

## Introduction: Jesus and History

He also said to the multitudes, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, 'A shower is coming'; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky; but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?" (Lk 12:54–6)

The future is big business. It always has been. On New Year's Day, a television news program features an economist with a financial projection, followed by a psychic predicting which movie stars will be divorced. Then a smiling face offers the weather forecast backed up with maps, charts, and numbers. Finally the political commentator ventures that the coming year will be a decisive test for the nation in the areas of tax reform and national defense.

We want to know everything we can about the future, especially our own futures. We are anxious about our health, our children, our finances, the fate of the nation, the poor of the world, and our security in life and in death. We would pay dearly for reliable information, tips, and predictions, eager to find solutions and convinced that ignorance can be very expensive. But who knows what will happen? What kinds of knowledge count? And in which areas? People have all kinds of hunches about the future.

People also have all kinds of opinions about Jesus. Some of these views are well informed, but more often they have little

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## 2 INTRODUCTION

basis in history or the New Testament. And what kinds of knowledge count here? What can be said on the basis of history and the New Testament? Devout believers and skeptics can agree that the story about him is full of details and convictions about the future. But how are they to be understood?

Here is one who was proclaimed as a prophet of God and God's Son on earth, a healer, social critic, and physician of souls. And according to the New Testament, after he was executed he was raised from the dead and declared to be the ruler of heaven and earth. His kingdom is still coming, and he will be the judge of the earth and humanity, dead and alive. What did these powerful affirmations mean to those who knew him and to those who staked their lives on faith in him?

Even now, people who do not accept the Christian faith have often heard these dramatic claims. They may be unsure what to make of Jesus. Christians may also wonder. Many differing claims are made in Jesus' name with conflicting visions of the future.

In one setting, sincere faith and religious hucksterism are melted together in the heat of impassioned threats of Jesus' judgment. Here fearful souls shudder before an angry God. Elsewhere, Jesus is the heavenly messenger of higher knowledge or spiritual wisdom. He declares a new age of self-understanding, far removed from the passions. Are either of these the Jesus of the New Testament? Is it possible to know more about the future he announced? Can careful interpretation shed some light in the midst of such heated confusion?

*Jesus and the Future* is a tantalizing title. This topic is of broad public interest, and many people hold fervent views. Few are neutral about Jesus, and no one is indifferent about the future, especially their future. It is important, therefore, to remember that this book is one of a series entitled *Understanding Jesus Today*. This series seeks to assist people to read the

New Testament and understand Jesus in the light of current scholarship.

This book seeks to broaden and clarify the reader's understanding. It does not attack or defend personal convictions. It does not advance a private agenda for the future. But it is also not neutral, because neither history nor the New Testament was ever neutral about Jesus. The story of Jesus is full of convictions about the future. Thus this study describes Jesus' own words and deeds within his times and the religious traditions of Israel. It also gives brief introductions to some of the questions about God and the future that were at stake for the first followers of Jesus, and it demonstrates how early Christian faith in Jesus gave hope for the future in the midst of troubled times.

This is not a book on futurism. It does not pursue the increasingly scientific study of trends and projections, nor does it appeal to Jesus in order to discredit these efforts. The task of building statistical models and making economic and sociological projections has proved its value for business, government, and personal planning. Of course such models of the future are based on assumptions, probabilities, and contingencies. The debate among the futurists is intense. The optimists in technology contend with the environmental pessimists. But this book does not enter that discussion, at least not directly.

On the other hand, the assumptions of some futurists may be challenged by the Jesus traditions of the New Testament. Which factors are decisive in producing the future? Is the future simply a projection of economic indicators? Can it be captured by models of social trends or political ideologies? Perhaps statistical probabilities do not tell the whole human story, past, present, or future. Perhaps history is not merely a "darkling plain" where "ignorant armies clash by night." How shall current discussions accommodate the long-standing convic-

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#### 4 INTRODUCTION

tions of biblical faith? There the meaning and future of human life are caught up in God's purposes and plans. Those who are willing to consider the meaning and morality of the future might well be interested in the Jesus of the New Testament.

This book does not include a list of predictions or prophecies. Some people regard the Bible as a road map of the future that only needs to be decoded, and they pore over Jesus' words and revelations in search of specific modern historical figures and events. Others claim a privileged knowledge of God's plans whether based on their private interpretations of the Bible or their personal religious experiences. This book challenges such usage of the Bible, especially as it is often practiced to manipulate fearful people. But it also affirms the power of religious conviction to name the powers of oppression and to maintain hope in justice and mercy against all appearances.

