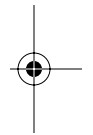


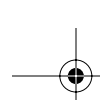
PREFACE

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.

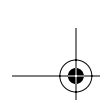
The Bible, I believe, is a divinely inspired book. But therein lies the rub. It is an inspired *book*, not a fortune cookie. So if we go jumping into the middle (where the Gospels are, where Jesus is) without any context, it's going to create some serious comprehension problems.

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





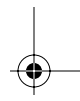
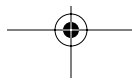
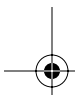
ritualistic purity like cleaning cups and utensils, I'm not sure how you'd take this statement—Jesus hates dishwashers? But the message behind the statement is that the Pharisees were focused on externals and ignoring internal corruption. The people listening to Jesus would have nodded their heads, perhaps 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.

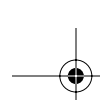
Finally, the Gospels are themselves stories. True, they are history, but like a History Channel documentary on the Olsen Twins, which moves from the *Full House* years to the WalMart clothing line, the material in each of the Gospels has been thoughtfully arranged to bring out themes and flow from a 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-



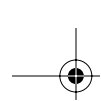


estly about implications. I'll try to put everything you've read, and I've written, into some broader perspective, something that makes sense.

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.





1 CONTACT

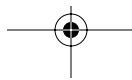
Jesus Arrives on Planet Earth

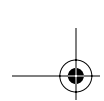
Once upon a time . . .

There was a wise man who was called Jesus, and his conduct was good, and he was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. And those who had become his disciples did not abandon their loyalty to him. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion, and that he was alive. Accordingly they believed that he was the Messiah, concerning whom the Prophets have recounted wonders.¹

With phrases such as “his conduct was good” and “he was known to be virtuous,” you may have thought that Jane Austen wrote the above description of Jesus, but it was actually written by Flavius Josephus, born in A.D. 37, only a few years after the death of Jesus (around A.D. 30–33). We begin here—not with Matthew, Mark, Luke or John—as a reminder that in the Gospels we will be retracing concrete historical events, not vague religious ones. As Josephus attests, these things really happened.

Though every Easter *Time* or *Newsweek* or some other popular magazine goes in search of the historical Jesus, their quest is driven more by circulation numbers than finding answers. The resulting articles are more in the genre of entertainment than scholarship, with the most po-





larizing or radical views being thrown together in a ring. This is not to say that there isn't legitimate debate about who Jesus was, nor that certain events don't require the acquiescence of faith, but the fact is that there *is* considerable scholarly consensus on the historical Jesus.

The problem, of course, is that consensus doesn't make a good cover story: "What We've Always Thought About Jesus Is Pretty Much True" isn't likely to move many magazines. And so facts notwithstanding, every Easter we will continue to read that "new findings" have placed "everything we ever thought" "under siege" and that "scholars" are locked in a "battle for the Bible" and "quest" for the "historical Jesus." This year, we will no doubt "uncover," that Jesus was actually a Viking explorer with a really bad sense of direction.

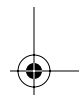
But the accuracy of the Gospel's birth accounts has been established by the most stringent of historical and social apparatuses: gossip. Jesus and Christianity had their share of enemies, and several of the Gospels circulated within Israel shortly after his death. If anyone had stepped forward and said, "That's a bunch of לַתְּרַהֲבָה [for authenticity, I've left the Hebrew untranslated]. Jesus was a falafel vendor outside of Jericho," Christianity would have withered and died. But they didn't, so it didn't. Rather, Christianity spread like pollen, because give or take a virgin birth or resurrection (issues requiring faith), there was consensus within Israel upon the basic facts as described in the Gospels.

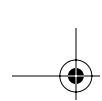
John began his Gospel by connecting Jesus directly to God:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. . . .

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. (John 1:1, 2, 14)

Mark's Gospel begins with Jesus as an adult and leads with his cousin John:





The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

It is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you.” . . .

And so John came, baptizing in the desert. (Mark 1:1, 2, 4)

So we're left with only Matthew and Luke to compile a scrapbook of the events surrounding Jesus' birth. If you were curious about issues of teething, bedtimes, allowances or how many hours Mary was in labor, I'm afraid you're out of luck. The Gospel writers included only those events having special significance to Jesus' identity and future ministry. This is a common practice for all stories, fact or fiction: the story of Batman, for example, is compelling even though it doesn't include his first steps or first day of school, but it would be unintelligible without the death of his parents or his encounter with a cave full of bats. So the Gospels contain only a handful of stories about his childhood, yet each will prove foundational to understanding Jesus.

