoubtedly, and he certainly owns the title and uses it frequently to describe himself. And he in some ways sees himself continuing the work of John the Baptist. He also compares himself to figures like Elijah in the Old Testament.

And so he completely does identify with the prophetic role, but he is also more than a prophet. He also identifies as a rabbi. He's also a teacher of wisdom, a type of sage.

What is more, he begins to give some sort of, shall we say, cryptic or veiled intimations that he is also Israel's Messiah. Now that was a little bit controversial because if you walked around with a big neon line saying get your Messiah here, and if there's a big crowd of people following you, then the local leaders are going to get very, very nervous and they're going to send in the security forces to kind of put you down because it looks like you're staging a coup. So he does it in a very kind of cryptic form.

He asks like questions like, well, you know, in Psalm 110, you know, the Lord said to my Lord, and if this is said by David and David calls the Messiah Lord, then who knows who's David then? I mean, is the Messiah of David or not? So he does it in these kind of cryptic questions trying to kind of like affirm things that are suggestive but are not quite clear because he doesn't want to give the game away just yet. And it's not until this trial before Kiasfas, that actually comes out and really does say, well, yeah, I am, you know, the son of the blessed one, you know, the Messiah. So in one sentence, prophet was the

easy title to own.

It was what came after that. It was the harder one. Oh, yeah, I mean, and the big question is, it's kind of like an easy or isn't he? Is he claiming to be the Messiah or not? Because there's some things that he's doing that do have a kind of, you know, messianic thread.

You know, I mean, he talks about a kingdom of God. He gets called a son of David by supplicants of healing. And so they're trying to whip up a bit of enthusiasm for him, that type of thing.

You know, he compares himself to David and Solomon. Okay. So a number of things that certainly do intimidate, but he's also he's not carrying out a military campaign.

He's not raiding the countryside with a small army. He's not, you know, walking around with a banner saying, you know, hashtag overthrow Rome now or anything like that. Okay.

So he's kind of, he does accept, I think, a messianic title or role, but he wants to redefine it in light of a different suite of values, according to a different, a different way of reading scripture so that the Messiah is not this triumphant warrior. It's more like a, like a, like a shepherd, more like the, the smitten shepherd of Zechariah, the suffering servant of Isaiah, the suffering righteous one of the Psalms. He wants to redefine the messianic role according to a different suite of scriptural stories.

Through his actions, Jesus gained the reputation of being a glutton and a drunkard and a friend of tax collectors and sinners. How could this Jesus fellow, a clever rabbi, a mighty healer and even a prophet by all accounts, stooped to the level of keeping company with folk who are morally wretched and ceremonially impure? Wasn't Jesus concerned about his reputation or with his own personal purity, which Israel's worship demanded? Or not a prophet to be rebuking and admonishing people like these? Jesus' answer was that it wasn't the healthy who needed a position, but the sick. God had always been in the business of welcoming prodigal children home.

Jesus' table fellowship with outsiders was meant to be a living parable of the open invitation to enter the kingdom of God. It was as if Jesus was handing out the hors d'oeuvres of the future messianic banquet, showing in advance who would dine in God's company in the new creation. OK, so let's dig a little further into this.

We know he's happy to own the title of "Profit." We know that he doesn't want to be seen as a general, but he is going to be the Messiah, but not the sort of Messiah that you think, who else did Jesus think he was? Are there any other key aspects of his identity that we need to address? Well, the big question that we have to ask is did Jesus think he was God? That's probably the number one question, and that's one some historians know

Jesus saw himself as a prophet, maybe a Messiah, but many people have struggled with the idea that Jesus thought he was God. Now, on the one hand, we've got to get away from the view that Jesus kind of rocked around Galilee and Judea saying, "Hi, I'm God. I'm going to die for your sins shortly, but before we do that, we need to fill in some time, so let me tell you some really good Sunday school stories that you'll be able to pass on for generations, and eventually we'll even make videos with acting vegetables." You know, he didn't go around saying, "Hi, I'm God." I mean, he was there to say that that big promise of the coming of God is king is happening, and it's happening in and through me.

That's what the kingdom of God means. It means the coming of God as king. And if you want to understand that, read passages like Isaiah 52, you know, behold Zion, your Lord comes to you.

You know, your God reigns or passages like Zechariah 8 or parts of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. He's saying the shot clock had wound down to zero. The day of the new Exodus is happening, God is at last coming as king.

And the proof of that is the various things that Jesus is doing. He's enacting those promises of Isaiah 61. He's sending the captives free.

The lame walk, the blind see. The poor have the good news. God is coming in and through him, which is why he speaks with a sense of unmediated divine authority.

He doesn't say the word of the Lord came to me, and I say unto you, no, he simply speaks with his own divine authority. And there's a number of places where I think we see that. Number one, you see that is when Jesus offers to forgive people's sins.

And people say, and the scribes say, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, you're forgiving people's sins." But God alone can do that. And Jesus says, "Well, I've healed the guy, so what's easier to heal the guy or to say your sins are forgiven?" Now, the idea there is that saying the word is easy, but doing the action is hard. But if he can do the action, if he can heal a lame person, then obviously the utterance or the statement that goes with it are then attested.

