



The Jesus I Never Knew
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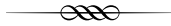
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CHAPTER 1

THE JESUS
I THOUGHT I KNEW



Suppose we hear an unknown man spoken of by many men. Suppose we were puzzled to hear that some men said he was too tall and some too short; some objected to his fatness, some lamented his leanness; some thought him too dark, and some too fair. One explanation . . . would be that he might be an odd shape. But there is another explanation. He might be the right shape. . . . Perhaps (in short) this extraordinary thing is really the ordinary thing; at least the normal thing, the centre.

G. K. CHESTERTON

CHAPTER 1

THE JESUS I THOUGHT I KNEW



I first got acquainted with Jesus when I was a child, singing “Jesus Loves Me” in Sunday school, addressing bedtime prayers to “Dear Lord Jesus,” watching Bible Club teachers move cutout figures across a flannelgraph board. I associated Jesus with Kool-Aid and sugar cookies and gold stars for good attendance.

I remember especially one image from Sunday school, an oil painting that hung on the concrete block wall. Jesus had long, flowing hair, unlike that of any man I knew. His face was thin and handsome, his skin waxen and milky white. He wore a robe of scarlet, and the artist had taken pains to show the play of light on its folds. In his arms, Jesus cradled a small sleeping lamb. I imagined myself as that lamb, blessed beyond all telling.

Recently, I read a book that the elderly Charles Dickens had written to sum up the life of Jesus for his children. In it, the portrait emerges of a sweet Victorian nanny who pats the heads of boys and girls and offers such advice as, “Now, children, you must be nice to your mummy and daddy.” With a start I recalled the Sunday school image of Jesus that I grew up with: someone kind and reassuring, with no sharp edges at all—a Mister Rogers before the age of children’s television. As a child I felt comforted by such a person.

Later, while attending a Bible college, I encountered a different image. A painting popular in those days depicted Jesus, hands outstretched, suspended in a Dalí-like pose over the United Nations building in New York City. Here was the cosmic Christ, the One in whom all things inhere, the still point of the turning world. This world figure had come a long way from the lamb-toting shepherd of my childhood.

Still, students spoke of the cosmic Jesus with a shocking intimacy. The faculty urged us to develop a “personal relationship with Jesus Christ,” and in chapel services we hymned our love for him in most familiar terms. One song told about walking beside him in a garden with dew still on the roses. Students testifying about their faith casually dropped in phrases like “The Lord told me. . . .” My own faith hung in a kind of skeptical suspension during my time there. I was wary, confused, questioning.

Looking in retrospect on my years at Bible college, I see that, despite all the devotional intimacies, Jesus grew remote from me there. He became an object of scrutiny. I memorized the list of thirty-four specific miracles in the Gospels but missed the impact of just one miracle. I learned the Beatitudes yet never faced the fact that none of us—I above all—could make sense of those mysterious sayings, let alone live by them.

A little later, the decade of the 1960s (which actually reached me, along with most of the church, in the early 1970s) called everything into question. Jesus freaks—the very term would have been an oxymoron in the tranquil 1950s—suddenly appeared on the scene, as if deposited there by extraterrestrials. No longer were Jesus’ followers well-scrubbed representatives of the middle class; some were unkempt, disheveled radicals. Liberation theologians began enshrining Jesus on posters in a troika along with Fidel Castro and Che Guevara.

It dawned on me that virtually all portrayals of Jesus, including the Good Shepherd of my Sunday school and the United Nations Jesus of my Bible college, showed him wearing a mustache and beard, both of which were strictly banned from the Bible college. Questions now loomed that had never occurred to me in childhood. For example, How would telling people to be nice to one another get a man cru-

cified? What government would execute Mister Rogers or Captain Kangaroo? Thomas Paine said that no religion could be truly divine which has in it any doctrine that offends the sensibilities of a little child. Would the cross qualify?

In 1971 I first saw the movie *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, directed by Italian filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini. Its release had scandalized not only the religious establishment, who barely recognized the Jesus on-screen, but also the film community, who knew Pasolini as an outspoken homosexual and Marxist. Pasolini wryly dedicated the film to Pope John XXIII, the man indirectly responsible for its creation. Trapped in an enormous traffic jam during a papal visit to Florence, Pasolini had checked into a hotel room where, bored, he picked up a copy of the New Testament from the bedside table and read through Matthew. What he discovered in those pages so startled him that he determined to make a film using no text but the actual words from Matthew's gospel.

