Jesus in Context

Jesus changed our world forever. But who was he and what do we know about him? David Wenham’s accessible volume is a concise and wide-ranging engagement with that enduring and elusive subject. Exploring the sources for Jesus and his scholarly reception, he surveys information from Roman, Jewish, and Christian texts, and also examines the origins of the gospels, as well as the evidence of Paul, who had access to the earliest oral traditions about Jesus. Wenham demonstrates that the Jesus of the New Testament makes sense within the first century CE context in which he lived and preached. He offers a contextualized portrait of Jesus and his teaching; his relationship with John the Baptist and the Qumran community (and the Dead Sea Scrolls); his ethics and the Sermon on the Mount; and his successes and disappointments. Wenham also brings insights into Jesus’ vision of the future and his understanding of his own death and calling.

David Wenham first taught in India. For many years he was on the faculty of Wycliffe Hall and Oxford University, and later at Trinity College Bristol, where he was also Research Fellow of Bristol University. He is the author and editor of many publications in New Testament studies, notably on the question of Paul’s relationship with Jesus. His most recent book is From Good News to Gospels: What Did the First Christians Say about Jesus?
CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN RELIGION, PHILOSOPHY, AND SOCIETY

Series Editors
Paul K. Moser, Loyola University, Chicago
Chad Meister, Bethel College, Indiana

This is a series of interdisciplinary texts devoted to major-level courses in religion, philosophy, and related fields. It includes original, current, and wide-ranging contributions by leading scholars from various disciplines that (a) focus on the central academic topics in religion and philosophy, (b) are seminal and up-to-date regarding recent developments in scholarship on the various key topics, and (c) incorporate, with needed precision and depth, the major differing perspectives and backgrounds – the central voices on the major religions and the religious, philosophical, and sociological viewpoints that cover the intellectual landscape today. Cambridge Studies in Religion, Philosophy, and Society is a direct response to this recent and widespread interest and need.

Recent Books in the Series

Roger Trigg
*Religious Diversity: Philosophical and Political Dimensions*

John Cottingham
*Philosophy of Religion: Towards a More Humane Approach*

William J. Wainwright
*Reason, Revelation, and Devotion: Inference and Argument in Religion*

Harry J. Gensler
*Ethics and Religion*

Fraser Watts
*Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality: Concepts and Applications*

Gordon Graham
*Philosophy, Art, and Religion: Understanding Faith and Creativity*

Keith Ward
*The Christian Idea of God: A Philosophical Foundation for Faith*

Timothy Samuel Shah and Jack Friedman
*Homo Religiosus? Exploring the Roots of Religion and Religious Freedom in Human Experience*

Sylvia Walsh
*Kierkegaard and Religion: Personality, Character, and Virtue*

Roger S. Gottlieb
*Morality and the Environmental Crisis*

J. L. Schellenberg
*Religion after Science: The Cultural Consequences of Religious Immaturity*
Clifford Williams
Religion and the Meaning of Life: An Existential Approach

Allen W. Wood
Kant and Religion

Michael McGhee
Spirituality for the Godless: Buddhism, Humanism, and Religion

William B. Parsons
Freud and Religion

Charles Taliaferro and Jil Evans
Is God Invisible?: An Essay on Religion and Aesthetics
Jesus in Context

Making Sense of the Historical Figure

DAVID WENHAM
## Contents

*List of Figures* .......................... page ix

*Preface* ........................................ xi

  Introduction and Purpose of This Book ........................................ 1

**PART I SETTING THE SCENE** ................. 3

  1 Sources for Our Knowledge of Jesus’ Context ................................. 5
  2 The Historical and Social Contexts ........................................... 10
  3 The Religious Context ......................................................... 25
  4 Our Sources of Information about Jesus ....................................... 43
  5 The Writing of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John .................................. 51
  6 Finding the Historical Jesus .................................................... 63