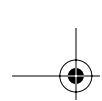


Virgin Born

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”



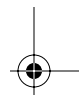
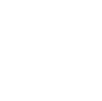
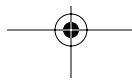


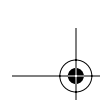
All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.” (Matthew 1:18-23)

Television journalist Larry King was once asked who, from all of history, he would like to interview. He immediately answered, “Jesus Christ.” Then he added what his first question would be: “ ‘Are you indeed virgin born?’ . . . The answer to that question would explain history for me.”² Perhaps I lack the spiritual depth of Larry King, but the first question on my list would probably be more along the line of, “Whatever happened to my old dog, Banjo?” The question of the virgin birth would certainly be in my top ten, though, because the answer would explain a lot.

Matthew begins his account with the words, “This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about.” Matthew is not introducing his audience—Jews living in Israel only decades after the death of Jesus—to a new story but filling in details of a story they already know: setting the record straight, clearing up any misconceptions, rumors or hearsay. A virgin birth would generate plenty of gossip, and Matthew must rescue the historical facts from both skeptics and well-meaning believers who might exaggerate and overspiritualize them—“The way I heard it, Mary gave birth to a 30-year-old man named Jesus, beard and all.” This, according to Matthew, is how the birth of Jesus *really* happened.

Mary was “pledged to be married to Joseph” (verse 18), which in Israel was more of a quasi wedding than a quasi engagement. You were essentially married, only not yet living together, giving you all of the monogamy with none of the fringe benefits, and, I suppose, making it all the more difficult for Joseph to digest the news that Mary was pregnant. Mary’s pregnancy would have created a nasty scandal, and



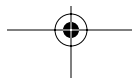


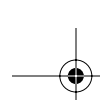
rather than expose her to public shame and possible execution, Joseph graciously decided on a quiet divorce—until, Matthew tells us, Joseph had a dream. In fact, it must have been quite a dream, for this is probably not the first time in the history of unplanned pregnancies that someone claimed “miraculous conception,” but undoubtedly it is the first time someone believed it.

One would assume that being the parents of the Messiah would guarantee certain privileges with God, but in the Gospels, divine communication with Mary and Joseph is always mediated indirectly through angels or dreams. This unexpected detail may have been simply Matthew setting the record straight, or perhaps the detail itself is pregnant with the seed of Jesus’ message: even the best of the human species stand at a distance from the Creator, and need a mediator to bridge the gulf. In either case it affirms what most of us intuit to be true about the universe: there are worlds well beyond our windows.

The most persuasive evidence for the claim of Jesus’ virgin birth hinges on a sign contained within the book of Isaiah: a book written roughly seven hundred years before Jesus was even born. The prophet Isaiah made the following prediction: “The Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14). Isaiah goes on to describe the miraculous child:

He will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David’s throne
and over his kingdom,





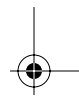
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever. (Isaiah 9:6, 7)

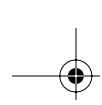
The virgin birth, then, is not simply a miracle or some bizarre happen-
stance, but more significantly, it was the agreed-upon sign between God
and his covenant people, Israel, indicating that the Deliverer had arrived.

What exactly is a sign? *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines *sign* as
“an indication, pointer, signal or evidence of what is happening or going
to happen.” *Oxford* also declares a sign to be “any trace of a wild animal,
especially its tracks or droppings.” Clearly irrelevant, but you have to ad-
mire the forward-thinking Oxford editors for including animal droppings
in their definition.

Now, in the long history of human egos many have aspired to be the
Messiah. Whether they wanted to fool people into following them or they
were themselves convinced they were the Messiah (asylums are full of
the latter), there has been no shortage of imposters. So, through the
prophet Isaiah, God’s people were promised a sign (a pointer, a signal,
evidence) that God would, in fact, be with us. That sign was to be a virgin
bearing a child, and the Gospel writer did not want us to miss the fact
that Jesus was born of a virgin. Then again, maybe it was more than just
a sign; maybe it was also a necessity. Maybe the double helix of human
DNA is more twisted than we thought, such that it can’t produce a sin-
less Messiah any more then it could produce a llama. I mean, even the
greatest recipe, if it contained dirt, would create the greatest meal—con-
taining dirt.