Pasolini's film captures well the reappraisal of Jesus that took place in the 1960s. Shot in southern Italy on a tight budget, it evokes in chalky whites and dusty grays something of the Palestinian surroundings Jesus lived in. The Pharisees wear towering headpieces, and Herod's soldiers faintly resemble Fascist *squadristi*. The disciples act like bumbling raw recruits, but Jesus himself, with a steady gaze and a piercing intensity, seems fearless. The parables and other sayings, he fires in clipped phrases over his shoulder as he dashes from place to place.

The impact of Pasolini's film can only be understood by one who passed through adolescence during that tumultuous period. Back then it had the power to hush scoffing crowds at art theaters. Student radicals realized they were not the first to proclaim a message that was jarringly antimaterialistic, antihypocritical, pro-peace, and pro-love.

For me, the film helped to force a disturbing reevaluation of my image of Jesus. In physical appearance, Jesus favored those who would have been kicked out of Bible college and rejected by most churches. Among his contemporaries he somehow gained a reputation as "a wine-bibber and a glutton." Those in authority, whether religious or political, regarded him as a troublemaker, a disturber of the peace. He spoke and acted like a revolutionary, scorning fame, family, property,

and other traditional measures of success. I could not dodge the fact that the words in Pasolini's film were taken entirely from Matthew's gospel, yet their message clearly did not fit my prior conception of Jesus.

About this same time a Young Life worker named Bill Milliken, who had founded a commune in an inner-city neighborhood, wrote *So Long, Sweet Jesus*. The title of that book gave words to the change at work inside me. In those days I was employed as the editor of *Campus Life* magazine, an official publication of Youth For Christ. *Who was this Christ, after all?* I wondered. As I wrote, and edited the writing of others, a tiny dybbuk of doubt hovered just to my side. *Do you really believe that? Or are you merely dispensing the party line, what you're paid to believe? Have you joined the safe, conservative establishment—modern versions of the groups who felt so threatened by Jesus?*

As often as not I avoided writing directly about Jesus.



When I switched on my computer this morning, Microsoft Windows flashed the date, implicitly acknowledging that, whatever you may believe about it, the birth of Jesus was so important that it split history into two parts. Everything that has ever happened on this planet falls into a category of before Christ or after Christ.

Richard Nixon got carried away with excitement in 1969 when Apollo astronauts first landed on the moon. "It's the greatest day since Creation!" crowed the president, until Billy Graham solemnly reminded him of Christmas and Easter. By any measure of history Graham was right. This Galilean, who in his lifetime spoke to fewer people than would fill just one of the many stadia Graham has filled, changed the world more than any other person. He introduced a new force field into history, and now holds the allegiance of a third of all people on earth.

Today, people even use Jesus' name to curse by. How strange it would sound if, when a businessman missed a golf putt, he yelled, "Thomas Jefferson!" or if a plumber screamed "Mahatma Gandhi!" when his pipe wrench mashed a finger. We cannot get away from this man Jesus.

“More than 1900 years later,” said H. G. Wells, “a historian like myself, who doesn’t even call himself a Christian, finds the picture centering irresistibly around the life and character of this most significant man. . . . The historian’s test of an individual’s greatness is ‘What did he leave to grow?’ Did he start men to thinking along fresh lines with a vigor that persisted after him? By this test Jesus stands first.” You can gauge the size of a ship that has passed out of sight by the huge wake it leaves behind.

And yet I am not writing a book about Jesus because he is a great man who changed history. I am not tempted to write about Julius Caesar or the Chinese emperor who built the Great Wall. I am drawn to Jesus, irresistibly, because he positioned himself as the dividing point of life—my life. “I tell you, whoever acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man will also acknowledge him before the angels of God,” he said. According to Jesus, what I think about him and how I respond will determine my destiny for all eternity.

Sometimes I accept Jesus’ audacious claim without question. Sometimes, I confess, I wonder what difference it should make to my life that a man lived two thousand years ago in a place called Galilee. Can I resolve this inner tension between doubter and lover?

I tend to write as a means of confronting my own doubts. My book titles—*Where Is God When It Hurts*, *Disappointment with God*—betray me. I return again and again to the same questions, as if fingering an old wound that never quite heals. Does God care about the misery down here? Do we really matter to God?

Once, for a two-week period, I was snowbound in a mountain cabin in Colorado. Blizzards closed all roads and, somewhat like Pasolini, I had nothing to do but read the Bible. I went through it slowly, page by page. In the Old Testament I found myself identifying with those who boldly stood up to God: Moses, Job, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, the psalmists. As I read, I felt I was watching a play with human characters who acted out their lives of small triumph and large tragedy onstage, while periodically calling to an unseen Stage Manager, “You don’t know what it’s like out here!” Job was most brazen, flinging to God this accusation: “Do you have eyes of flesh? Do you see as a mortal sees?”

