

A Study Guide and Supplementary Material

by Tim Reddish

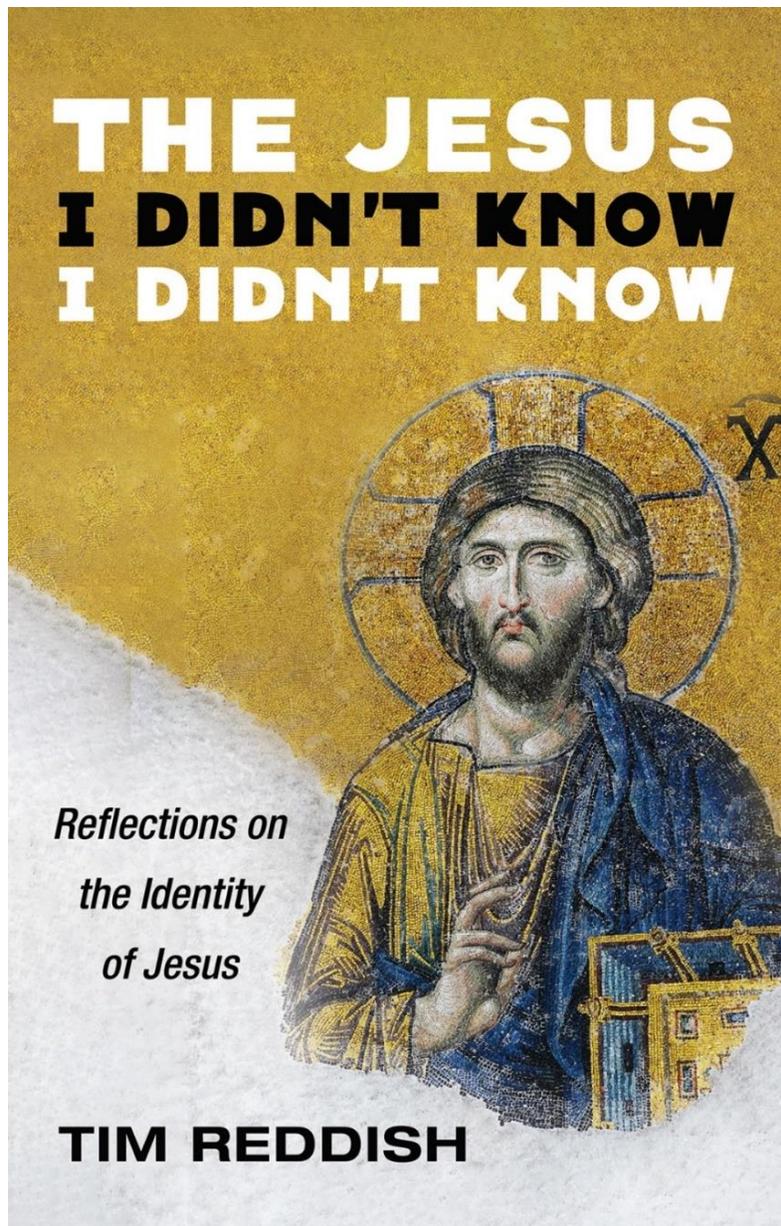


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Introduction

The church's portrayal of Jesus can put people off Christianity for many understandable reasons, not least bitter personal experience. But before a person throws out the proverbial baby with the bathwater, I hope they would at least explore the Gospels carefully and seek a more authentic, biblical Jesus. After all, whether we like it or not, this man has changed world history. We are still talking about this carpenter from Nazareth two thousand years later and that prompts the question: *Why?* The chances are that if you are reading this Study Guide you are—or were—sufficiently engaged with the contents of *The Jesus I Didn't Know I Didn't Know* (Wipf & Stock, 2021) to want to be assisted as you dig deeper into the material. The book itself didn't assume you were a Christian but that you were at least sympathetic to the historical figure of Jesus. It tried to be introductory but not superficial or cursory; I didn't want to insult the intelligence of the curious reader. This *Study Guide and Supplementary Material* is written in the same spirit and style but more with Christians in mind—though *not* exclusively so. My intent is to be inclusive, honest, and welcoming of those who are skeptical while encouraging, even challenging, those who call themselves Jesus-followers. Let me know what you think . . .

Before continuing further, allow me to briefly explain an implicit feature within *The Jesus I Didn't Know I Didn't Know*. Some of you may have noticed one of my “principles of hermeneutics.” That's a technical phrase meaning my approach to interpreting a biblical text. Everyone has such tenets, even if they are at the subconscious level; I am merely trying to be explicit here. It's this: If we are seeking to understand or interpret what a Gospel writer is saying, we can only use *his* Gospel as we seek clarification. We are therefore not at liberty to use Luke, say, to interpret Matthew, Mark, or John (or any other combination). We treat the Gospel's *independently*. In the same way, we can't use what Paul writes to interpret the Gospels or, for that matter, Hebrews, James, or any other book. What this means is that instead of trying to harmonize the different New Testament books, as if they were written by a single author, we accept each one on its own merits. That allows us to explore their similarities *and* differences and respect *each* author's perspective. If we follow this principle, it can lead to some startling discoveries concerning Jesus that I believe can enrich our faith—including each author's reflections on the *identity* of Jesus.¹

On a more mundane level, I realize that having many footnotes can be annoying! It makes the book seem more academic; that's not the intention in this introductory work. The footnotes are merely “added value” for the curious. They mainly consist of biblical references (for those who find such things important) and added clarifications, along with some definitions of possibly unfamiliar terms (e.g., Herodian, Sadducee, etc.) My suggestion is to not be distracted by the footnotes, simply ignore them—unless a specific matter has tweaked your interest. In the same way, I have added an excursion (and an

¹ Scholars who seek to systematize theology take all such subtleties into account. The different weights they put on the various authors can result in different emphases in their conclusions.

appendix) here which you can omit if you wish without losing anything in terms of the Study Guide's continuity. Again, it's simply added information for those who are interested.

Finally, I believe studying *The Jesus I Didn't Know I Didn't Know* in a group context would be richly rewarding. Naturally, I would say that wouldn't it! This guide is to assist a group leader without curtailing your freedom in choosing other questions or raising related topics. It could also be used independently by a group as a whole. One approach is for individuals to read a chapter in *The Jesus I Didn't Know I Didn't Know* ahead of time. When the group meets, it's good to begin by discussing the things that grabbed each person's attention in either a positive or negative way. Then perhaps consider any queries you may have in understanding the chapter's contents; your own questions are obviously very important and need to be addressed. Finally, work through that chapter's material in this Study Guide. As you explore the book together, I encourage group members to genuinely listen and respect each other's views. It goes without saying that I trust an individual reader of this *Study Guide and Supplementary Material* will also find it as engaging and insightful as the book itself. My prayer is that the divine spirit—the Holy Spirit—will illuminate your thinking as you read and reflect, and that you will have many of your own *aha* moments of discovery. . .

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Chapter 1 The Birth of Jesus

1. Are you fascinated by your ancestry? If not, do you know someone who is, or can you appreciate why someone might be? What is it about a family tree that may be so meaningful or important to a person?

Luke also presents a genealogy of Jesus, though he places it as a segue after his account of Jesus' baptism and before the story of the temptation of Jesus.² Both Matthew and Luke considered details of Jesus' ancestry important enough to include in their respective Gospels, and that begs the question, "Why?" Presumably a family tree reveals something significant about the *identity* of an individual, not least affirming that Jesus was a historical person—indeed, truly human! More specifically, the two genealogies link Jesus with David and Abraham. Jesus is therefore not just an authentic part of Jewish tradition, he is a descendent of King David himself.³ And that's particularly noteworthy because the expectation was that the messiah would be a "Son of David."⁴ Both Luke and Matthew stress that Jesus has that appropriate lineage—even if it's through adoption by Joseph.

Luke, however, goes further than Matthew and extends his genealogy beyond Abraham to Adam and then to God, the true father of *all* humankind—not just the Jewish race.⁵ This latter aspect is a significant addition in that Luke has already stressed that Jesus is the Savior of the whole world.⁶ That is first hinted at with the angel's proclamation to the shepherds, "I am bringing you good news of great joy *for all the people*: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."⁷ And Luke later makes it explicit through Simeon who, upon seeing baby Jesus, says: "My eyes have seen God's salvation" and goes on to describe Jesus as "a light for revelation to non-Jews."⁸ Ultimately, even if genealogies seem tedious to us, they serve an important *purpose* in that they point to someone's identity—because it reveals their history or heritage.

2. What is your favorite birth story of Jesus? Is it Luke's account of Mary and Elizabeth, together with the mention of angels that culminates in shepherds visiting a manger scene in Bethlehem? Or is it Matthew's story of Joseph's dreams and the later homage of the Magi and their three gifts? Had you realized before that the two accounts don't perfectly dovetail together?

² See Luke 3:23–38.

³ Luke also ensures that Jesus is born in Bethlehem, the city of David (Luke 2:4), to stress this royal connection (cf. Matt 2:4–6).

⁴ See Matt 1:1; 2:4–6; Luke 1:32; 2 Sam 7:12–13; Ezek 34:23–24; 37:34; Amos 9:11; Isa 11:1, 10; 16:5, Jer 23:5; 33:14–26; Zech 12:8.

⁵ Moreover, Luke—unlike Matthew—has *no* women in his list, which is what one would naturally expect in a male-dominated society. Hence the unusual nature of Matthew's genealogy which includes various women. . .

⁶ Yet another title we could add to the list in chapter 4.

⁷ Luke 2:10b–11. While "messiah" is a very meaningful term for Jews, the implications of Jesus as "Lord" would be readily appreciated by non-Jews—as discussed in TJDKIDK chapter 4.

⁸ See Luke 2:28–32. Matthew makes this connection through the visit of the (non-Jewish) Magi from the East (Matt 2:1–12).

3. What then are we to make of Matthew’s and Luke’s birth narratives of Jesus? What is their literary *genre*?⁹ Was the author’s intent to write factual history?

If so, the inconsistencies in the two accounts are troubling,¹⁰ not to mention the difficulties scholars have had in corroborating their accounts with other non-biblical documents of the era.¹¹ Regardless of those well-known issues, the two accounts have much in common, particularly if you focus on what they have to say concerning the *identity* of Jesus. And, as mentioned in TJIDKIDK, that—in my mind—is the critical point of these (stylized) birth narratives. Why not—as an additional exercise—read the first two chapters of Matthew and Luke and, as you do so, list the *names* or *titles* that the Gospel writers use for Jesus? This is the authors’ (or narrators’) way of revealing who *they* think Jesus is, irrespective of *who* is said to be speaking (e.g., an angel, Herod, Zechariah, Mary, Simeon, etc.). The number of times each title is used also indicates emphasis—and Messiah and Son of David are both high on their lists. What titles do Matthew and Luke *both* stress? They share that common emphasis regardless of the differences in the details of their birth narratives. Are there titles that Luke uses that Matthew does not, and vice versa? These differences reveal each Gospel writer’s distinctive features and it’s worth being aware of them as you continue to read through their accounts.¹²

4. What are your views concerning the “virgin birth”?

Many deny its occurrence, considering it to be scientifically “impossible.” Others dismiss it as a myth. Yet many Christians recite the traditional Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds, with their mention of the virgin Mary, without any further thought. Consequently, the virgin *conception*—to be more precise—is often considered an essential Christian belief; to doubt that is to be pejoratively labelled as a “liberal” or one who’s not an authentic “Bible-believing” Christian. Furthermore, some Christians regard the virgin conception as proof of the divinity of Jesus; I disagree.¹³ What’s interesting though is that both Matthew and Luke introduce a virgin conception in their separate birth narratives, which implies this was an established part of a common, oral tradition. There was, then, clearly *something* odd, mysterious, or even scandalous about the birth of Jesus that was already widely known. To therefore *not* mention that fact would be an inauthentic cover-up—and would be seen as such by their contemporaries. Matthew and Luke don’t ignore the matter; yet both see the subtle hand of God in Christ’s birth with their angelic messages and their use of Old Testament scriptures. I suggest we not make more of the virgin birth than is necessary, particularly given the lack of other direct reference to it in the rest of the New Testament. This need *not* be a stumbling block to—or a litmus test of—one’s faith in Jesus. Let’s not exaggerate its importance, nor be embarrassed by it. Whatever we may think about the virgin birth,

⁹ See also TJIDKIDK chapter 2, footnote [32].