This is not a devotional book, at least not primarily. The bookshelves are full of volumes in which Jesus is the answer, although the question keeps changing. Jesus has also been brought forward as a spokesman for several visions of the future, some of them full of confidence and others almost eager to declare doom to the planet Earth. But then Jesus himself becomes a serious question. After so many portraits of Jesus have been painted in striking likeness to the artist or the preacher, thinking people begin to object. Which Jesus is this? What was Jesus about in his own time? Why did the Gospels say what they did about him? What vision for the future did he represent to the early Christians? Even modern Christian devotion may be served in the long run if such questions are pursued with vigor and honesty.

This book is concerned with such questions. It informs the reader about current scholarship on Jesus and the New Testament. *Jesus and the Future* is primarily about Jesus and the early Christian testimonies to him. The future under consideration is first the future he prophesied and which they envi-

## Jesus and History

5

sioned in his name. This is a study of a particular topic in the New Testament. It highlights crucial passages and shows how to understand what was at stake. It is an introduction to reading the New Testament historically.

Chapter 1, "Jesus and Troubled Times," surveys the common hope of Jesus' people, the Jews or the people of Israel. This hope was grounded in their long history and scriptural heritage, and it was an expectation of God's blessing, salvation, and kingdom. But that history also produced conflicts and divisions in Israel. By the time of Jesus' execution under the Romans in about A.D. 33, several groups and traditions struggled with each other. Each had its views of the past and visions of how God would fulfill Israel's hopes and promises. The future was filled with theological controversy and political consequences.

Chapter 2, "Jesus and the Prophets," focuses on Jesus of Nazareth as he was remembered from his own times. This is a discussion of "the historical Jesus" and what he taught about the future. The Christian sources are more intent on proclaiming him to be the Lord than on recalling the facts of the past, but they still preserve memories of his words and deeds. Jesus' prophetic role and his confidence of the depth of God's gracious ways still leave their mark on the Christian stories.

Chapter 3, "Jesus and the Kingdom," deals with Jesus as he was proclaimed to be the Messiah and Lord in the years of the early Christian movement. This is a discussion of "the Christ of faith" and how the stories were told and the Gospels were written to proclaim God's judgment and hope in Jesus' name. The faith of the early Christians affirmed that Jesus brought God's heavenly Reign to earth and authorized them to announce it. Christian hope for the future made their present meaningful.

Chapter 4, "Jesus and the End," presents Jesus as he was envisioned in the Revelation to John. This is a discussion of hope in Christ's justice and mercy. In the face of cruel threats,

## 6 INTRODUCTION

the remedy of salvation is severe. But God has not destined the world for ultimate destruction. The “apocalypse” or “revelation” is a vision of God’s final renewal and restoration of the earth.

Reading the New Testament historically, therefore, proves to be an introduction to the hopes of Israel in the Roman era, the message of Jesus, the proclamation of the early Christians, and the adamant faith of those who appeared to have no future. This also proves to be a theological reading because both Jesus and his followers believed God to be the Lord of history. In the New Testament, it is not possible to know the future without understanding what is going on between God and humanity in the present.

Readers need to consider the relevance of these testimonies to their sense of the future and the present. Those who merely want to predict what is going to happen may be disappointed to discover how open the future was for Jesus and his followers. But the task of understanding Jesus today requires knowledge of the past. Such understanding also produces an appreciation of the ways that faith in God was shaped in human experience, and it illumines how that faith also shaped the future. The story of Jesus is an assurance of hope for the future of the world, but it is not a naive optimism. It was forged in the fires of conflict with powers and dominions that seemed to rob the future of hope.

*Chapter 1*

## Jesus and Troubled Times

### **Crucified under Pontius Pilate**

So they took Jesus, and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called the place of the skull, which is called in Hebrew Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them. Pilate also wrote a title and put it on the cross; it read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." (Jn 19:17–19)

The story of Jesus and the future must begin in the past, and it must begin at his death. This is not the fabled past of "once upon a time," which could only yield a fictional future. This is the flesh-and-blood past in which crucifixion was a cruel form of public execution generally reserved for slaves and enemies of the Roman order. It is an era in history when the Roman legions had occupied Palestine for almost a century, and only the Senate and emperor in Rome could declare someone to be "King of the Jews." It is during the decade (A.D. 26–36) when Pontius Pilate was the governor, charged with keeping the peace in a region that was known to be a seedbed of trouble. The title he placed over Jesus' head was not a confession of faith. It was a bitter warning to all Judea against any dreams of future revolt.

Those facts of history were already more than bare facts. They were filled with interpretation and meaning. Consider the scene from Pilate's point of view. This was not a casual murder in a dark alley, nor a human sacrifice to appease the gods. It was an authorized execution carried out by troops un-

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## 8 JESUS AND TROUBLED TIMES

der his command, and it was meant to send a message. A dead “King of the Jews” would offer no future. The authority and the future lay with Roman destiny.