Every so often I could hear the echo of a booming voice from far offstage, behind the curtain. “Yeah, and you don’t know what it’s like back here either!” it said, to Moses, to the prophets, most loudly to Job. When I got to the Gospels, however, the accusing voices stilled. God, if I may use such language, “found out” what life is like in the confines of planet earth. Jesus got acquainted with grief in person, in a brief, troubled life not far from the dusty plains where Job had travailed. Of the many reasons for Incarnation, surely one was to answer Job’s accusation: Do you have eyes of flesh? For a time, God did.

If only I could hear the voice from the whirlwind and, like Job, hold a conversation with God himself! I sometimes think. And perhaps that is why I now choose to write about Jesus. God is not mute: the Word spoke, not out of a whirlwind, but out of the human larynx of a Palestinian Jew. In Jesus, God lay down on the dissection table, as it were, stretched out in cruciform posture for the scrutiny of all skeptics who have ever lived. Including me.

*The vision of Christ that thou dost see
Is my vision's greatest enemy:
Thine has a great hook nose like thine,
Mine has a snub nose like to mine. . . .
Both read the Bible day and night,
But thou read'st black where I read white.*

WILLIAM BLAKE

As I think about Jesus, an analogy from Karl Barth comes to mind. A man stands by a window gazing into the street. Outside, people are shading their eyes with their hands and looking up into the sky. Because of the overhang of the building though, the man cannot see what it is they are pointing toward. We who live two thousand years after Jesus have a viewpoint not unlike the man standing by the window. We hear the shouts of exclamation. We study the gestures and words in the Gospels and the many books they have spawned. Yet no amount of neck-craning will allow us a glimpse of Jesus in the flesh.

For this reason, as William Blake's poem expresses so well, sometimes those of us who look for Jesus cannot see past our own noses. The Lakota tribe, for example, refers to Jesus as "the buffalo calf of God." The Cuban government distributes a painting of Jesus with a carbine slung over his shoulder. During the wars of religion with France, the English used to shout, "The pope is French but Jesus Christ is English!"

Modern scholarship further muddies the picture. If you peruse the academic books available at a seminary bookstore you may encounter Jesus as a political revolutionary, as a magician who married Mary Magdalene, as a Galilean charismatic, a rabbi, a peasant Jewish Cynic, a Pharisee, an anti-Pharisee Essene, an eschatological prophet, a "hippie in a world of Augustan yuppies," and as the hallucinogenic leader of a sacred mushroom cult. Serious scholars write these works, with little sign of embarrassment.*

Athletes come up with creative portrayals of Jesus that elude modern scholarship. Norm Evans, former Miami Dolphins lineman, wrote in his book *On God's Squad*, "I guarantee you Christ would be the toughest guy who ever played this game. . . . If he were alive today I would picture a six-foot-six-inch 260-pound defensive tackle who would always make the big plays and would be hard to keep out of the backfield for offensive linemen like myself." Fritz Peterson, former New York Yankee, more easily fancies Jesus in a baseball uniform: "I firmly believe that if Jesus Christ was sliding into second base, he would knock the second baseman into left field to break up the double play. Christ might not throw a spitball, but he would play hard within the rules."

In the midst of such confusion, how do we answer the simple question, "Who was Jesus?" Secular history gives few clues. In a delicious irony, the figure who has changed history more than any other

*The U.S. public tends to ignore such trendy portrayals. A recent Gallup survey revealed that 84 percent of Americans believe Jesus Christ was God or the Son of God. Overwhelmingly Americans believe that Jesus was sinless, brave, and emotionally stable. By lesser margins they regard him as easy to understand (!), physically strong and attractive, practical, warm, and accepting.

managed to escape the attention of most scholars and historians of his own time. Even the four men who wrote the Gospels omitted much that would interest modern readers, skipping over nine-tenths of his life. Since none devotes a word to physical description, we know nothing about Jesus' shape or stature or eye color. Details of his family life are so scant that scholars still debate whether or not he had brothers and sisters. The facts of biography considered essential to modern readers simply did not concern the gospel writers.

Before beginning this book I spent several months in three seminary libraries—one Catholic, one liberal Protestant, one conservative evangelical—reading about Jesus. It was daunting in the extreme to walk in the first day and see not just shelves but entire walls devoted to books about Jesus. A scholar at the University of Chicago estimates that more has been written about Jesus in the last twenty years than in the previous nineteen centuries. I felt almost as if the hyperbolic comment at the end of John's gospel had come true: "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written."

