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# THE JESUS SCANDALS

WHY HE SHOCKED HIS  
CONTEMPORARIES  
(AND STILL SHOCKS TODAY)

DAVID INSTONE-BREWER

MONARCH  
BOOKS

Oxford, UK & Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA

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Cambridge, 2011





# Introduction

I work at Tyndale House, a research institute in Cambridge which specializes in biblical studies. A huge number of scholars from all over the world come here for short or long visits, so I'm forever hearing the latest discoveries and theories, and I'm surrounded by all the books and facilities I need to research them further.

Some of these coffee-break-length chapters started life as articles in *Christianity* magazine and I have added many others in a similar style. During the research and writing process I have been at different times annoyed, amazed, dismayed, delighted – and always surprised.

My personal presuppositions are that Jesus is who he claimed to be in the Gospels, and that these accounts represent what actually happened. But, of course, many people, including some of my academic colleagues, have different conclusions, so often I address more sceptical viewpoints.

To understand Jesus we have to know something about Jews of the time, and to understand the Gospels it helps a great deal if we read them with the mindset of a first-century Jew or Gentile – the people for whom they were written. My specialist area of research is early rabbinic Judaism, but this book also delves into other forms of Judaism such as that of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and into Roman and Greek culture. When we look at the Gospels through the eyes of someone from these cultures, they appear very different – problems in understanding the text are often solved and unexpected details take us unawares.

## THE JESUS SCANDALS

This book may challenge many traditional interpretations, but its aim is to find a foundation for historical facts about Jesus. Surprisingly, as the first chapter shows, scandals are a good place to look.

# Why Look for Scandals?

Scandals are our best guarantee of historical truth in the Gospels. When disgraceful, embarrassing and shocking details about Jesus are recorded by his friends and supporters, it is much harder to disbelieve them.

Jesus was accused of being a bastard, blaspheming, abusing alcohol, partying with prostitutes, being mad and working for Satan – in other words, scandal followed him. And a huge part of his teaching and ministry tackled head-on the scandals that pervaded society and would therefore have been regarded as scandalous by his audience.

Scandals are the inconvenient truths which the Gospels could not omit without being dismissed as fiction by their first readers. If there had been no scandals, the Gospel writers wouldn't have invented them – why create potential reasons for people to dismiss Jesus? And if there *were* scandals, the original readers would remember, so the Gospel writers had to mention them and make a reply.

These scandals supply inadvertent confirmation for Christian claims. The fact that Jesus was charged with blasphemy indicates that he did claim divinity. The fact that he was stigmatized as illegitimate gives at least some credence to the stories of a miraculous birth – though sceptics would say it was a reason for inventing such stories. The fact that he spent time with prostitutes and gangsters indicates that he really did teach that *anyone* could have their life transformed. And the fact that he was charged with doing miracles by Satan's power demonstrates

that even his enemies believed his miracles were real.

The Gospels are a model of how *not* to win friends and influence people. Their primary audience consisted of Jews and those Gentiles who were friends of Jews, because most of the early converts came from these groups. And yet the Gospels regularly include criticisms of Jewish leaders and generally accepted Jewish beliefs and attitudes. From the financial scams of the Temple to the belief that God rejects all disabled people and that illness is due to sin, Jesus spoke against many Jewish teachings and practices in embarrassingly public ways.

The Romans, too, didn't escape Jesus' caustic tongue. Their practice of using child slaves as sex toys enraged him: he said their punishment would be worse than undergoing a mafia-style drowning wearing concrete boots. We can contrast this with the historian Josephus' multi-volume record of the Jewish–Roman wars. Written at about the same time as the Gospels, it included only mild criticisms of Roman culture.

As well as scandals that were taking place within society, other scandals are found within Jesus' teaching itself when he said things that no one wanted to hear. He spoke more about eternal hell and coming judgment than about the popular subject of God's love – though he was also outspoken about this. The Gospel writers didn't try to help his image by editing what Jesus said, but included equally both the things that made him unpopular and popular.

