

CONFRONTING JESUS

9 Encounters with the Hero of the Gospels

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REBECCA MCLAUGHLIN

“Who is Jesus, really, and why does he matter? That’s the question Rebecca tackles in this insightful exploration of the life of Jesus, using his four authorized biographies—the Gospels. For the last two thousand years, those who have studied Jesus have found him simple enough for a child to understand yet profound enough to confound the philosophers. Whether you’re exploring who Jesus really is for the first time or just want to learn more about the beauty of our Savior, *Confronting Jesus* is a must read.”

J. D. Greear, Pastor, The Summit Church, Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina; author, *Just Ask*

“In a time when the public witness of the church in America has been profoundly damaged due to scandals, divisions, and culture wars, I have encouraged so many of my friends—from non-Christian neighbors to church planters—to return to the simplicity and the power of Jesus. Albert Einstein once admitted that though he wasn’t a believer in Jesus, he was nevertheless ‘enthralled by the luminous figure of the Nazarene.’ There couldn’t be a better time than now for us all to be enthralled by him once more, and I can’t think of a better person to (re)introduce us to the luminous figure of the Nazarene than Rebecca. A beautiful and moving book!”

Abraham Cho, Senior Director of Training, City to City NYC and North America

“Among the many books that have been written about Jesus, *Confronting Jesus* is one of the most carefully written, compelling, and convincing volumes I have seen. What makes it special is how thoughtful and accessible it is, not only to Christians but also to those who have questions or even doubts concerning faith. If you are looking for a resource to help you or a friend encounter and consider Jesus Christ as he really is, look no further. This is that resource.”

Scott Sauls, Senior Pastor, Christ Presbyterian Church, Nashville, Tennessee; author, *A Gentle Answer* and *Beautiful People Don’t Just Happen*

“McLaughlin offers anyone curious about or interested in Christianity the best entry point by giving her readers a high-definition look at Jesus: who he is, what is unique and significant about him, and most importantly, why it’s worth believing in him. The descriptions of Jesus you will find in this book come together to make an attractive and compelling case for why so many of us love and follow him.”

Vernon Pierre, Lead Pastor, Roosevelt Community Church, Phoenix, Arizona

“No one has been more impacted by the phenomenon of ‘fake news’ than Jesus Christ. The amount of misinformation circulated about this first-century Jewish man is staggering. In *Confronting Jesus*, Rebecca masterfully unpacks what the Gospels reveal about Jesus. You will be amazed by the good news he delivered, in awe of the life he lived, and compelled by the invitation he extends.”

Christine Caine, Founder, A21 and Propel Women

“It is no secret that Jesus is the central figure in the Christian faith. However, we live in a day when many do not know why he is so central. Rebecca McLaughlin has done us a kindness by laying out the beauty of Jesus with clarity and conviction. Bring your questions and, through these pages, find Jesus ready, willing, and able to answer.”

Irwyn L. Ince Jr., Coordinator, Mission to North America; author, *The Beautiful Community: Unity, Diversity, and the Church at Its Best*

Confronting Jesus

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Confronting Jesus

9 Encounters with the Hero of the Gospels

Rebecca McLaughlin

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*For Julia,
who generously read drafts of this manuscript twice,
and for everyone else who does not believe that Jesus is the Son of God,
but will take the time to read this book*

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Preface

I WROTE MY FIRST BOOK while pregnant with my third child. But its true gestation was much longer. I'd spent almost a decade working with Christian professors at leading universities in the United States and Europe. I'd heard their stories and how their research and their faith were not in conflict but were intertwined—especially in areas that are supposed to have discredited historic Christianity.

I'd spent even longer interacting with non-Christian friends who had principled objections to my faith. They found it not only implausible but also in important ways immoral. Not only, for example, had science disproved the existence of God, but the church's track record when it came to racism, to women, and to the treatment of people who identify as LGBT made them uninterested in even considering Jesus. I wrote *Confronting Christianity: 12 Hard Questions for the World's Largest Religion* as a love letter to these friends. I got their questions and concerns but wanted to explain as best I could that, when we look more closely, every seeming roadblock to faith in Jesus becomes a signpost.

I wrote the book that's in your hands as something of a sequel. It doesn't focus on the questions that keep people from considering Jesus. Instead, it looks straight at Jesus himself. If you feel curious

about Jesus, this book is for you. If you feel like you need to hear a lot of answers to your reasonable questions before you want to spend your time exploring Jesus as revealed in the Gospels, I'd be honored if you'd read *Confronting Christianity*.

My thirdborn is now three, and he's exploring Jesus for himself. He and his big sisters recently learned a verse from the Gospel of John, in which Jesus says, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). This is the kind of claim that Jesus makes about himself. If it's not true, this book is worthless, and I'm stumbling around in darkness. But if it *is* true, I pray that you will find yourself attracted to the light.

Introduction

ON MY FIRST NIGHT out after giving birth to my third child, I saw *Hamilton*. I was the only Brit in the group. My American companions could enjoy the story of rejecting British rule a little differently. But even I could relish the pacey, punchy, hip-hop history of a man of whom I'd previously not heard. Hamilton was once one of the least known Founding Fathers. But now, this nonstop, shot-taking, revolution-making immigrant is one of the most famous figures in American history.

