

# Was Jesus Unique?

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**I am often asked whether I think Jesus was unique. It's an interesting question and one that is not easy to answer.**

While Christians certainly affirm Jesus as the uniquely begotten Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, as without sin, and so on, when we examine this question from an historical perspective, the answer is more complicated. Undoubtedly, the legacy of Jesus shaped world history in many important and fascinating ways. But what of the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth in his first-century Palestinian setting? Was that Jesus unique?

Part of my work as an historian of the early Jesus movement involves trying to understand how Jesus' ideas, teachings, and actions fit alongside

other radical and apocalyptic movements from his time and place. Indeed, many so-called messiahs, prophets, and (from the perspective of the elite) terrorists or bandits arose from among the Jewish masses to offer a promising vision of a divinely-backed new world order.

Such parallels can help us unpack what the early Jesus movement thought they were up to, why their leader was put to violent death, and how particular beliefs and themes were generated and became important. What this approach doesn't tell us is how the Jesus movement was uniquely special or different. How could it be?



Dura Europos Synagogue, panel WC3 : David anointed king by Samuel.

If Jesus was truly exceptional and unlike everyone else, then he would no longer be a credible or recognizable figure emerging from that historical time and place, he would not have gained a popular following among the Jewish peasantry in Galilee, he would not have made much sense to his contemporaries at all.

Some people like to point out how something about Jesus' teaching or attitude was different or special in some way. For example, that he was uniquely inclusive of women for a man of his time. Or that he advocated a principled stance against all acts of violence in the here and now. Such views, while sincerely held, are often exaggerated, and can remove Jesus from his complex social world. For each of these examples of Jesus doing something unusual or different, there are generally known instances of others doing broadly similar things, even if they formed a minority view.

Similarly, expectations and rumours of resurrection were not unprecedented or unique to the Jesus movement. In the first century, many Jews, fuelled by apocalyptic fervour, believed the righteous would rise at or before the end times. These included great ancestors of Israel, Jewish prophets, and martyrs. A template for such beliefs could be found in texts like 2 Maccabees 7, where defiant Jewish martyrs gleefully took beatings in the expectation of vindication through an ongoing existence of life after death. We also see something resembling this idea in Matthew 27:52-3 where, at the

moment of Jesus' death, "many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised".

But, back to the pivotal question: was Jesus unique? When you really think about it, everybody is unique. Everybody also shares things in common. This is why, for the critical historian, "uniqueness" is not a particularly helpful or interesting category.

**What makes Jesus unique is not one aspect of his life or work but the specific combination of elements that constituted his person.**

For those uneasy about the theological ramifications of this, appreciating the full humanity of Jesus (alongside his divinity) means he was impacted by the same social, political, economic, and religious forces that affected others in his world. Conversely, he responded to these forces in ways that must have been credible within that environment. Otherwise, he would not have become such a successful conduit for the cause of the poor in Galilee and Judea, his movement would not have antagonised the elite, and he may not have ended up on a Roman cross as he and others most surely did.

So, to those concerned to emphasise the uniqueness of Jesus, I would ask a question in return: why remove the historical Jesus from his historical context?