¹⁰ See TJIDKIDK chapter 1, footnote [2] and footnote [84] in this Study Guide.

¹¹ For example, Herod’s edict to kill all the children two years old and under (Matt 2:16) or the implausible notion of an empire-wide census that would result in chaotic mass travel of the population (Luke 2:1–3).

¹² See also Excursion 1 below for Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus.

¹³ See TJIDKIDK chapter 1, page 7.

Joseph resolves the matter when he officially names Jesus, which formally makes Jesus his legal son and heir.¹⁴

5. What does the Bible mean when a writer (or the faith community) claims a person is a prophet? Related to that, what are your views on prophetic oracles? (Your response likely links in with what you believe about divine inspiration.¹⁵) In TJIDKIDK, I state: “Prophecy needs to be understood more in terms of *forth-telling* than in *foretelling*.”¹⁶ What do you think of that idea?

Forth-telling means the prophet is (or is perceived to be) speaking God’s message or wisdom into the audience’s *current* situation. It’s a proclamation that the hearers may embrace¹⁷ or reject, and the truth of the prophetic oracle will be revealed in time. I suggest that too often we assume that a prophet’s role is to foretell the distant future. And that viewpoint comes with various prior (or unspoken) assumptions concerning God’s knowledge and relationship with time. Again, we need to be careful here as Christians can have different views on those complex, philosophical matters.¹⁸ In the context of prophetic writings, which were—of course—edited and combined later into books so memorializing the revered prophets, we also need to remember that hindsight is always 20-20, as we say. Ultimately, a prophet was deemed to be God’s messenger to God’s people if his oracles proved to be true or were seen as insightful or profound by the faith community; it was they who recognized that “God has spoken through prophets.”¹⁹

6. Do you think there are such prophetic figures today? If so, what criteria might you use to help discern a prophet? Moreover, can you name recent examples?

7. I also said that “a community of faith can believe such oracles to have more than one meaning.”²⁰ What do you think of that notion?

Consider, for example, how Luke later adapts Joel’s oracle in Peter’s first sermon.²¹ Evidently, even the prophetic “word of the LORD” was not set in stone, as such, and later writers could edit them for new contexts without—presumably—feeling they had violated sacred texts.²² How does this practice affect your understanding of divine inspiration?

¹⁴ See Matt 1:25.

¹⁵ For those interested, I have written on that topic in Reddish, *Science and Christianity*, Wipf and Stock, 2016, chapter 2.

¹⁶ TJIDKIDK chapter 1, footnote [27].

¹⁷ And respond appropriately, e.g., repent of their ways.

¹⁸ See also: Reddish, *Science and Christianity*, Wipf and Stock, 2016, chapter 6 (and references within).

¹⁹ See Heb 1:1 and the Nicene Creed.

²⁰ TJIDKIDK chapter 1, footnote [27].

²¹ Cf. Acts 2:17–21 (“in the last days”) and Joel 2:28–32 (“after all this”); this is not insignificant—theologically speaking. See also Luke 4:18–19 where Luke also adapts Isa 61:1–2a; 58:6 (LXX) to suit his purposes.

²² This should, in my view, be a cause for reflection for those who advocate for biblical “inerrancy.”

8. Some people speak of premonitions, usually in a negative sense in that something bad is about to happen. Whatever we might think about such things, they lie at the foggy edge of human consciousness. Do you believe that people can have visions—vivid dreams through which the divine spirit speaks? Discuss.

9. What are your views on angels—of their existence and role?

I encourage you not to disappear down a rabbit hole of speculation here. Regardless of our views today, they were not controversial figures to the biblical authors or their audiences. Nevertheless, descriptions of angelic visitations are very rare in the Bible and point to special moments when God was deemed to have stepped into history, as it were. Even so, as mentioned in TJIDKIDK,²³ it's the *message*, not the means (vision, visitation), that is important. What do you think of that idea?

²³ TJIDKIDK, p8–9.

Excursion 1: Luke's Account of the Birth of Jesus

While it's too simplistic to say that "Luke presents us with a perspective based on Mary, and Matthew gives us a viewpoint from Joseph,"²⁴ they *do* portray their birth narratives differently. Put another way, their accounts stress different things. Luke, as we will see, links the birth story of Jesus with that of John the Baptist through their respective mothers, Mary and Elizabeth. And while Matthew has his angelic messages revealed in visions,²⁵ Luke has angelic beings visit in person.²⁶ In this excursion we will explore Luke's account, given that TJDKIDK only considered Matthew's version.

Interestingly, other than the preface,²⁷ Luke chapter 1 can be read independently from Luke 2. Luke 1 focuses on the birth announcements of Jesus and John the Baptist, and Luke carefully differentiates between the roles of the two men as adults.²⁸ Luke also cleverly uses two Spirit-inspired songs—one linked to Mary, the other to John's father, Zechariah—to communicate important theological information to his readers. These prophetic hymns also allude to Hannah's song of praise for the birth of Samuel,²⁹ again indicating the importance of all these men to salvation history. The second chapter contains remarkably sparse details as to the actual birth of Jesus and focuses instead on the shepherds' visitation and the later encounter with Simeon at the temple. Both chapters introduce various titles of Jesus and indicate his divine mandate and future roles.

Luke 1

The long silence of God is over, says Luke. And that ending comes dramatically with a visit of an angel to an old priest called Zechariah. That's odd in itself because the Old Testaments prophets had long spoken of a coming *kingly* messiah,³⁰ and one therefore might have thought that the story would begin in a palace and with a royal announcement. But that's not what happens.³¹ Luke's story begins then in a religious setting. One could even say that Zechariah and his aging wife, Elizabeth,³² represent the best of the Jewish race, in that Luke tells us that both of them were righteous before God and honorably followed the commandments.³³ Some might think that if they had such a reputation then their lives would be overflowing with God's blessing. But no, they had no children and in those days that was a

²⁴ TJDKIDK, p1.

²⁵ See Matt 1:20; 2:12, 13, 19.

²⁶ Luke 1:11, 26; 2:9. (The angel Gabriel is mentioned twice, a subtle Old Testament connection to Dan 8:16; 9:21.)

²⁷ Luke 1:1–4. I will assume that Theophilus was Luke's patron, although that is not a critical issue here.

²⁸ It seems likely that Luke's readers, including Theophilus, were aware of both Jesus and John the Baptist, so clarifying their identities and roles seems to have been important starting point for Luke. (Note: John the Baptist clearly had a significant following in that his disciples were to be found as far away as Ephesus (in modern-day Turkey); see Acts 19:1–7).

²⁹ See 1 Sam 1–2; see also [34].

³⁰ For example: Jer 33:14–16; Mic 5:2–5a; Isa 9:2, 6–7; 11:1–3a; 61:1–4.

³¹ That was also the supposition of the Magi in Matthew account (Matt 2:1–2) and might have been Theophilus' assumption.

³² Elizabeth was also of a priestly pedigree; she was a descendent of Aaron himself, see Luke 1:5.

³³ Luke 1:6.

seen as a judgement from God, resulting in—as Elizabeth herself puts it—social disgrace.³⁴ And so Luke’s Gospel begins with a strange irony. Nevertheless, although Zechariah and Elizabeth were powerless to conceive a child, they still waited in hope for a miracle baby—and perhaps that was a ridiculous hope given their old age.³⁵ In the same way, the Jews themselves were still waiting in hope for the messiah to come after all these years.

Luke then tells us that one day the angel Gabriel came to Zechariah and announces some amazing news:

“Your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and . . . he will be great in the sight of the Lord. . . . even before his birth *he will be filled with the Holy Spirit*. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, *in the spirit and power of Elijah . . . to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.*”³⁶

That is a stunning proclamation on a number of counts. Not only will they have a child—a son—but the mention of John in terms of the “spirit and power of Elijah” is incredibly powerful. It indicates that that John will be a prophet. But as exciting as that might sound to a priest like Zechariah, the mention of “Elijah” alludes to John being a very special prophet, as discussed in TJIDKIDK.³⁷ And that means this isn’t just a domestic tale of blessing, but good news for all Jews and for the whole world—as Luke will later make clear.³⁸

We can lose sight of this story’s improbability through overfamiliarity. I suggest Luke wanted his readers to be shocked and overwhelmed by the angel’s news and so identify with Zechariah’s reaction. Gabriel’s message seems too good to be true and we, like Zechariah, are understandably skeptical. He asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man, and my wife is well along in years.”³⁹ And because of that incredulity, the angel Gabriel makes Zechariah unable to speak until the time of John’s birth. I suggest that on one level, this may not have been a punishment, as such,⁴⁰ but rather *a sign of promise*: a much-needed confirmation to both Zechariah and others of the reality of this unusual, private encounter. Let’s also not forget that Zechariah’s response was precisely that of Abraham when God told him Sarah would have their miracle son, Isaac.⁴¹ So Luke is again making Old Testament

³⁴ Luke 1:25. This is made evident in Luke’s use of Mary’s song, which links to Hannah and her childlessness; 1 Sam 1–2. In so doing, Luke skillfully edits and adapts his birth narrative sources into the style of the Greek Old Testament (LXX), indicating a *continuation* of God’s action in Israel’s history. (In keeping with this “childlessness as divine judgement” logic, the birth of John could be interpreted as the time of judgement now being over. Note: this notion of childlessness as divine judgement is *not* how we understand things today.)

³⁵ This also connects with Abraham’s wife, Sarah, (Gen 16:1); Rebekah (Gen 25:21), Rachel (Gen 30:1), Samson’s mother (Judg 13:2), and Hannah (1 Sam 1–2). Luke assumes that his readers (including Theophilus) are familiar with the Old Testament and will make these connections.

³⁶ Luke 1:13–17 (italics added). See TJIDKIDK, p13.

³⁷ TJIDKIDK, chapter 3, esp. p13–14; see also Mal 3:1–4; 4:5–6; Isa 40:1–5.

³⁸ Luke hints at this wider salvation in Luke 2:10 and is more explicit in Luke 2:32.

³⁹ Luke 1:18.