When it comes to the Bible's four accounts of Jesus's life, we find the story of another history maker who was born poor and obscure. But rather than shaping just America, this man's impact has been felt across the world. Like *Hamilton* writer Lin-Manuel Miranda, the Gospel authors were writing about a real, historical person, and their goal was to tell his story in a way that would energize their audience. But unlike Miranda, the Gospel writers claim to report the actual words and deeds of Jesus, not just to capture the spirit of their hero. The New Testament Gospels known as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are four of the best-selling books of all time. But many of us have not sat down to read even one of them cover to cover.

Perhaps your knowledge of Jesus is like my knowledge of Alexander Hamilton before I saw Miranda's musical. You know the basic outline: a first-century Jewish man, known as Jesus Christ, was born to a virgin named Mary and was believed to be God's Son. He was seen as a miraculous healer and a great moral teacher, and although he was ultimately crucified by the Romans, Christians believe that he was raised from the dead. Perhaps you know some of his most famous quotes: "Don't judge" or "Love your neighbor as yourself." But that's about it. You haven't seen the show. Or maybe you know more. Perhaps you grew up in the church, hearing Jesus quoted and reading the Bible, but you've moved on since then. You can hum along to Jesus's highlight hits. But some of the details of his life have become a little hazy over time, and honestly, you wonder if the Gospels are mostly mythical accounts about a fairy story figure from two thousand years ago.

In this book, we'll explore what the Gospels tell us about Jesus, and we'll ask how they might be relevant to our own lives today. In chapter 1 ("Jesus the Jew"), we'll look at the history of the Jewish people prior to Jesus's birth, the evidence for his existence as a real human being, the political context in which he was born, and the evidence that the Gospels are reliable sources for his life and teachings. In chapter 2 ("Jesus the Son"), we'll examine what the Gospels say about Jesus's divine identity. In chapter 3 ("Jesus the King"), we'll explore Jesus's claim to be God's long-promised, everlasting King. In chapter 4 ("Jesus the Healer"), we'll see how Jesus's healing miracles illuminated his identity. In chapter 5 ("Jesus the Teacher"), we'll notice how Jesus's teachings both ground and disrupt our modern, moral paradigms. In chapter 6 ("Jesus the Lover"), we'll uncover Jesus's claim to be the true bridegroom to God's people and the perfect

friend. In chapter 7 (“Jesus the Servant”), we’ll see how Jesus takes a servant role and calls his followers to do so too. In chapter 8 (“Jesus the Sacrifice”), we’ll explore the paradoxical claim that Jesus is both the sacrificial Lamb of God and the temple where the sacrifice is made. Finally, in chapter 9 (“Jesus the Lord”), we’ll confront Jesus’s claim that he is rightful Lord of all and that our truest freedom will be found in serving him. By the end, I hope you’ll want to read a Gospel for yourself to find out more about this first-century Jewish man who claimed he was the maker of all things, the King of the Jews, the mighty healer, the greatest teacher, the ultimate lover, the suffering servant, the perfect sacrifice, and the universal Lord.

In most Broadway shows, the staging hides the lighting. But in *Hamilton* the lights are deliberately laid bare. This book attempts a similar approach. Each chapter draws on all four Gospels, but rather than just providing a composite image, my hope is that the book will make you curious about the particular angle from which each Gospel shines its light.

Let’s start with the stage set up.

Mark’s Gospel was likely written first: around thirty-five to forty-five years after Jesus’s death. It’s believed to be based on the memories of Simon Peter—one of Jesus’s closest friends—written down by a man named John Mark.¹ (As we’ll see in our tour through the Gospels, lots of people at that time had two names!) Mark is the shortest Gospel, and it’s bursting with a *Hamilton*-like immediacy that fits with the impulsive character of Peter himself. In fact, the Greek word for “immediately” forms the drum beat of Mark’s Gospel, as if the writer were running out of time!

1 The claim that Mark was acting as Peter’s interpreter and scribe appears in very early writings—for example, by Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis, writing early in the second century.

Matthew's Gospel is traditionally associated with one of Jesus's disciples: a tax collector known as Levi or Matthew. Matthew records the famous "Sermon on the Mount"—a concentrated dose of Jesus's teachings, snatches of which you'll likely know even if you've never read his Gospel. It is the most unmistakably Jewish account of Jesus's life, continually connecting Jesus to Old Testament texts. But Matthew continually weaves in non-Jewish figures, and it ends with Jesus commanding his first Jewish disciples to go and make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19–20)

Luke's Gospel begins by explaining his process. Like a careful historian, Luke has interviewed "those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses," and he has written up their testimony into "an orderly account" (Luke 1:2–3). In Luke we find a particular focus on women, the poor, the weak, the sick, and the marginalized. Luke was a doctor and the only non-Jewish Gospel author. The book of Acts, which tells the story of the early Christian movement, was written by Luke as a sequel to his Gospel.