Now, a lot of people used to say, "Well, actually what Jesus is doing there, he's just acting like a rogue priest." Okay, he's declaring the forgiveness of sins, which the priest would do in the temple. Now, I used to think the same thing, except I discovered that the Jerusalem cultists, you know, where they used to do sacrifice, it's not like your Christian service, where you have a confession of sin, and then the minister, or the pastor, or the priest, then declares the forgiveness of sins. There was none of that.

It was just assumed that the ritual kind of worked in itself, so you didn't need a priest pronounced in forgiveness of sins. So Jesus is not acting just like a rogue priest. He is, in

a sense, a serping divine prerogatives.

And he's got this strong sense of unmediated divine authority. And that is why they say, "But who can do this like God alone or the one God?" The other thing that I think is very interesting is in Luke 19, where Jesus seems to be, he's coming into Jerusalem, and he's weeping over Jerusalem because he knows what's going to happen. The city is putting itself on a path to conflict with Rome, rather than embrace his way of being Israel, his view of the kingdom.

Eventually they're going to choose the path of revolution and violence, and it's all going to go horribly wrong. He weeps over Jerusalem. He says, "Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who stoned the prophets." If you did not know the day of your visitation, and this language of visitation, the way it's used elsewhere, is about the coming of God.

So Jesus sees him in his own coming to Jerusalem as this fulfillment of prophetic promises of God coming as King. And finally, the scene that seals it for me is when Jesus is before Kiafas, and Kiafas asked him, "Are you the son of the blessed one?" And the Messiah and Jesus says, "Yes, and you will see the Son of man sit the right hand of the most time coming with clouds and power and glory." Now what's interesting about Jesus' response to Kiafas is that his words blend two scriptural texts, which is Psalm 110 verse 1, and also Daniel 7, 13 to 14. What those two texts have in common is the idea of a figure seated and sharing God's own throne.

So Jesus is saying to Kiafas that he shares in vice regency with the God of Israel. Now this is an amazing claim to make to say that you share in the orbit of divine sovereignty. And I think the reason why Kiafas tears his cloak was not because Jesus has added the divine name I am, but rather Jesus is putting him in a place or a state of authority and sovereignty that was reserved for the one God of Israel.

So I think both implicit in the Gospels a little bit more explicit in John, Jesus is certainly claiming that he is a divine person. Although like I said, he doesn't go around in a kind of snazzy showing away saying, "God, man, here, come get your autograph." Right, look, I'm a simple man, Mike, so I'm actually going to ask, I can see from what you're saying that Jesus behaves like God, that he does those things that only God might do, that he in fact actually makes the sorts of claims about himself that would point at his divinity. But is there any point where he actually uses, I mean you say he doesn't necessarily do it, but does there any points like say John 8 when he says before Abraham was, "I am," is that actually a claim to divinity or am I misunderstanding that? Well, in the case of John's Gospel, I think that is one of the more explicit statements you can find.

Other people want to maybe treat it differently. People raise questions about the historical texture of John's Gospel. I mean, I remember John's Gospel is a little bit different to the synoptics and he's operating with a little bit more, I want to say artistic license, but he's offering a far more dramatic interpretation of who Jesus is and he



certainly accents who Jesus is in his own way.

And sometimes I think what John gives us is not just the words of Jesus, but also the impression that Jesus created amongst his earliest followers. So historians often talk about the difference between the verber of Jesus and the voice of Jesus. So you can say the synoptic Gospels give us a lot of the verber, the words of Jesus, but sometimes the more general voice, whereas in John's case, I think he does give us more of the general vibe of Jesus rather than maybe the actual words.

Okay. Well, look, if there was one thing you wanted people to take away from your book or yours and Tom writes book about Jesus, the historical Jesus, what would it be? I would say number one, Jesus is not just the warm-up act to Paul, okay? As if Jesus is Paul's own personal John the Baptist because some of the evangelical circles I travel and they tend to be very, very Paul focused. So it's all about half of Romans and Galatians, that's kind of their canon within the canon.

And we like Jesus because you led us to Paul. Now that's a little bit of an overstatement, a bit of a hyperbole, I know, but I think you really have to appreciate that Jesus, the Gospels, really do preface but kind of occupy the front end of our canon because God really wants to stress to us that knowing the story of Jesus should be a big part, the main part of the New Testament. So the story of Jesus is not just okay, look, as long as he was born of a sinless birth, long as he died of sin-bearing death, the rest is filler.

No, this is the crucial link between the story of Israel and the story of the church, okay? You can't jump from Genesis 3 to Romans 3, you've got to have the story of Israel, which is then completed, fulfilled, comes to its climax in the story of Jesus himself. Mike, thanks very much for taking us through Who Was Jesus and that's just being part of the insight that we're having into the New Testament in its world. Now, next episode we'll be dealing with that controversial figure, Paul.

Why was Paul so controversial and we'll dig a little further into that? But until then, we'd encourage you to have a look at the New Testament in its world and we'll provide in the show notes lots of links associated with this week's episode about Who Was Jesus. Thanks again and we'll see you next time. You've been listening to The Attunity Podcast Network, [eternitypodcast.com.au](http://eternitypodcast.com.au)

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