⁴⁰ Although, to be fair, that is how Luke portrays it; Luke 1:19–20. It therefore seems more is expected from a priest than of Mary; Luke 1:34.

⁴¹ Gen 17:16–17. (“Isaac” means “he laughs,” which was Abraham’s reaction to God’s news.)

connections for his readers. Abraham and Sarah, and now Zechariah and Elizabeth, had to wait on God to fulfill his promise of sons to aging parents. Perhaps Luke was reminding his readers that the God of the impossible continues to prove true to his word.

What did John do during this time of enforced silence during Elizabeth's pregnancy? We don't know, of course, but he probably reread the scriptures—as well as listened to his wife! Taking the story at face value, searching the holy texts for insight is a plausible thing for a priest to do. After all, an encounter with an angel resulting in real physical consequences would make a sincere Jew look to scripture for wisdom. Luke later tells us that after Zechariah formally named his son "John," he could suddenly speak again, and he immediately blessed God.⁴² The people's reaction though was one of fear, for they also recognized the specialness of John's birth indicated that *God* was at work in this situation and they therefore wondered what John's future might be.⁴³ Luke uses this dramatic story-telling to introduce further theological insights through Zechariah's Spirit-inspired song of proclamation.⁴⁴ I suggest the use of such songs and angelic messages is Luke's prime focus in these stories, and he spends the rest of his Gospel explaining how these divine revelations are fulfilled.

As you know, names often have meaning. Jesus is a variant of Joshua and means "God is salvation." To make sense of Zechariah's song we also need to know that John's name means "God is gracious," Zechariah means "God has remembered," and Elizabeth means "God is my oath."⁴⁵ With these meanings in mind, listen again to parts of Zechariah's prophetic song and hear their echoes; (incidentally, this is something else I didn't know I didn't know):

"Praise the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has visited and *redeemed*⁴⁶ [Jesus]
his people. He has sent us a mighty *Savior*⁴⁷ [Jesus]
from the royal line of his servant David, *just as he promised* [Elizabeth]
through his holy prophets long ago. . . *He has been merciful* [John]
to our ancestors by *remembering* [Zechariah]
his sacred covenant that *he swore with an oath* [Elizabeth]
to our ancestor Abraham⁴⁸ . . . so we can serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness for as long as
we live."⁴⁹

⁴² Luke 1:64.

⁴³ Luke 1:65–66.

⁴⁴ Luke 1:67–79; this song is called the *Benedictus* after its first word in the Latin translation. Some have thought this prophecy of Zechariah was originally a hymn circulating among followers of John the Baptist and/or Jewish Christians. If so, then Luke 1:76–79 may be a Lucan/Christian addition to make it clear that the focus is on Jesus and that John "will go before the Lord to prepare his ways." Both the *Benedictus* and the *Magnificat* entered into the liturgy in the seventh century.

⁴⁵ Or "God is the absolutely faithful one" or "God is the covenant maker."

⁴⁶ I am taking a slight liberty here as the Greek word for "redeem" is not the same as "save/salvation." (Note, however, the names have meaning in Hebrew and Luke's Gospel, like the rest of the New Testament, was written in Greek.) Nevertheless, Joshua/Jesus means "God is salvation or deliverance," and being redeemed means being rescued from bondage/slavery.

⁴⁷ Literally "horn of salvation" (alluding to 1 Sam 2:1 (NET); Hannah's song); see also Ezek 29:21; 1 Sam 2:10; Ps 18:2; 2 Sam 7:8–16.

⁴⁸ See Gen 12:1–3; 26:3.

⁴⁹ Luke 1:68–75 NLT (excerpts, italics added). Note Luke's explicit mention of Abraham here also links with [35].

Notice that thanking God for his son, John, is not the subject of this part of the song. Luke's clearly a skillful writer and his priority is to link Jesus with Israel's history. His proclamation is all about God remembering his covenant with Abraham; this then is a song of praise for God's gracious provision of a mighty deliverer, for keeping his promises, and for showing mercy.⁵⁰

You can then imagine Zechariah looking down at the baby in his arms as he continues with the second part of his song:

“And you, my little son, will be called the *prophet* of the Most High,⁵¹ because *you will prepare the way for the Lord*.⁵² You will tell his people how to find salvation Because of God's tender mercy, the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness⁵³ and in the shadow of death, and to guide us to the path of peace.”⁵⁴

This speech carefully differentiates John from Jesus; John is God's *prophet*; Jesus is God's *Son*.⁵⁵ John prepares the way of the Lord;⁵⁶ it is Jesus who brings God's salvation. Zechariah explicitly makes the further connection that because John has now come, Jesus will soon be coming to replace darkness with light and to replace fear⁵⁷ with peace.

Before we consider the announcement of the birth of Jesus to Mary by the angel Gabriel,⁵⁸ let's pause for some cultural context. Much of medieval and renaissance art portrays Joseph as a very old man, and this has stuck in our imagination.⁵⁹ We in the West rightly find it offensive today when a young teenage woman is married to a man old enough to be her grandfather. However, cultural studies reveal that in the first century, Jewish girls were usually engaged sometime between the ages of 12 and 15, and would be married sometime thereafter,⁶⁰ at 15 or 16, and boys would have been 19 or 20 years old.⁶¹ True, there is much about Mary and Joseph that we simply don't know. What we *do* know is that

⁵⁰ In fact, in-keeping with Jewish expectation, the messiah would rescue them from their *political* oppressors, from “all who hate us”—as Zechariah puts it (Luke 1:71, 74; cf. Acts 1:6). They understood their deliverance from their enemies was so they could worship God in peace and without fear. (How ironic an aspiration, given the ongoing Middle East tensions.)

⁵¹ Luke 1:76a. “Most High” is a polite euphemism that avoids articulating God's personal and holy name, “YHWH.”

⁵² Those words would remind Jews of the prophet Malachi, who prophesied: “I am about to send my messenger, who will clear the way before me” Mal 3:1; see also Isa 40:3–5.

⁵³ See also Isa 9:1–2; 42:7; 49:9–10. Luke's (Jewish) readers would appreciate all these allusions to the Hebrew scriptures.

⁵⁴ Luke 1:76–79, NLT (italics added). This emphasis on *peace* suggests a powerful, implicit critique of other contemporary Jewish hopes for Israel's liberation through violent means, made more vivid when we recall this was written after the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem in 70 CE.

⁵⁵ Compare Luke 1:76 and 1:32.

⁵⁶ Mal 3:1; Isa 40:3.

⁵⁷ Literally, “the shadow of death.” This may have had added significance to Luke's readers in the fear and darkness of the destruction of Jerusalem (70 CE) and the death of Peter (c. 64–68 CE) and Paul (c. 62–68 CE).

⁵⁸ See Luke 1:26–56.

⁵⁹ This is largely based on a late sixth or seventh century Egyptian text, *The History of Joseph the Carpenter*, allegedly written by Jesus and claiming Joseph was 90 years old when he married Mary and 111 when he died. See:

<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0805.htm> .

⁶⁰ This engagement period was typically one year (Culpepper, “Luke.” In *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* 9, edited by Leander E. Keck. Nashville: Abingdon, 1995, p51.)

⁶¹ So says American historian and scholar of early Christianity, Paula Fredriksen, professor emerita of scripture at Boston University, and author of *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*. New York: Vintage Books (2000).

after Jesus is 12 years old,⁶² Joseph isn't mentioned again in the Gospels. The presumption is that he had died sometime before Jesus began his ministry, that is, when Jesus was around 30 years old.⁶³ And given that Joseph was a carpenter and that they lived in Nazareth,⁶⁴ he may well have worked as a skilled construction worker in the nearby thriving Roman town of Sepphoris. Perhaps he died from an industrial accident or from an illness; we just don't know—and speculation is pointless. What we do know is that Mary, like many women, must have had a hard life. At the time of their wedding, they were poor with an income that only covered their basic needs.⁶⁵ We also know Mary had other children; Mark tells us she had four other sons—James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas—and at least two daughters.⁶⁶ Yes, a hard life of parenting. We can reasonably guess that she was widowed in her 30s or early 40s. And according to the 4th gospel,⁶⁷ Mary witnessed the death of her first-born son while in her late 40s. Crucifixion was not only a horrific way to die, it also brought to Mary the shame of having a criminal son.

I mentioned earlier of the social humiliation that Elizabeth experienced by being childless. Yet the birth of John the Baptist replaced that shame with honor, for he grew up to be a revered prophet. Luke joins Elizabeth's and Mary's stories together, perhaps linking their perceived social disgrace, given that Mary was pregnant but not yet married to Joseph.⁶⁸ What we do know from the four Gospels is that there was some scandal linked to the birth of Jesus,⁶⁹ and it appears the Gospel writers were aware of the gossip. Luke and Matthew's birth narratives of Jesus provide some context to the rumors that their readers may have heard.⁷⁰ However much Mary's family may have wanted to hush up the pregnancy, Luke tells us that Mary had a true friend in Elizabeth—regardless of differences in their ages and social status. Luke reports Elizabeth's affirmation to Mary when they first meet: "*Blessed* are you among women and *blessed* is the child you will bear!"⁷¹ Any stories casting aspersions on Mary and on the birth circumstances of Jesus are countered by Elizabeth's staunch defense of her relative. Elizabeth, who herself had long experience of gossip and disgrace, is unconcerned by Mary's social predicament. Instead of being tainted by association with the family scandal, Elizabeth responds, "Why am I so *favored* that the mother of my Lord should come to [visit] me?"⁷² In short, Luke presents Mary as

⁶² See Luke 2:41–52.

⁶³ Luke 3:23.

⁶⁴ Matt 13:54–55; Mark 6:3. (Joseph and Mary lived in Nazareth: Luke 1:26; 2:39.)

⁶⁵ See Luke 2:24; Lev 12:8, i.e., they lived on subsistence income.

⁶⁶ See Mark 6:3; (cf. Matt 13:55–56; John 2:12; Gal 1:19; we don't know if Mary remarried, see [67].)

⁶⁷ See John 19:25–27; there, Jesus also tells John to take care of Mary, as her protector—perhaps suggesting Mary was still a widow.

⁶⁸ See Luke 2:5.

⁶⁹ See TJIDKIDK, p2–3. Some scholars treat John 8:41; 9:29 as a veiled reference to Christ's birth. Mark 6:3 describes Jesus as the "son of Mary" and this appears to be somewhat derogatory, for a man was not regarded as his mother's son in Jewish usage unless an insult was intended (cf. Judg 11:1–2).

⁷⁰ The story of the virgin birth is not mentioned in Mark's or John's Gospels. See also TJIDKIDK, chapter 1, footnote [31].

⁷¹ Luke 1:42–45 (italic added). Luke presents this as Holy Spirit inspired speech, Luke 1:41.

⁷² Luke 1:43 (italic added); Elizabeth continues: "Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!" (v45). The phrase "mother of *my Lord*" is clearly a (later) Christian title for Mary, the mother of *Jesus*; see TJIDKIDK, p33–34. (Recall too the angel Gabriel's opening message to Mary was: "Greetings, you who are highly *favored*! The Lord (or LORD, i.e., God) is with you" (Luke 1:28, 30; italic added).)

someone who was obedient to God's call on her life,⁷³ regardless of the potential for scandal or humiliation.