The last Gospel to be written down was John, likely sixty or so years after Jesus's death. It's more philosophical in tone—more like an opera than a musical. John skips many incidents in the other Gospels and includes others that don't feature elsewhere. But as we'll see in chapter 1, we can't dismiss John as historically unreliable because it was written later. Some of the most respected scholars believe that this Gospel was written by one of Jesus's first followers, who as a young man witnessed much of what he records.²

2 See, e.g., D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 68–81; Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 6; Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the New Testament: Countering the Challenges to Evangelical Christian Belief* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 153–59.

INTRODUCTION

You can read even the longest Gospel (Luke) in the time it takes to watch *Hamilton*, and just as I enjoyed Miranda's musical in the company of friends, you might find it helpful to read a Gospel with a friend or two as well: maybe with a friend who sees Jesus differently than you do. Perhaps together you can try to account for his rise to the top: how this man who lived poor and died young—who never wrote a book, raised an army, or sat on a throne—became the most life-transforming, earthshaking, history-making human of all time.

Jesus the Jew

THE 2017 MOVIE *The Zookeeper's Wife* begins with a mother watching her young son nap. Two animals lie with him. At first, I thought they must be piglets. But as the camera moved from soft focus to clarity, I realized that they were baby lions. The early scenes depict an almost literally Edenic life. This woman, Antonina, walks fearlessly into the elephant enclosure to resuscitate a newborn calf. With one hand, she clears the baby's airways. With the other, she calms its anxious mother, who could have trampled her at any time. The love that binds her to her husband, Jan, flows out into their love for their creatures. But from the first, we know this scene is set in Warsaw and the date is 1939. When Jan has no choice but to help some little Jewish kids to board a train, we know where they are going. As he pulls Jews out of the ghetto and hides them in the basement of their zoo, we know what fate awaits them if they're found.¹ The film is arrestingly beautiful, but the horror of the Holocaust is continually pressing in. I had to pause it multiple times to weep.

¹ *The Zookeeper's Wife*, directed by Niki Caro (London: Scion Films, 2017).

Likewise, when it comes to the Gospel accounts of Jesus's life, the story of the Jewish people saturates the text. But for many of us, the contours of that story are unknown. We know what happened after Jesus's life on earth, but not before. We're so used to Jesus's unrivaled impact on the world that it's hard for us to see him as he first stepped onto the stage of human history. We're so used to the dominance of Christianity—which is now the largest and most diverse belief system in the world—that it's hard for us to imagine Jesus as a member of a subjugated ethnic group. We're so used to Jesus's influence on Western culture that it's hard for us to remember his profoundly Middle Eastern roots. We're so used to Christianity that we forget how deeply Jewish Jesus is.

In this chapter, we'll glimpse where Jesus came from: literally, politically, and theologically. We'll ask whether Jesus was a real man, who worked and walked and wept two thousand years ago, and whether we should see the Gospels as historical accounts that can truly give us access to Jesus the Jew. But first, we'll excavate the ancient history of the Jewish people. When Jesus walked onto the stage, it wasn't act one. It was the first scene after the intermission. So we'll begin with a whirlwind, snatch-and-grab tour of the plot of the Bible up to that point, and we'll start to notice the ways in which Jesus's story is best understood in light of Jewish history.

In the Beginning

For many in the West today, believing that there is one true Creator God who made the universe can seem implausible. Not believing that there is a God at all is seen by many as the default setting. You'd need real evidence to believe in a Creator. In the ancient Near East, the Jewish belief in only *one* Creator God was also highly countercultural. But the alternative wasn't atheism or agnosticism;

it was polytheism. Most people believed in many gods. Against this majority view, the Bible's first chapter boldly proclaims that there is only one Creator God, who made all things, and who made human beings in his image (Gen. 1:26–27).

The global success of Christianity has made belief in one Creator God the most widespread view across the world today. (The proportion of people who don't believe in a Creator is actually much smaller than many in the West assume, and the proportion is shrinking globally, not growing!) But both at the time when Genesis was written and at the time when Jesus was born, monotheism would not have seemed plausible. To make the claim still more preposterous, the Gospels insist that Jesus *is* this one Creator God: not a demigod, or another god, but the one true God made flesh. So why would this Creator God become a man? The first three chapters of the Bible's first book set a scene that makes us long for a solution.

Genesis 2 paints a picture like the opening of *The Zookeeper's Wife*: human beings in loving relationship with each other, charged with caring for the rest of God's creation. But while for Jan and Antonina, hatred, sin, and death invaded from *outside*, in Genesis 3 the rot comes from *within*. God's prototypic people break God's prototypic law. This ruins their relationship with God and with each other. Like an asteroid strike ravaging the atmosphere, their turn away from God spoils everything. But just as the *The Zookeeper's Wife* takes us from Eden through pain and death and heartache to redemption, so God was working in the darkness to unfold his life-restoring plan—a plan to bring human beings back into intimate relationship with God and with one another, a plan that hinged on Jesus.

God's plan began with a promise to a quite unpromising man who came from a city that in modern-day terms is in Iraq. Abraham

was old and childless. But God promised to make him into a great nation and to bless all the families of the earth through his family (Gen. 12:1–3). And Abraham believed God. Well, eventually. Like many figures in the Bible’s cast, Abraham hit some spectacular fails. But in the end, he believed. His wife Sarah got pregnant and their son Isaac was the seed from which the Jewish people grew. Both Matthew and Luke offer genealogies to show that Jesus was descended from Abraham (Matt. 1:1–17; Luke 3:23–38). Jesus’s Jewish identity is vital to his mission in the world.