And yet a sign, even a miraculous sign, can be rationalized and dis-
missed without faith. Even with all our science and intellectual posturing,
we still believe what we want to believe. So it’s not surprising that in some
of the Jewish literature opposing Christianity in its early centuries, Jesus





is referred to as “a bastard son of an adulteress.”³ But this only confirms a historical consensus on the main fact—Mary was pregnant apart from Joseph.

The virgin birth was the first sign that Jesus was no ordinary child. But other indicators were to follow.

Bethlehem: A Way in a Manger

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”

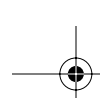
When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

“But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.”

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.” (Matthew 2:1-8)

Let’s begin with the most obvious question: What’s a Magi? Simple: in order to rule efficiently, kings needed a cabinet of counselors—wise men. In the ancient world, part of what made a wise man wise was the ability to determine the currents of the future through the charting of stars and con-





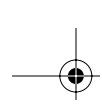
stellations. So, in context, “Magi” refers to those individuals who were at the same time royal cabinet members, counselors and astronomers, sent as ambassadors of good will from other nations.

At first glance the visit of the Magi has a bit of a tall tale feel to it, but that has less to do with history and more to do with bizarre crèche displays we see on people’s lawns at Christmas? (Wise men, sheep, camels, cows, angels: why not throw in a statue of Karl Marx for good measure?) In fact the Roman historian Suetonius (A.D. 70-130) mentions just such a delegation of Magi arriving in Rome in A.D. 66 to pay homage to Nero. Both Suetonius and Tacitus (A.D. 56-117) also tell us that at the turn of the era there was an expectation that a world ruler would come from Judea (Israel), so there is nothing strange about an entourage of Magi arriving in Israel—perhaps it would have been strange if they had not.⁴

The Magi came to Herod, the Jewish king, whom they naturally assumed would be aware of a new king’s birth taking place within his own country. He wasn’t. Herod didn’t stay current on such spiritual matters and had to ask his own wise men, the “chief priests and teachers of the law,” what the Scriptures said about the location of the Messiah’s birth. The answer: Bethlehem.

The modern city of Bethlehem is about as remarkable as Cleveland. There’s no telling where tax and tourist dollars have been squandered, but then again, I wouldn’t know how much it costs to keep a three-thousand-year-old city from sifting into sand. The ancient city of Bethlehem was—I dare say—even less remarkable, and yet the Jewish scholars and “teachers of the law” knew that this would be the address of the Messiah, and here is why they knew. The prophet Micah made a pronouncement—on God’s behalf—that the Messiah would be born in the city of Bethlehem. This prediction, dated roughly 750 years before the birth of Jesus, reads as follows:





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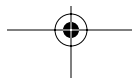
You, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times. (Micah 5:2)

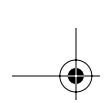
You have to admit, that's pretty amazing. About the only thing that could possibly blunt the impact of this prediction is the ill-conceived notion that such ancient prophecies were ubiquitous, with seers spouting oracles on every street corner of the ancient world. In *Star Wars* there is a foretelling of one who would bring balance to the Force. The Lord of the Rings is saturated with messianic language. And while I apologize for mentioning this movie in the same breath, in *The Chronicles of Riddick* Vin Diesel plays the Furion, prophesied to level an empire. And what about the medieval mystic Nostradamus? Here, for example, is one of his most famous prophecies:

Takes the Goddess of the Moon, for his Day & Movement:
A frantic wanderer and witness of God's Law,
In awakening the world's great regions to Gods will.⁵

This is said to be a reference to the late Princess Diana. I know, a shock to me too, as I thought it sounded eerily like Martha Stewart. And that's just it: the prophecy is so vague it could be about anyone. Truth be told, academic testing of predictions by the world's most renowned psychics yielded a success rate of roughly 11 percent, which might not be so dismal if the control group, making random guesses concerning the future, didn't score at the same 11 percent rate of accuracy. (I'm sure the psychics scored much higher on bending spoons and giving dating advice.)

In contrast, biblical prophecies almost always contain a clear and ver-





ifiable predictive element. Amidst the imagery and poetics are predictions as tangible as a piece of produce; they can be sniffed, squeezed and weighed for accuracy. This is not “When the lima bean weeps, the trolls of perdition shall promenade to sounds of salsa and laughter” kind of nonsense. This is a statement of future fact: “The Messiah will be born in the town of Bethlehem.”

