

# 1

## THE DECEPTIVELY FAMILIAR JESUS

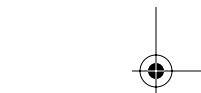


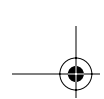
AS A BOY I LEARNED TO FISH IN A see-through river. Trout were so visible in the transparent water of the Big Sur that I could watch them approach, mouth and spit out my bait. I could lay down my line just in front of them, seeing them startle when the splash came too close. The sight of their gray shadows wavering across a forest pool made my boy heart pound. Each morning of vacation I woke with one objective: to find the fish and to catch them.



Even in such clear water, trout can easily fool the eye. The water is transparent, but it moves and bends light. A ripple, a rock, a well-placed stick can deceive. In water the fish do not look like the rounded, bright-colored images you find pictured in a guidebook. They are slim, elusive ghosts. A fisherman needs a practiced eye to read the water and see the fish.

For me, seeing Jesus in the Gospels is a little like that. The prose is clear water. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John concentrate on facts, telling who, what, when, where and how. Nevertheless, Jesus remains hard to grasp. I read the Gospels for a long time and never felt





that I knew him in the way I felt I knew Martin Luther King Jr. or C. S. Lewis after I read their biographies and letters.

Everybody knows what it's like to look at some long-familiar object and see it as though for the first time. Perhaps it's a picture that hung in your living room since you were a child. Perhaps it's the house across the street, so familiar you have never really noticed it. Jesus is like that: deceptively familiar. People think they know all about him, so they never really look at him. When they finally do, they are surprised at what they find. Jesus may seem to be a stranger, even though they have grown up in his company.

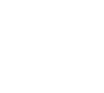
"Deceptively familiar." We know absolutely nothing about Jesus' true appearance, yet oddly, his "portrait" can be put on a ten-second television spot and achieve one hundred percent name recognition. Jesus with the long hair, the flowing robe and the kind face can be portrayed by a hundred different artists and yet remain instantly recognizable.

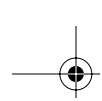
Along with this visible portrait go personality attributes that "everybody knows." Jesus, everybody knows, was the kindest man who ever lived. Love spilled from him like the glow of a lamp. Children flocked to him; followers could get lost in the deep pools of compassion they met in his eyes. He was gentle and quiet. He felt others' pain deeply.

We know this Jesus so well that the question, "What would Jesus do?" seems to make perfect sense. (I can't always predict what my best friend will do, but I imagine that I know Jesus' behavior better than that.)

We feel we know Jesus because he's part of the landscape of our culture. Some of what we know, however, is based more on sentiment than on gospel truth.

When I first began to read the Gospels for myself, I didn't find this





predictable, well-known Jesus. In the Gospels he says and does puzzling things—like shriveling a fig tree and telling followers to keep his miracles a secret. He’s hard on people, excoriating the Pharisees and even calling one of his disciples “Satan.” He makes extreme demands—like urging his followers to be as perfect as the Father in heaven—and exerts very little effort to explain himself. Jesus follows an agenda that his own followers, let alone the crowds, do not “get.” Luke comments, “The disciples did not understand any of this. Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about” (Luke 18:34). Jesus in the Bible is much more difficult to make out than the universal Jesus whose kindness everybody knows.

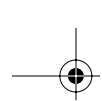
Yet surely we are meant to understand the Jesus of the Bible. Surely that’s why the early Christians carefully recorded the details of his life: so we could know him and follow him—indeed, so we could worship him.

### **JESUS WITHOUT HIS CONTEXT**

Many Christians, if you asked them to tell you what they know about Jesus, would give a short summary that comes mainly from Paul’s letters. It goes like this: Jesus is God, and he came to earth as a baby. He lived a sinless life and gave himself to die on the cross for our sins. Then he rose again and now lives in heaven.

Notice that in this telling, we don’t need to know much about Jesus’ life as the Gospels describe it. We know the beginning and the ending, but not much in between. Jesus did not sin, we know, but what he did do we can hardly explain. We say nothing about his teaching and healing and calling disciples. He could have been crucified anywhere and anytime—in Havana, Los Angeles or Beijing—and his atonement for sin would be the same.





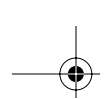
Paul knew much more about Jesus than this brief summary suggests, and I believe he expected his readers to know more as well. However, this was almost the only Jesus I knew as a young believer—a Jesus without a context. In the background behind Jesus I could see flat-roofed houses and Roman soldiers, but these were just stage scenery. Jesus' life in the first century among an oppressed people under a Roman governor was irrelevant to his ministry, as far as I knew.

In church I learned that Jesus came “in the fullness of time” because the Roman Empire built good roads and spread the Greek language. Apparently the Roman Empire mattered because of its information infrastructure. (Never explained was why Jesus didn't come later, after the invention of television.) Jesus' message addressed nothing specific to the society he lived in, and certainly nothing to the venomous power clash between Israel and Rome. He was a religious figure, and everybody knows that religion shouldn't meddle with politics. Jesus spoke of eternal truths: heaven and peace with God and love for your neighbor. Apparently he could have done the same at any time, in any place.

Let me give a parallel example. Suppose I tried writing about the wisdom of Abraham Lincoln without noting that he was president during the Civil War. Can we admire the man without all that military history? I could compose quite a helpful book about Lincoln's wit and wisdom without mentioning the war. I could show Lincoln as philosophical, stirring, full of clever sayings—a kind of cracker-barrel philosopher.