When Jesus healed the sick, for example, no one complained. But when he did it on the Sabbath, or said that someone's sickness wasn't due to sin, he outraged almost everyone. The scandal attached to it highlights that it was an important aspect of Jesus' teaching. And what was scandalous in those days may simply be normal today. Letting women attend religious teaching, for example, is not scandalous in most cultures today, but in the first

century, admitting that Jesus let this happen was detrimental to his standing as a religious teacher. In recognizing this kind of historical perspective, we can better understand the emphasis of Jesus' teaching.

Even the early church and the disciples themselves are presented in a scandalous way in the Gospels. Jesus had to teach his followers not to hate each other, but he also had to tell them how to forgive each other and set things straight when they did hate each other. His disciples are no superheroes; rather, they are portrayed as a motley bunch of idiots who persistently misunderstand Jesus and generally get in the way. But that's what real life is like and it shows that the Gospels are concerned with portraying reality, not fiction.

Scandals are memorable. You remember an outrageous story because everyone talks about it and you've probably passed it on to someone else yourself. When people nod, they are listening to you; when they shake their heads in disagreement they become more attentive; but when they are scandalized by something they memorize the details so that they can tell their friends about it!

Historians love scandals almost as much as newspapers do. When assessing whether an account is likely to be accurate they use terms like "criterion of embarrassment" (i.e. the more embarrassing it is for the person who records it, the more likely it is to be true) and "counter-cultural ethics" (i.e. if the subject's behaviour has been criticized by everyone else, then they are unlikely to have made it up). Of course scandals are biased, but scholars recognize that all records of history are biased and, at least with a scandal, the bias is out in the open.

Scholars are right to be sceptical. The early church must have been tempted to portray Jesus in the best possible light, and we have to assume that this is what they tried to do, just as we still do. This is what makes the scandals in the Gospels so

valuable. The Gospels have been subjected to more scrutiny than any other ancient documents – and rightly so, because people don't base their lives on Caesar's *Gallic Wars* or the Dead Sea Scrolls. The life of Jesus is incomparable, so we need to know if the records are accurate.

Whole libraries have been written on the Gospels – I know, because I work in a library containing nothing but books in the realm of biblical study. I've distilled some of the most surprising and controversial scandals uncovered by scholarship so that you can judge for yourself about the real history and teaching of Jesus. The kinds of accusation made against Jesus are sometimes confirmed by sources from the same time as the Bible, so I have often highlighted evidence from the history and culture of the time. For example, we'll find that some historians have identified part of the original court records for Jesus' trial, and see that some of Jesus' teaching on subjects as varied as hell and harmonious living is paralleled in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The chapters in this book can be read in any order; each one is self-contained and is short enough to read in a coffee break. They are also designed to be turned into talks – just add your own opening illustration and use your own words. At the end of each chapter I try to highlight something of particular relevance so that each one can be used as a discussion starter or a provocative short talk – you can perhaps change or omit this “thought” to suit your audience. And when something you read particularly surprises you, why not store it up in your head to produce in a quiet conversational moment with friends? It is sure to get a good discussion going.

I'm an academic, so I'm frequently sceptical, but I also know Jesus for myself. So the Gospels are precious to me – especially the scandal of the cross.

PART 1

SCANDALS IN  
JESUS' LIFE

# Illegitimate Birth

My father added his mother's family name to his own, in order to make a more impressive surname. He was a barrister who needed more work and he hoped to attract a better sort of client. The ploy didn't work... and it made me the butt of endless jokes at school. Over half a century ago, when my father did this, it was a relatively novel idea. Today, it is much more common to meet someone whose name includes their mother's surname, so my children don't suffer the derision of their classmates as I did. But when the people of Nazareth called Jesus "son of Mary", the whispered sneers would have been deafening. His detractors gave him this name when he dared to preach at the synagogue in his home village. It's not until we take a look at the social background that we can recognize how great an insult this was.