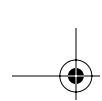
Furthermore, the prophets whose messages were preserved as Scripture were included there because of their flawless prophetic accuracy during their own lifetime. If they said it, it had come to pass. And on that reputation, their predictions concerning the far future—those that went beyond their lifetime—were anticipated with confidence.

To all of this, Judaism added a final layer of quality control. If someone claiming to be a prophet made a prediction that didn’t come to pass, the law required that they be executed—an ingenious method for weeding out prophetic mediocrity.

The Old Testament contains sixty-one specific prophecies and nearly three hundred references to the future Messiah. The Gospel writers wanted their audience to realize that Jesus had fulfilled (or would fulfill) every last one of them. But for a second, let’s forget about the other 299 and just think about this one: if we can safely rule out both Princess Diana and Martha Stewart, how many people in human history who could remotely qualify for the title of Messiah were born in Bethlehem? Not a lot of names come back based on that search query. And yet Jesus was born there—what are the odds?

“What are the odds?” is, of course, just a figure of speech. But if you would in fact like to know the odds, mathematics professor Peter Stoner worked up the numbers. He calculated the odds against one person fulfilling just eight of the sixty-one specific prophecies at 1 in 10^{21} . To illustrate that number, Stoner gave the following example: “First, blanket the entire Earth land mass with silver dollars 120 feet high. Second, spe-





cially mark one of those dollars and randomly bury it. Third, ask a person to travel the Earth and select the marked dollar, while blindfolded, from the trillions of other dollars.”⁶

While I’m sure that was protractor-gripping amusement for math and physics majors, I promise that was the last time we’ll be doing math. To summarize, then, Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem was the second major messianic sign. That’s being born of a virgin + being born in Bethlehem = two signs.

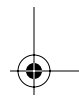
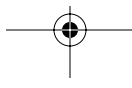
Oops, more math. Sorry, forgot. I also forgot, or nearly did, that there is a fuller discussion on the features of messianic prophecy found in the appendix, should you want to be briefed on it.

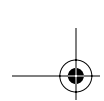
The Census: God and Governments

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in





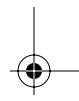
the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” (Luke 2:1-12)

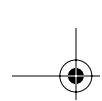
I’ve known for quite some time that Santa isn’t real. The day my parents told my older brother the truth about Santa was the same day he told me. And hopefully it won’t come as a shock to you, but very few of our Christmas holiday traditions have their roots in the Gospels. Rudolph, Frosty, mistletoe, Christmas trees: the Gospels have none of it. These are gritty accounts, unsanitary times, life without anesthetic.

People must always be counted because people must always be taxed. Roman sources suggest that Caesar’s census did in fact take place but locate it in the springtime and not winter, which leads to the obvious question: “Why is Christmas celebrated in December, instead of closer on the calendar to, say, opening day of trout season (April 15)?” I know this is a detour, but I think it’s a detour worth taking. So we’re taking it—all the way to Mardi Gras.

Mardi Gras is part cultural mosaic and part cultural train wreck: at times an artful blending of cultures and at other times, well, a bloody head-on collision. In browsing the folk art and voodoo shops of Bourbon Street in New Orleans, you’ll witness one of those collisions. Amid the assorted deities, dolls and devils, you’ll find the Virgin Mary hiding, as though embarrassed to be present. What’s the Virgin Mary doing in a voodoo shop? How did it come to this?

This is commonly called Christianization. It is what happens when a culture absorbs Christian ideas but the overarching belief structure never changes. Up until the fourth century A.D., the Roman empire was largely antagonistic toward Christianity: at best, Christians were tolerated, at worst, they were martyred in the coliseum. But when the emperor Constantine was converted to Christianity, instead of simply pur-

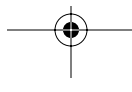


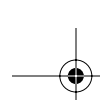


chasing a Bible or getting a Jesus fish for his chariot, he decided to legislate Christianity onto his empire. But true Christian faith can never be legislated, and Constantine had to settle for Christianizing the populace. It's probable he accomplished this, among other shrewd political choices, by changing the end-of-year pagan festivities (winter solstice) into Christmas, since even for a dictator, expunging a national holiday can be political suicide. The ensuing centuries abound with many such compromises, some violent and inhumane, and it could be argued that Christianity was better off under persecution than suffering this corrosive marriage with the culture. (Then again, I'm not next in line to wrestle a lion in the coliseum, so I'll keep my opinion to myself.)

