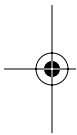


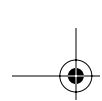
PREFACE

I think at some point just about everyone takes a run at reading the Bible. People turn to it for comfort, direction, security, to ward off evil, for answers to their obsessing questions (*Will I ever get married? Will I die in a disfiguring accident? Am I unknowingly a Judas . . . the Antichrist?*). But most often the motive for turning to the Bible is simply a desire to understand—or perhaps “figure out”—Jesus.

You can live on the hands of Jesus Standard (or “A.D.”) Time for only so long before experiencing some curiosity about who Jesus is. So we turn to the Bible—more specifically, the Gospels—to discover Jesus. But it isn’t long before the culture, language, genre and historical context of the thing grind our exploration to a halt. The person of Jesus remains uncharted territory, simply the etched contour of an enormous landmass, with a cross scribbled somewhere in the interior. We can get the sense that the real message and meaning of the Gospels—and of Jesus—is out of reach, reserved for Bible scholars and theologians: those with pointy heads and pointy beards.

I don’t believe this to be the case. In fact I know this is not the case. The problem isn’t that the Bible, the Gospels or Jesus are too esoteric or ethereal. It’s that we attempt to understand them without any context whatsoever—which is rather silly, if you think about it. If you don’t know the context, even the back of a cereal box is cryptic and enig-





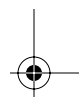
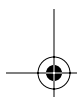
matic: cartoons that aren't funny, games that aren't entertaining, club memberships and offers that no one will ever respond to. If I handed you a cereal box and told you it was a newspaper, you'd think the world had come unscrewed. It's not meant to be engaging; it's meant to be something you stare at while you eat your breakfast and attempt to wake up. Context is everything.

The Bible, I believe, is a divinely inspired book. But therein lies the rub. It is an inspired *book*, not a fortune cookie. So if we go jumping into the middle (where the Gospels are, where Jesus is) without any context, it's going to create some serious comprehension problems.

In my Bible the Gospels begin on page 807. There aren't a lot of books you can jump into on page 807 and not have missed much (with the possible exception of *Moby Dick*). It's a little like trying to figure out the movie plot simply from scene selections 18-22—it ain't gonna happen. To get the whole story, you have to get the whole story. A lot of questions about Jesus are answered by understanding the entire plot: how the Gospels and Jesus intersect with the history and story of the Old Testament that precedes it.

And then there's the context of genre. As Jesus so un-succinctly puts it in Mark 4:22, "Whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open." If you can believe it, Jesus said this to clarify why his lessons were so confusing, because a lot of his teaching was done in the form of parables (something like fables, with a spiritual message embedded in the story) and proverbs. If you can recognize the genre of a book or passage you've gone a long way to figuring out its meaning.

A third context is culture. In Matthew 23:25 Jesus says, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence." If you don't know that the Pharisees were consumed with





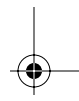
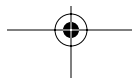
ritualistic purity like cleaning cups and utensils, I'm not sure how you'd take this statement—Jesus hates dishwashers? But the message behind the statement is that the Pharisees were focused on externals and ignoring internal corruption. The people listening to Jesus would have nodded their heads, perhaps even snickered a bit. Without that cultural context, however, cooks, dishwashers and perhaps the whole restaurant industry—according to the Bible—are headed to hell in handbaskets, or doggybags as the case may be.

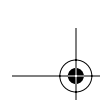
Finally, the Gospels are themselves stories. True, they are history, but like a History Channel documentary on the Olsen Twins, which moves from the *Full House* years to the WalMart clothing line, the material in each of the Gospels has been thoughtfully arranged to bring out themes and flow from a beginning to an end. So, for example, Matthew begins his story with Jesus' family tree, while Mark begins his story with Jesus' cousin John, and both of them do so for a reason.

Now, I could add other contexts—like, for example, how someone decides to translate a particular passage in the Bible from its original language—but these four will go a long way toward unlocking meaning. And the good news is that I'm going to explore these contexts for you. You should be able to read this book in one sitting and afterward have a solid grasp of the basic flow, context and meaning of who Jesus was, what he said, and what he did.

This book's structure follows the basic structure of the Gospels. The Gospels, taken together, tell the story of Jesus: from the unique series of events surrounding his birth, through the three years of his public ministry (recounting his teachings and miracles), to his final trip to Jerusalem and, day by day, the last week of his life: his betrayal, death and resurrection.

But I shall not leave you there orphaned. By the end of the book we'll know each other well enough to dispense with politeness and talk hon-





estly about implications. I'll try to put everything you've read, and I've written, into some broader perspective, something that makes sense.

As this is religious subject matter, I feel I should give a disclaimer up front. I write with considerable bluntness, and generally, if it pops into my mind, it appears on paper. I, of course, could edit myself, but for the most part I choose not to because I'd like this book to be as accessible and down-to-earth as possible, as such subject matter rarely is. But I do want to say that it is neither my desire nor my goal to be irreverent, only relatable. And don't mistake my manner of communication for either apathy or agnosticism—I assure you I'm neither.

Rather through context, commentary and considerable bluntness, my desire is to strip away the veneers of both religiosity and skepticism (which has its own creeds) and get down to the bare wood, looking to arrive at not some austere set of facts but the unvarnished Jesus of the Gospels and history—Jesus without religion.