Jews in the time of Jesus took their father's name as their surname. Matthew's list of disciples includes "James son of Zebedee" and "James son of Alphaeus" (see Matthew 10:2-4). In Aramaic, the Jewish language of the time, this would have been "James bar Zebedee" and "James bar Alphaeus", just like "Simon bar Jonah" (Matthew 16:17). This is the pattern found in all Jewish literature of that period and, like our surnames, they kept these names even after their father had died. For common names like "Simon" they sometimes used other naming strategies; so Simon son of Jonah also has a nickname (Peter, i.e. "Rocky"), while other Simons are named after a former affiliation ("the Zealot"), a former affliction ("the leper"), or his home town ("of Cyrene" – Matthew 10:2, 4; 26:6; 27:32). Significantly, there are



no other instances in ancient literature of a Jew who was named, like Jesus, after his mother.

In Nazareth, everyone knew the scandal of Jesus' birth – it occurred less than nine months after his parents' marriage and everyone could count. In fact, after spending three months at Elizabeth's house (Luke 1:56) and other delays, Mary probably had a visible bump on her wedding day. It would have been slightly more socially acceptable if Joseph had been the father, but he denied this. So when Jesus had the temerity to preach in his home village, the gossiping turned into public outrage: "Isn't this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon, and aren't his sisters here?" (Mark 6:3). This tirade is all the more damning because of who it leaves out – Jesus' father! It was outrageously insulting to identify him in this way and list all these family members without naming his father. Even if the subject's father had died, he would have been named – in fact it would have been even more important to name him because his eldest son should carry his name forward for posterity. This glaring omission proclaimed the scandalous fact loudly and clearly: no one knew who Jesus' father was.

While only Mark records the insult at Nazareth, the other Gospels do not ignore this scandal, and each one responds to it in a different way, reflecting their own style and perspective. Mark reads like a tabloid newspaper with its short sentences, immediacy, and friendly naivety; Matthew, like *The Times*, is concerned about political and religious establishments and seeks to highlight corruption and hypocrisy; Luke is similar to the *Guardian* – more interested in social concerns and the disadvantaged such as lepers, women and the poor; and the Gospel of John is like a more thoughtful weekly digest, such as *Newsweek* or *Time* magazine, because it was written after a considerable time of theological reflection.

Any good salesman will tell you that the best way to deal with a weakness is to address it head on, and that's what Matthew and Luke do when they give extended details about Jesus' special parentage. Matthew starts his Gospel with the genealogy of Jesus from Adam, through David, down to Joseph. Then he presents the surprise: Jesus was not the son of Joseph but of the Holy Spirit. Being concerned about the establishment, Matthew emphasizes the roles of a regal star and Eastern emissaries, and the malevolent interest paid by King Herod. Luke has a similar emphasis on the virgin birth, but starts by depicting the piety of Mary and her relative Elizabeth, the elderly priest's wife whom Mary travels to visit as soon as she falls pregnant. The unspoken implication is that Mary would not have confided in Elizabeth if she had anything to be ashamed of.

In our present society it is easy to forget how utterly unacceptable it used to be to have any sexual scandal in your parentage, but in many cultures a slur on your parentage is still the worst insult imaginable. When the Americans first tried to combat Saddam Hussein's army they had a seemingly insurmountable problem: they couldn't find it! The Iraqis had prepared vast warrens of underground bunkers over a huge area and even after several weeks of bombing the US had failed to kill or even dislodge significant numbers. Then someone who knew the Iraqi culture came up with a brilliant and successful ruse. The Americans fitted loudspeakers on armoured cars that were filled with snipers. Then they drove across the apparently empty desert broadcasting in Arabic: "Your mothers were born illegitimately." This was so unbearable for the Iraqi soldiers that they poured out of their hidden bunkers firing wildly at the loudspeakers... and becoming sitting targets for the snipers.