The agglomeration of scholarship began to have a numbing effect on me. I read scores of accounts of the etymology of Jesus' name, discussions of what languages he spoke, debates about how long he lived at Nazareth or Capernaum or Bethlehem. Any true-to-life image receded into a fuzzy, indistinct blur. I had a hunch that Jesus himself would be appalled by many of the portrayals I was reading.

At the same time, with great consistency I found that whenever I returned to the Gospels themselves the fog seemed to lift. J. B. Phillips wrote, after translating and paraphrasing the Gospels, "I have read, in Greek and Latin, scores of myths, but I did not find the slightest flavour of myth here. . . . No man could have set down such artless and vulnerable accounts as these unless some real Event lay behind them."

Some religious books have about them the sour smell of propaganda—but not the Gospels. Mark records what may be the most important event in all history, an event that theologians strive to interpret with words like "propitiation, atonement, sacrifice," in one sentence: "With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last." Odd, unpredictable

scenes show up, such as Jesus' family and neighbors trying to put him away under suspicion of insanity. Why include such scenes if you are writing hagiography? Jesus' most devoted followers usually come off as scratching their heads in wonderment—*Who is this guy?*—more baffled than conspiratorial.

Jesus himself, when challenged, did not offer airtight proofs of his identity. He dropped clues here and there, to be sure, but he also said, after appealing to the evidence, “Blessed is he who takes no offense at me.” Reading the accounts, it is hard to find anyone who does not at some point or another take offense. To a remarkable degree the Gospels throw the decision back to the reader. They operate more like a “whodunit” (or as Alister McGrath has pointed out, a “whowashe”) detective story than like a connect-the-dots drawing. I found fresh energy in this quality of the Gospels.

It occurs to me that all the contorted theories about Jesus that have been spontaneously generating since the day of his death merely confirm the awesome risk God took when he stretched himself out on the dissection table—a risk he seemed to welcome. Examine me. Test me. You decide.



The Italian movie *La Dolce Vita* opens with a shot of a helicopter ferrying a giant statue of Jesus to Rome. Arms outstretched, Jesus hangs in a sling, and as the helicopter passes over the landscape, people begin to recognize him. “Hey, it’s Jesus!” shouts one old farmer, hopping off his tractor to race across the field. Nearer Rome, bikini-clad girls sunbathing around a swimming pool wave a friendly greeting, and the helicopter pilot swoops in for a closer look. Silent, with an almost doleful expression on his face, the concrete Jesus hovers incongruously above the modern world.

My search for Jesus took off in a new direction when the filmmaker Mel White loaned me a collection of fifteen movies on the life of Jesus. They ranged from *King of Kings*, the 1927 silent classic by Cecil B. DeMille, to musicals such as *Godspell* and *Cotton Patch Gospel* to the strikingly modern French-Canadian treatment *Jesus of Montreal*.

I reviewed these films carefully, outlining them scene by scene. Then, for the next two years, I taught a class on the life of Jesus, using the movies as a springboard for our discussion.

The class worked like this. As we came to a major event in Jesus' life, I would scout through the various films and from them select seven or eight treatments that seemed notable. As class began, I would show the two- to four-minute clips from each film, beginning with the comical and stiff renditions and working toward profound or evocative treatments. We found that the process of viewing the same event through the eyes of seven or eight filmmakers helped to strip away the patina of predictability that had built up over years of Sunday school and Bible reading. Obviously, some of the film interpretations had to be wrong—they blatantly contradicted each other—but which ones? What really happened? After reacting to the film clips we turned to the gospel accounts, and the discussion took off.

This class met at LaSalle Street Church, a lively congregation in downtown Chicago, which included Ph.D.'s from Northwestern as well as homeless men who used the hour in a warm room as a chance to catch up on sleep. Thanks largely to the class, I gradually underwent a transformation in how I viewed Jesus. Walter Kasper has said, "Extreme notions . . . see God dressed as a Father Christmas, or slipping into human nature like someone putting on dungarees in order to repair the world after a breakdown. The biblical and church doctrine that Jesus was a complete man with a human intellect and human freedom, does not seem to prevail in the average Christian head." It did not prevail in my head, I admit, until I taught the class at LaSalle Street Church and sought to encounter the historical person Jesus.

Essentially, the films helped restore Jesus' humanity for me. The creeds repeated in churches tell about Christ's eternal preexistence and glorious afterlife, but largely ignore his earthly career. The Gospels themselves were written years after Jesus' death, from the far side of Easter, reporting on events as distant from the authors as the Korean War is from us today. The films helped me get further back, closer to a sense of Jesus' life as seen by his contemporaries. What would it have been like to hang on the edges of the crowd? How would I have responded to this man? Would I have invited him over for dinner, like

Zacchaeus? Turned away in sadness, like the rich young ruler?
Betrayed him, like Judas and Peter?