So just as it would be a terrible miscalculation to assume that Urban Outfitters is a Christian company because it sells Jesus figurines and "Jesus is my homeboy" T-shirts, it would also be wrong to assume that everything that has gone on in history under the name of Christianity is an expression of sincere Christian faith. It simply isn't. We never seem to get to the real Jesus when all we talk about is the behavior of people while wearing a cross, because anyone can wear a cross—and wearing a cross doesn't prevent us from doing anything. In fact, if I were the Satan, I think I'd wear one whenever I went out in public—it goes good with black.

With that detour out of the way, let's get back to the unsanitized, demythologized, not-fit-for-Hallmark version of Christmas that we find in the Gospels: Forced to enroll in a Roman census, amid stinging rumors of infidelity and promiscuity, a sixteen- or seventeen-year-old girl named Mary rode twenty-six miles to Bethlehem on the back of a donkey—in her third trimester. (While statues depict the blue-clad Mary with her heart visibly radiating from her sternum, we should presume that she made the journey with her heart beating safely within her rib cage.) Upon arrival, there were no vacancies, and so Mary enjoyed the further





blessing of birth labor from the vantage point of a stable floor (probably belonging to Joseph’s family). Perhaps this was God’s plan, or perhaps Joseph—failing to plan—arrived late. But we are left viewing irony itself: the Messiah entered the world, only to land in an animal’s feeding trough, because nobody had any room for him.

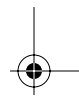
The Wonder Years

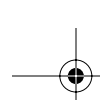
When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him.

Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up to the Feast, according to the custom. After the Feast was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, “Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.”

“Why were you searching for me?” he asked. “Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” But they did not understand what he was saying to them.

Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to





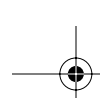
them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. (Luke 2:39-51)

The childhood years of Jesus truly are the “wonder years,” for we are left to wonder where in the world he wandered off to. While the Gospels contain intricate details of Jesus’ adulthood, Luke alone provides us with this one story from his adolescence. That’s it: just a handful of sentences, but enough to partially answer the question we always inquire of greatness: When did they know they were different?

As his later book of Acts and the writings of early leaders of the church attest, Luke’s research for his Gospel included firsthand interviews with some of the disciples. This story from Jesus’ adolescence, along with phrases such as “Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart” (Luke 2:19) and other details in the Gospel, led many to speculate that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was among those whom Luke interviewed. While this is speculative, I’m very fond of speculation.

In some ways the snapshot contained in this passage is almost comical, for while Mary and Joseph are universally upheld as the models of parenthood, in the one story we have of Jesus’ adolescence, he went missing for an entire day—and nobody noticed. I think today this would earn a visit from Child Protection Services. The likely explanation, however, is that the entire extended family traveled together, and it was simply assumed that Jesus was with other family members. Whatever their anxieties might have been, Mary and Joseph trace Jesus back to Jerusalem and ultimately to the Temple, where they find him riddling the religious leaders with questions. What we need to know of Jesus’ adolescence, according to the need-to-know sensibilities of the Gospel writers, is this: by the age of twelve, Jesus appears to be aware of who he is and what he has come to do.





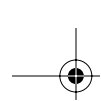
It is not surprising or problematic that the Gospel writers would want to devote the majority of their Gospels to Jesus' ministry years, but it became a problem a century later, when this hole in Jesus' biography was spackled by a series of accounts written under the pseudonyms of apostles (The Gospel of Thomas, The Gospel of Judas, etc.). Like an episode of *Smallville* chronicling the exploits of a teenage Clark Kent, these gospels attribute all sorts of adolescent shenanigans to Jesus. This is my favorite from the Infancy Gospel of Thomas.

The son of Annas the scribe was standing there with Jesus. Taking a branch from a willow tree, he dispersed the puddle of water, which Jesus had gathered. When Jesus saw what had happened, he became angry and said to him, "You godless, brainless moron, what did the ponds and waters do to you? Watch this now: you are going to dry up like a tree and you will never produce leaves or roots or fruit." And immediately, this child withered up completely.⁷

The moral of this story: don't mess with Jesus' puddle—ever. But far from being harmless novels, most of these stories were actually propaganda for a cult of the second and third centuries, known as Gnosticism. Holding to the belief that the physical world (as opposed to the spiritual world) and our physical bodies were evil, the Gnostic cult behind the Gospel of Thomas struggled not with the deity of Jesus but with the idea that God would take on evil, corrupt flesh. In other words, their raging doubt was not whether Jesus was the unique Son of God, but whether Jesus was truly a man.

