SIMPLY JESUS

A New Vision of Who He Was, What He Did, and Why He Matters

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A Very Odd Sort of King

AS JESUS WAS GOING ALONG, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. When he came to the descent of the Mount o Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began to celebrate and praise God at the tops of their voices" (Luke 19:36–37). The crowd went wild as he got nearer. This was the momen they'd been waiting for. All the old songs came flooding back, and the were singing, chanting, cheering, and laughing. At last their dreams were going to come true.

But in the middle of it all their leader wasn't singing. "When he came near and saw the city, he wept over it" (v. 41). Yes, their dreams were indeed coming true. But not in the way they had imagined.

He was not the king they expected. He wasn't like the monarchs of old who sat on their jeweled and ivory thrones, dispensing their justice and wisdom. Nor was he the great warrior-king some had wanted. He didn't raise an army and ride into battle at its head. He was riding on a donkey. And he was weeping, weeping for the dream that had to die, weeping for the sword that would pierce his supporters to the soul. Weeping for the kingd m that wasn't coming as well as for the kingdom that was.

Jesus's arrival in Jerusalem a few days before his death is one of the best-known scenes in the gospels. But what was it all about? What did Jesus think he was doing?

I have a clear, sharp memory of the moment when that question first impinged on my consciousness. It was the autumn of 1971. It was a month or so after our wedding, and I had just begun my training for ordination. New worlds were opening in front of me. But I hadn't expected this one. A friend lent me the album *Jesus Christ Superstar.*

I had known about Jesus all my life. Indeed, I venture to say that I had known Jesus all my life; better still, perhaps, to say that he had known me. He was a presence, a surrounding love, whispering gently in scripture, singing at the top of his voice in the beauty of creation, majestic in the mountains and the sea. I had done my best to follow him, to get to know him, to find out what he wanted me to do. He wasn't an undemanding friend; he was always a disturbing, challenging presence, warning against false trails and grieving when I went that way anyway. But he was also a sigh-of-relief healing presence; like Bunyan's hero, I knew what it was to see burdens roll away. I had been many times around the cycle we find in the gospels in the character of Peter: firm public declarations of undying loyalty, followed by miserable failure, followed by astonishing, generous, forgiving love.

But as my bride and I moved in to our basement apartment, I listened to *Superstar.* Andrew Lloyd Webber was then still a brash young pup, not a Peer of the Realm, and Tim Rice was still writing lyrics with real force and depth. Some were worried about *Superstar.* Wasn't it cynical? Didn't it raise all kinds of doubts? I didn't hear it that way. I heard the questions: "Who are you? What have you sacrificed? . . . Do you think you're what they say you are?" These were the proper next questions, the other side of the story I had learned (or at least *an*other side of the story).

It was as though all the energy of the popular culture of the 1960s had suddenly swung around, away from its preoccupation with sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll, and was looking again at the Jesus it had almost forgotten. There was a sense of, "Oh, you're still there, are you? Where do you fit? What was it all about anyway?" Western culture bounced back at Jesus the question with which he had teased his own followers. Instead of "Who do you say that I am?", *we* were asking *him,* "Who do *you* say that *you* are?"

Rice and Lloyd Webber didn't give an answer. That wasn't their aim. I often point out to students that they come to a university not to learn the answers, but to discover the right questions. The same

was true of *Superstar.* And the question it asked was, I am convinced, right and proper. It's not the only question about Jesus, not the only question we should ask *of* Jesus, but it's utterly appropriate in its own way. And necessary. Unless you ask this question ("Are you who they say you are?"), your "Jesus" risks disappearing like a hot-air balloon off into the mists of fantasy. This problem remains enormously important.

It is the question of who Jesus actually was. What he did, what he said, what he meant. It is, by implication, the question that any grown-up Christian faith must address. Is our sense of Jesus as a presence, disturbing but also healing, confronting but also comforting, simply a figment of our imagination? Was Freud right to see it as just a projection of our inner desires? Was Marx right to say that it was just a way of keeping the hungry masses quiet? Was Nietzsche right to say that Jesus taught a wimpish religion that has sapped the energy of humankind ever since? And—since those three gentlemen are now a venerable part of the cultural landscape in their own right—are today's shrill atheists right to say that God himself is a delusion, that Christianity is based on a multiple mistake, that it's all out of date, bad for your health, massively disproved, socially disastrous, and ridiculously incoherent?

Faced with these questions, whether from Rice and Lloyd Webber, Richard Dawkins, or anybody else, Christians have a choice. They can go on talking about "Jesus," worshipping him in formal liturgy or informal meetings, praying to him, and finding out what happens in their own lives and communities when they do so—and failing to address the question that has been in the back of everyone else's mind for the last century at least. Or they can accept the question (even if, like many questions, it needs redefining, the closer you get to it) and set about answering it.

I was not yet ready, in the autumn of 1971, to do the latter. But within a few years I had realized that I could no longer put it off. By then, in the late 1970s, I was ordained, preaching regularly, leading Confirmation classes, organizing worship. I was finishing my doctorate and teaching undergraduates. My wife and I had two children and more on the way. We were facing the challenges of "real life" on several levels. Why should I avoid the challenge of the real Jesus? Every time I opened the gospels and thought about my next sermon,

I was faced with questions. Did he ***really*** say that? Did he really *do* that? What did it mean? There were plenty of voices around to say he hadn't said it, he didn't really do it, and that the only "meaning" is that the church is a big confidence trick. If I was going to preach and, for that matter, if I was going to counsel people to trust Jesus and get to know him for themselves, I couldn't do it with integrity unless I had faced the hard questions for myself.

It's been a long journey. No doubt there is much more to discover. But this book will tell you, as simply as possible, what I've found out so far.

The Challenge to the Churches

With Jesus, it's easy to be complicated and hard to be simple. Part of the difficulty is that Jesus was and is much, much more than people imagine. Not just people in general, but practicing Christians, the churches themselves. Faced with the gospels—the four early books that give us most of our information about him—most modern Christians are in the same position I am in when I sit down in front of my computer. My computer will, I am reliably informed, do a large number of complex tasks. I only use it, however, for three things: writing, e-mail, and occasional Internet searches. If my computer were a person, it would feel frustrated and grossly undervalued, its full potential nowhere near realized. We are, I believe, in that position today when we read the stories of Jesus in the gospels. We in the churches use these stories for various obvious things: little moralizing sermons on how to behave in the coming week, aids to prayer and meditation, extra padding for a theological picture largely constructed from elsewhere. The gospels, like my computer, have every right to feel frustrated. Their full potential remains unrealized,

Worse, *Jesus himself* has every right to feel frustrated. Many Christians, hearing of someone doing "historical research" on Jesus, begin to worry that what will emerge is a smaller, less significant Jesus than they had hoped to find. Plenty of books offer just that: a cut-down-to-size Jesus, Jesus as a great moral teacher or religious leader, a great man but nothing more. Christians now routinely recognize this reductionism and resist it. But I have increasingly come to believe that we should be worried for the quite opposite reason. Jesus—the Jesus

we might discover if we really looked!—is larger, more disturbing, more urgent than we—than the church!—had ever imagined. We have successfully managed to hide behind other questions (admittedly important ones) and to avoid the huge, world-shaking challenge of Jesus's central claim and achievement. It is we, the churches, who have been the real reductionists. We have reduced the kingdom of God to private piety, the victory of the cross to comfort for the conscience, and Easter itself to a happy, escapist ending after a sad, dark tale. Piety, conscience, and ultimate happiness are important, but not nearly as important as Jesus himself.

You see, the reason Jesus wasn't the sort of king people had wanted in his own day is—to anticipate our conclusion—that he *was* the true king, but they had become used to the ordinary, shabby, second-rate sort. They were looking for a builder to construct the home they thought they wanted, but he was the architect, coming with a new plan that would give them everything they needed, but within quite a new framework. They were looking for a singer to sing the song they had been humming for a long time, but he was the composer, bringing them a new song to which the old songs they knew would form, at best, the background music. He was the king, all right, but he had come to redefine kingship itself around his own work, his own mission, his own fate.

It is time, I believe, to recognize not only who Jesus was in his own day, despite his contemporaries' failure to recognize him, but also who he is, and will be, for our own. "He came to what was his own," wrote one of his greatest early followers, "and his own people did not accept him" (John 1:11). That puzzle continues.

Perhaps, indeed, it has been the same in our own day. Perhaps even "his own people"—this time not the Jewish people of the first century, but the would-be Christian people of the Western world—have not been ready to recognize Jesus himself. We want a "religious" leader, not a king! We want someone to save our souls, not rule our world! Or, if we want a king, someone to take charge of our world, what we want is someone to implement the policies we already embrace, just as Jesus's contemporaries did. But if Christians don't get Jesus right, what chance is there that other people will bother much with him?

This book is written in the belief that the question of Jesus—who he really was, what he really did, what it means, and why it matters—

remains hugely important in every area, not only in personal life, but also in political life, not only in "religion" or "spirituality," but also in such spheres of human endeavor as worldview, culture, justice, beauty, ecology, friendship, scholarship, and sex. You may be relieved, or perhaps disappointed, to know that we won't have space to address all of these. What we will try to do is to look, simply and clearly, at Jesus himself, in the hope that a fresh glimpse of him will enable us to gain a new perspective on everything else as well. There will be time enough to explore other things in other places.

Getting Inside the Gospels

Jesus of Nazareth was a figure of history. That's where we have to start. He was born somewhere around 4 BC (the people who invented our present system of dating got it nearly right, but not quite) and grew up in the town of Nazareth in northern Palestine. His mother was related to the priestly families, and Jesus ha a cousin, John, who in the ordinary course of events would have worked as a priest. His mother's husband, Joseph, was from the ancient royal family, the family of King David, of the tribe of Judah, though by this time there was no particular social status attached to such family membership. We know very little of Jesus's early life; one of the gospels tells a story of him as a precocious twelve-year-old, already able to as key questions and debate with adults. His later life indicates that, like many Jewish boys, he wa from a early age taught to read Israel's ancient scriptures and that by adulthood he knew them inside out and had drawn his own conclusions as to what they meant. The strong probability is that he worked with Joseph in the family business, which was the building trade.

So far as we know, he never traveled outside the Middle East. Likewise, he never married; despite the speculations of occasional fantasy literature, there is not the slightest historical trace of any such relationship, still less of any children. (Jesus's blood relatives were well known in the early church; if he himself had had a family, we would certainly have heard about it. And we don't.) From complete obscurity Jesus suddenly came to public attention in th late 20s of the first century, when he was around thirty years old. Virtually everything

we know about him as a figure of history is crammed into a short space of time; it's not easy to tell if it lasted one, two, or three years, but pretty certainly it wasn't any longer. He was then picked up by the authorities in Jerusalem and, after some kind of trial or trials, was executed on the charge of being a would-be rebel leader, a "king of the Jews." Like many thousands of young Jews in that period, he died by crucifixion, a horrible method of killing designed to torture the victim as long as possible. It happened at Passover-time, most likely in AD 30 or possibly 33.