**PART II JESUS’ LIFE, MINISTRY AND TEACHING: CONTEXT AND HISTORY** ........ 79

  7 Beginnings ........................................ 81
  8 Baptism and John the Baptist .................................................. 90
  9 Amazing Teacher in Galilee: Parables ...................................... 102
 10 The Kingdom of God ......................................................... 112
 11 Healings, Miracles and the Son of Man ...................................... 122
 12 Friend of the ‘Poor’ ......................................................... 133
 13 Followers and Supporters ..................................................... 142
 14 Following Jesus in Practice: Way of Life .................................... 153
## Contents

15 Opposition, New Directions, Jesus as Messiah 170
16 So to Jerusalem: Journey, Arrival, Confrontation 180
17 Jesus’ Vision of the Future and of His Own Divine Authority 189
18 On the Way to Crucifixion: Why Did Jesus Have to Die? 204
19 Finale in Jerusalem 217
20 After the Death of Jesus: Victory? 230
21 Final Conclusions, and Postscript 237

Select Bibliography 240
Index 246
Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Sea of Galilee</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Second-century fragment of the Greek NT</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Map of the Roman Empire</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>Map of Palestine in the time of Jesus</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>Herod family tree</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>Augustus: Roman emperor when Jesus was born</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>Inscription from Caesarea Maritima with Pilate’s name</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Model of the temple in Jesus’ time</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Jerusalem temple ‘No entry’ warning to Gentiles</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Qumran caves where scrolls were found</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Arch of Titus, Rome, showing booty from Jerusalem temple</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Inscription showing name Gallio (outlined), mentioned in Acts</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Diagram of two-source hypothesis</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>Miqvah (ritual bath) at Qumran</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>River Jordan</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>Fishing boat from Jesus’ time (preserved in metal frame)</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>Modern-day Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>Plan of Jerusalem at the time of Jesus</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>Denarius coin</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>Donkey’s head graffito</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Preface

To be asked to write a book about Jesus is both a challenge and a privilege, and I am grateful to the editors for their invitation. I have studied the subject for more than fifty years, and I am indebted to far more people than I can name who have stimulated my thinking, starting with my father John Wenham.

In the writing of this book, I would particularly like to thank Professor Rainer Riesner for sending me a pre-publication copy of his hugely informative book *Messias Jesus*, as well as for his long-standing friendship. Drs Robert Dutch, Nathan Ridlehoover and Peter Turnill, also Mr Stuart O Seanoir, read drafts of my work, giving me astute and helpful comments. My wife Clare has accompanied me on my academic journeyings to Cambridge, India, Bristol and Oxford, and I am very grateful.

One of the most obvious things to say about a book like this, indeed about any historical study, is that no scholar is impartial. I write as a Christian, but as one who has long felt an affinity with Jesus’ disciple Thomas who wanted good evidence if he was to believe what he had been told about Jesus (John 20:25). The Oxford scientist Richard Dawkins contrasts science as based on evidence with religion as based on faith, but Christian faith has always claimed to be based on history and evidence.

This book seeks to offer two things: (1) informed description of the data relating to the history of Jesus; and (2) discussion of the data, primarily in relation to the Jesus’ first-century context, but also taking into account scholarly views and debates. It does not presuppose a lot of knowledge, but it will hopefully have insights and perspectives even for those familiar with the issues. Key references to primary sources are given, particularly to biblical texts and the works of Josephus (though usually
only one reference is given when the gospels overlap with each other). As for secondary literature, so much fine scholarly work has been done over the years that I am able to note only an embarrassingly small selection of useful resources; for a slightly fuller bibliography see my Exploring the New Testament: A Guide to the Gospels & Acts, co-authored with Steve Walton, 3rd edition, 2021.

In referring to the Bible I use the traditional terminology in referring to the ‘Old Testament’ (OT, the pre-Christian Hebrew Scriptures), and to the ‘New Testament’ (NT, the Greek books specifically relating to Jesus). In referring to historical dates I use \textit{bce} (before the Common Era) and \textit{ce} (Common Era). In line with common academic usage, I refer to ‘Palestine’, not in any political or national sense, but simply to refer to the land where Jesus lived and worked (often referred to as ‘the Holy Land’ by Christians).

In biblical quotations I am largely using my own translation, but also the English Standard Version (ESV) as indicated.