Jesus, I found, bore little resemblance to the Mister Rogers figure I had met in Sunday school, and was remarkably unlike the person I had studied in Bible college. For one thing, he was far less tame. In my prior image, I realized, Jesus' personality matched that of a *Star Trek* Vulcan: he remained calm, cool, and collected as he strode like a robot among excitable human beings on spaceship earth. That is not what I found portrayed in the Gospels and in the better films. Other people affected Jesus deeply: obstinacy frustrated him, self-righteousness infuriated him, simple faith thrilled him. Indeed, he seemed more emotional and spontaneous than the average person, not less. More passionate, not less.

The more I studied Jesus, the more difficult it became to pigeon-hole him. He said little about the Roman occupation, the main topic of conversation among his countrymen, and yet he took up a whip to drive petty profiteers from the Jewish temple. He urged obedience to the Mosaic law while acquiring the reputation as a lawbreaker. He could be stabbed by sympathy for a stranger, yet turn on his best friend with the flinty rebuke, "Get behind me, Satan!" He had uncompromising views on rich men and loose women, yet both types enjoyed his company.

One day miracles seemed to flow out of Jesus; the next day his power was blocked by people's lack of faith. One day he talked in detail of the Second Coming; another, he knew neither the day nor hour. He fled from arrest at one point and marched inexorably toward it at another. He spoke eloquently about peacemaking, then told his disciples to procure swords. His extravagant claims about himself kept him at the center of controversy, but when he did something truly miraculous he tended to hush it up. As Walter Wink has said, if Jesus had never lived, we would not have been able to invent him.

Two words one could never think of applying to the Jesus of the Gospels: boring and predictable. How is it, then, that the church has tamed such a character—has, in Dorothy Sayers' words, "very efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah, certified Him as a fitting household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies"?

Pulitzer prize-winning historian Barbara Tuchman insists on one rule in writing history: no “flash-forwards.” When she was writing about the Battle of the Bulge in World War II, for example, she resisted the temptation to include “Of course we all know how this turned out” asides. In point of fact, the Allied troops involved in the Battle of the Bulge did *not* know how the battle would turn out. From the look of things, they could well be driven right back to the beaches of Normandy where they had come from. A historian who wants to retain any semblance of tension and drama in events as they unfold dare not flash-forward to another, all-seeing point of view. Do so, and all tension melts away. Rather, a good historian re-creates for the reader the conditions of the history being described, conveying a sense that “you were there.”

That, I concluded, is the problem with most of our writing and thinking about Jesus. We read the Gospels through the flash-forward lenses of church councils like Nicea and Chalcedon, through the church’s studied attempts to make sense of him.

Jesus was a human being, a Jew in Galilee with a name and a family, a person who was in a way just like everyone else. Yet in another way he was something different than anyone who had ever lived on earth before. It took the church five centuries of active debate to agree on some sort of epistemological balance between “just like everyone else” and “something different.” For those of us raised in the church, or even raised in a nominally Christian culture, the balance inevitably tilts toward “something different.” As Pascal said, “The Church has had as much difficulty in showing that Jesus Christ was man, against those who denied it, as in showing that he was God; and the probabilities were equally great.”

Let me make it clear that I affirm the creeds. But in this book I hope to go back beyond those formulations. I hope, as far as is possible, to look at Jesus’ life “from below,” as a spectator, one of the many who followed him around. If I were a Japanese filmmaker, given \$50 million and no script but the Gospels’ text, what kind of film would I make? I hope, in Luther’s words, to “draw Christ as deep as possible into the flesh.”

In the process, sometimes I have felt like a tourist walking around a great monument, awed and overwhelmed. I circle the monument of Jesus inspecting its constituent parts—the birth stories, the teachings, the miracles, the enemies and followers—in order to reflect on and try to comprehend the man who has changed history.

Other times I have felt like an art restorer stretched out on the scaffolding of the Sistine Chapel, swabbing away the grime of history with a moistened Q-tip. If I scrub hard enough, will I find the original beneath all those layers?

In this book I attempt to tell the story of Jesus, not my own story. Inevitably, though, a search for Jesus turns out to be one's own search. No one who meets Jesus ever stays the same. I have found that the doubts that afflict me from many sources—from science, from comparative religion, from an innate defect of skepticism, from aversion to the church—take on a new light when I bring those doubts to the man named Jesus. To say more at this stage, in this first chapter, would cause me to break Barbara Tuchman's cherished principle.