We are therefore in a curious position when we try to place Jesus in his proper historical context. We know a very great deal about the short, final period of his life and hardly anything about the earlier period. Jesus himself wrote nothing, so far as we know. The sources we have for his public career—the four gospels in the New Testament—are dense, complex, and multilayered. They are works of art (of a sort) in their own right. But it is quite impossible to explain their very existence, let alone their detailed content, unless Jesus was himself not only a figure of real, solid history, but also pretty much the sort of person they make him out to be. If he wasn't that—if cunning people made him up out of thin air to validate their own new movement, as some have ridiculously suggested—he's not worth bothering with. But if he was a figure of history, we can try to discover what he did and what it meant in his own day. We can try to get, not "behind" the gospels, as some sneeringly suggest is the purpose of historical research, but *inside* them, to discover the Jesus they've been telling us about all along, but whom we had managed to screen out. That will occupy the bulk of the book.

But Christians have always believed, as well, that Jesus is alive in the present and that he will play a crucial role in the eventual future toward which we are heading. He is the same, declared another wise early Christian writer, "yesterday, today and forever" (Heb. 13:8). This book is mostly about the "yesterday," not least because that's the part many today simply don't know. But toward the end of the book I shall deal a little with the "tomorrow" part (what will Jesus be in God's ultimate future?) and suggest ways in which this combination of "yesterday" and "tomorrow" might condition us to think and behave differently in relation to Jesus "today."

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The Three Puzzles

JESUS OF NAZARETH then, stands out in the middle of history. Tens of millions call him "Lord" and do their best to follow him. Countless others, including some who try to ignore him, find that he pops up all over the place—a line in a song, an imag in a movie, a cross on a distant skyline. Most of the world has adopted a dating system based supposedly, on his birth (it's a few years off, but near enough). Jesus is unavoidable.

But Jesus is also deeply mysterious. This isn't just because, like any figure of ancient history, we don't know as much abou him as we might like. (In fact, we know more about him than we do about most other people from the ancient world; but even some who wrote about him at the time admitted that they were only scratching the surface:) Jesus is mysterious because what we *do* know—what our evidence encourages us to see as the core of who he was and what he did—is so unlike what we know about anybody else that we are forced to ask, as people evidently did at the time: who, then, *is* this? Who does he think he is, and who is he in fact? Again, people who listened to him at the time said things like, "We've never heard anyone talking like this," and they didn't just mean his tone of voice or his skillful public speaking. Jesus puzzled people then, and he puzzles us still.

There are three reasons for this. The first reason for our being puzzled is that, for most of us, Jesus's world is a strange, foreign country. I don't mean just the Middle East, a major international trouble spot then as now. I mean that people in his day and in his country

thought differently. They looked at the world differently. They told different stories to explain who they were and what they were up to. We do not habitually think, look, and tell stories in the way they did. We have to get inside that world if the sense Jesus made then is going to make sense to us now.

An example may help. In today's Western world it's common for young adults to ask their parents for financial help to get them started in life. If well-to-do parents refused such a request, we might think them mean. But when Jesus told a story about a younger son asking his father for his inheritance while the father was still alive, his hearers would have been shocked. They would have seen the son's action as putting a curse on the father, saying, in effect, "I wish you were dead." That gives the whole story a different flavor. You can't assume that things worked in those days the way they work now.

But if the first reason for the puzzle is that Jesus's *world* is strange to us, the second is that Jesus's *God* is strange to us. That idea may itself seem odd. Isn't God simply God? Isn't it just a matter of whether you believe in God or not? No. The word "God" and its various equivalents in other languages, ancient and modern, may *mean* "the supreme or ultimate reality" or "a being or object believed to have more than natural attributes and powers and to require human worship." Those are, actually, the two basic definitions offered by *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. But a brief study of the world's great religions, including those of the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Indians, and Chinese, or for that matter a glance at the different religious movements in the Western world over the last few centuries, will show that there are many different views of what this "supreme or ultimate reality" is like. It isn't enough to ask whether someone believes or does not believe in "God." The key question is which God we're talking about. Part of the reason why Jesus puzzled the people of his day was that he was talking about "God" most of the time, but what he was saying both did and did not make sense in relation to the "God" his hearers had been thinking of.

We need, then, to get inside Jesus's world. And, as we do so, we need to try to catch a glimpse of what he meant when he spoke of God. These are two of the key puzzles. Once we grapple with these two puzzles, though, we begin to discover something much of our world, including much of today's church, has ignored or forgotten

altogether. This is the hidden puzzle behind the other two. Throughout his short public career Jesus spoke and acted *as if he was in charge.*

Jesus did things people didn't think you were allowed to do, and he explained them by saying he had the right to do them. He wasn't, after all, merely a teacher, though of course he was that too—in fact, one of the greatest teachers the world has ever known. He spoke and acted as more than a teacher. He behaved as if he had the right, and even the duty, to take over, to sort things out, to make his country and perhaps even the wider world a different place. He behaved suspiciously like someone trying to start a political party or a revolutionary movement. He called together a tight and symbolically charged group of associates (in his world, the number twelve meant only one thing: the new Israel, the new people of God). And it wasn't very long before his closest followers told him that they thought he really *was* in charge, or ought to be. He was the king they'd all been waiting for. If we look for a parallel in today's world, we won't find it so much in the rise of a new "religious" teacher or leader as in the emergence of a charismatic, dynamic politician whose friends are encouraging him to run for president—and who gives every appearance of having what it takes to sort everything out when he gets there.

You might have thought, and people certainly did at the time, that Jesus's untimely death dashed all those hopes once and for all. But not long after his death his associates started to claim that he *was* now in charge, for real. And they started to act as if it was true. This isn't about "religion" in the sense the Western world has imagined for over two hundred years. This is about everything: life, art, the universe, justice, death, money. It's about politics, philosophy, culture, and being human. It's about a God who is so much bigger than the "God" of ordinary modern "religion" that it's hardly possible to think of the two in the same breath. The really striking, and really puzzling, thing about Jesus—then and now—is that he seems not only to have been talking about this much bigger God, but actually launching the transformative new project this God had planned all along. And his followers really believed it had happened.

Talking about someone new being in charge was dangerous talk in Jesus's day, and it's dangerous talk still. Someone behaving as if they possess some kind of authority is an obvious threat to established rulers and other power brokers. Perhaps that's why, particularly in the

last two or three hundred years, this side of Jesus hasn't been explored too much. Our culture has become used to thinking of Jesus as a "religious" figure rather than a "political" one. We have s en those two categories as watertight compartments, to be kept strictly separate. But it wasn't like that for Jesus and others of his time. What would happen if we took the risk of going back into his world, into his vision of God and asking "Suppose it really is true?" What would it look like, in other words, if Jesus not only was in charge then, but is in charge today as well?

A ridiculous idea, you might say. It's blindingly obvious that Jesus isn't in charge in our world. Murder, misery, and mayhem still continue, as they always have. Even Jesus's own so-called followers contribute their fair share. (As I write this, a "Christian" mob is vowing to take violent revenge on adherents of another religion who have bombed a packed church.) What could we possibly mean by saying, 'Jesus is in charge"?

Well, we'll come to that later. But before we can even get going, we have to face a problem that is peculiarly our own. Behind the three historical puzzles (Jesus's world, Jesus's God, and Jesus's behavior—acting as if he was in charge) are additional difficulties that, like the elements of a perfect storm, have come together to pose severe challenges for anyone trying to address the questions about Jesus, let alone to do so simply.

The Perfect Storm

IT WAS LATE OCTOBER 1991. The crew of the fishing boat *Andrea Gail,* out of Gloucester, Massachusetts, had taken the vessel five hundred miles out into the Atlantic. A cold front moving along the Canadian border sent a strong disturbance through New England, while at the same time a large high-pressure system was building over the maritime provinces of southeastern Canada. This intensified the incoming low-pressure system, producing what locals called the "Halloween Nor'easter." As Robert Case, a meteorologist, put it, "These circumstances alone could have created a strong storm, but then, like throwing gasoline on a fire, a dying Hurricane Grace delivered immeasurable tropical energy to create the perfect storm."* The hurricane, sweeping in from the Atlantic, completed the picture. The forces of nature converged on the helpless *Andrea Gail* from the west, the north, and the southeast. Ferocious winds and huge waves reduced the boat to matchwood. Only light debris was ever found. There had, of course, been earlier "perfect storms," but this was the one made famous by the book and movie of that title.

Those of us who study and write about Jesus find ourselves at the mercy of our own perfect storm. The very mention of Jesus raises all kinds of winds and cyclones today. Listen to the buildup of the western wind. "How do we know those things really happened? Isn't

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it the sort of legend people always tell about remarkable characters? Hasn't modern science and history shown we can't believe that kind of tale? And anyway, weren't the books about Jesus written a long time later, by people who wanted to make him out to be someone extra special, so that they could boost their own religious beliefs or even establish some kind of power for themselves? Isn't it time we got rid of these old superstitions once and for all?"

But as that storm whistles in from the west, watch the skies darken to the north, as other voices clamor for our attention. "Of course Jesus did it! The Bible is the word of God, and we have to believe it! Anyway, he was the Son of God, so he could do that kind of stuff. Miracles were his stock-in-trade. We have to stand up for the truth of the gospels against the blasts of modern skepticism. We can't let the atheists and the nay-sayers have it all their own way. It's time to roll back the climate of suspicion and once again learn to trust—to trust the canon of scripture, to trust the great traditions of the church, to trust the God of miracles, to trust Jesus himself. Even to ask the historical question shows that you've sold out to the rationalists before you go any farther."

It's not comfortable being out on an open boat when these two winds strike from their different directions. Believe me—it's where I've lived for the last forty years. The winds are howling around you, you can hardly hear yourself think, and you suspect that neither side can hear too well either. It's a dialogue of the deaf.

If the western wind here stands for the rationalistic skepticism of the last two hundred years and the high-pressure system to the north stands for the "conservative" Christian reaction to that sneering modernist denial, what is the tropical hurricane? We'll come to that presently. For the moment, let's examine these first two storm systems a bit more closely.