Jesus must have constantly faced slurs about his parentage, though these were probably rarely spoken out loud. In John's

Gospel we find a heckler who tried to disrupt Jesus' preaching by shouting out what the gossips were saying privately. Jesus had just claimed to come from his Father in heaven (John 8:18), so the heckler called out, "Where is your father?" (v. 19). While some in the crowd were asking, "What does he mean?", others were no doubt passing on the juicy details. At first Jesus ignored the interruption and continued to teach about his origins from above (vv. 21–23), but when he proclaimed that those who rejected him would die in their sins (v. 24), the heckler demanded: "Who are you?" – that is, "What's your name?" He probably hoped for an answer like, "Jesus son of Joseph" so that he could dispute it, but instead, a little later, Jesus evaded this by calling himself "The Son of Man" (v. 28). Shortly after this the heckler said: "Well, we are sons of Abraham" (i.e. good Jews), so Jesus retorted, "If you were really Abraham's sons, you wouldn't be trying to kill me" (vv. 33–40). Now the gloves were off and the heckler delivered the final blow: "At least we aren't born out of fornication!" (v. 41). You can almost hear the collective sharp intake of breath, but no one spoke up to contradict this charge.

This kind of rumour about Jesus' birth continued for hundreds of years in rabbinic literature where Jesus is called "son of Pandera". This title must date back to at least the end of the first century because rabbis in the second century were already unsure who this Pandera was. They concluded from the negative tone that the name Pandera referred to an illicit lover, who was perhaps a Roman soldier.<sup>1</sup>

So how does history view the scandal of Jesus' parentage? After his death and resurrection, the Jews were understandably sceptical about explanations in the Gospels that Jesus' Father was God himself, and historians are equally sceptical – though, as we'll see below, the facts about this scandal actually help to make the miracle more likely.

The job of historians is to question the motivation and accuracy of ancient reports and to decide, on the basis of other facts and their knowledge of human psychology, what actually happened. So, for example, when historians read Suetonius' report that several miracles and signs accompanied the birth of Emperor Augustus,<sup>2</sup> they have to decide whether this was over-enthusiastic hype or overt propaganda. And when they investigate the birth of Jesus we wouldn't expect them to use different criteria. Historical method can never easily accept a miracle because by any criteria of what is likely to have happened, a miracle will always be at the bottom of the list. Miracles are, by their nature, special, so they are never likely.

However, there are significant reasons why it is also unlikely that Joseph and Mary would have invented such a strange cover story. First, first-century Palestine was a relatively well-educated and sophisticated society, and the religious leaders of the time were particularly sceptical about improbable and unprecedented miracles. Most Jews would have regarded the story of a virgin birth as unbelievable at best and blasphemous at worst. Second, Joseph and Mary would have attracted less criticism if they'd said the child was the result of rape by a Roman soldier or pre-marital love-making. And if Joseph was a character who was brave enough to marry this apparently fallen woman, it makes sense that he would also have the courage to tell the truth. And why would they invent such a dubious story when, as the incidental references in the Gospels of John and Mark demonstrate, these claims about Jesus' birth being miraculous were simply disbelieved by most Jews? They didn't believe it in his home village or in the rest of the country, as anyone knowing that society could have predicted.

Historians have a problem: they have to choose between two equally unlikely scenarios. Either a group of religious

Jews adamantly proclaimed an extremely naive and potentially blasphemous story, or there was a miraculous birth. This is an uncomfortable choice, except for those who do not rule out the miraculous.

For all Christians, the fact that Jesus was the brunt of the gossips is a precious insight into his suffering. Isaiah predicted that the Messiah would be despised and rejected, sorrowful and grieving, afflicted with illness, wounds and punishments so severe that people would assume that he was being smitten by God (Isaiah 53:3–5). The question of his parentage was a scandal which he bore with all those who are falsely branded with moral disapproval for something outside their control – those who don't know their parents, rape victims, and those whose sexuality is damaged by child abuse. The scandal of Jesus' illegitimacy demonstrates that when God became human, he shared all our suffering and redeemed every aspect of our fallen humanity so that he could represent and redeem everyone.

### Notes

1. See Joseph Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth: His life, times and teaching*, trans. Herbert Danby, Allen & Unwin, 1925, pp. 18–45.
2. Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, *Augustus* 94.