Isaac married Rebekah (which is a brilliant name), and they had two sons: Jacob and Esau. Jacob was renamed Israel, and his twelve sons started Israel’s twelve tribes. In another stunning fail, one of the twelve sons, Joseph, was sold into slavery by his brothers. But as Joseph later explained to them, what they intended for evil, God intended for good (Gen. 50:20). Joseph became overseer of Egypt under Pharaoh and saved both Egypt and his family from famine. He married an Egyptian woman, and their two half-Egyptian sons became founders of the half-tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. So from the beginning of the twelve tribes of Israel, people from different ethnicities were spliced into God’s covenant people. These are the first murmurings of the fulfillment of God’s promise to bless all the families of the earth through Abraham’s family. But after four hundred years in Egypt, the Israelites had gone from being honored immigrants to subjugated slaves.

The Birthing of a Nation

After helping hundreds of African Americans escape slavery, Harriet Tubman was nicknamed “Moses.” It was a fitting moniker. Tubman had experienced slavery herself before leading others out of it, and the original Moses had experienced oppression as a baby—when

Pharaoh had ordered the death of all the Israelite baby boys—but went on to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses only escaped by being hidden in a basket that was floated on the Nile and found by Pharaoh’s daughter, who raised him. But when God called Moses from a supernaturally burning bush, he’d been living away from Egypt for years. Moses made every excuse he could think of as to why he *shouldn’t* go back and demand that Pharaoh let God’s people go. But the God of the universe didn’t take no for an answer.

When Moses asked for God’s name, he replied, “I AM WHO I AM. . . . Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Ex. 3:14). The God of the Bible is the one who simply *is*. But he also identifies himself with his people: “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (3:6). The one who *is*, is Israel’s promise-making God. The enigmatic divine name, *Yahweh*, that appears in the Old Testament is a form of the Hebrew verb “to be” used in the expression “I AM.” For Jews, the name *Yahweh* was so holy that it was never read aloud. They substituted “Adonai,” which means “my Lord.” This was later carried over into the Greek translation of the Old Testament, which rendered *Yahweh* with the Greek word *kurios*—that is, “Lord.” Following this practice, most English translations of the Bible substitute “the LORD,” using small capital letters, for *Yahweh*. But as we’ll see in chapter 2, Jesus does an utterly outrageous thing: he takes this divine name—“I am”—upon himself.

When Moses told Pharaoh to let God’s people go, Pharaoh refused. So God sent ten horrific plagues. Pharaoh kept agreeing to let the Israelites go but then changing his mind. The last plague echoes the slaughter of the Israelite boys from which Moses himself had escaped. Moses warned Pharaoh that if he still refused, the firstborn child in every house would die. The Israelites were

told to daub the blood of a lamb on their doorposts so that death would pass over their homes. Here, as in many Old Testament moments, we have a foreshadowing of Jesus, who (as we'll see in chapter 8) is hailed in the Gospels as the Lamb of God: the one who's sacrificed like a Passover lamb, so that everyone who trusts in him can live.

At last, Pharaoh consented to let God's people go. But then he changed his mind again and sent his armies to pursue the Israelites—trapped between their enemies and the Red Sea. In a final act of rescue, God sent a great east wind to part the sea. His people walked across, before the waters closed back on their pursuers. This moment of release—the exodus—became the birthing of a nation. In some respects, it stood in Israel's memory like the War of Independence in the minds of my American friends. “We roll like Moses,” sings Hamilton, “claiming our promised land.”² But instead of fighting their own battles, the Israelites had been fought for by God. And unlike America, ancient Israel had a unique relationship with God. The Jews of Jesus's day were clinging to this hope. Despite oppressive Roman rule, they still believed that they were God's own people: descended from Abraham, rescued from slavery, and—just as importantly—given the law.

The Rules of the Relationship

When my husband complains that I've stolen his favorite hoodie or charger or keys (I'm quite the conjugal kleptomaniac), I parrot back our wedding vows: “All that I am I give to you, and all that I have I share with you.” Marriage frees me up to take my husband's stuff. But it severs other freedoms. I've turned away

2 Lin-Manuel Miranda, “My Shot,” on *Hamilton: Original Broadway Cast Recording*, Atlantic Records, 2015.

from every other possible spouse to bind myself to him. He's done the same. This vow of exclusivity is not designed to stunt the relationship but to protect it.

After Yahweh rescued the Israelites from Egypt, he gave them the law to show how to live with him. The first of his famous Ten Commandments reads, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:2–3). Like wedding vows, God's law established the norms of the relationship. Worshiping God alone came first, and from it flowed a wealth of other moral acts: like loving others as yourself, providing for the poor, defending the oppressed, living in sexual faithfulness, and speaking the truth. But even while Moses was receiving these divine commands, God's people were breaking them by worshiping a golden calf.