The Distortions of Skepticism and Conservatism

The two violent winds of skepticism and conservatism have picked up extra energy from massive social; political, and cultural storms that have raged across the Western world over the last two or three hundred years and that seem, as we speak, to be coming to something of a climax. If you are an American, you will guess that a lot of people

taking the "skeptical" position vote Democrat, and a lot of people taking the "trusting" position vote Republican. I could introduc you to several people who buck those trends, but the picture is nonetheless worryingly accurate. Can it really be the case that our judgment about who to vote for and what policies are best for a country and for the world can be mapped so easily onto questions of whether or not to believe a strange set of stories from the first century?

Unlikely though it seems, I think that is exactly what has happened. In a complicated, confused, and danger us world, anything will serve as a guardrail for people blundering along in the dark. We oversimplify complex problems. We bundle up very different social and political issues into two packages, and with a sigh of relief—now at least we know who we are, where we stand!—we declare ourselves to be in favor of *this* package and against *that* one. And we make life uncomfortable for anyone who wants to sit loose, to see things differently.

Jesus, as always, gets caught in the middle—along with a good number of his followers. Many people in America today were brought up in strict Christian homes and churches of one sort or another. There was a set package. Jesus, the Bible (if you were Protestant), the Mass (if you were Catholic), family, strict morals, the Rapture (for some Protestants), purgatory (for some Catholics), and ultimately a straight choice between heaven and hell—all of that describes the world many remember only too well. And many of those who do remember it remember it with a shudder. That's the small, narrow world from which (phew!) the healthy skepticism of the modern world has rescued them. So, for many Americans today, and others elsewhere too, Jesus is part of the tight little world, closed and closed-minded, from which they have thankfully escaped. If you want to know why the "new atheists" like Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris sell so many books, the answer is that they're offering the modernist version of the good old-fashioned theological term "assurance." They are assuring anxious ex-believers that the nightmare of small-minded and stultifying "religion" is gone forever.

In my own country things are a bit different. Few peopl in Britain today have had that kind of strict upbringing. But skepticism still thrives. Those same atheistic books denouncing the church, Christianity, and religion in general sell by the cartload. Two generations

after most people stopped sending their children to Sunday school it seems that people still want to strike out at the religion they haven't got. Do they suspect that God, or someone, is still out there and might be dangerous? I any case, such rumors need to be stifled. The general public wants them to be stifled. We have our dreams of being free, grown-up humans, and we don't want to bend the knee to anyone, especially that fussy old God or that strange character Jesus! Actually, the skeptics, who take grim comfort from the apparent decline of many mainline churches, don't often focus on Jesus himself. They have far softer targets to aim at (badly behaved clergy, for a start). But if they do mention Jesus, they tend to dismiss him with a wave of the hand. Jus a first-century fanatic whose wild-eyed followers turned him into a god. Or, damning him with faint praise just a mild-mannered first-century moralist, one of many great teachers down through the ages Those are the internal dynamics of the western wind, the howling gale of contemporary skepticism.

Meanwhile, however, millions around the world, and tens of thousands in Britain and the United States too, tell a different story. They claim to have discovere Jesus as a living, challenging, healing presence. Stories abound of changed lives, of physical and emotional healing. New churches have sprung up, full of eager and excited people, often young people. Addicts are cured. Dysfunctional families are reunited. Real help is given to the sick, the poor, the prisoners. Failing schools are turned aroun ew energy is found for creative ocial and cultural projects. For such people, the whole thing is real enough. It's hard to argue with a radically changed life or, indeed, with still being alive when the doctors had given you up for dead. That's why there such energy ehind the orthern high-pressure system, the powerful force of a newly energized, but often very "conservative" Christian faith.

Many skeptics simply ignore these current Christian phenomena. Many of these newer, high-octane Jesus-followers simply return the compliment. That's unhealthy—on both sides. We need to think things through. Jesus himself was open to all comers. He told his followers to love God with their minds as well as every other part of themselves. There is nothing to lose and everything to gain by p oper inquiry.

For what it's worth, my long-lasting impression is that the "Jesus" who gets caught in the cross fire of these cultural wars may be considerably less than the Jesus we actually find in the pages of the early Christian writings—and in real, first-century history itself. After all, just as it's quite possible for skeptics to be mistaken, so it's quite possible, as church history shows in plenty, for devout Jesus-followers to be mistaken as well. It is vital to look again at Jesus himself.

Two Jesus Myths

There are, then, two myths that swirl around our heads, around the churches, around the TV studios, and around the editorial offices of newsmagazines. Let's name them even more clearly and, to some extent, shame them, so we can be clear about the present confusions before we turn to the equally confusing world of the first century. We'll take them in the reverse order this time. First, the high-pressure system of conservative Christianity.

Here we find the classic Western Christian myth about Jesus, which is still believed by millions around the world. In this myth, a supernatural being called "God" has a supernatural "son" whom he sends, virgin-born, into our world, despite the fact that it's not his natural habitat, so that he can rescue people out of this world by dying in their place. As a sign of his otherwise secret divine identity, this "son" does all kinds of extraordinary and otherwise impossible "miracles," crowning them all by rising from the dead and returning to "heaven," where he waits to welcome his faithful followers after their deaths. In the Catholic version of this classic Western myth, Jesus calls his close friend Peter to found the church; anyone who wants to be with Jesus, here or hereafter, must join Peter's movement. In the Protestant version, Jesus commissions his followers to write the New Testament, which reveals the absolute truth about Jesus and, once more, how to get to heaven.

(Already I hear that wind getting up. "What d'you mean it's a myth? Don't you believe that? Are you one of those dangerous liberals after all? Aren't you a bishop?" Okay, okay, I hear you. Please wait. Patience is a Christian virtue.)

The second myth, prevalent in the skeptical "western wind" of our perfect storm, is the new classic modernist myth, which is widely believed in secular society and in several mainline churches too. In this new myth of Christian origins, Jesus was just an ordinary man, a good

first-century Jew, conceived and born in the ordinary way. He was a remarkable preacher and teacher, but he probably didn't do all those "miracles." Some people seem to have felt better after meeting him, but that was about it. He certainly didn't think he would die for the sins of the world. He was simply trying to teach people to live differently, to love one another, to be kind to old ladies, small children, and (that blessed postmodern category) the "marginalized." He was talking about God, not about himself. The idea of being a supernatural "son of God" never occurred to him; he'd have been horrified to hear such a thing and even more to have had a "church" founded in his memory.

He certainly didn't rise from the dead; yes, his followers, feeling that his work would continue, used careless language that seemed to imply that that's what had happened, but of course it didn't. Then these followers began to tell stories about him that snowballed into legends, which then sprouted fresh interpretations. The "gospels" we now have in the Bible are the product of that free-floating—and perhaps self-serving—inventive process. They tell us a lot about the new aims and agendas of the early "Christians" and about how they settled down and adapted the original message of Jesus to different circumstances. But if we want to find out about Jesus himself, we have to work our way back through the fog of subsequent hero worship and, above all, through the process by which he was "divinized." We might even need to call on some of the "other gospels," the ones that boring old "orthodox" Christianity left out of its "canon."

(At this point I hear the other wind rattling the window panes. "And you don't believe that? Don't you realize that the gospels are full of later invention and interpretation? Are you one of those right-wing fundamentalist fanatics who think that all of that stuff just happened the way it says in the gospels? Which stone have you been living under for the last two hundred years?" All right, all right, I hear you too. If you're representing the world of sweet reasonableness, then calm down and take the argument one step at a time.)

When I say that these two stories are "myths," I mean it in the following way. A "myth" in this strict sense is a story that purports to be in some sense "historical" and that encapsulates and reinforces the strongly held beliefs of the community that tells it. Serious "myths" are regularly expressed not only in narrative, but also in symbol and action. Much of the life of the broadly "conservative" Western church acts out the first myth. Much of the life of "liberal" Christianity, on the one hand, and of the wider secular world, on the other, acts out the second. Both are very, very powerful stories. They have shaped the lives of millions, and they still do. But they are both, in this sense, myths. Neither of them will stand up to full-on, hard-edged, no-nonsense historical scrutiny. Or, for that matter, theological scrutiny.

The underlying problem with both these myths is that they pose the question in the wrong place. First, "Did it all happen or didn't it?" This is the plain, blunt question of a typical eighteenth-century Westerner. No frills, no metaphors, no interpretation, just "facts." Did it happen or not? The "conservative" or "orthodox" brigade, driven onto the back foot (that's a cricketing metaphor for what happens when the bowler sends down a hostile delivery), marshals its forces to say, "Yes, it really did happen." And there the matter ends. Those in the "liberal" or "skeptical" brigade shrug their shoulders: "No, it didn't really happen. Or not much of it, anyway." Again, that's the end of it. Facts or no facts. But what about meaning?

The second related question—I was asked it just yesterday by a journalist—is: so was Jesus the Son of God, or wasn't he? And for most people the phrase "son of God" carries with it all the connotations of that first myth, in which the supernatural being swoops down to reveal secret truth, do extraordinary "miracles" to prove his "divinity," die a redemptive death, and get back to heaven at once, enabling others to get there too. And if I say—as I'm going to—that I don't think that story is the right way to talk about Jesus, some will say, "So you don't think he's the Son of God, then?" and condemn me as a hopeless liberal. Whereas if I say—as I'm going to—that I *do* think Jesus was and is the "son of God," albeit within a very different sort of story, others will condemn me as a hopeless conservative.

The Problem of Historical Complexity

And now at last we are ready to take up the third element in the perfect storm we face today when we talk about Jesus. Out in the Atlantic, but heading for shore fast, is a hurricane. It was coming anyway, but when it meets these two winds we should expect a storm of what people today, perhaps confusingly, call "apocalyptic" proportions.

The third element is the sheer historical complexity of speaking about Jesus. The world of first-century Palestinian Judaism—his world—was complex and dense in itself. Anyone who has tried to understand today's Middle Eastern problems can be assured that life was every bit as complicated in the first century as it is now. We have a thousand sources on which to draw for constructing a picture of today's problems, everything from newspaper reports to Facebook and Twitter postings. But for historians of the first century—and if we want to talk about Jesus himself, as opposed to making up fantasies about him, we are all bound to become to some extent historians of the first century—we are faced with a strange challenge.

