

# Catholic UPDATE

## Jesus the Jew

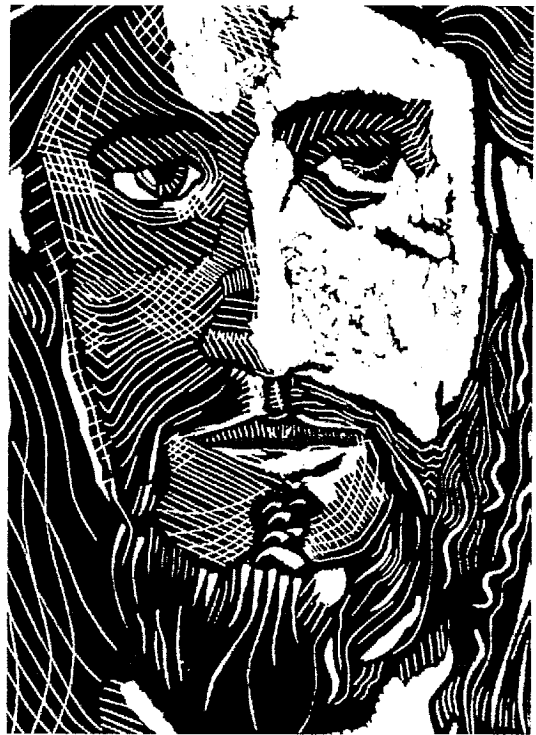
by Arthur Zannoni

**D**id you ever wonder what Jesus really looked like? What was the color of his hair? What color were his eyes? How much did he weigh? How tall was he? While these are all interesting questions, we cannot really answer them. But what we do know is that Jesus was Jewish.

Jesus was not a Christian. He did not go to Mass on Sunday; he went to services on the Sabbath (Saturday). He did not go to church; he went to synagogue. He did not speak Greek or Latin or English; he spoke Hebrew and Aramaic. He had a Jewish mother, which means he probably looked a lot like other Jews of his day.

His earliest followers all were Jewish. No one addressed him as father, pastor or reverend. But he was addressed in all likelihood as rabbi (teacher). He did not write or read the New Testament, for it was composed after his death. He did read the Hebrew Scriptures, what Christians call the Old Testament.

He never recited the rosary, chanted a litany, or used a modern prayer book. Rather, he recited the Psalms; he died with one on his lips: "Eli, Eli..." ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" — Psalm 22:1). He did not celebrate Christmas or Easter. He celebrated



Shavuot (Feast of Weeks), Sukkot (Feast of Tabernacles) and Passover (the Seder).

Jesus was a deeply faith-filled and a profoundly committed Jew of his day. Unfortunately, many of us, despite our religious education and upbringing, have not understood the importance of our having a solid background in Jewish religious, social and political history in order to truly understand Jesus. The purpose of this *Update* is to explore the Jewish roots of Jesus and Christianity.

## Jesus the Galilean Jew

**J**esus was not an urban Jew but a rural Palestinian Jew who, along with his family, lived in Galilee, in the northern part of the country. Galilee was a very small rural section of ancient Palestine. In Jesus' day, Galilee was divided into an upper and lower region. The lower region where Jesus dwelt was a very rich valley that went from the Mediterranean to the Sea of Galilee, a distance of about 25 miles. You can walk from Nazareth to the Sea of Galilee in about three hours.

Among the important villages of this region in Jesus' day were Nazareth and Capernaum. Nazareth, Jesus' hometown, was a small agricultural village in the very heart of rural Galilee. The village's population was made up of farmers and a few artisans. We know from Luke's Gospel that Nazareth had a synagogue, which Jesus attended. It was there that he read from the Isaiah scroll (Luke 4:16-30).

Capernaum, located north of Nazareth on the Sea of Galilee, appears to have been the center of Jesus' activity during most of his public life (Mt. 4:12-13). It was a commercial and agricultural center with a customs house. Capernaum had a synagogue in which Jesus both healed and taught (Luke 4:31-37).

These villages were made up of the *am ha aretz* (known in those days as "the people of the land"), the farmers and the poor who were the primary receivers of the Galilean Jesus' preaching, teaching and healing. This area was overwhelmingly Jewish. It was both the soil Jesus trod and the home of his original apostles.

### Questions

- 1 Jesus was not a Christian. What was he? Where did he worship?
2. How was Jesus addressed?
3. Why didn't Jesus read the New Testament? What scriptures did he recite?
4. List the three Jewish feasts Jesus probably celebrated (give Hebrew name and meaning.)  
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5. Jesus was a Palestinian Jew. He lived in Galilee. Describe this region.
6. Why is Nazareth important? Describe this place.
7. Why is Capernaum important? Describe.
8. Translate *am ha aretz*.