Most of the discussion of Jesus and the future will focus on Jesus as one who interpreted and enacted the hope and faith of Israel. His vision of the future was clearly controversial among his own people. But the Romans also had convictions about history and hopes for the future, and they certainly were not focused on Jewish prophets or the God of Israel. Their poets, historians, and prophets declared the Roman Peace or the Peace of Caesar Augustus to be a sacred trust. The ideal of security was to be defended at all costs, and its traits were well known in their heritage:

. . . the official religion of worship and divination, executive authority, senatorial influence, statute and customary law, the popular courts and magisterial jurisdiction, good faith, the provinces and allies, imperial prestige, military and financial strength. (Cicero, “Pro Sestio,” 45–46)

This is a worldview of order. The power of the state is to be maintained and justified as the will of the gods. It is a concept of history that made sense to those who were running the world. Every empire has such claims to legitimacy, and ancient kingdoms were especially religious in their claims. Their politics were always “theocratic,” at least in their claims of divine favor or authority. Their subject nations were seldom consulted.

Pilate probably did not consider Jesus to be an imposing threat to the grand Roman vision of a golden age of peace and prosperity. He may have regarded the controversy surrounding Jesus as merely another local disturbance, a Jewish dispute to be settled quickly in the midst of a religious holiday. Nevertheless, Pilate was administering policies that were full of political and religious convictions, and he was wrapped in the cloak



## Crucified under Pontius Pilate

9

of Roman authority as a governor. He would not have appreciated the implied threat that he would not be “Caesar’s friend” if he did not execute Jesus (Jn 19:12). His verdict and charge intended to crush any hopes or dreams of the future associated with Jesus.

Of course the New Testament story was not told from Pilate’s point of view nor from the perspective of the Temple leaders who were in close collaboration with the Roman rule. The meaning of the execution was not dictated by Pilate or the religious rulers who opposed Jesus. Jesus’ followers declared an alternative theology of history and the future. Every surviving first-century version announces that Jesus was raised from the dead. God had vindicated Jesus. “God has made him Lord and Messiah,” they said, “this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36). Or as Paul stated it, “We impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor 2:7–8).

The early Christians understood the facts and the future quite differently from Pilate. They knew that they were telling the story from the underside of history. They were persuaded that Jesus truly was “The King of the Jews.” God’s will and reign were at work in Jesus, and Jesus was now established as the ultimate ruler of heaven and earth. “Jesus is Lord!” was their conviction about God and the world, and “O Lord come!” was their hope for the future.

Therefore our topic is a historical one, in at least two senses. First, the history of his times are crucial to understanding both Jesus and the future he declared. Jesus did not appear in a vacuum. He was surrounded by conflicts in his social, political, and religious culture, and he was executed as a royal pretender. That historical past is central to what he meant. Pontius Pilate and the apostle Paul could have agreed that Jesus was executed

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## 10 JESUS AND TROUBLED TIMES

in a particular time and place. Perhaps they would have agreed that it was a test of whose gods were ultimate. It might even be possible for a later Roman governor to understand that Jesus was thought to be alive (see Acts 25:13–22). But the Romans and religious leaders in occupied Palestine could not accept the claims made in his name without changing their whole understanding of the world.

Thus ours is also a historical subject in a second sense in that it is a proposal about the meaning of history. Jesus makes sense only when he is seen within the heritage of Israel. The historical facts are indispensable, but the meaning of those facts is even more crucial. The issue is more “What is going on in history?” than simply “What happened?” The conflict that led to Jesus’ death was about the Kingdom of God or how God has chosen to rule in the world. In the grand sweep of history, this was a conflict with the Roman order, but first of all Jesus posed a challenge to Israel and its leaders.

To understand the future Jesus proclaimed, it is necessary to understand why existing systems of authority felt threatened by him. It is necessary to recall the moral and religious myths and symbols by which the world lived and legitimated itself. Jesus did not simply predict the future. He declared the coming of God’s Reign in terms that redefined the meaning of the present and future.

The story of Jesus and the future begins with the public event of his execution. The Romans sought to put an end to Jesus and the Kingdom of God he proclaimed, but his followers regarded his death as crucial to the “hidden wisdom of God,” which the “rulers of this age” did not understand. This story then circles back into the history of the Scriptures of Israel, returns to Jesus, and then out into the proclamation of the Christ and his kingdom in the following decades. The Christian story is a distinctive interpretation of the hope of Israel. It is filled with the heritage of Israel’s scriptural faith and played