Take an example. John F. Kennedy is perhaps one of the best-known Americans of the mid-twentieth century. His presidency was of course cut short by his sudden and violent death, a death that had, and perhaps still has, iconic significance for many Americans and others around the world. Those of us alive at the time all still remember where we were when we heard the news. Now suppose we had four books containing very detailed accounts of what Kennedy did and said during his three-year presidency, with only a brief glance at what went before. Suppose it was quite clear that these were put together by people who believed that what Kennedy had done and said had lasting importance for their own day. But suppose as well that, instead of the overwhelming multitude of sources we actually possess for the decades before his day, we simply had a history book written in the early years of the twenty-first century (i.e., forty years after his death) plus a scattering of other material—a few letters, tracts, coins, souvenir artifacts, that kind of thing—to help us reconstruct the world within which what Kennedy did and said made the sense it did at the time, and particularly to get some idea of why some thought him a hero and others thought he had to be killed. One can imagine all the theories—the reconstructions of the Cold War mentality, the social and cultural tensions of 1960s United States, the state of the main political parties at the time, the dynastic ambitions of Kennedy's father, and so on. There would be plenty of wiggle room for interpretation.

That is more or less our challenge with the historical evidence for Jesus. We have the four "gospels," written later by people who believed passionately that what Jesus had done and said, coupled with his death and what happened afterwards, were of massive ongoing

significance. The gospels are highly detailed; one of the problems of writing the present book has been trying to decide what to leave out. They are clearly written from particular (pro-Jesus) points of view. But, unlike today's historian studying JFK in his actual context, we have simply a history book written forty or fifty years later (by Josephus, an aristocratic Jew who went over to the Roman side in the war of AD 66–70) and a scattering of other material, bits and pieces, tracts, coins, letters, and so forth. Out of these very disparate sources we have to reconstruct the setting in which what Jesus did and said made the sense it did, so much sense that some thought he was God's Messiah and others thought he had to be killed at once. If we don't make the effort to do this reconstruction, we will, without a shadow of doubt, assume that what Jesus did and said makes the sense it might have made in some other context—perhaps our own. That has happened again and again. I believe that this kind of easy-going anachronism is almost as corrosive to genuine Christian faith as skepticism itself.

This tropical storm—the challenge of writing history about Jesus—would be threatening enough even without the cultural pressures of the western wind (modernist skepticism) and the high-pressure system to the north (would-be "Christian" conservatism). Or, if you like, angry voices from the left, angry voices from the right, and a major historical puzzle sweeping in on us with full force. If, trying to make things simple, we fail to recognize this multilayered complexity, we will simply repeat the age-old mistake of imagining Jesus in our own image or at least placing him, by implication, in our own culture. And part of the whole point of the Christian message is that what happened back then, what happened to Jesus, what happened *through* him, was a one-time, never-to-be-repeated piece of history.

Hence the perfect storm of present-day discussion. I have on my desk as I write two brand-new books about Jesus, one written by the pope himself and another by a well-known English skeptic. Both are learned, sophisticated, engaging. They cannot both be true. Behind me are twenty shelves of books about Jesus and the gospels written over the last two hundred years. They cannot all be true either. What are we to do?

Faced with this massive storm brewing, some earnestly advise us to stay in the harbor. It's too dangerous out there just now; let's just

tell the story the way we learned it, let's rely on the great tradition of the church, let's be faithful to our scriptures. This amounts, of course, to a sophisticated version of the northern high-pressure system: take shelter from the western wind, pretend the hurricane isn't happening, and just let the northern wind blow wherever it wants. To do anything else, such voices say, is to capitulate to the forces of skepticism and cynicism, to collude with post-Enlightenment reductionist notions of "history."

Not so. The western wind of modernist skepticism and the eastern hurricane of historical puzzle are not the same thing. There were historians before the Enlightenment; please God, there will be historians after postmodernity. History studies what actually happened (and when, and where, and how) and particularly *why* people did what they did. These are good questions. We should be grateful to the whole post-Enlightenment movement we loosely call "modernism" for reminding us that they matter, even as we should firmly decline the same movement's unwarranted restriction of the kinds of answers it is prepared to accept.

Part of our difficulty here—this has been another serious problem I've faced in writing this book—is that the world of first-century Palestinian Judaism was complex and (to us) often highly confusing. Imagine, again, trying to explain the United States of the early 1960s to a visitor from Mars with short, dense books of Kennedy memorabilia as your main sources. In any particular historical context, certain things made sense, certain ideas and actions went together in a way that felt entirely natural at the time, but that we may well have to reconstruct with considerable difficulty. Sometimes, doing first-century history, people use this difficulty as a way of saying that Jesus and his followers couldn't have thought like this or like that: if *we* find a certain idea difficult or puzzling, how could they (poor, pre-Enlightenment souls!) possibly have gotten their minds around it?

Sometimes people argue the other way around. We, today, are eager to ask certain questions (for instance, "Do heaven and hell exist, and how can I get to the first and avoid the second?"); and so we assume, too readily, that people in Jesus's day were eager to ask those questions as well, meaning pretty much the same by them as we do now. But if we are to do real history, we have to allow people in other times and other places to be radically different from us—even though

in order to do history at all, we have to exercise disciplined imagination and try as best we can to relate to those very different people. It's a challenge. But it's one I believe we can meet.

What matters, I have become convinced, is that we need to understand how *worldviews* work. If you have been born and bred within a culture that tells certain stories, observes certain customs and festivals, practices particular domestic habits, and sings particular songs, and if these things all go together and reinforce one another, a single phrase or action may well carry multiple layers of meaning. Imagine our visiting Martian landing this time in the middle of a game of baseball or cricket. Those of us who have played those games appreciate the subtleties, the nuances, the finely balanced match, the implications of how the ball is pitched or bowled, of who it is that's coming up to bat next. We know what it means when people, attending those games, sing particular songs. You or I would take all of that in at a glance, but it might take us an hour or more to explain it, in all its detail, to our alien guest. That doesn't mean it's horribly theoretical or abstract. It only means that most people, most of the time, live more complex lives than we often realize.

That complexity is likely to increase when you go to a place like first-century Jerusalem at Passover-time, with pilgrims singing those psalms again and families getting ready to tell one another the story they already know, the story of God and Moses and Pharaoh and the Red Sea and the hope of freedom at last, while the Roman soldiers are looking down from their watchtowers and while an excited procession comes over the Mount of Olives, led by a man on a donkey, and starts to sing about the kingdom that is going to appear at any minute . . .

So how can we go about the task of trying to understand Jesus himself? There is a whole other book to be written about the kind of evidence we have for Jesus and how we can use it responsibly. What are the gospels? What about those "other gospels"? What sources did these books use, and how can we evaluate them historically? What non-Christian sources are there for Jesus? (Answer: a reference in the Jewish historian Josephus, a reference in the Roman historian Tacitus, and one possible allusion in a more scurrilous Roman writer, Suetonius.) How were the stories of Jesus shaped by the needs of his first followers as they went out into the wider world? What were the

motives and intentions of the writers themselves? What can we know about the communities within which they themselves lived, prayed, thought, and wrote?

All of these questions have been the subject of intensive study over the last two hundred years. But the present book isn't the place to address any of them. I have written about them myself in various other places and hope to do so more in the future. But actually all such questions are themselves not "neutral." There is no place where we can gain a "fixed point" from which to begin. The way you treat the sources will reflect the way you already understand Jesus, just as the way you understand Jesus will reflect the way you understand the sources. This isn't a vicious circle. The same would be true in the study of Napoleon, or John F. Kennedy, or indeed Margaret Thatcher. It just means that we have to go forward carefully, around and around the loop, checking that we're talking sense about both the subject and the sources. The present book represents one part of one journey around one element in that loop.

In fact, I increasingly suspect that a good deal of the "methods" developed within professional biblical scholarship over the last two hundred years have been, themselves, the product of a worldview that may not have been truly open to discovering the real Jesus. The worldview of post-Enlightenment Europe and North America was determined, often enough, to see Jesus as a religious teacher and leader offering a personal spirituality and ethic and a heavenly hope. It had no intention of seeing him as someone who was claiming to be in charge of the world; some might say that the "methods" of supposedly "historical scholarship" were designed, whether accidentally or not, to screen out that possibility altogether. This doesn't mean that those "methods"—the study of the sources, the forms of the early Jesus stories, the motives of the gospel writers—have nothing to say. On the contrary, they have a great deal to say. But there comes a time when it may be appropriate to stand back, having heard it all, and to have another shot at saying, "Actually, I think *this* was what was going on." This, I think, is one of those times.

So if we are going to approach Jesus himself in a fresh way and ask the right questions instead of the wrong ones, we need to get our minds and imaginations into Jesus's own day by examining another

"perfect storm," the one into which Jesus himself was walking. What were the winds that gathered speed just then, rushing in upon him from various directions? What did it mean for him to be caught in the eye of this storm? As he rode into Jerusalem that fateful spring day, what did he think he was doing?

4

The Making of a First-Century Storm

A REALLY GOOD METAPHOR deserves more than one outing—as Jesus himself seems to have found, using and reusing ideas and scenes in his kaleidoscopic display of parables. Let's have another go at the perfect storm, then, but now set in the first century. This time, the forces converging on a spot off the Massachusetts coast stand not for today's particular cultural pressures, but for the pressures that were building up in Jesus's own day. And the place where they are converging is Jerusalem.

We smile at those medieval maps that placed Jerusalem at the center of the earth, with everything else radiating out from that point. How quaint, we think. But maybe there's a truth there, buried under the rubble of successive social, cultural, political, and religious earthquakes. Maybe that's the point. Maybe the reason Jerusalem was seen as the center of the world was because that's where all the pressure was concentrated. That's where the fault lines all came together, where the tectonic plates ground relentlessly into one another, as indeed they still do. And it is to Jerusalem that we have to go to understand Jesus of Nazareth. That's where the real perfect storm took place. That's where all the dark forces converged, one spring day in, most likely, the year we call AD 30 (or, less likely, 33).

How can we tell the story of Jesus in a simple way, when so many elemental forces came rushing together at that point in space and

time? So much history, so many bad memories, such high expectations and aspirations, such a tangled web of faith and fear and hatred and hope. And so many memorable characters crowding onto the stage, catching our eye and firing our imagination: Mary Magdalene, Peter, Pontius Pilate, Judas . . . the list goes on. And then we catch a glimpse—or was it just our imagination?—of Jesus himself, towering over them but without ever appearing aloof. Who was he? What was he about? What was he trying to do? Why should we care, two thousand years later?

These were, of course, the questions his closest friends wanted to ask as they woke him up in the middle of an actual storm on the Sea of Galilee. It's still a dangerous place today. There are signs in the parking lots on the western side of the sea warning that high winds can sweep giant waves right over parked vehicles. But Jesus wasn't fazed. According to the story, he got up and told the storm to be quiet (Matt. 8:23–27; Mark 4:35–41; Luke 8:22–25). And it obeyed him. I think his friends told that story not only because it was striking and dramatic in itself, but because they saw in it something of the larger story they were struggling to tell: the story of a man in the eye of the storm, the storm of history and culture, of politics and piety, a man who seemed to be asleep in the middle of it all, but who then stood up and told the wind and the waves to stop.