Early leaders of the church were aware of such writings as the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Judas, taking them only as serious as to list them among the newest works of fiction (dating at least a hundred years after the original Gospels), and warn of their veiled attempt to strip Jesus of his hu-





manity. The Christian leader Irenaeus (A.D. 120–190) wrote authoritatively: “There are four gospels and only four, neither more nor less: four like the points of the compass, four like the chief directions of the wind.”⁸

These Gnostic gospels still have historical interest (at least I find them interesting), but clearly they are not Scripture. Which perhaps raises in your mind some broader questions concerning the New Testament. You might want to pause for a few answers, found in appendix A, before moving on. Otherwise we’ll jump ahead, through the next eighteen years, to the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry.

John the Baptizer

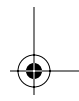
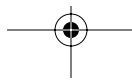
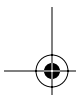
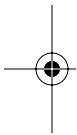
The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

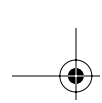
It is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way”—
“a voice of one calling in the desert,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.’”

And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: “After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” (Mark 1:1-8)

Like everyone with a digital camera I take a ton of photos, never printing





any of them. I was recently looking at an amazing shot of my wife and me, taken in the center of Teatralny Square in Warsaw, Poland. Well, that's not really true. It's a great shot of the Square, but objectively speaking, it looks like a movie poster for *Dawn of the Dead*. I didn't see them at the time, and have no idea who they are, but behind us in the picture, hands in pockets, stand three congenitally red-eyed intruders in my documentary.

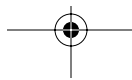
To an unfamiliar reader, this is how John the Baptist comes across in the Gospels: a character whose brief cameo has no seeming connection to the storyline. But as we'll see, John was anything but peripheral to the messianic drama; he is rather the preface to it.

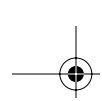
The biblical prophet Malachi (which my spell check is convinced should be *mariachi*; while that would be festive, it's just not the case) declared to Israel four hundred years before the birth of Christ that the next big thing in God's unfolding plan of salvation was not the coming of the Messiah but the coming of his herald: a great prophet who would announce the coming king.

I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me.
Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come. (Malachi 3:1)

See, I will send you [one like] the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. (Malachi 4:5)

The Old Testament describes Elijah as "a man with a garment of hair and with a leather belt around his waist" (2 Kings 1:8), language that the Gospel of Mark uses to describe John the Baptist: "clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist" (Mark 1:6). He came using words reminiscent of Malachi's prophecy: "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him" (Mark 1:3). With the appearance of John, the Gospels suggest that the 'one like Elijah' had arrived, and something new was about to happen in Israel.





As best as a timeline can be traced, the ministry of John seems to have lasted about two years, preceding and for just a brief time overlapping the ministry of Jesus. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus provides us with a description of John the Baptist nearly identical to what we know of him from the Gospels.

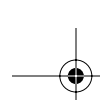
John called the baptist . . . was a good man and had urged the Jews to exert themselves to virtue, both as to justice toward one another and reverence towards God.⁹

As is true of most people with ego strength, John seemed immune to social opinion, conventions and status. Subsisting on locusts and honey and living in the wilderness, he camped on the borders of civilization in every possible sense. John's prophetic role was that of a herald, a forerunner whose job was to announce the coming Messiah. John attempted to jar Israel back from a spiritual coma, and to the degree that he succeeded, he provided Jesus with his initial stream of followers. His second role was to bear witness to the Messiah—a sort of celebrity endorsement. And, as Josephus's quote attests, in first-century Israel, John was a spiritual rock star.

John stands as a living, walking—screaming—metaphor. He is the last, and final, in the long line of Old testament prophets, but stands a foot taller than the rest, subsuming in his ministry and message all that the former prophets had said, warned and predicted. In John's pointing to Jesus it's as if the entire Old Testament were pointing to him, saying, "This is the guy we're talking about!"

The downside of not being a respecter of persons, is, well, not being a respecter of persons. Sometime after naming Jesus as the Messiah, John made public accusations concerning King Herod's adulterous relationship with his sister-in-law. Herod, valuing freedom of expression about as much as any tyrant might, had him imprisoned and executed.





Herod probably thought that with John's death his troubles were over, not realizing that John was simply the warm-up band. Having fulfilled all of the major Old Testament birth prophecies of the Messiah, and having received a glowing endorsement and an initial stream of followers from Israel's reigning prophet, Jesus was only getting started. With John gone, all eyes in Israel will now turn solely to him.