Why mention all this? Well, let me (again) assure you I intend *no* disrespect toward Mary, but we need some honesty in relating her story. Church tradition, perhaps in response to early rumors, has tried to venerate Mary and in the process robbed her of her humanity. She has been portrayed as a perpetual virgin—so denying that Jesus had siblings, as having lived a sinless life, and even of a direct assumption or elevation to be with God. While Protestants don't believe this, we are *all* influenced by Mary's image of perfection, and this saintly portrayal is implied in many a Christmas card. The biblical evidence is that Mary was indeed special, in that she was favored by God for a specific role in salvation history and therefore someone rightly to be honored. Nevertheless, she was fully human, and she had a tough life. She experienced all the worries of being a parent,⁷⁴ exacerbated by early widowhood and being a single mom. If church history's portrayal of Mary and Elizabeth is idealized and sentimentalized, then we have been robbed of potential role models of strong women in the Bible. And we also need to be reminded again and again, that faithfully following God does not guarantee that life will be a bed of roses.

Having said that, life also has wonderful moments of affirmation and joy. And because none of us know the future, we need to "treasure those moments in our hearts," something that Luke tells us twice that Mary herself did.⁷⁵ When Mary meets Elizabeth and they share their exciting news of their pregnancies, Mary responds with a joyful song of praise, known traditionally as the *Magnificat*.⁷⁶ We will explore its contents briefly in a moment, but what is perhaps odd is Mary's joy is not so much about herself but about what God is about to do through her life and that of Elizabeth, and through their respective sons. Many contemporary mothers on hearing this may be annoyed; it's *not* very feminist; it sounds like just more self-sacrifice for the family. The words of Mary's song can also sound super-spiritual, so fostering that stereotypical image of Mary's piety. Consequently—and despite the important differences in cultural situations and expectations between then and now—instead of Mary's life experience being a potential point of connection, we are perhaps turned off by her apparent religious exuberance.

I suggest, however, that we are in grave danger of making a serious category mistake here. Luke is using a well-established and widely understood mode of writing to communicate something important to his readers through words he places on the speaker's lips in their speeches and songs.⁷⁷ Teenage Mary is *not*, on top of everything else, now being introduced as a brilliant poet and songwriter. And neither would Mary be an Old Testament scholar, yet there are numerous references to the psalms and the prophets in her song. No, through this writing convention, Luke is interpreting the *meaning* of events for his readers, just as he did in Zechariah's song. And yes, that meaning is a cause for great celebration

⁷³ See Luke 1:38, 45.

⁷⁴ See: Luke 2:41–52; Mark 3:31–35; Matt 12:46–50; Luke 8:19–21.

⁷⁵ Luke 2:19, 51. Those words are evidently part of the early oral Christian tradition of which Luke knew.

⁷⁶ Luke 1:46–55. The term *Magnificat* is the first words of the song in Latin: "[My soul] *magnifies* [the Lord/LORD]".

⁷⁷ This is evident not just in the speeches of Elizabeth, Mary, Zechariah, and Simeon, but in the sermons of Peter, Paul, and Stephen in Acts.

and joy! As mentioned earlier, Luke is also stylistically paralleling the song of Hannah, the mother of Samuel. Luke is establishing for his readers that Mary is to be considered as another one of Israel's great women.

Mary bursts into joyful song, singing:

“My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name.”⁷⁸

Luke is stressing that Mary's reputation for all time is as one truly blessed or honored by God and not as one steeped in social shame or suspicion or guilt. Jesus later said, “There are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last.”⁷⁹ Mary is one of those of the last and the least who is honored by her faithfulness to God. That shocking role reversal is a feature of the kingdom of God, as presented in the Beatitudes.⁸⁰ Hear again those words from Luke's account and apply them to Mary's situation:

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in God's kingdom.”⁸¹

Of course, these blessings don't only apply to Mary, but they are modelled by her behavior, and they point to a long-held Jewish hope being realized when the messiah comes. And Luke, through Mary's song, then continues to foreshadow the *kind* of person Mary's son will become.⁸² And that's a source of joy for all people, as the angel later told the shepherds.⁸³

One of the things Luke presents through the stories of Mary, Elizabeth, and Zechariah is God's bigger picture. Throughout the rest of his Gospel, Luke will flesh out that perspective in detail for his readers. Luke's focus is often on *ordinary* people, like Mary and Joseph, and I suggest that their life stories can therefore be a source of inspiration, comfort, and hope, and which in turn can lead us to better grasp the Jesus story as a whole. The God who lifts up the humble and the faithful is evidently not concerned about scandal. In fact, the *ultimate* scandal is that a holy God would enter into our human life with all its vice, violence, and corruption. Rather than abandoning us to the consequences of our own sinfulness and folly, God has sent us Jesus as our deliverer and *that's* the good news the angel Gabriel announced to Mary.

⁷⁸ Luke 1:46–49. The word “servant” needs to be linked to Luke 1:38; also compare Luke 1:46 with 1 Sam 2:1.

⁷⁹ See Luke 13:30; Matt 19:30; 20:16; Mark 10:31.

⁸⁰ See TJIDKIDK, p59.

⁸¹ Luke 6:20–23 (cf. Matt 5:3–12; Luke 1:50–56). Note the sense of irony and a passion for social justice.

⁸² Cf. Luke 1: 32–33, 50–55 and Luke 4:18–21.

⁸³ Luke 2:10–12.

Luke 2

Luke presumably mentions Caesar Augustus and Herod the Great at the beginning of his Gospel because he wants his readers to know that the birth of Jesus didn't happen "a long time ago in a land far, far away," but the event occurred in Judea while these *particular* leaders were in power.⁸⁴ Luke also stresses that Jesus was born in a *particular* place, in Bethlehem in Judea, known locally as the "city of David." Why is that important? Although Luke doesn't say it explicitly,⁸⁵ he clearly knew there was an oracle by the prophet Micah that the messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Luke also knew that Jesus was raised in Nazareth and so he provides a somewhat dubious rationale⁸⁶ as to why Joseph and Mary must travel to Bethlehem while she is heavily pregnant.⁸⁷ (Matthew has *no* such journey to Bethlehem; Joseph and Mary already lived there.⁸⁸) Nevertheless, Luke uses this journey to again stress the messianic connection by pointing out that Joseph is a direct descendant of King David. Incidentally, Luke doesn't mention Mary traveling on a donkey, although it's possible. (The addition of a donkey comes from a fanciful story written about a century later.⁸⁹) Moreover, Luke has no urgency of the baby being born on the night they arrived; the baby happened to be born sometime while they were in Bethlehem.⁹⁰ As mentioned earlier concerning the age of Joseph, we have all been influenced by artistic portrayals of the birth of Jesus, including Christmas pageants with their stereotypical inn-keepers' all saying: "There's *no* room"! Jesus wasn't born in a stable or a barn, but in a home. And that might surprise you, so allow me to expand on this briefly.

We must remember that, culturally speaking, hospitality was both a common decency and a religious obligation. A pregnant woman would therefore receive priority care because the alternative social shame would be unthinkable. Moreover, Joseph—an honored, male descendent of King David—would likely have some influence in Bethlehem. It's also possible he had relatives there who could provide

⁸⁴ Luke mentions Caesar Augustus (who ruled from 27 BCE to 14 CE) in Luke 2:1 and Herod the Great (who ruled from 37 to 4 BCE) in Luke 1:5; (see also Matt 2:1). However, Quirinius was governor of Syria only from 6 to 12 CE, so there is an inconsistency/error here—long appreciated by scholars. Moreover, an *empire-wide* census where you had to travel to your birth town would cause utter chaos and so is implausible. In fact, the census practice was to simply register in the town where you lived and was for taxation purposes—and could even lead to violence (Acts 5:37). Because Luke knew Jesus was raised in Nazareth (in Galilee), he creates this trip to Bethlehem (in Judea, 80 miles way) to stress the *Davidic* connection. (Note: Periodically someone will grab the news headlines by saying there's no evidence outside of the Bible that Jesus ever existed. This is simply not true; the evidence may be sparse, but no serious scholar doubts Jesus was an historical figure.)

⁸⁵ Matthew, however, does make an explicit connection by citing Mic 5:2 in Matt 2:6—and such citations are frequent and a feature of Matthew's Gospel; see TJIDKIDK, chapter 1, footnote [17]. Luke often subtly *alludes* to Old Testament texts, as in the case of Hannah's song in Luke 1, and this makes his actual citations more note-worthy (e.g., Luke 3:4–6; 4:17–19.)

⁸⁶ See [84]. Moreover, is it really necessary that a heavily pregnant Mary accompany Joseph for the purposes of a census?

⁸⁷ Luke 2:2–4; of course, Luke would have seen this edict as providential.

⁸⁸ See Matt 2:1. Only after the "escape to Egypt" and the later death of King Herod, do Joseph, Mary, and the family move to live in Nazareth; see Matt 2:22–23. (See also TJIDKIDK, chapter 1, footnote [2].)

⁸⁹ The *Gospel* (or *protoevangelium*) of James introduces the donkey (17:1, 2), this is a late 2nd century apocryphal text. Furthermore, this story has Jesus being born in a cave (18:1) on the way; there's also a midwife (19:1)! See: <https://www.gospels.net/infancyjames>.

⁹⁰ Luke 2:6.

some sort of accommodation. The difficulty arises from the use of the word “inn,”⁹¹ which to us means a country hotel. And that meaning is appropriate in the parable of the good Samaritan, who you will remember put the injured man in an inn and pays for his care.⁹² But a different Greek word is used in the Bethlehem story and would refer to the guest room in the relatives’ house.⁹³ However, Luke says that this room was filled beyond capacity with all the other visitors who had journeyed to Bethlehem for the census. Just because the guest room was full doesn’t mean that Jesus was born in a barn or stable at the end of the garden! The appropriate inference is that the hosts invited them to stay in their own family room and the manger—or feeding trough—was a standard part of that room, because the animals also stayed in the house overnight for security (see Fig. 1). Consequently, the Christmas pageants get it right about the farmyard smell! Nevertheless, Mary and Joseph would have been treated as honored guests, and social etiquette would demand they be well cared for. Given all the specifics in chapter 1, what’s perhaps surprising is Luke’s lack of detail in describing the actual birth of Jesus.⁹⁴ And that leads us to look again to ascertain Luke’s emphasis in his narrative, namely the angels and the shepherds.

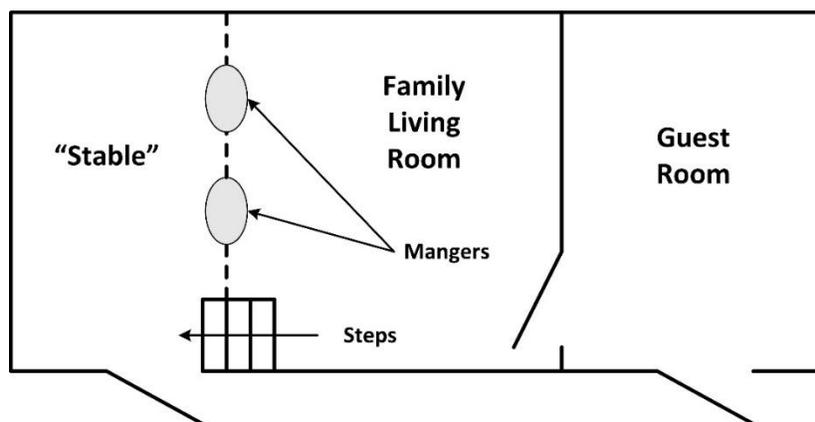


Figure 1: A Schematic Plan View of 1st Century Palestinian Rural Home.