Come back, then, to the Massachusetts coast in October 1991. The wind from the west, the storm from the north, and the hurricane from the southeast—they are all converging on a single point. This is not the place to be, not the time to be out on the open sea. Now think of the Middle East in the first century. There was a gale, there was a storm, and there was a hurricane. And Jesus was caught in the middle of it all.

The Roman Storm

The gale blowing steadily from the far west was the new social, political, and (not least) military reality of the day. The new superpower. The name on everyone's lips, the reality on everyone's minds. Rome.

Rome had been steadily increasing in power and prominence as a world force over the previous two or three hundred years. But until thirty years before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, Rome had been a republic. An intricate system of checks and balances ensured that nobody could hold absolute power, and those who did have power didn't have it very long. Rome had had tyrants many centuries before and was proud to have rid itself of them.

But with Julius Caesar all that changed. "Caesar" was simply his family name, but Julius made it a royal title from that day on (the words "Kaiser" and "Tsar" are variations on "Caesar"). A great military hero out on the frontiers, he did the unthinkable: he brought his army back to Rome itself and established his own power and prestige there. It seems that he even allowed people to think he was divine.

The traditionalists were furious, and they assassinated him. But this threw Rome into a long and bloody civil war from which one winner emerged, Caesar's adopted son, Octavian. He took the title "Augustus," which means "majestic" or "worthy of honor." This, along with "Caesar," became the name or title of his successors as well. He declared that his adoptive father, Julius, had indeed become divine; this meant that he, Augustus Octavian Caesar, was now officially "son of god," "son of the divine Julius." If you'd asked anybody in the Roman Empire, from Germany to Egypt, from Spain to Syria, who the "son of god" might be, the obvious answer, the politically correct answer, would have been "Octavian."

In a world where mainstream religion was emphatically a branch of the state, Augustus took the senior priestly roles. He became *pontifex maximus* ("chief priest" in Latin) and passed that role too to his successors. Meanwhile, Augustus's court poets and historians did a great job with their propaganda. They told the thousand-year story of Rome as a long and winding narrative that had reached its great climax at last; the golden age had begun with the birth of the new child through whom peace and prosperity would spread to the whole world. The whole world is now being renewed, sang Virgil in a passage* that some later Christians saw as a pagan prophecy of the Messiah. (The fathers of the American Constitution borrowed a key phrase from this poem, *novus ordo seclorum,* "a new order of the ages," not only for the Great Seal of the United States, but also for the dollar bill. They were thereby making the striking claim that history turned its vital corner

Eclogues 4.

not with Augustus Caesar, nor even with Jesus of Nazareth, but with the birth and Constitution of the United States.)

Virgil's poem goes on to promise that from now on, in this new age, under the divine kingship of Apollo himself, the earth will produce all that one could require. Earth, sea, and heaven will rejoice at the child now to be born. Nobody knows which child Virgil was referring to, but the point is clear: the new age, for which we have waited for a millennium, is now here at last through the peaceful and joyful rule of Augustus Caesar. The message was carved in stone, on monuments and in inscriptions, around the known world: "Good news! We have an Emperor! Justice, Peace, Security, and Prosperity are ours forever! The Son of God has become King of the World!"

Augustus ruled the Roman world, an increasingly massive empire, from 31 BC to AD 14. After his death, he too was divinized, and his successor, Tiberius, took the same titles. I have on my desk, as I write this, a coin from the reign of Tiberius. On the front, encircling Tiberius's portrait, is the abbreviated title: AUGUSTUS TI CAESAR DIVI AUG F, short for AUGUSTUS TIBERIUS CAESAR DIVI AUGUSTI FILIUS, "Augustus Tiberius Caesar, son of the Divine Augustus." On the reverse is a picture of Tiberius dressed as a priest, with the title PONTIFEX MAXIMUS. It was a coin like this one that they showed to Jesus of Nazareth, a day or two after he had ridden into Jerusalem, when they asked him whether or not they should pay tribute to Caesar. "Son of God"? "Chief Priest"? He was in the eye of the storm.

That tells us almost all we need to know about the first element of our first-century "perfect storm." But why was Rome particularly interested in the Middle East?

For reasons surprisingly similar to those of today's Western powers. Rome needed the Middle East for urgent supplies of necessary raw materials. Today it's oil; then it was grain. Rome itself was grossly overpopulated and underemployed. There were far too many people to be fed on local produce alone. Grain shipments from Egypt were vital. In the first century, as in the twenty-first, sea traffic was a tempting target for pirates and other hostile action. To avoid that, it was vital to keep the whole area stable. The job of a Roman governor in a place like Jerusalem was to keep the peace, to administer justice, to collect the taxes, and particularly to suppress unrest. After all, as the propaganda insisted, the rule of Caesar, the Roman "son of god,"

was the "good news" that had brought blessings and benefits to the whole world. Surely, once the locals saw what blessings Rome was so generously offering, they would happily come into line? Could it really be that difficult to win over their hearts and minds to the great ideals of the empire to the west?

That was the western gale, the first element in the perfect storm at whose center Jesus of Nazareth found himself. We now turn to the high-pressure system.

The Jewish Storm

The second great element in Jesus's perfect storm, the overheated high-pressure system, more turbulent and complex than the first element, is the story of Israel. As far back as we can trace their ancient scriptures, the Jewish people had believed that their story was going somewhere, that it had a goal in mind. Despite many setbacks and disappointments, their God would make sure they reached the goal at last. This is the story within which many Jews of Jesus's day believed, passionately, that they themselves were living. They were not just telling it as an ancient memory. They were, themselves, actors within its ongoing drama.

It is, I think, hard for people today to imagine what it's like to live within a long story in this way. The closest we come, perhaps, is the widespread assumption that ever since the rise of the modern Western world we are acting out a story of "progress." This is the so-called Whig view of history writ large: history is the story of movements of progressive freedom, and we must go forward and make the next one happen, and the next one after that. Despite all the tyrannies of the last century, people today still believe this myth of progress, as evidenced by the numerous proposals you read or hear that begin, "Now that we live in this day and age . . ." or "Now that we live in the twenty-first century . . ." Those phrases signal the presence of some kind of "progressive" agenda. People who think like that are actors in a play whose script they already know. They believe themselves called to take the drama forward toward a supposed libertarian utopia. On the day I am revising this chapter, the day after the wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton in Westminster Abbey, there is a grumpy letter in the London *Times*, complaining that this event and

the public reaction to it have "turned the clock back a hundred years." That only makes sense if you assume that the "clock" had been inexorably moving toward republicanism—a myth that many have found consoling down through the years, but that many more around the world seem determined to resist.

Take that rather vague, though still powerful, notion of "progress" and multiply it many times over. We have lived with the "progressive" dream for two or three centuries, but the Jews had been living in their great story for, they believed, well over a thousand years. Their story, like a great costume drama going on over many generations, stretched back to Abraham, Moses, David, and other heroes of the distant past. But it was all going to come to its great climax, they believed, any moment now. It was a single story, and they were at its leading edge.

So far as we know, this story was unique in the ancient world. Even the Romans had not thought of themselves in this way, with the sense of a great story now at last reaching its climax, until Augustus and his court poets used the idea in their propaganda. (This is interesting in itself. It's clear from earlier Jewish texts that the Jews didn't get the idea from Livy or Virgil. But it's equally obvious that the Roman poets didn't borrow it from the Jews either. Faced with these two parallel movements, we can see already why they crashed into each other, as you would expect in a perfect storm.) As far back as we can trace their ancient scriptures—what Christians call the Old Testament—the Jewish people and their ancestors had believed, or had been told by their prophets to believe, that their story was going somewhere, that it had a goal in mind. Despite many setbacks and disappointments, their God would make sure they reached the goal at last.

After all, they were taught that their God was the one true God of all the world. He wasn't simply one more god among many. It was therefore impossible that his will for the world would ultimately be thwarted. And, since the present state of affairs was clearly less than ideal, he would do whatever it took to sort things out. His people would, in the meantime, find themselves caught up in the story of how that would happen. Thus, whereas the Romans had what we might call a *retrospective eschatology,* in which people looked *back* from a "golden age" that had already arrived and saw the whole story of how they had arrived at that point, the Jews cherished and celebrated

a *prospective eschatology,* looking *forward* from within a decidedly ungolden age and longing and praying fervently for the freedom, justice, and peace that, they were convinced, were theirs by right. God would do it! It was going to happen at last!

The stories the Jews told (and when I say "told," I mean not only told one another, read out aloud in their meetinghouses, studied privately, and turned into prayer, but also celebrated in national festivals, which involved most of the population and brought vast pilgrim crowds from all over the world) were not simply stories of small beginnings, sad times at present, and glorious days to come. They were more specific, more complex, dense with detail, and heavy with hope. Their theme came to its fullest flowering in the great story of the Exodus, when, roughly fifteen hundred years before the time of Jesus, Moses had led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, across the Red Sea (which miraculously parted to let them through), and through the desert to the promised land. The Jews lived on the hope that it would happen again. The tyrants would do their worst, and God would deliver the people. Understand the Exodus, and you understand a good deal about Judaism. And about Jesus. Jesus chose Passover, the great national festival celebrating the Exodus, to make his crucial move.

We will look in more detail at the Exodus story a little later. It was celebrated annually at Passover and in other festivals too. But the Exodus, in turn, looked back farther, to the divine call to the original patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Their story in turn looked back farther still, to the mysterious but powerful story of creation itself, when Israel's God had brought his beautiful, ordered, and living creation out of the primal waters of chaos. *The God who brought order out of chaos and who brought his enslaved people out of Egypt would do it again.* Creation and covenant: God made the world, God called Israel to be his people, and God would remake his world in order to rescue his people Israel. Every time the Jewish people told the story (and they told it often), that was what they were thinking and hoping and praying for. It was this hope, this story that generated the second great storm wind, the powerful high-pressure system, into whose path Jesus of Nazareth decided to walk. And, eventually, to ride a donkey.

Long before that point, two more elements had entered the story of Israel and continued thereafter to dominate the horizon. When

I lived in Jerusalem for three months in 1989, I frequently walked through the ultra-Orthodox Jewish quarter, Mea Shearim. Among the fascinating and evocative sights and sounds of that community I observed many posters. Some of them were warning visitors to dress modestly: no bare flesh here, please! But many of them were harping on a darker, more powerful double theme. Many of the families in Mea Shearim had escaped from Eastern Europe around the time of the Holocaust. The horror of that period had shaped their imagination. It was because of what Hitler did that one must now observe the ancestral law. It was because of what Hitler did that God would now do a new thing. And it was because of what Hitler did that this Jewish community was praying and waiting and longing for—the Messiah. "Hitler and the Messiah!" "Hitler and the Messiah!" The great wicked ruler and the coming great deliverer! That was the message I saw then.

