

Who was Simon of Cyrene?

Simon of Cyrene is mentioned in three of the four Gospels as the man impelled by the Roman soldiers to carry Jesus' cross out of Jerusalem. His place of origin has led many to wonder if he was of African descent (and therefore black), or if he was simply born there as were many others of Greek, Roman, and Jewish descent.

Cyrene was situated in modern-day Libya, on the northern coast of the African continent. Settled by the Greeks in 630 B.C. and later infused with a significant Jewish population, Cyrene was the capital of the Roman district of Cyrenaica at the time of Jesus' crucifixion. By then, Cyrene was home to a large number of Greek-speaking, or Hellenistic, Jews.

Many Jews from Cyrene had returned to their native Israel and were part of a community in Jerusalem called the Synagogue of the Freedmen comprising Jews from many other provinces including Alexandria (Egypt), Cilicia and Asia (Acts 6:9). Luke records men from Cyrene being among those converted at Pentecost (Acts 2:10). After the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 7), believers from Cyrene were among the first to be scattered by the persecution in Jerusalem; arriving in Antioch, they preached to the Gentiles there (Acts 11:20). These believers were instrumental in the formation of the church at Antioch, where, for the first time, "the disciples were called Christians" (Acts 11:26).

Simon of Cyrene is mentioned in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Matthew only records his name and place of origin (27:32), but Mark and Luke say that he was "on his way in from the country" (Luke 23:26). Mark, uncharacteristically, provides the most information about Simon, adding that he was "the father of Alexander and Rufus" (Mark 15:21), men obviously well known to Mark's readers. It is speculated that the Rufus mentioned here

may be the same man Paul greets in his letter to Rome, whom he calls “chosen in the Lord” and whose mother “has been a mother to me, too” (Romans 16:13). Paul’s knowledge of Rufus’s family indicates that at some point they lived further east.

So does any of this indicate whether Simon was black? Ultimately, we don’t know for sure. There is always the possibility that Simon was an African who converted to Judaism, or that he was of mixed descent. However, considering that people of Jewish lineage lived throughout the Roman Empire, it is also possible that Simon of Cyrene was olive-skinned.