As the story of Israel unfolds, we see this pattern again and again: God's people turn from him. They worship idols and oppress the poor. So God sends judgment. They repent. He rescues them. The cycle starts again. Like a serially unfaithful spouse, God's people kept violating the rules of the relationship. We'll see in chapter 5 that Jesus lived and taught God's law in radical and life-affirming ways, and in chapter 6 we'll see how Jesus stepped into the shoes of Yahweh, the faithful husband to his all-too-often unfaithful people, and how his coming finally dealt with the intractable problem of their sin—a problem that was frequently made worse by their leaders.

Kings and Catastrophes

One of my favorite *Hamilton* songs is, "You'll Be Back." It is a comic pseudo love song, sung by the deranged British monarch,

that features the timeless lyric, “Da da da dat da dat da da da da ya da.”³ It’s not an attractive depiction of royalty. From the American perspective, King George is just a subjugating, tax-demanding nuisance. For a thousand years after they entered God’s promised land, the Israelites had leaders and judges, but no king. When they requested one, God told them that a human king might not be all they hoped for. In fact, the description God gives of how a king would treat them is not unlike the depiction of King George in *Hamilton* (see 1 Sam. 8:10–18). But God consented to the people’s plea, and Israel’s first king, Saul, was anointed.

Saul began well, but ended badly. He disobeyed God, and God rejected him. Saul’s replacement, King David, started as a shepherd boy who famously defeated the gigantic Philistine, Goliath. God called David “a man after his own heart” (1 Sam. 13:14), and David wrote many of the stunning Old Testament psalms. He was the archetypal king of Israel, and Jesus (who descended from him) is often hailed as “Son of David” in the Gospels. And yet, like so many of the scriptural would-be heroes, David had his own spectacular fails. One day he saw a beautiful woman bathing on a roof, summoned her to sleep with him, and then when she got pregnant arranged for her husband to die in battle. God sent a prophet to expose David’s sin, and he mournfully repented. But still, his moral failure and his role in Israel’s wars meant he could not be the one to build God’s temple. That fell to his son Solomon.

Solomon was known for his God-given wisdom. But even he could not escape the cycle of sin. Like the pagan kings around him, he started a harem and ended up worshiping many gods. We’ll see in chapter 3 that Jesus is the long-promised, ultimate King of

3 Jonathan Groff, vocalist, “You’ll Be Back,” by Lin-Manuel Miranda, on *Hamilton: Original Broadway Cast Recording*.

the Jews, who alone could rule with justice. But we'll also see in chapter 8 that Jesus is the real temple: the place where God would truly dwell and where the real sacrifice was made.

After Solomon's death, the land was split into a northern kingdom (Israel) and a southern kingdom (Judah), and the cycle continued. Like a loving father, God sent prophet after prophet to call his people back and warn them of impending judgment. But finally, the hammer fell. In 725 BC the northern kingdom, Israel, fell to the Assyrians. The king of Israel and many of the people were exiled. Then, in 597 BC, Jerusalem (in the southern kingdom of Judah) was captured by the Babylonians. Its leaders were exiled. Ten years later, Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed, and many of the people were deported. "By the waters of Babylon," one of the psalms laments, "there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion" (Ps. 137:1).⁴

By the time of Jesus's birth, God's people had been allowed to return to their land and to rebuild their temple. But rather than being sovereign, they were living as a subjugated race. And yet, faithful Jews were clinging to their scrolls and hoping God would send the Savior-King he'd promised by his prophets. But so far, every hope had been destroyed.

Enter Jesus.

Jesus of Nazareth

If you scrolled back two thousand years, you would not have zoomed in on Nazareth as the likely hometown of the most influential man in all of history. First-century Israel was a backwater of

⁴ Zion was the name of the fortified hill in Jerusalem that King David conquered, renamed "the city of David," and took as his residence (see 2 Sam. 5:6–9). Later Old Testament writers often used the term *Zion* to refer to Jerusalem—the capital city that served as the site of the Lord's temple and the king's throne.

the Roman Empire, and Nazareth was a backwater of Israel. When one of Jesus's followers, Philip, told a fellow Jew, Nathanael, "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph," Nathanael replied, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:45–46). It was a good question.

Nazareth was a marginal town in a troubled area. In 4 BC a group of Jews in the region rebelled against Rome and captured the Roman armory in Sepphoris, a town four miles from Nazareth.⁵ The Romans retaliated. They burned Sepphoris to the ground, sold its inhabitants into slavery, and crucified about two thousand Jews.⁶ This was the world in which Jesus was raised. Resisting Roman rule bought you a one-way ticket to a cross.

Things could have been worse. The Romans generally tolerated Jewish religious practices. King Herod, who was not ethnically Jewish, was installed by Rome as "King of the Jews" in 37 BC and enjoyed significant autonomy to rule—including remodeling the temple in Jerusalem to make it one of the most impressive buildings of its day. But Herod never really won his subjects' hearts. He was a brutal man, even having several of his own sons executed, and is best remembered in Matthew's Gospel for ordering the slaughter of the baby boys and toddlers of Bethlehem (Matt. 2:16). In the decades following Herod's death, multiple Jewish freedom fighters attempted insurrections against Rome.