Yet I would give a very superficial portrayal of Lincoln unless I showed how his wisdom led America through its most awful, bloody crisis. To understand Lincoln as a wise man, and to grasp the depth of his words, I must follow him through Bull Run, Shiloh, Gettysburg and Appomattox. I must understand that the survival of “govern-





ment of the people, by the people, for the people” was at stake. I must grasp Lincoln’s strategy for saving America.

It’s the same with Jesus. If we settle for a superficial understanding of who he was and what he intended, we end up preaching a superficial gospel. The “everybody knows” version of Jesus too easily carries an individualistic, consumer-oriented appeal. In the extreme, we preach a gospel that is all about me—my personal growth, my spiritual experiences with Jesus as my friend. This makes worship superficial, for we miss the grandeur of Jesus’ character and ministry.

Jesus would never have recognized faith lived apart from history and place and neighbors—and neither will we, if we are grounded in his life.

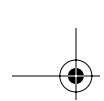
### JESUS THE JEW

For almost forty years I have studied the Gospels. I have read and re-read them trying to learn to see Jesus. Many writers, pastors and fellow believers—more than I could name—have aided me. In recent years I have been especially challenged and helped by the scholarly work known as the Third Quest, and particularly by the writings of N. T. Wright. Those familiar with Wright’s work will see how frequently I have drawn on his scholarship.

Nothing I have learned makes me doubt the faith I gained as a child. However, I have found a great deepening in my understanding of Jesus. I feel as though I had been studying a picture in a book, and now the figure has begun to take on three dimensions and move as a living, breathing creature.

In particular, Wright has helped me understand Jesus as a first-century Jew. Of course, I always knew Jesus was Jewish, but the significance of that fact was vague to me. I suppose I inferred a meaning similar to Jewishness in twentieth-century America. I thought Jesus



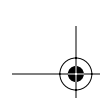


must have had dark eyes and hair and strong family ties. He ate kosher food and worshiped in a synagogue. None of these qualities seemed very important. Perhaps they added some color to Jesus' character, but they didn't clarify much about what he was doing. He could just as well have been Chinese or African or Anglo or Anything.

I did not understand that Jesus was a Jew in a sense that has largely vanished from the world today. Like many Jews of the first century, Jesus saw reality through the lens of the Hebrew Bible. Jesus believed the Scriptures, not only in the reverential way that religious believers typically "believe" in sacred texts, but in the sense that he thought they were true, true as the morning news, true as gravity. Those Scriptures explained what God had been doing since creation, and what he intended to do. The Hebrew Bible told Jews an astonishing story: any hope for the world would flow through them. They were God's chosen people, his instrument of redemption for all of creation. The whole world mattered to God, but the Jews mattered the most because he would use them to save the rest.

Jesus worked from the conviction that Israel had been called to restore the whole world. He also worked from the conviction that Israel could restore the world only as Israel was herself restored. Jesus came to Israel at a time when the nation was militarily occupied and culturally under siege. Within a generation, conquering armies would sweep it off the map. Sacrificial worship would come to an end as the temple—God's throne on earth—was destroyed. How could Israel save the world if temple and kingdom disappeared? Jesus came to this impending crisis—the hope of the world in the clutches of sin, the hope of the world on the edge of destruction. You cannot understand the eternal significance of what Jesus did unless you first understand the emergency he addressed among his own people in that time and place.





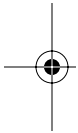
As any Bible reader knows, the Gospels claim that Jesus' life fulfilled many Old Testament prophecies. I used to understand those fulfillments as miraculous proofs to be checked off. Scripture predicted that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Check! Scripture said that he would be born of a virgin. Check! Scripture predicted that the Savior of the world would ride into Jerusalem on a donkey. Check! This is like doing a crossword puzzle and seeing the answers fall neatly into place. It is scarily wonderful how the prophetic predictions came true. Somebody planned this!

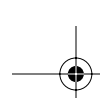
But gradually I came to understand prophecies at a deeper level. The Old Testament texts are not checklists. They tell a story in which the entire cosmos is being reclaimed by God through one tiny nation's redemption. Jesus believed this incredible story. Jesus intended to bring the long story of Israel to a new era of fulfillment. That is how he fulfilled prophecies: he filled them full. The prophets glimpsed from afar the bright lights at the end of the story. Jesus began to switch on those lights.

As I have begun to understand Jesus in his first-century Jewish context, I have found his life imbued with depth and astonishing majesty. Everything I knew before seems to have gained new dimension and color and texture. I see a great, profound leader.

And as a result of seeing Jesus more clearly, I see my life—and human life—as deeper and grander. I see myself not as an isolated individual, a religious consumer who gets pleasurable spiritual experiences through Jesus. Rather I see myself bound into his family, joining in his astonishing flesh-and-blood mission to redeem the cosmos. I am part of a four-thousand-year-old movement that has outlasted empires and will, in the end, assume the administration of everything.

How I see Jesus is not a small thing, not a matter of my “spirituality.”





Rather it is a matter of life—my own life and all life on the planet. To see Jesus clearly and fully is ultimately to see everything. It is the transforming core of vision. “In your light we see light” (Psalm 36:9).

\* \* \*

Enough grand generalities. To see Jesus clearly we must study what he said and did. The rest of this book will do just that. We will follow Jesus through his ministry on earth: his baptism, his temptations, his preaching, his healings and works of power, his warnings, his calling and sending of disciples, his praying, his death and resurrection. We will consider his time and place in history. We will locate him in the historic community of Judaism.

We will also ask how each aspect of his ministry should affect our lives today. Jesus very deliberately set out to start a movement. We are part of that movement if we belong to him. We walk “in his steps,” as 1 Peter 2:21 tells us. We will try to understand how Jesus’ life guides our lives in the movement he began. We will see the path he traveled and then ask: how do we follow in his steps?