And that, with the first name changed to suit different circumstances (Caesar? Herod?), is the message you would have heard in Jesus's day. These two themes—the great evil empire and the coming royal deliverer—look back partly to the Exodus itself, when Moses delivered Israel from Pharaoh's Egypt. But they increased in power with the long story of Israel's monarchy and the spectacular national disasters that had befallen the people during that period. These themes are, if you like, the particular dust storms that the great high-pressure system of Israel's history picked up along the way, gathering momentum with every passing decade. Memories of King David and his famous victories over the surrounding pagan nations were kept alive, as prophets promised a coming day when a king from David's family would bring justice, peace, and prosperity to the whole world. (Had the Roman poet Virgil been reading Isaiah 11? Probably not, but the coincidence of themes is striking.) Memories of King Solomon building the Temple in Jerusalem were kept alive by those who defended, cleansed, restored, or beautified the Temple, a process that was still going on in Jesus's day under the patronage of the Herod family. The coming king would defeat the wicked, oppressive nations and would build, or rebuild, God's Temple! Hitler and the Messiah! Down with the one! Bring on the other!

For "Hitler," then, also read "Babylon." Other disasters had come crashing down on the Israelites. But easily the worst was when the

Babylonians captured Jerusalem in the early sixth century BC, decimated the royal family, smashed the Temple to bits, and carried away its treasures, dragging off most of the population into an exile from which few would ever return. It was like Egypt all over again: enslavement in a foreign land. "By the rivers of Babylon," wrote one of their poets, "there we sat down and there we wept" (Ps. 137:1). And it was memories of Jerusalem, of "Zion," that made the tears bitter. They had lived at the fault line in world history and geography, and the earthquake had swallowed them up alive.

And now here comes the extraordinary bit, the part of the story many miss out, the twist in the tale responsible for the fact that, by the time the high-pressure system of Jewish history reached the first century, it was already dangerously close to storm force. Though many Jews had, remarkably enough, been brought back from Babylon and by the end of the sixth century had even rebuilt the Temple, there remained a strong sense that this was not yet the real "new Exodus" for which they longed. Babylon itself had fallen, overthrown by a rival empire (Persia); but the phenomenon of which Egypt a thousand years before had been one classic example, and Babylon the most recent, was continuing. New wicked empires had arisen, and Israel was still enslaved to them. And there grew up a sense that a new Exodus, a real "return from exile," was still to be awaited, had not yet happened. It would come when the last great world empire had done its worst. Indeed, it would result in the overthrow of that dark power.

This is the long story, the great narrative of hope, the prospective eschatology, within which many Jews of Jesus's day were living, had been living for a long time, and would continue to live. In Jesus's day it was obvious which world power had taken on the role of Egypt and Babylon. This is where our high-pressure system meets our gale. The long story of Israel must finally confront the long story of Rome. This is no time to be out on the sea in an open boat. Or riding into Jerusalem on a donkey.

The clash of these two stories produced several movements within a couple of hundred years on either side of the time of Jesus. We shall look at these in a later chapter. For the moment we move on to the third element in the perfect storm of the first century.

5

The Hurricane

THE GALE OF ROME and the high-pressure system of Jewish hopes. It takes one more wind to make the perfect storm. And, as in the original Massachusetts disaster, this one was of a different order altogether.

To understand this great cyclone, this tropical hurricane, you have to understand, as I said before, something about the ancient Jewish vision of God. This always was the highly unpredictable element within the Jewish story itself. God remained free and sovereign. Again and again in the past, the way Israel had told its own story was different from the way God was planning things. The people, no doubt, hoped that the way they were telling their own story would fit in comfortably enough with the way God was seeing things, but again and again the prophets had to say that this was not so. Often God's way of telling the story cut clean against the national narrative. *And Jesus believed that this was happening again in his own time.*

God had promised to come back, to return to his people in power and glory, to establish his kingdom on earth as in heaven. The Jewish people always hoped that this would simply underwrite their national aspirations; he was, after all, their God. They wanted a divine hurricane simply to reinforce their already overheated high-pressure system. But the prophets, up to and including John the Baptist, had always warned that God's coming in power and in person would be entirely on his own terms, with his own purpose—and that his own

people would be as much under judgment as anyone, if their aspirations didn't coincide with God's.

Jesus not only believed that this was another of those moments where the true, prophetic vision of the divine hurricane would clash with the current national mood. He believed, it seems—the stories he told at the time bear this out quite strikingly—that as he came to Jerusalem *he was embodying, incarnating, the return of Israel's God to his people* in power and glory.

But it was a different kind of power, a different kind of glory. This is another point that *Jesus Christ Superstar* got exactly right. Jesus is approaching Jerusalem, and Simon the Zealot urges him to mount a proper revolution. Jesus, he says, will then get the power and the glory forever. But then Jesus sings, hauntingly, the lines that make clear that there is a radical difference between the national aspiration, as voiced by the Zealots, and the divine purpose. Neither Simon nor the crowds nor the other disciples nor Jerusalem itself have any idea what power is. They don't understand what glory is. They simply haven't a clue. So he continues with the warning, which, in all our sources, he went on to enact in a dramatic symbol. Jerusalem itself was going to be thrown down, stone by stone. The harsh wind of western empire would blast away the Temple itself, the central symbol of national identity and the building that made Jerusalem what it was, because Jerusalem and its leaders had not recognized the moment when God was visiting them, was coming back to them in person (Luke 20:44).

The Wind of God

Here, then, is the third element in the first-century perfect storm: the strange, unpredictable, and highly dangerous divine element. The wind of God. This is God's moment declares Jesus, and you were looking the other way. Your dreams of national liberation, leading you into head-on confrontation with Rome, were not God's dreams. God called Israel, so that through Israel he might edeem the world; but Israel itself needs redeeming as well. Hence God comes to Israel riding o a donkey, in fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy of the coming peaceful kingdom, announcing judgment on the system and the city that have turned their vocation in upon themselves and going

off to take the weight of the world's evil and hostility onto himself, so that by dying under them he might exhaust their power.

All his public career Jesus had been embodying the rescuing, redeeming love of Israel's God, and Israel's own capital city and leaders couldn't see it. The divine hurricane sweeps in from the ocean, and to accomplish its purpose it must meet, head-on, the cruel western wind of pagan empire and the high-octane high-pressure system of national aspiration. Jesus seizes the moment, the Passover moment, the Exodus moment, not least because these too speak of the sovereign freedom and presence of God as much over his rebellious and incomprehending people as over the tyranny of Egypt. And as we watch the events of Jesus's final days unfold, we cannot simply look on and register them as an odd quirk of history. The claim being made in the stories of Jesus is that this was the perfect storm. This was where the hurricane of divine love met the cold might of empire and the overheated aspiration of Israel. Only when we reflect on that combination do we begin to understand the meaning of Jesus's death. Only then might we begin to understand how it is that the true Son of God, the true High Priest, has indeed become king of the world.

This is, of course, to run too far ahead of ourselves. If we are to approach that density of understanding, we must first grasp just how powerful, within the ancient scriptures, this theme of God's sovereign, independent action really was.

Sometimes, indeed, Israel's God was envisaged, as in our present running metaphor, in terms of the violent forces of nature, rampaging through the heavens and coming to the rescue of his people:

The earth reeled and rocked;
the foundations also of the mountains trembled
and quaked, because he was angry.
Smoke went up from his nostrils,
and devouring fire from his mouth;
glowing coals flamed forth from him.
He bowed the heavens, and came down;
thick darkness was under his feet.
He rode on a cherub, and flew;
he came swiftly upon the wings of the wind.

He made darkness his covering around him,
his canopy thick clouds dark with water.
Out of the brightness before him
there broke through his clouds
hailstones and coals of fire.
YHWH also thundered in the heavens,
and the Most High uttered his voice.
And he sent out his arrows, and scattered them;
he flashed forth lightnings, and routed them.
Then the channels of the sea were seen,
and the foundations of the world were laid bare
at your rebuke, O YHWH,
at the blast of the breath of your nostrils. (Ps. 18:7–15)

That sounds pretty much like a hurricane to me. And perhaps something more. Whatever else the ancient Israelites believed about their God, he was not a tame God. He was not the cool, detached God of ancient Epicureanism or modern Deism. But nor was he simply the personification of those forces of nature. He uses them, riding on the wind. At other times he tells the winds to be quiet. He remains sovereign over the elements. He is, after all, their creator.

This is a different sort of wind altogether. In a sense, it's strange even to put it alongside the other two. But the reason for doing so is that the first-century Jews told stories not only about their national history, but about their God. They celebrated his power, singing psalms like the one I've just quoted. They held together, with fierce devotion, their robust beliefs that their God was the one and only God, their anguish was the pain of the world, and the agony of their own people was at the heart of that world. Jerusalem, as ever, stood at the point where the tectonic plates of the world crashed together. It was, it seemed, the appropriate place of prayer for a world in pain.

Who Should Be King?

But it was also, in Jesus's day, a deeply puzzling place in its own right. This is where the story of God, the great hurricane that would sweep in from the third angle of the triangle, came into its own. Jesus's contemporaries believed, because their ancient prophets had told them so, that their God had promised to live in their midst, in the Jerusalem Temple, which was the lineal descendant of Solomon's Temple, which was itself the successor to the wilderness tabernacle constructed by Moses. But—again, as the prophets had said—Israel's God had abandoned the Temple at the time of the exile to Babylon. Ezekiel saw it happen (chaps. 10–11).

Ever afterwards, the same prophets had promised that he would one day return. He would come back to Mount Zion, to the holy city, to the Temple, to Jerusalem. "The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple" (Mal. 3.1). "The glory of YHWH will be revealed, and all people shall see it together" (Isa. 40:5). "Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of YHWH to Zion" (52:8). On and on go the promises, resonating through the minds and hearts and prayers of Israelites, of the Jewish people, of the Jerusalemites, of the pilgrims. Of Jesus of Nazareth.

The point is this. At exactly the time when Jesus was growing up, there was a movement—call it a political movement, a religious movement, or (as Josephus calls it) a "philosophy"—that said that *it was time for God alone to be king.* The people were waiting for the cyclone. They were praying for it. Did they know what it would mean?