When Jesus began his public ministry, likely in the late 20s, he was stepping into a political landscape that was already highly charged. Hamilton declared, "I will lay down my life if it sets us

5 Both Matthew and Luke say that Jesus was born during the reign of King Herod, who died in 4 BC, so our traditional dating of Jesus's birth to AD 1 is likely a few years off.

6 The Jewish historian Josephus reports this in his *Jewish Antiquities* 17.10.

free,”⁷ and like many other would-be Messiahs, Jesus died nailed to a Roman cross. But unlike any other leader of the day, his life and teachings changed the world. Or so we’ve been told. But how can we know that Jesus even existed, let alone that the stories we have in the Gospels are true?

In his 2012 book, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth*, New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman answers the first question for us like this: “The reality is that whatever else you may think about Jesus, he certainly did exist.”⁸ Ehrman is a skeptic when it comes to Jesus’s divinity. But he says the view that Jesus is a real, historical figure “is held by virtually every expert on the planet.”⁹ We know this not just from the Bible itself but from multiple early references to Jesus from people who didn’t like Christians at all. They confirm that Jesus was a first-century Jewish rabbi, was claimed to be “the Christ” (God’s promised King), was crucified under Pontius Pilate (the Roman Governor of Judaea), and was subsequently worshiped by his followers.

The real life of Jesus the Jew—a human being, born in history—is vital to every other claim presented in the Gospels or narrated in this book. He cannot be the other things the Gospels claim if he is not a real, historical figure, with flesh and blood like you and me. But believing that Jesus of Nazareth was a Jewish man in history is not enough for us to have any confidence that what the Gospels say about Jesus is true. So in the rest of this chapter, we’re going to address some of the legitimate questions twenty-first-century readers might have about the historical reliability of the Gospel

7 Miranda, “My Shot.”

8 Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 4.

9 Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 4.

accounts. Because if the Gospels are more like myth than history, then Christianity is a sophisticated fake: like a supposedly ancient manuscript that turns out to be a forgery.

Weren't the Gospels Written Too Long after Jesus's Death?

In 2020 civil rights leader Rev. John Perkins interviewed civil rights lawyer Bryan Stevenson. The son of a sharecropper, Perkins was born in poverty in Mississippi but fled to California at age seventeen after his brother was murdered by a town marshal. In 1957 he became a Christian and decided to go back to his hometown to share the good news of Jesus. His subsequent role in the Civil Rights Movement earned him harassment, imprisonment, and beatings. Bryan Stevenson was born two years after Perkins's conversion, in a poor, black, rural community in Delaware. The Civil Rights Movement made it possible for him to make his way to Harvard Law School. But poor black Americans were still facing grave injustice, and Stevenson founded the Equal Justice Initiative in Alabama to represent people who had been sentenced to death on flimsy evidence or without proper representation. When Perkins asked his guest to share how God called him to his work, Stevenson told the story of his first visit to death row. A law student intern, he'd been sent to tell a prisoner that he was not at risk of execution in the coming year. Stevenson felt unprepared. The prisoner had chains around his ankles, wrists, and waist. Stevenson delivered his message, and the man expressed profound relief. They talked for hours. But then two officers burst in.

Angry that the visit had taken so long, the officers reapplied their inmate's chains with force to punish him. Stevenson pleaded with the officers to stop. He told them it was his fault they'd overrun

their time. But the prisoner told Stevenson not to worry. Then he planted his feet, threw back his head, and sang:

I'm pressing on the upward way,
 New heights I'm gaining ev'ry day;
 Still praying as I'm onward bound,
 "Lord, plant my feet on higher ground."

"Everybody stopped," Stevenson recalled. "The guards recovered, and they started pushing this man down the hallway. You could hear the chains clanking, but you could hear this man singing about higher ground. And in that moment God called me. That was the moment I knew I wanted to help condemned people get to higher ground."¹⁰ When Stevenson told Perkins this story, it was thirty-seven years since he had heard this inmate sing: bang in the middle of the time range most scholars estimate between Jesus's death and the writing of Mark's Gospel.

Jesus's life and ministry had many witnesses—from the crowds that gathered to hear him, to the small group of disciples who had left their homes to follow him. Like actors learning scripts, first-century disciples learned their rabbi's teachings. After Jesus's death, they went on tour, repeating the message and teachings of Jesus to anyone who'd listen. Along with his twelve official disciples, Jesus had many other followers, including many women who traveled with him (see Luke 8:2–3). Some of Jesus's followers are named in the Gospels, and world-class New Testament scholar Richard Bauckham has argued convincingly that these named witnesses are

¹⁰ See "Dr. John M. Perkins Bible Study with Bryan Stevenson," YouTube video, June 9, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com>. The quoted hymn is "I'm Pressing on the Upward Way" by Johnson Oatman Jr. (1856–1922).

being cited as sources for eyewitness testimony. It was like saying, “I got this from Mary Magdalene; she saw it with her own eyes.”¹¹

None of us remember *everything* that happened years ago. But all of us recall the things that utterly transformed our lives. Stevenson remembered his first visit to death row in detail: the words he said, the things he felt, how the prisoner looked, what the officers did. This day reset his life. Likewise, those who witnessed Jesus were changed forever. They dedicated the rest of their lives to telling his story. Thirty, forty-five, or even sixty years would not have wiped their memories away, any more than John Perkins could forget his experiences in the Civil Rights Movement, some sixty years ago. So, why weren't the Gospels written down sooner? Bauckham argues that they were written decades after Jesus's death precisely because the first eyewitnesses were starting to die out.¹² Like contemporary biographers, the Gospel authors wanted to ensure the eyewitness testimony was preserved with accuracy before it was too late.