This is Luke’s third mention of an angelic visitation, this time to shepherds. The unnamed angel said to them:

“Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy *for all the people*: to you is born *this day* in the city of David *a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord*. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger.”⁹⁵

⁹¹ See Luke 2:7 (NRSV, NET).

⁹² Luke 10:25–37, esp. 34–35.

⁹³ Luke 2:7 (NIV). The same Greek word is used for the upper room used in the Last Supper/Passover meal, Luke 22:7–13. See also Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity (2008), chapter 1.

⁹⁴ See Luke 2:6–7. (For example, Luke doesn’t mention Mary and Joseph’s emotions over the birth of Jesus.)

⁹⁵ Luke 2:10–12, NRSV/NET (italics added). (cf. “this day” with “in those days” (Luke 2:1); God’s new day has arrived.)

As mentioned earlier, the function of an angelic message is to inform us of something we could never figure out for ourselves; it's a divine revelation.⁹⁶ What do we learn? First, this is good news—so there's no need to be fearful. It's news that will bring great joy to *everybody!*⁹⁷ A baby has been born; *where?* In Bethlehem—the city of David; *who?* A Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord—three titles⁹⁸ that tersely explains the reason for the joy, and the rest of Luke's Gospel will explain those names and why it's good news for the whole world. And there's an important *sign*, which was possibly one of comfort and reassurance to the shepherds. The shepherds could have been intimidated by the angel's news, thinking that a kingly messiah or Lord would be well outside of their social league. Yet the angel said, "You will find a child wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger," and that tells them this child has been wrapped in the normal way of any rural baby, and he is to be found in an animal's feeding trough—not a royal palace. After the angels have burst into song and finally departed, the shepherds process the information they have been told. It's certainly a good news message for them because they were "outsiders," since being a shepherd was a despised occupation at the time. They were seen as shifty, dishonest people who graze their flocks in other people's lands. Moreover, they were ritually unclean simply because their jobs made it virtually impossible for them to observe the Jewish purity regulations. It was to such marginalized shepherds, which included girls, that God's message first came, and that's a hint as to the *kind* of people who would ultimately welcome Jesus and his message.⁹⁹ Moreover, Luke's reference to shepherds not only alludes to King David, who was a shepherd in his youth, but this is another concrete example of God "lifting up the lowly," as Mary sang in the Magnificat.¹⁰⁰

Luke's narrative continues: the shepherds "hurried off and located Mary and Joseph, and found the baby lying in the feeding trough."¹⁰¹ Now we might not be impressed by that simple fact, but Luke's point is that the angel gave the shepherds a *sign*, and that sign *was fulfilled* in that it led them directly to baby Jesus. If that *lesser* thing was proved to be true, then the *greater* is also true—implies Luke—that this child will grow up to be the Savior of the World, the Messiah, the Lord. And that was a logical argument that people understood and respected in those days.¹⁰² I freely admit we likely won't find this line of reasoning persuasive today. But that's not *my* point; this is *not* Christian apologetics, as such, i.e., defending the historical truth of Luke's depiction of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus. No, the point here is to recognize *Luke's* own agenda.

I have two further brief observations. First, the chapter begins with Caesar Augustus who was the Roman emperor known to have brought peace (*Pax Romana*)¹⁰³ throughout the empire by ending its

⁹⁶ See TJIDKIDK, p9.

⁹⁷ The *Pax Romana* was good news to the wealthy, powerful elite but perhaps not so such for the vast majority of people.

⁹⁸ See also TJIDKIDK, chapter 4 for a discussion on Messiah and Lord.

⁹⁹ See Luke 4:16–19 where Luke's announcement of Jesus' style of ministry makes this explicit. This upside-down role reversal of the kingdom of God is a key theme for Luke, who himself—being a non-Jew—was also an outsider.

¹⁰⁰ Luke 1:52.

¹⁰¹ Luke 2:16, NTE.

¹⁰² This *assurance* connects with Luke 1:4, (and "assurance" is a better translation than "truth"; NRSV), and the whole of Luke 1.

¹⁰³ This peace lasted for about 200 years.

bitter civil wars. Consequently, people said that Augustus was the Savior of the world—he was its King and its Lord. His birth was celebrated as a gift from the gods, and he too was to be worshiped as a divine being. Yet his so-called “peace” was oppressive and brutally enforced. Luke contrasts this reality with the pre-dawn of God’s new kingdom, celebrated by the choir of angels, singing “Glory to God in the highest, and *peace upon earth among those in his favor.*”¹⁰⁴ Jesus, God’s Messiah, the coming Savior of the World is bringing a different kind of peace, one achieved non-violently by means of servanthood and suffering; one that is inter-relational and based on love of God and neighbor. It is Jesus who is the true Lord of all, *not* Caesar, implies Luke, and by the time we reach the end of his second volume—the book of Acts—he will have made his case.

Second, Luke mentions the word manger—or feed trough—*three* times,¹⁰⁵ and given his meagre details of the birth of Jesus, that’s surely significant. Scholars suggest this is an allusion to Isaiah 1:3, which says: “An ox recognizes its owner, a donkey recognizes its master’s manger; but Israel does not recognize me, my people do not understand.”¹⁰⁶ Most people in Luke’s day did *not* understand, and so he writes his Gospel to persuasively make the case. Both Luke and Matthew¹⁰⁷ say we have to be alert to God’s presence in unexpected places.

¹⁰⁴ Luke 2:14 (italics added). Luke makes a further parallel between Jesus and Caesar Augustus, since it was customary in the Roman empire for poets and orators to declare peace and prosperity at the birth of one who was to become emperor. In this case, of course, the angels are praising *God*, not Caesar. Luke uses that familiar literary pattern to proclaim the “good news”—the gospel—of joy and peace to occasion of the birth of Jesus, who is *not* an emperor, but is called Savior, Christ, and Lord. Incidentally, the previous usage of “Lord” in Luke is synonymous with God. Perhaps this is feature of Luke’s Christology and parallels Matthew’s “Immanuel” or “God with us” (Matt 1:23), and John’s “Word made flesh” (John 1:14).

¹⁰⁵ Luke 2:7, 12, 16.

¹⁰⁶ See also John 1:10–13. The common question why the Jews in general did not recognize Jesus as their messiah is therefore considered and addressed by the Gospel writers.

¹⁰⁷ See Matt 2:1–12.

Chapter 2 The Baptism of Jesus

1. Have you heard of “Epiphany” before? Does your church acknowledge or celebrate this season in the Church calendar? In addition to the baptism of Jesus, the visit of the wise men (Magi) from the East¹⁰⁸ is celebrated early in the New Year—not everything we celebrate at Christmas happened at Christmas.¹⁰⁹
2. In TJDKIDK, I carefully differentiated the precise wording of Mark’s account of Jesus’ baptism with that of Matthew, highlighting some subtle—though significant—differences.¹¹⁰ Had you noticed or considered these discrepancies before? What do you make of them? How does this influence or inform your understanding of the divine “inspiration of scripture”?¹¹¹ (Bringing one’s assumptions on this complex matter to the surface can be a revealing epiphany. If that proves to have been true for you, it will likely enhance your further reading and study of the Bible.)
3. I stated: “The importance of *authority* is a general theme within the Gospels—indeed, within the whole of the New Testament.”¹¹² What do you think of this notion?

To further help make the case, let’s consider Paul. He sees the need to establish or legitimize his authority in 1 Corinthians because (a) it has been challenged¹¹³ and (b) because he seeks to robustly correct the internal issues within the assembly that have come to his attention.¹¹⁴ The authority of the twelve apostles is apparently not in doubt at Corinth,¹¹⁵ but Paul is also eager to link his own calling with the risen Christ.¹¹⁶ Moreover, Paul continues to establish his authority over the Corinthian assembly by emphasizing his *preeminence*. One of the issues at Corinth is disunity caused, in part, by followings of other leaders, most notably Apollos.¹¹⁷ Apollos was probably a charismatic, well-educated, enthusiastic, and eloquent speaker.¹¹⁸ Such an individual would be impressive and perceived to be full of wisdom, something highly valued in Corinth.¹¹⁹ While Paul writes diplomatically about Apollos,¹²⁰ he

¹⁰⁸ See Matt 2:1–12. (As you consider that story, what mystery is being revealed?)

¹⁰⁹ In Matt 2:16, Herod (allegedly) ordered the killing of all the children in Bethlehem under two years old; this echoes the birth story of Moses (see Exod 1:15–2:10), so making parallels between the two infants. Given the specified age of two, it appears some time has elapsed since Jesus was born.

¹¹⁰ TJDKIDK, p11: in particular, concerning the *meaning* of John’s baptism: cf. repentance and forgiveness.

¹¹¹ See also the discussion on hermeneutics in the *Introduction* above and footnote [15].

¹¹² TJDKIDK, p12. I later mention that underlying the confrontation between Jesus and the religious leaders—and, later, at his trial(s)—is really the issue of authority (see TJDKIDK, p26).

¹¹³ See 1 Cor 3:1–4, 5–15; 4:1–20; 9; 15:8–10.

¹¹⁴ See 1 Cor 1:11, 7:1.

¹¹⁵ See 1 Cor 15:5.

¹¹⁶ See 1 Cor 9:1; 15:8. (See also 1 Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1; Rom 1:1.)

¹¹⁷ See 1 Cor 1:12; 3:4–6; 4:6 and R. A. Horsley, *1 Corinthians*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press (1998), 35.

¹¹⁸ See 1 Cor 1:17; 2:1, 4–5; Acts 18:24–28.

¹¹⁹ Evident from the Paul’s emphasis on wisdom in 1 Cor 1–2.

¹²⁰ See 1 Cor 3:5–9.

also makes his own primacy clear: “I *planted*, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.”¹²¹ He then changes the metaphor: “like a *skilled master builder* I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. . .”¹²² The implication is clear: while the builder gets appropriate credit, the one who lays the foundation is worthy of even more merit. In conclusion, once we are sensitized to the issue of authority, the easier it is to recognize in other New Testament documents and in the discourses of Jesus.

4. The authority of John the Baptist is not in doubt within the New Testament, but where it comes from can seem a bit confusing—is it from God or the people (or both)? What do you think? The connection with Elijah seems very important to the Gospel writers;¹²³ what do you think of that Old Testament link?

5. What does the concept of “repentance” mean to you?

The notion of a U-turn may sound like a once in a lifetime event; it rarely is. One’s journey of faith often has multiple U-turns. One reflective question to consider: As you—and others who know you well—look back over your life, is there evidence of character development and personal behavior that resonate with that of Jesus? Put differently, is there more love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control being exhibited?¹²⁴ Life has its ups and downs, and life events can destabilize us, but if the overall trend is of more Christ-like behavior then we are growing in the faith. Some do this at a faster pace than others—so don’t be tempted to compare yourself with others!¹²⁵ Our role is simply to be faithful.