They knew what it wouldn't mean. They were fed up with their own "kings"—the Hasmonean dynasty of the last hundred years, such as it was, and then Herod and his second-rate sons. They saw no prospect of any human leader arising from such quarters to do what had to be done, to fight the battle, to overthrow the pagans, to cleanse and restore the Temple, to establish the long-awaited rule of justice and peace. In between the long years of hope and the even longer years of crushing sorrow, this movement emerged saying that God, only God, could and would be king. God would come back and would rule his people. The Jewish historian Josephus tells us about some of the forms of this movement; there were undoubtedly many more. And even when the hope didn't turn into action, it smoldered on in private dreams and prayers. Theocracy! Yes, that's what they wanted—as long as it was the right God doing the ruling. As Bob Dylan once said, " 'I am the Lord thy God' is a fine saying, as long as it's the right person who's saying it."

This idea of theocracy wasn't as extraordinary as it might sound to modern ears (though, as we shall see, the debate about such matters has recently come back into public prominence). The ancient scriptures were full of the theme. In fact, the Bible relates how, when the people first asked for a king, the divine response was that it was inappropriate: God himself was their king, so they didn't need a human king as well (1 Sam. 8:7; 12:12). At that time, a compromise was reached: after the failure of Saul, the first king, God chose David, "a man after his own heart." Somehow, right from the start, there was a sense in which God was king—through David.

That, presumably, is part of what it means to say that, when Samuel anointed David with oil to proclaim him king, "the spirit of YHWH came mightily on David from that day forward" (1 Sam. 16:13). That didn't mean that David had a smooth, easy path to power. Far from it. He was on the run, hunted by Saul, moving from place to place, resorting to tricks and deceit to stay out of trouble.

But, at last, Saul died in battle against the Philistines. He had failed in the main royal task of defeating the national enemy. David, who had earlier killed the Philistine hero Goliath and had thereby marked himself out as potential royalty, came into the kingdom for which he had been anointed several years before. This story is heavy with resonances for the story of Jesus of Nazareth. Indeed, Jesus himself refers to it as part of the explanation for his own strange itinerant public career, under the eagle eyes of critical opponents (Mark 2:23–28).

David of course, made big mistakes as did his successors. The story of his reign shows the cracks starting to appear that would ruin the kingdom of his successors bit by bit starting with the splitting off of the northern kingdom and ending with the devastation of Jerusalem itself and the shameful and horrific exile. But in the beginning, right after David's establishment as king, the scriptures report a promise made to him by God. David had decided he wanted to build a house for his God a great Temple, so that the God who had lived among his people in the tabernacle would now live with them permanently. This permanent dwelling would be the focal point o the city, which would thereby be established forever as the capital city of God's people: Jerusalem. The city at the center o' the earth.

A fine ambition, you might think. But then Nathan, David's court prophet, comes to him with a message and a promise. David is not,

actually, to build the house for God. His son will do it. But, more important, God will make David a "house"—a house, that is, not made with stone and timber, but a "house" in the sense of a family:

> When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. (2 Sam. 7:12–14)

That promise was remembered and pondered again and again in the days to come, right up to the time of Jesus. Nobody, it seems, was absolutely sure what it would mean in practice. But many saw the royal house of Israel as the means by which the living God would establish his own kingdom, his own rule or reign. There is a sense in which it isn't an either/or choice, *either* God *or* David. Somehow it seems to be both. This is the point at which we can understand only too well how it was that the Israelite people of old, and the Jewish people of Jesus's day, could very easily forget that *their* national dream and *God's* purposes for them might actually be two quite different things. The prophets existed to remind them of the fact; but prophets were easy to ignore or forget. Or kill.

God as King

As it was, the more the story of Israel went on, the more the ancient poets and prophets spoke explicitly about God himself being king, taking charge, coming to sort everything out. They sang memorable songs about what it would be like when God did this. These poems, we should remind ourselves, continued to be sung in the Jerusalem Temple right through to the time of its destruction in AD 70, as they continue to be sung in synagogues and private homes, wherever Jews say their prayers, to this day. What follows is a small selection of many similar passages:*

*For others, see Pss. 22:27–28; 44:4–5; 74:12–13, 22; 93:1–2; 99:1–5.

YHWH is king forever and ever;
the nations shall perish from his
O YHWH, you will hear the desire of the meek;
you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear
to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed,
so that those from earth may strike terror no more.
(Ps. 10:16–18)

Clap your hands, all you peoples;
shout to God with loud songs of joy.
For YHWH, the Most High, is awesome,
a great king over all the earth.
He subdued peoples under us,
and nations under our feet.
He chose our heritage for us,
the pride of Jacob whom he loves.

God has gone up with a shout,
YHWH with the sound of a trumpet.
Sing praises to God, sing praises;
sing praises to our King, sing praises.
For God is the king of all the earth;
sing praises with a psalm.

God is king over the nations;
God sits on his holy throne.
The princes of the peoples gather
as the people of the God of Abraham.
For the shields of the earth belong to God;
he is highly exalted. (Ps. 47:1–9)

For YHWH is a great God,
and a great King above all gods.
In his hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are his also.
The sea is his, for he made it,
and the dry land, which his hands have formed.

O come, let us worship and bow down,
let us kneel before YHWH, our Maker!

For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand. (Ps. 95:3–7)

Say among the nations, "YHWH is king!
The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved.
He will judge the peoples with equity."
Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
let the field exult, and everything in it.
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
before YHWH; for he is coming,
for he is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with his truth. (Ps. 96:10–13)

I will extol you, my God and King,
and bless your name forever and ever. . .
All your works shall give thanks to you, O YHWH,
and all your faithful shall bless you.
They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom,
and tell of your power,
to make known to all people your mighty deeds,
and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.
Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and your dominion endures throughout all generations.
(Ps. 145:1, 10–13)

We notice a constant triple theme in these songs. First, Israel's God is celebrated as king especially in Jerusalem, in his home in the Temple. Second, when Israel's God is enthroned as "king," the nations are brought under his rule. Israel rejoices, but all the other nations will be included as well—sometimes, it seems, so that they may be punished for all their wickedness, particularly their oppression of Israel, but sometimes too so that they may be brought in to share the life of God's people and join in with Israel's praise of the one God. Indeed, the whole of creation will join in the celebration. Third, when God is king, the result is proper justice, real equity, the removal of all corruption and oppression.

One can see all too easily how these songs would give rise, among a people weary of corrupt and self-serving rulers, to the longing for YHWH himself to come and take charge. He and he alone would give the people what they needed and anted. He would take control and sort everything out. The singing of these songs week in and week out, while watching the dreary procession of corrupt officials and regimes come and go, would provide a natural seedbed for the hope for Israel's God to be king—and nobody else.

This longing would only be increased by the prophetic passages that spoke in the same way:*

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, "Your God reigns" [i.e., "Your God is king"].
Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices,
together they sing for joy;
for in plain sight they see
the return of YHWH to Zion.
Break forth together into singing,
you ruins of Jerusalem;
for YHWH has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.
YHWH has bared his holy arm
before the eyes of all the nations;
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God. (Isa. 52:7–10)

Sometimes, of course, this theme resulted in a note of severe warning:

> Cursed be the cheat who has a male in the flock and vows to give it, and yet sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished; for I am a great King, says YHWH of hosts, and my name is reverenced among the nations. (Mal. 1:14)†

*See also Isa. 33:22; Obad. 17, 21; Zech. 14:9.

†Yes, today many people are shocked at the ide of animal sacrifice. It was part of most ancient religions, Judaism included. That's a subject for another time.

So far I have only quoted passages in which the word "king" or "kingdom" or a near equivalent actually occurs. But it isn't hard to extend the range. Consider, for example, passages in which Israel's God is spoken of as the true "shepherd" of his people—remembering that, in a rural economy where looking after livestock was one of the most common occupations, "shepherd" was a frequent image for "king." We think again of the Psalms:

YHWH is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul. (23:1–3)

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock!
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth. . . .
Stir up your might,
and come to save us! (80:1–2)

And also of the prophets:

See, the Lord YHWH comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep. (Isa. 40:10–11)

Hear the word of YHWH, O nations,
and declare it in the coastlands far away;
say, "He who scattered Israel will gather him,
and will keep him as a shepherd a flock."
For YHWH has ransomed Jacob,
and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him.
They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion,
and they shall be radiant over the goodness of YHWH.
(Jer. 31:10–12)

And then, in particular, an extraordinary passage in which YHWH, the true shepherd of Israel, is contrasted with the human rulers who have failed in their task of looking after the "sheep," Israel:

> Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them—to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord YHWH: Ah, you shepherds of Israel w o have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them. . . .
>
> For thus says the Lord YHWH: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. . . . I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord YHWH. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice. (Ezek. 34:2–6, 11–12, 14–16)

This could hardly be clearer. The human "shepherds" have been a dismal failure; only YHWH himself will now do. He and he alone will give the "sheep"—the people of Israel—what they need and what the other shepherds have so obviously not given them. There is a radical

break between the way Israel's rulers have been telling and living the national story and the way God wants to tell it. But then comes the shock, sending us all the way back to 2 Samuel to revisit the strange long-term relationship between the kingship of God and the kingship of David:

> I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, YHWH, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, YHWH, have spoken. (Ezek. 34:23–24)

The result is that Israel will be YHWH's sheep indeed:

> They shall know that I, YHWH their God, am with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, says the Lord YHWH. You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, says the Lord YHWH. (Ezek. 34:30–31)

Ezekiel 34 is all about Israel's God becoming king, to do for his people what other kings and rulers have failed to do. That is clear. But it is also clear that the prophet reserves a role for the eventual king (or "prince") from the line of David. How these two relate he does not say. Somehow, when God is king, "David" (i.e., the coming king from David's family) will be king. These will not cancel one another out. When we read, among the stories of Jesus, hints and promises about a shepherd who cares for the sheep, these are the resonances we should be picking up.

A similar result emerges from a psalm that was well known and widely quoted and adapted at the time. It functioned, for Jews of the period and then for the early Christians, as a model of how YHWH would set up his kingdom over the turbulent nations—by establishing the true Davidic king:

> *Why do the nations conspire,*
> *and the peoples plot in vain?*
> *The kings of the earth set themselves,*
> *and the rulers take counsel together,*
> *against YHWH and his anointed. . . .*
>
> *He who sits in the heavens laughs;*
> *YHWH has them in derision.*

Then he will speak to them in his wrath,
and terrify them in his fury, saying,
"I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill."

I will tell of the decree of YHWH:
He said to me, "You are my son;
today I have begotten you.
Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession.
You shall break them with a rod of iron,
and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." (Ps. 2:1–2, 4–9)

Here we have it. YHWH is in charge and will establish his own rule over the rest of the world from his throne in Zion. But he will do this through his "anointed," through the one he calls "my son."