How Do We Know We Have the Right Gospels?

Dan Brown's novel *The DaVinci Code* is one of the bestselling books of all time.¹³ A pseudo-sequel, *The Lost Symbol*, is now a Peacock TV series.¹⁴ Both books trade in conspiracy theories about the Bible. In particular, *The DaVinci Code* popularized the claim that the New Testament Gospels were picked for political reasons to smother a more feminist version of Jesus that's seen in other so-called Gospels—like the Gospel of Thomas, the most-often-referenced competitor to the biblical Gospels. But if we look at

11 See Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Eerdmans, 2006), 39–66

12 See Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 7, 308–9.

13 Dan Brown, *The DaVinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

14 Dan Brown, *The Lost Symbol* (New York: Doubleday, 2009).

the evidence, we'll find that the selection of Gospels included in the Bible wasn't arbitrary or politically motivated. Unlike the Gospels in our Bibles, the Gospel of Thomas wasn't written until the mid-to-late second century—far beyond the lifetime of Jesus's disciple Thomas or any other eyewitness. Unlike the Gospels, it's not a biography but a collection of supposed sayings of Jesus. And if you read it, you won't find a more feminist take but rather some quite misogynistic lines, which sound utterly unlike the Jesus of the Gospels.

Some people claim that the four Gospels were only selected at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325. But this is simply false. A few New Testament letters were debated as late as this.¹⁵ But the Gospels were recognized as faithful and authoritative from very early on.¹⁶ Indeed, despite his own skepticism, Bart Ehrman assures us that the four New Testament Gospels are “the oldest and best sources we have for knowing about the life of Jesus” and that this is “the view of all serious historians of antiquity of every kind, from committed evangelical Christians to hardcore atheists.”¹⁷ But we don't have the original manuscripts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, so how can we know that the texts we have today are accurate?

How Do We Know We Have the Right Texts?

The first verse of Mark's Gospel reads, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). Or does it? The phrase “the Son of God” does not appear in some of the earliest remaining

15 For example, James, 2 Peter, and Jude.

16 Moreover, though discussions took place in the early church about which documents to include in the New Testament, there is no historical evidence (contrary to popular belief) that the Council of Nicaea even discussed this topic.

17 Bart D. Ehrman, *Truth and Fiction in The Da Vinci Code* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 102

manuscripts—and even our earliest manuscripts are likely copies of the originals, or even copies of copies. What’s more, there are around 400,000 textual differences among the Greek New Testament manuscripts we have. So, are we naïve to think the Gospel texts in our Bibles capture what the Gospel authors wrote? No.

First, the 400,000 textual differences sum up all variants in *all* the approximately 5,600 copies of New Testament texts that we have from the first thousand years after Jesus’s death—regardless of when the manuscript was written, how significant the variant is, and how many manuscripts have it. In his insightful book, *Why I Trust the Bible*, New Testament scholar William Mounce gives an example. In Greek, a proper name like Jesus could stand by itself or could be paired with a definite article. If one scribe wrote “the Jesus” in one place in his manuscript when all the others just wrote, “Jesus,” that would be counted as a variant—despite making no meaningful difference to the text. The large number of variants in surviving Gospel manuscripts is not because the texts are so unreliable but because we have *so many* manuscripts. What’s more, because the manuscripts we have come from so many different places, we can check them for accuracy by triangulating among manuscripts that would have been copied independently and seeing where they do and don’t converge.¹⁸

To be clear, there are *some* places where Gospel texts are in doubt. But none of them affects our understanding of Jesus. For example, while the original first sentence of Mark may not have included “the Son of God,” that title is applied to Jesus at other points in Mark and in the other Gospels. The few debated passages are flagged in our modern editions. For example, the last twelve verses of Mark’s

18 William D. Mounce, *Why I Trust the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021), 134.

Gospel are typically included in our Bibles with the note, “Some of the earliest manuscripts do not include 16:9–20.” This is no cover-up job. Like expertly excavated archeological sites, the four Gospels in our Bibles give us faithful access to those early writings about Jesus.

Tragically, this hasn’t always been the case. For example, during the Nazi era in Germany, the Gospels in many German Bibles were edited to remove all the references to Jesus’s Jewishness and to make his teaching sound supportive of Nazi aggression. The authentic Gospels were completely incompatible with Hitler’s ideology, so they had to be changed.¹⁹ Just as white Christians today must reckon with the ways in which our forbears in the faith have been complicit in oppressing folks of African descent, so non-Jewish Christians must reckon with the history of anti-Semitism that has plagued the Western church. But just as racial oppression is torn to shreds by the authentic New Testament texts, so anti-Semitism is utterly irreconcilable with Jesus in the Gospels, who is unquestionably Jewish and most of whose first followers were Jewish too.

