

# Esoteric Christianity

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[www.theosophical.org](http://www.theosophical.org)

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## Lesson 1: Christianity, Inner and Outer

Before we can talk about esoteric Christianity, we have to say a few things about the beginning of historical Christianity, because there are many misconceptions, half-truths, and lies about it. It would take an entire course—or a book—to go through all of these and debunk them one by one.

Here there is only space to set out a concise summary of Christian origins as (mostly) accepted by current scholarship. Scholars of course do not agree about every last point—and the more irresponsible ones have created many of the misconceptions—but there is a broad consensus among the most respected authorities.

From all the sources known to us, there was a historical figure named Jesus of Nazareth. He was most likely born between 8 and 6 BC, during the reign of King Herod the Great of Judea (roughly equivalent to today's Israel), who died around 2 BC. Jesus started to publicly preach and perform healings sometime around AD 30, while Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea. (At this point Judea had been reduced in size and only controlled the southern half of Palestine.)

Jesus's public career may have been as short as a year, although the traditional figure given is three years. He spent most of his career in Galilee, in northern Palestine. He went to Jerusalem—in Judea—around the time of the Jewish Passover in the spring of one year and fell afoul of the priests in the Temple there. They conspired to have him put to death, and Pilate, the supreme civil authority, carried out their wishes.

Almost immediately after Jesus's death by crucifixion, a number of his disciples reported that he had appeared to them alive in a resurrected form. These disciples started the religion that became known as Christianity.

There are many more assertions about Jesus in the New Testament and elsewhere, but scholars say that many of them were simply legends and sayings fathered upon him after his time on earth. There is very little agreement about which are factual and which are legendary. The views of even the most respected scholars are filtered through their own beliefs and preconceptions. Even the little I have written above would be disputed by some—most importantly the resurrection—but it is very hard to dismiss this as a later addition, because it is multiply attested and goes back to the earliest sources. Moreover, the beginnings of Christianity are very hard to understand without it.

We do not have anything written either by Christ or by his original disciples. There are no eyewitness accounts of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. You can go through the entire New Testament and search in vain for a statement that says, “I was there, and saw this.” Except for one. Saul (later Paul), a Jew from Tarsus, began as a persecutor of the Christian sect, but then became a convert and its most important apostle. This happened after he had the famous vision on the road to Damascus. Paul did not write the most famous account of this event, which is found in Acts 9:1–20. But we do have this statement from him, in 1 Corinthians 15:3–8:

For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures: And that he was seen of Cephas [Peter], then of the twelve; After that he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep. After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles. And last of all he was seen of me only, as of one born out of due time.<sup>1</sup>

This is the closest thing we have to a firsthand account of Jesus. He was seen by his disciples after his death, and then by Paul. Jesus’s followers would have reason to mistrust Paul, since he had been their enemy, but he reported an experience that was enough like theirs that they accepted him. Paul does not, however, say anything more about this encounter here or elsewhere in his writings.

Thus a number of people claimed to have seen the risen Christ. This is not as unusual as it seems, because many people have visions of and encounters with loved ones soon after their deaths; it is even rather common. Were the disciples’ experiences like these, or were they different in some crucial way (for example, in finding his tomb empty)? This is much harder to determine, again because there is no clear way to distinguish fact from legend.

A Christian may reply that it is a matter of faith; but this is a course in esoteric Christianity, which has to do more with knowledge than with faith.

By the way, we do not know much about Jesus’s disciples—even the “twelve” that Paul mentions. They did not write the books in the New Testament that were attributed to them. We do not even know what happened to them, although there are innumerable tales about them, most of which are, again, legends. The first half of Acts talks about a few of them and their activities, but it switches direction in midcourse, and the second half is all about Paul.

The New Testament was written approximately between AD 50 or 51 (the date of the earliest text, Paul’s first epistle to the Thessalonians) and 130 (the date of the latest text, the second epistle of Peter, which Peter certainly did not write).

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<sup>1</sup> Biblical quotations in this course are from the King James Version unless otherwise noted.