6. The Gospel writers, each in their own way, carefully differentiate the roles and identities of Jesus and John the Baptist for their readers. Why not read John 1:6–9, 15, 19–34. How does the author of the 4th Gospel¹²⁶ distinguish between the *roles* of Jesus and John the Baptist? What *words* does the author use, and how does his language compare with that of the other Gospels?

7. What does the word “baptism” mean to you? Is it something that you view positively, negatively, or perhaps as an irrelevance? (Note that Christian baptism is subtly different from John’s baptism; see Appendix below.)

8. The details of what happens following Jesus’ baptism are remarkable: the heaven’s being “ripped open,” the descending of the Holy Spirit like a dove, and the divine voice’s message. What do

¹²¹ 1 Cor 3:6. A further example of Paul asserting his primacy is in 1 Cor 12:28.

¹²² 1 Cor 3:10. Paul’s rhetorical skills are also evident, a sign of his wisdom and authority to those so receptive.

¹²³ See TJDKIDK, p14, footnote [14]. I confess that John 1:21 is intriguing. However, the key issue is not *who* John the Baptist thought *he* was, but *who*—with the benefit of hindsight—think did *the people* (including the Gospel writers) think John was.

¹²⁴ These qualities are called the fruit of the Holy Spirit and are a sign of God’s presence (see Gal 5:22–23).

¹²⁵ See John 21:21–22.

¹²⁶ Note: the 4th Gospel was *not* written by John the Baptist.

you think of that description? Can you see that it also functions as a “call narrative” for Jesus, so providing him with authority in the spirit of an Old Testament prophet?¹²⁷

9. I wrote: “We have no idea if Jesus himself knew of his identity [e.g., as Savior or Messiah] at the time.”¹²⁸ Some might think that an odd statement, so please allow me to clarify.

As I later mention in TJIDKIDK on p18, “We cannot really answer the question, ‘Who did Jesus think he was?’ That is because Jesus didn’t leave any authored documents from which to base a response.” The gospel of Jesus is—it’s fair to say—a singular message. Yet we have four different accounts of that “good news” provided by the authors of what we call the four Gospels. Each Gospel writer presents Jesus in their own way.¹²⁹ They are therefore *interpreters* of events for their readers, carefully selecting from the material available to them in order to make their case. Notwithstanding the differences in wording, styles, tones, and emphases, there is sufficient agreement in their accounts to paint a meaningful—and I would say reliable and convincing—picture of the life of Jesus: his teachings, actions, death, and resurrection. It’s the Gospel writers themselves—indeed, all the New Testament writers—who speak with conviction and passion of the Jesus they came to call by various titles, including Messiah and Lord.¹³⁰ The consistency amongst the Gospels in the use of those titles show how the authors—and the communities they represent, the broader early church—came to understand the *identity* of Jesus. We therefore need to be careful in psychoanalyzing the words Jesus reportedly said about himself, because we may be evaluating the authors of the Gospels instead. This discussion is not intended to undermine the Gospel accounts, rather just to urge some prudent caution in over-analyzing their contents.¹³¹ We also need to be mindful of the *way* we read or study the texts, in that perhaps we are attempting to prove something or addressing some question *we* are asking, rather than trying to understand the agenda and issues *the author* is considering. It also goes without saying, the first century Greco-Roman world in which Jesus lived was very different from our own.

¹²⁷ See TJIDKIDK, p16, footnote [24].

¹²⁸ TJIDKIDK, p15.

¹²⁹ See TJIDKIDK, p36 and footnote [1].

¹³⁰ See TJIDKIDK chapter 4 for a brief introduction to a selection of those titles.

¹³¹ We also need to be cautious of the quest some today have for *certainty*, even introducing modern terms—like infallibility and inerrant—to bolster their own agendas. However, Paul reminds us, “We walk by faith, not by sight.” (2 Cor 5:7).

Chapter 3 The Temptation of Jesus

1. I often hear people say that God is testing them or, worse, God is punishing them for something they have done. What do you think? Do you think that God is a disciplinary deity and acts in such punitive ways? Why—or why not?

The “God of the Bible” is the God as *perceived* by the authors—in the case of the Old Testament, written and edited over many centuries. People of faith certainly believe that God has revealed Godself through the divine’s relationship with their community and through God’s acts in history (e.g., creation, the exodus from Egypt, the Jewish covenant, the Babylonian exile). Moreover, Christians believe that God’s nature is supremely revealed in Jesus the Messiah, God’s Son.¹³² Nevertheless, God’s Spirit is still active in the world revealing Godself to every generation. Our understanding of God therefore changes throughout history and even during one’s lifetime. How the early church understood God’s character in the story of the devil’s temptation of Jesus may not be exactly how we view it today. We need to be at least open to that possibility.

Furthermore, some people think that God “allows” or “permits” our sufferings and trials. Others, like me, find that view of God’s action most troublesome. What God can and cannot do—or does and doesn’t do—in the world comes under the theological umbrella of “divine action” or providence. And there are various Christian views on this topic.¹³³ In thinking about the temptation account, what are *your* underlying assumptions or control beliefs concerning God’s *nature* and *how* God works in the world? Moreover, what are your views on the existence and capabilities of Satan?¹³⁴ It’s good to be self-aware of these matters as we approach this (and other) text(s).

2. How do you view the temptation story? What is your instinctive reaction to it? Discuss.

I have stated that this account of the temptation of Jesus is really a Jewish trial or testing story, one that establishes a person’s character or reveals their integrity—in this case, establishing/revealing what *kind* of messiah Jesus will be. As such, it can be compared to the testing of the people of Israel in the wilderness and the story of Job. This being the case, this narrative also aligns with Jewish wisdom literature (e.g., Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job), and the outcome is one that reveals Jesus as a *wise* person, and therefore part of that ancient wisdom tradition. The story’s context and genre are important to recognize, else we may shoot off on a tangent.

¹³² See TJDKIDK, chapters 4, 7, 8.

¹³³ See, for example: Jowers, Dennis W., ed. *Providence: Four Views*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011; Terrance Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000.

¹³⁴ In the context of the story, did Satan *already* know that Jesus was the Messiah or was the devil trying to ascertain whether he was? (I also encourage you to read Reddish, *Does God Always Get What God Wants?* Cascade, 2018, appendix I, “Is Satan Real?”)

In the context of messiahship, those three tests seem very pertinent. The triplet of money, sex, and power¹³⁵ are often mentioned today in relation to our own temptations, to which we can obviously add pride or hubris. If such things are our prime motivators—whether consciously or subconsciously—then they become idolatrous powers, and we can become captivated by them. These temptations are usually understood to be probing human weakness and are *internal* in origin, in contrast to the story of Adam and Eve and the (external) serpent.¹³⁶ That story of the Fall and this account of the devil’s testing of Jesus seem to be paralleled in Paul’s description of Jesus as the second Adam.¹³⁷ Consequently, we can’t consider this account of the temptation of Jesus without seeing these crucial Old Testament connections.¹³⁸ If we simply treat this as a “how to overcome temptation” story, we will have completely missed the point.

3. We all experience temptations in life. Now that we better understand the context and meaning of this story of Jesus, how might it help or influence us—if at all—in addressing the struggles and temptations we face today? Discuss.

4. What is your emotional reaction to Heb 4:14–16—especially 15?¹³⁹ Explain your response.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says: “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”¹⁴⁰ This apparent command is daunting, burdensome, guilt-inducing, and . . . impossible. Christians—especially young, idealistic, passionate Jesus-followers—can be *crushed* by this verse. What are we to make of it?

It’s always dangerous to extract a verse from its context. I suggest it’s best to see this verse as a *summary statement* from the sermon rhetoric of Matt 5:43–48, where Jesus advocates for “loving (even) our enemies.”¹⁴¹ God’s love is impartial; divine providence within nature—i.e., supplying sunshine and rain—does *not* depend on whether a person is faithful to God or not. As I write later in chapter 6: if we want to belong to God’s kingdom, we are to do the same *kinds* of things God does. We are to love, reconcile, and forgive. And we are to be faithful, persistent, honest, generous, trusting, and discerning—for those are God’s traits.¹⁴² Luke’s version summarizes it this way: “Be merciful, just as

¹³⁵ Alternatively, affluence, influence, and pleasure.

¹³⁶ See Gen 3.

¹³⁷ See Rom 5:12–19; 1 Cor 15:21–22. This is a complex analogy, however Jesus’ faithfulness under trial is contrasted with Adam’s faithlessness, his lack of trust in God. Moreover, this connection with Adam implies *all* humankind, not just Jews.

¹³⁸ The principal link being Deut 8:2 (see TJKIDK, p22) and Israel’s trials in the wilderness, and their lack of faithfulness. Some scholars also see Jesus’ faithfulness (even to death on a cross) and his identity as Messiah to signify Jesus is representative of the New Israel, the new community of God’s people. (cf. second Adam in [137].)

¹³⁹ see TJKIDK, p25–26.

¹⁴⁰ Matt 5:48. (cf. Lev 11:44a; 19:2; these summary statements of the mosaic law echo these words of Jesus.)

¹⁴¹ cf. Luke 6:27–36; Lev 24:22.

¹⁴² See also TJKIDK, p64–65.

your Father is merciful.”¹⁴³ This saying summarizes *how* we are to love and *why* we are to love.¹⁴⁴ We are to love completely, unreservedly, maturely—as does God—but not foolishly or unwisely.

That being the case, the earlier use of “perfect” does not—thankfully—denote “sinless,” for we are fallible human beings. Compare 1 John 1:8–10 with Heb 4:14–16 and in light of those promises, let’s replace guilt feelings with divine grace, and experience forgiveness and freedom through what Jesus accomplished.

5. Do you think that those tests or temptations were truly *real* for Jesus—i.e., that he could have succumbed to at least one of them?¹⁴⁵ For readers who believe in the divinity of Jesus, does this story trouble you? After all, *if* Jesus *couldn’t* sin by virtue of his divinity, what’s the point of the story?

I suggest that this illustrates the kinds of difficulties we can encounter when we read back *into* the text aspects of later theology—even orthodox theology, such as the Trinity.¹⁴⁶ We need not be troubled by this kind of thing if we acknowledge that:

- (a) Although we are part of a faith tradition that believes the biblical authors were divinely inspired,
- (b) The same inspirational Holy Spirit continues to speak today to the broad community of faith, and to individuals.¹⁴⁷
- (c) That means we can authentically view the Bible differently, say through a trinitarian lens, while recognizing that this later theological perspective will, in places, be inconsistent with how the biblical authors portrayed the nature of God.

6. Referring back to the theme of *authority* (see chapter 2), I suggested that Jesus’ victory over the devil (in faithfully enduring these three tests) resulted in him gaining authority over Satan, thereby restraining him—as demonstrated by Jesus’ later exorcisms.¹⁴⁸ What do you think of this insight?

¹⁴³ Luke 27:36.

¹⁴⁴ cf. Rom 13:8; Gal 5:14; Jas 2:8–9; John 13:35.

¹⁴⁵ See TJKIDK, p25–26, including footnote [33].

¹⁴⁶ This will be discussed more in chapter 8.