What about the Differences between the Gospels?

Six years before he was interviewed by John Perkins, Bryan Stevenson published his best-selling autobiography, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*. In the introduction, Stevenson tells the story of his first time on death row. The basics are the same as in the interview mentioned above. But there are differences. In the book, Stevenson names the prisoner: Henry. In the interview, he

¹⁹ For an overview of Nazi-era Bibles, see Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 106–10.

never does. In the book, he gives many details of the day and of the conversation he and Henry had that he doesn't mention in the interview. But he also leaves things out in the book that he does say to John Perkins. Most notably, in the interview Stevenson says he felt called by God as Henry sang. In the book, he writes, "In that moment, Henry altered something in my understanding of human potential, redemption, and hopefulness."²⁰ He doesn't mention God at this point in the book at all. Why did Stevenson tell the story differently to Perkins? Had he forgotten the inmate's name? Was he lying when he said God called him to his work? No. He was addressing a different audience.

If you read the Gospels in quick succession, you'll find a lot of overlap, but also differences. John skips many stories in Matthew, Mark, and Luke and tells us tales found nowhere else. Sometimes the Gospels tell their stories in a different order, or report Jesus's teachings with different words, or in different places. Some of these discrepancies are easily explained: a traveling rabbi would naturally tell similar stories in different places, so if two Gospels record Jesus saying something essentially similar but differently worded, it doesn't mean that one of them is wrong. Other differences arise from the divergent perspectives of the eyewitnesses consulted. If Henry had been interviewed about his first meeting with Stevenson, he might have left out the roughness of the guards, his chains, and his own song. The things that struck the intern on his first death row visit may not have registered for the inmate. It's also likely that Jesus preached in Aramaic—the mother tongue of most Jews in his region—while the Gospels are written almost entirely in Greek: the common language of

20 Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (New York: One World, 2014), 12.

the broader culture. Different Gospels may translate an Aramaic teaching differently.

Other Gospel differences arise from simplification and cultural translation. In a talk I've given multiple times to different audiences, I tell the story of a Nigerian street preacher, Oluwole Illisanmi, being arrested outside a tube station in London in 2019. For American audiences, I say "train station" rather than using the British term "tube." Sometimes I comment that the officers were white, but other times I leave this detail out. I claim the two officers gave him a choice: go away or be arrested. But only one of the officers actually said those words. Honestly, I could omit the other officer completely without changing the story. Likewise, we sometimes find two people or two angels in one Gospel story, and only one in another. This doesn't mean one author is wrong; it means one simplified.

As Gospel readers, we are also stepping into a storytelling culture that's different from ours. I recently caught up with a Nigerian friend who told me about an older pastor she revered. She used the pronoun "they," and I assumed she meant the pastor and his wife. But later she explained that Nigerians use plural pronouns to refer to respected elders. I had no idea. Likewise, there are times when the Gospel authors shape their narratives in ways that would have worked in their cultural context but cause confusion in ours: for example, they might order their material theologically rather than chronologically, telling their stories in a particular sequence to make a theological point.

Like stage lights shining from different angles, the Gospel authors write from different eyewitness accounts and with different audiences in mind. My grandpa will sometimes start telling a story and then get interrupted by my grandma. He might be using too

much detail (“You don’t have to tell them *all of that*”) or too little (“No, Julie saw it first, *then* Chris!”). My grandpa will pause and purse his lips and then explain that he *knows* my auntie Julie saw it first, but as Chris is *my* mother, and he’s telling the story to *me*, he’s focusing on Chris’s testimony.

I can imagine how the conversation would have gone if Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John had gathered for a writers’ group. Mark’s feedback to the others would be, “Speed it up, guys!” Matthew would say, “I hate to break this to you, but you left out most of the ways in which our Lord fulfilled the Scriptures!” Luke would chime in, “I think you’ve underemphasized quite how much Jesus cares about the poor,” and John would say, “Thank God I’m here to tell all the stunning stories you guys left out!” If Stevenson could tell the story of his own calling in two quite different ways for different audiences, we shouldn’t be surprised to find the different Gospel authors shedding different light on the life of Jesus of Nazareth: a Jewish man who lived and died in history and whose short life and troublemaking teachings shook the world.

So What?

Toward the end of *The Zookeeper’s Wife*, a Nazi officer goes down into the basement of the zoo. The Jews who have been hiding there have gone. But he sees the little Stars of David one young girl has drawn across the walls, with illustrations of her fellow fugitives. The pictures tell a story of their history, their hiding place, and their escape, but most of all their Jewishness.

As we explore the Gospels in this book, we’ll find marks of Jesus’s Jewishness on every page. Like little Stars of David painted on the basement walls, we’ll see connections to the history of Israel at every turn, and we’ll see marks of the first-century, Jewish context

in which Jesus lived. To understand the Gospels, we must recognize that Jesus was a Jewish man whose real life was played out on a very Jewish stage: a stage whose actors saw themselves as people of the one Creator God, awaiting God's Messiah, who would make God's ancient promises come true.

And so, the curtain rises.