I have deliberately set out these passages at some length to show just how strong, just how deep-rooted in scripture, is the idea of YHWH himself coming to rule and reign as Israel's king. Several of the themes one can observe in the sorry sequence of would-be kings from the Maccabees to bar-Kochba (see Chapter 9) emerge in a clear light: victory over the nations, the rescue of Israel from oppression, Jerusalem and the Temple as the proper dwelling place for God's glory, and so on. But it is YHWH himself who will bring this about—or, in that final twist in Ezekiel 34, echoed in Psalm 2, YHWH himself *acting in and through the Davidic king.*

The idea of YHWH alone as king, as expressed by the extreme revolutionaries in the first century, thus raises a big question. What will this mean in practice, in reality? What will it look like? How does all this line up, if it does, with the national expectation and hope? Will it underwrite it, will it overthrow it, or will it perhaps do both of those at the same time? Paying attention to the prophets would indicate that something like this third possibility was likely; but what would it actually mean?

In particular, the question was raised: would YHWH actually appear, visibly and in person, to take charge? If so, what could people expect to see? How would it happen? Or, if not, would he act through chosen representatives—perhaps specially inspired prophets? (There was no shortage of people in the first century claiming prophetic inspiration, speaking urgent words from YHWH to his suffering and anxious people, sometimes promising them immediate and spectacular supernatural deliverance.) And if YHWH did choose to act in that way—acting in one sense all by himself, but in another through particular representatives—how would those people be equipped for the task?

This, again, is where the ancient idea of "anointing" comes into play. An individual is solemnly smeared with holy oil as a sign, and perhaps a means, of a special "equipping," or "enabling," from YHWH himself to perform the necessary tasks. Such persons are no longer acting on their own authority or initiative, but on God's. A dangerous claim, and one can imagine people being instantly cynical: "Claiming to speak for YHWH? What, another one? We've heard that before. You're probably just a fraud like all the others."

There was, after all, no obvious model for what it might look like, how it might happen, that YHWH would do what all those psalms and prophets said and come in person to take charge, ruling the world, rescuing Israel, establishing his presence in the Temple, judging the nations, and causing the trees and the animals to shout for joy. The ancient scriptures are quite unhelpful on the matter. When YHWH visits Abraham, Abraham sees three men and entertains them at a meal. When YHWH meets Moses, what Moses sees is a burning bush. When, later, YHWH guides Moses and the Israelites through the desert, what they see is a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. When YHWH reveals his glory to the prophet Isaiah, all Isaiah tells us (in his terror) is that YHWH was high and lifted up, surrounded by angels, with the hem of his robe filling the Temple. Was that, we wonder, what was meant when, in the same book, we are told that the sentinels would shout for joy as in plain sight they saw YHWH returning to Zion? Was that what was meant when it said, "The glory of YHWH will be revealed, and all people shall see it together" (Isa. 40:5)? When Ezekiel saw the glory of YHWH, all he offered by way of a description was a strange account of YHWH's chariot-throne, with its whirling wheels darting this way and that. Which of these models, if any, ought one to expect? Or would it be something different?

The notion of YHWH himself as Israel's true king thus became closely bound up with the idea of his powerful *return.* At the time of the exile, it was widely believed that Israel's God had abandoned the

Temple and the city of Jerusalem, leaving them to their fate. (How else, people reasoned, could they have fallen?) Ezekiel saw the glory depart because of the people's wickedness (chaps. 10–11). But then, toward the end of his majestic book, he was given another vision of YHWH's glory returning to the newly rebuilt Temple (43:1–5). For Isaiah and Ezekiel, then, not only would Israel return to its land, but YHWH would return to the Temple. That is at the heart of the vision of King YHWH in Isaiah 52. And that, we may suppose, is what devout Jews hoped and prayed for as they sang all those psalms about YHWH becoming king, taking charge at last, rescuing his people, and bringing justice to the world.

But it hadn't happened yet—or not as far as the prophets after the exile were concerned. Yes, they had returned from Babylon to Judaea. Yes, they had ebuilt the Temple. But YHWH had not returned to fill the house once more with his glory. The last two prophets in the canon both promise that he *will* indeed come, but this makes it all the clearer that *he has not yet done so:*

> Thus says YHWH: I will return to Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem; Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of YHWH of hosts shall be called the holy mountain. . . . Thus says YHWH of hosts: I will save my people from the east country and from the west country; and I will bring them to live in Jerusalem. They shall be my people and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness. (Zech. 8:3, 7–8)

> See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. e messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says YHWH of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and h will purify the descendants o Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to YHWH in righteousness. . . . Then I will draw near to you for judgment. . . . (Mal. 3:1–3, 5)

All this brings into sharp focus the theme I have described as the third great storm, the hurricane from the southeast—and the final type of "king" that people in Jesus's day were eager to see. The people who were longing for God alone to be their king were clinging to the hope set out in scripture: the hope that, after all these years, Israel's God would return to be with his people, to rescue them, to restore them, to condemn their oppressors, to take charge, to do justice, to sort things out, to rule over them like a good king should, but unlike any actual human king they had ever known. And, bearing in mind not only Ezekiel 34, but also a remarkable passage in Zechariah, it appears that the divine king might after all come in the form of a human king:

> *Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!*
> *Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!*
> *Lo, your king comes to you;*
> *triumphant and victorious is he,*
> *humble and riding on a donkey,*
> *on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*
> *He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim*
> *and the war-horse from Jerusalem;*
> *and the battle bow shall be cut off;*
> *and he shall command peace to the nations;*
> *his dominion shall be from sea to sea,*
> *and from the River to the ends of the earth.*
> *As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you,*
> *I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. (Zech. 9:9–11)*

We notice the echoes of promises made to David in Psalm 2 and elsewhere: when the true king of Israel arrives, he will be king not only of Israel, but of the whole world. That is part of the point, as we have seen again and again with the promises about God's victory over the nations (or, just possibly, God's welcoming of them into a kind of extended holy people). When God acts as Israel believes he will, it will be not only to rescue his people, but to establish his sovereign rule over the whole world. God will finally be in charge from one sea to the other, from the River to the ends of the earth. And what will it look like? Like a humble figure, riding into Jerusalem on a donkey.

The Coming Anointed One

Nobody in the two hundred years before Jesus and nobody in the hundred years of continuing struggle after his time seems to have put all this together and suggested that Israel's God might come *in the form and person of the Davidic king.* Or, if they did, we have no record of it. The closest we com might be bar-Kochba, proclaiming himself in AD 132 to be a great light from heaven, the promised and long-awaited "star." We will look at his movement later on.

But of course the prime example of a movement that held together the themes of God's kingdom, on the one hand, and a messianic kingdom, on the other, was indeed that of Jesus himself. Within a few years of his death, the first followers of Jesus of Nazareth were speaking and writing about him, and indeed singing about him, not just as a great teacher and healer, not just as a great spiritual leader and holy man, but as a strange combination: *both* the Davidic king *and* the returning God. He was, they said, the anointed one, the one who had been empowered and equipped by God's Spirit to do all kinds of things, which somehow meant that he was God's anointed, the Messiah, the coming king. He was the one who had been exalted after his suffering and now occupied the throne beside the throne of God himself.

But they also believed that Jesus had thereby fulfilled the dreams of those who wanted God, and God alone, to be king. Jesus, they believed, had lived and worked within the same overall story as other would-be kings of the time. But he had transformed the story around himself. In Jesus, they believed, God himself had indeed become king. Jesus had come to take charge, and he was now on the throne of the whole world. The dream of a coming king—of God himself as the coming king, ruling the world in justice and peace—had come true at last. Once we get inside the world of Jesus's day and begin to understand what he might have meant by the word "God," we begin to understand too the breathtaking claim that Jesus , as, himself, now in charge. He was the one who had "an everlasting dominion" (Dan. 7:14), a kingship that would never be destroyed.

This claim cann ever be, n our sense or indeed in the ancient sense, merely "religious." It involves everything, from powe and politics to culture and family. It catches up the "religious" meanings, including

personal spirituality and transformation, and the philosophical ones, including ethics and worldview. But it places them all within a larger vision that can be stated quite simply: God is now in charge, and he is in charge in and through Jesus. That is the vision that explains what Jesus did and said, what happened to Jesus, and what his followers subsequently did and said. And what happened to them too.

But here is the puzzle—the ultimate puzzle of Jesus. This puzzle boils down to two questions.

First, why would anyone say this of Jesus, who had not done the things people expected a victorious king to do? Why, indeed, did Jesus end up being crucified with the words "King of the Jews" above his head? And why would anyone, three minutes, three days, or three hundred years after that moment, ever dream of taking it seriously?

Second, what on earth might it mean today to speak of Jesus being "king" or being "in charge," in view of the fact that so many things in the world give no hint of such a thing?

Those are the questions that will now occupy us in the rest of this book.

In Part Two, we shall look at Jesus's public career, watching him stake the claim that God's kingdom was being launched then and there and hearing him explain it to his puzzled hearers. We shall then see where it led him and learn how he understood his own forthcoming death as the means by which, in a strange and dark mystery, God's kingdom would be established forever. That will open a new way for us to consider, in Part Three, what it might mean in today's and tomorrow's world to speak of Jesus as being truly in charge—and, equally important, not just to speak of it, but to help make it happen.

But, as we draw these introductory chapters to a close, we return to the image of the perfect storm. We have felt the force of the western gale: the relentless power of Rome, its emperor, its armies, its steely-eyed ambition to rule the world. We have sensed the buildup of hope and national aspiration within the high-pressure system that emerged from the age-old stories of Israel, producing a complex but coherent narrative in which many of Jesus's contemporaries believed themselves still to be living, in which indeed they were eager for the denouement, the fulfillment, the great final day. These two by themselves would have been enough, and were enough in many other instances, to produce a terrible storm with devastating results.

But, from the moment Jesus of Nazareth launched his public career, he seems to have been determined to invoke the third part of the great storm as well. He spoke continually about the hurricane of which the psalmists had sung and the prophets had preached. He spoke about God himself becoming king. And he went about doing things that, he said, demonstrated what that meant and would mean. He took upon himself (this is one of the most secure starting points for historical investigation of Jesus) the role of a prophet, in other words, of a man sent from God to reaffirm God's intention of overthrowing the might of pagan empire, but also to warn Israel that its present way of going about things was dangerously ill-conceived and leading to disaster. And with that, the sea is lashed into a frenzy; the wind makes the waves dance like wild things; and Jesus himself strides out into the middle of it all, into the very eye of the storm, announcing that the time is fulfilled, that God's kingdom is now at hand. He commands his hearers to give up their other dreams and to trust his instead. This, at its simplest, is what Jesus was all about.