¹⁴⁷ We need wise discernment and sensitivity when attributing anything to the Holy Spirit because it is a claim of undeniable (divine) authority. This is where a community’s affirmation is vitally important, yet even having that support is no guarantee because we are fallible and culturally “located,” i.e., inevitably influenced by our history, education, values, etc. (This is a complex and ongoing matter; church history is littered with examples of division over such claims!)

¹⁴⁸ See TJKIDK, p26–27, including footnote [36].

Chapter 4 The Titles of Jesus

1. Who do *you* think Jesus is? (Why not consider some of the quotes by famous individuals at the beginning of *The Jesus I Didn't Know I Didn't Know*. Which ones resonated with you?)

As mentioned earlier, the Gospel writers use various titles for Jesus that indicate to their readers who *they* think Jesus is. Their views, and those of their Christian communities, were developed over time—decades in fact—as they processed their experience of Jesus in light of his resurrection. Christians believe that the Holy Spirit was part of that process. We also know from their accounts that many Jews rejected the early church's conclusion that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. Consequently, a feature of the authors' agendas was to formulate their Gospels so as to include curious skeptics and sympathetic non-Jews who, upon reflection, might be persuaded by their rhetoric. The titles they use for Jesus therefore point to his identity, which is further supported by his teaching and actions.¹⁴⁹

Messiah

2. What does the word “messiah” mean to you? How important is this title of Jesus to you?

People sometimes ask me why I often say, “Jesus the Messiah,” rather than just “Jesus Christ.” In reply, I suggest that we—through familiarity—fail to appreciate the profound meaning of “Christ,” something that becomes more apparent in the deliberate use of Jesus the Messiah (or Jesus *the* Christ). Moreover, Christ is a New Testament (Greek) word, whereas messiah is used in the Old Testament, and so using the title messiah reminds us of the theological continuity within the Bible.¹⁵⁰ In their different ways, all the New Testament authors stress this link. Jesus does not enter the historical stage, so to speak, with no prior context. Christians believe he is the fulfillment of Jewish hopes, indeed the hope of all nations.¹⁵¹

Whatever the word messiah meant to the Old Testament prophets, the expectation of Jesus' contemporaries is critical in appreciating the Gospel writers' usage of that title. Moreover, the royal linkage of messiah with Son of David has political overtones.¹⁵² Consequently, making a connection between messiahship and the title “King of the Jews” suggests there was a widely held expectation of a religio-political savior and not merely of a spiritual reformer. This political aspect can be overlooked if we are not sensitized to it. Consider, for example, the arrest of John the Baptist and Jesus' subsequent

¹⁴⁹ Note: the *meanings* or *use* of those titles may have subtle variations amongst the various New Testament writers. That nuance is beyond the scope of this introductory work and need not detract from anything of substance within TJDKIDK.

¹⁵⁰ Many today, following Marcion (c. 85–160 CE), wish they could erase the existence of the Old Testament and aspects of the New. This is one reason we need wisdom in studying (i.e., interpreting and applying) such texts today, along the guardrails of the broader Christian community.

¹⁵¹ See Matt 12:21 (Isa 42:4 LXX); Col 1:27; Acts 17:27.

¹⁵² Political and religious culture have never been far apart in Jewish thinking. We need to be mindful of this linkage, given our secular views on the separation of church and state.

shrewd itinerary into various independently governed regions so as to avoid political confrontation until he was ready to enter Jerusalem.¹⁵³ While the Gospel writers affirm Jesus as the Messiah or the Son of God (see below), it's not a title Jesus apparently openly used to describe himself—preferring instead to use the title Son of Man (see below).

Do you better appreciate my summary point: “We cannot properly understand the Gospels without appreciating the more nuanced meanings of this distinctly Jewish title [i.e., messiah] and its implications”?¹⁵⁴

Son of God

1. What does the title “Son of God” mean to you?

I suspect that for most people, including many Christians, the title Son of God is seen through a *trinitarian* lens. When we read “Son of God” in the Gospels, we presume that it refers to the second person of the Trinity—which of course in a way it does, but that orthodoxy arose *after* the New Testament texts were written. Don't get me wrong, I believe in the doctrine of the Trinity; my theology is thoroughly trinitarian—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: three “persons,” one God.¹⁵⁵ It's just that the use of Son of God *in the New Testament* points to messiahship rather than to Jesus' divinity. Had you considered this distinction before? How does this affect the way you will now read the texts?

Son of Man

1. What does the admittedly confusing title “Son of Man” mean to you?

Of all the titles, the meaning of Son of Man is probably the one that generates most scholarly debate. This is for a number of reasons, including: (a) this visionary title is somewhat mysterious in its brief usage in Dan 7:13–14, a key text; (b) it's meaning—like all such meanings—evolved in the intervening two centuries (and beyond); (c) as mentioned in TJIDKIDK, “the Gospel writers use this expression in various nuanced ways, such as an equivalent of Messiah, or with reference to both Jesus' ministry and sufferings, or to Jesus as eschatological judge.”¹⁵⁶ Even so, I have tried to be balanced and fair-minded in my brief explanation of “Son of Man.”¹⁵⁷ To my knowledge, no serious biblical scholar doubts Jesus' usage of Son of Man to enigmatically refer to himself, as portrayed by the Gospel writers. And regardless of the subtle variances in the meaning of Son of Man as a title for Jesus, its usage is *not*

¹⁵³ See, for example, Matt 4:12; 14:13.

¹⁵⁴ See TJIDKIDK, p31.

¹⁵⁵ See, Reddish, *Does God Always Get What God Wants?* Cascade, 2018, chapter 2 (and references therein).

¹⁵⁶ See TJIDKIDK, p32, footnote [24].

¹⁵⁷ Some may quibble over “went up” in Dan 7:13 as implying the Son of Man was not originally from God but later ascended to the divine realm. (Much depends on what Jesus' contemporaries believed at *that* time—hence the scholarly debate.)

merely the equivalent of human being (cf. Ezekiel¹⁵⁸). Rather, as I conclude in TJIKDIDW, this title “*points to the divine*, for the Son of Man is God’s agent in history.”¹⁵⁹

Lord

1. Many Christians begin their prayers with “Dear Lord Jesus,” probably learnt from childhood. Why do we include the word “Lord” and what does that word mean to you?

(Those with a British background will be familiar with Lord as a title for peers of the realm, someone who sits in the House of Lords in the Parliament. More regionally, a lord of the manor was the historical title for a local landowner of a rural estate. These connotations have nothing to do with this term in reference to Jesus.)

2. What do you think of the two distinct first-century meanings: (a) the Greek word for God’s personal name, YHWH, and (b) the Greek title for the Roman emperor? Can you therefore appreciate why the use of this title for Jesus was provocative for both Jews and non-Jews?

3. How do you think the resurrection shaped the usage of this title for Jesus in the early church? Is it therefore a significant title for you?

The Word Made Flesh

1. John’s Gospel is unique in using this title in his introduction; it’s a powerful, cerebral claim. What do you think of it? (As outlined in TJIDKIDK,¹⁶⁰ like Lord, the use of Word meant different things to Jews and non-Jews.)

2. Why is John’s punchline, “the Word *became flesh*” so important? Regardless of all the other titles John uses,¹⁶¹ this one stresses the transforming *creative* power of Jesus.¹⁶² Scholars have identified seven distinct *signs* within John’s Gospel that reveal God’s presence or “glory,” to use the religious term, in Jesus.¹⁶³ They are:

- a) Jesus turns the water into wine at the wedding of Cana (John 2:1–11).
- b) Jesus heals the royal official’s son (John 4:46–54).
- c) Jesus heals the man who was paralyzed at the pool of Bethesda (John 5:1–15).
- d) Jesus feeds the 5000 (John 6:5–14).

¹⁵⁸ See TJIDKIDK, p32, footnote [21].

¹⁵⁹ See TJIDKIDK, p33.

¹⁶⁰ See TJIDKIDK, p34–35.

¹⁶¹ See TJIDKIDK, p28–29.

¹⁶² See John 1:3.

¹⁶³ See John 2:11; 1:14, 18, 51.

- e) Jesus walks on water (John 6:16–24).
- f) Jesus heals the man who was blind from birth (John 9:1–7).
- g) Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1–45).

All these are powerful *creative* acts that support John's claim that Jesus is the divine Word made flesh.¹⁶⁴ Whether you agree or not with John's view, can you now better appreciate his point?

Consider John's list of titles in TJIDKIDK p28-29. Is there a title of Jesus to which you are particularly drawn? Why? Are there titles to which you are indifferent? Why do you think that's the case? Discuss.

¹⁶⁴ Some theologians see this as evidence for a new creation theology, with the resurrection as implied eighth sign, indicating a week of creation and then a new creation beginning with the resurrection. That's an interesting thought, don't you think?

Chapter 5 The Claims of Jesus

“The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath”

1. Some well-meaning Christians have a reputation for being narrow-minded, rule keepers and are better known for what they are *against* than what they are *for*. My favorite British Christian humorist, Adrian Plass, wittily describes them as members of the “spot it and stop it brigade.” There is clearly a stereotype being caricatured here, but for most non-Christians, such people give Christianity a bad name. Which is unfortunate really because that’s the last thing such people intend. They are so passionate about their beliefs that they feel their viewpoint needs to be ring-fenced from the surrounding culture and, in particular, from other Christians that they perceive to be more liberal or broad-minded or too tolerant.¹⁶⁵ This is not unlike the pharisees of the first century who strongly advocated for religious purity.¹⁶⁶ And that was not just adhering to the mosaic law, but also following the extensive oral tradition that had arisen in the interpretation of that law, resulting in many additional stipulations. Jesus considered such things as burdensome, without diminishing the *intent* of the law. In fact, they had become an unnecessary barrier between the common person and God, and part of Jesus’ mission was as a reformer of such practices.

What kinds of things have you experienced or heard of that have the same effect today?¹⁶⁷ Discuss.

2. The issue of authority crops up early in Mark’s Gospel.¹⁶⁸ Jesus was perceived by the crowds to speak knowledgeably, confidently, and have an authority superior to the religious leaders of the day. No doubt this was reinforced by Christ’s public exorcisms and healings.¹⁶⁹ Mark tells us that Jesus said (a), “The Son of Man has authority on earth *to forgive sins*”¹⁷⁰; (b) “The Son of Man is *Lord even of the Sabbath*.”¹⁷¹ What do you make of these two claims?

This particular usage of the “Son of Man” points to Jesus *as Messiah*, God’s Chosen One.¹⁷² In other words, Mark sees these claims as revealing the *kind* of divine authority that Jesus now has following his baptism,¹⁷³ as well as fleshing out the meaning of “the kingdom of God as come near.”¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁵ This is explored in Sanders, *Embracing Prodigals*, (Cascade, 2020).

¹⁶⁶ See TJIDKIDK, p38, footnote [4].

¹⁶⁷ Some may point to LGBTQI inclusion, others to abortion rights or the role of women or other important ethical matters. Some may be concerned over passionately held political views and their strong links to certain denominations. Others might be concerned over theological principles, such as the inerrancy or infallibility of the whole Bible. Regardless of the issue—which are nonetheless important—this kind of thinking can result in a litmus test to differentiate between who is a “proper” Christian and who is not. I find this a sad distraction from the gospel message itself. (See also TJIDKIDK, p50–51.)

¹⁶⁸ See Mark 1:22, 28.

¹⁶⁹ See Mark 1:21 – 2:12; this observation is affirmed in the other Gospels (e.g., Matt 7:28–28; Luke 4:32, 36).

¹⁷⁰ Mark 2:10.

¹⁷¹ Mark 2:28.

¹⁷² See TJIDKIDK, p32–33 and footnote [24].

¹⁷³ Mark 1:10–11.

¹⁷⁴ Mark 1:15.

3. Christians believe that divine forgiveness is somehow connected with the death and resurrection of Jesus, and consequently there is now *no need* for sacrifices in Christian worship.¹⁷⁵ (As a minister, I breathe a sigh of relief about that!) However, those were *future* events at this point in Mark's narrative. Nevertheless, Mark considers Jesus to *already* have authority to forgive sins. Regardless of the *blasphemy* issue for Jews,¹⁷⁶ what do you make of this *chronology* issue for Christians?
4. What do you think about the linking of forgiveness with physical healing in Mark 2:1-12?
5. Jesus *deliberately* heals on the Sabbath.¹⁷⁷ This act is therefore provocative. Why does Jesus draw attention to himself in this way; it's hardly discreet?¹⁷⁸
6. John's Gospel uses such Sabbath healings to point to the identity of Jesus in terms of a unique *father-son* relationship.¹⁷⁹ (Remember, the doctrine of the Trinity didn't yet exist.) Is John's analogy helpful to you? How does this parallel the use of *messiah* in the other gospels? How do you view the relationship between Jesus and the Creator God?
7. Do you find the words of Jesus at the top of TJDKIDK, p45 comforting? Why or why not? How do you think we are to *practically* "take Christ's yoke upon us"?
8. At the bottom of TJDKIDK, p46, I state: "The mission of Jesus is to bring about God's restoration wherever it is needed by gently leading people into God's healing love." Is that how you see the mission of Jesus? Is that how you see the mission of the church? Discuss.

"I am the Good Shepherd"

1. Those who are familiar with John's Gospel will have heard of his distinctive "I am" statements.¹⁸⁰ They are theologically rich and profound sayings. What do think of them and why?
2. I stated that Ezekiel 34 and Jeremiah 23:1-3¹⁸¹ were powerful oracles of warning and judgement against the leaders of God's people who failed to act like caring shepherds. What did you think of this

¹⁷⁵ Sacrifices was a key feature of temple worship in Jerusalem, until its destruction in 70 CE.

¹⁷⁶ See Mark 2:7.

¹⁷⁷ Mark 3:1-6. All the Gospel writers describe incidents where Jesus heals on the Sabbath.

¹⁷⁸ Particularly given John the Baptist is now in prison, Mark 1:14.

¹⁷⁹ See TJDKIDK, p42-44.

¹⁸⁰ See TJDKIDK, p47. As I mentioned on p19, "John's Gospel was the last to be written and can be additionally understood as a theological commentary on the life of Jesus."

¹⁸¹ See TJDKIDK, p49, footnote [58].

preamble and analysis as a background context for Jesus' "I am the good shepherd"? Did you find it convincing? Explain.

3. Do you view Jesus as the good shepherd of the *whole* world, the one who knows which sheep are part of his flock? And do you find this reassuring? How does this thought influence how you view those of other faiths (or of none)?

God's promise to Abraham was that he would be a blessing to the *whole* world,¹⁸² yet as time passed, the Jews (Israel) sought to keep that blessing for themselves rather than be God's revelation to the nations. This broader mission to non-Jews was the risen Christ's commission to the early church,¹⁸³ and is a major theme in Acts.¹⁸⁴ Jesus himself preached primarily to his fellow Jews, with just brief excursions into Samaria and other non-Jewish territories as an indication of the intent and extent of his vision and mission. Consequently, John 10:14, 16¹⁸⁵ hints at that wider inclusion as promised to Abraham. Put differently, I suggest Jesus was a strategic planner both in terms of timing and location for ministry. It is worth being alert to that aspect as you read the Gospels.

¹⁸² See Gen 12:2–3 (" . . . *all* peoples on earth will be blessed through you.").

¹⁸³ See Matt 28:18–20.

¹⁸⁴ Incidentally, we must always be aware that Luke-Acts are a two-volume work that were meant to be read *together*. The insertion of John's Gospel between Luke and Acts in the New Testament is therefore an unfortunate distraction, as it were, from Luke's original intention. Literary themes introduced in Luke's Gospel continue—and mature—in Acts.

¹⁸⁵ See TJIDKIDK, p50.

Chapter 6 The Politics of Jesus

Because many in the West hold to—or assume—the ideal of separation of church (or religion) and State, we tend to consider Jesus as purely a *spiritual* person. But in the first century, as in some parts of the world today, there was no such separation. Jewish *religious* practices had *political* implications.¹⁸⁶ Being an occupied territory of the Roman empire—and part of other empires before that—thwarted Jewish aspirations to once again be a self-governing nation. For many Jews, then, the messiah would be the catalyst for liberation from external oppression. (Recall that messiah had close connections to the political titles “Son of David” and “King of the Jews.”) Consequently, whether Jesus liked it or not, the Jewish people had civic aspirations for any would-be messiah, as well as expecting him to reform religious practices.

1. How does this background context inform your understanding of:

(a) The *ministry* of Jesus, such as the Sermon on the Mount?¹⁸⁷

(b) The *trial* of Jesus in Jerusalem, followed by his crucifixion?¹⁸⁸

2. I stated that Jesus’ so-called triumphal entry into Jerusalem, when he rode into the city on a donkey, was a *politically* charged act.¹⁸⁹ What does this mean? Please allow me to explain.

First, the *timing* is significant: Jesus was arriving in time to celebrate Passover with all the other pilgrims. Recall that Passover is a time that celebrates great hope of *freedom* as people remember and relive the story of God’s rescue from slavery in Egypt. Passover was therefore a time of nationalistic hope, as well as a prayer that God will rescue Israel once more—this time from Roman oppression.

Second, given Jesus *walked* all the way from Galilee, *why* now ride a donkey for the last two miles? That’s clearly a bit of staged theatre.¹⁹⁰ Jews would remember an oracle from Zechariah saying, “Your *king* comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble *and riding on a donkey*. . .”¹⁹¹ Jesus’ riding on a donkey is therefore provocative; he is deliberately enacting that prophecy. The Messiah is now being revealed in Jerusalem; the kingdom of God is at hand! Expectations are heightened by this act.

¹⁸⁶ The Roman empire allowed religious pluralism as long as the cultic worship of the emperor as supreme was honored. The Jews refused to do this, and this was problematic. An exception was therefore made for Palestine and a degree of Roman-sanctioned local governance was permitted (e.g., Herod Antipas, Philip the Tetrarch, etc.). The local Roman governor’s (e.g., Pontius Pilate) challenging mandate was to keep the peace (by brutal force, if need be) while ensuring taxes were paid to Rome. As part of the compromise, Jewish temple worship was permitted in Jerusalem, but a Roman garrison was next door (at the Antonia fortress) to maintain strict order in case religious zeal got out of hand.

¹⁸⁷ See Matt 5–7. (cf. Luke 6:20–49.)

¹⁸⁸ See Matt 27:1–26; Mark 15:1–15; Luke 23:1–25; John 18:28–19:22.

¹⁸⁹ See TJIDKIDK, p54. See also Mark 11:1–11; Matt 21:1–11; Luke 19:28–40; John 12:12–19. Moreover, Jesus was deliberately approaching Jerusalem *from the east*. (See TJIDKIDK, p68 and footnote [9].)

¹⁹⁰ Or, perhaps, political satire. (Afterall, Jesus comes humbly on young donkey, not a war horse . . .)

¹⁹¹ Zech 9:9–10. (See Matt 21:5; John 12:15.)

Third, in case the original readers failed to join those faint dots, Mark, Matthew, and Luke then say the disciples threw their cloaks over the donkey, like a makeshift throne.¹⁹² Others put their cloaks on the road,¹⁹³ along with leafy branches¹⁹⁴ from the nearby fields, so providing the red-carpet treatment. This behaviour is also mentioned in the Old Testament as the appropriate way to welcome a king.¹⁹⁵ Moreover, pilgrims sang as they approached Jerusalem for Passover.¹⁹⁶ “Hosanna” means literally “God save me” and is a Hebrew word that mixes exuberant praise to God with a prayer that God will rescue his people—and do so right away. “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD” is straight from Psalm 118:24—and pilgrims sang this every Passover. However, “Blessed is the *coming kingdom* of our ancestor *David*”¹⁹⁷ is *not* from the Psalms. The Gospel writers are therefore *interpreting* the drama and revealing the praise and expectations of those followers of Jesus. The royal identity of Jesus is therefore made clear: The *King* is coming!

3. When you hear the word “kingdom,” what is your reaction? How does that influence your prior understanding of the term “kingdom of God”? Is “kingdom” a problematic word for you? Explain.
4. What did you think of the Jewish notion of two eras of history, the “present age” and “the age to come,” together with the concept of the “Day of the LORD”?¹⁹⁸
5. Do you now better appreciate how the resurrection of Jesus resulted in the early church *having* to adapt the traditional Jewish timeline to that of Figure 1?¹⁹⁹ What questions does this “now and not-yet” kingdom of God raise for you?
6. I encourage you to read the whole of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7) in one sitting and in the process try and imagine what (a) a very pious Jew and, (b) a typical working-class Jew might have made of that speech. What kinds of things—not simply one’s attitude to wealth—do you think would be shocking or, alternatively, a welcome relief? How are such matters similar or different for us today? Can we appreciate the radical, practical nature of what Jesus said?
7. What does “grace” mean (in a Christian context)? Discuss.

¹⁹² Mark 11:7; Matt 21:7; Luke 19:35.

¹⁹³ Mark 11:8; Matt 21:8; Luke 19:36.

¹⁹⁴ Only John says they are *palm* branches (John 12:13). See also 1 Macc 13:50–51; 2 Macc 10:7; even so, Jesus did not come as a military conqueror, but in peace.

¹⁹⁵ See 2 Kings 9:13; 1 Macc 13:50–51; 2 Macc 10:7.

¹⁹⁶ See Ps 118:24–27. Mark 11:9–10. See also Matt 21:9; Luke 19:38; John 12:13.

¹⁹⁷ Mark 11:10 (italics added). Matt 21:9 also mentions “Son of David,” a kingly reference, and Luke 19:38 and John 12:13b both add “king” to make Jesus’ identity (or role) explicit. (And just in case we are not sure about Mark’s allusion, he has Bartimaeus repeatedly shouting “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” at the very end of the previous chapter; see Mark 10:46–52, italics added.)

¹⁹⁸ See TJIDKIDK, p55–56.

¹⁹⁹ See TJIDKIDK, p57.

8. Do you see the kingdom of God as inclusive? How inclusive? Why?

9. This chapter concludes with the statement: “To belong to God’s kingdom means we are to do the same kinds of things God does. We are to love, reconcile, and forgive. And we are to be faithful, persistent, honest, generous, trusting, and discerning—for those are God’s traits.”

Whatever misgivings we may have about the word “kingdom,” what do you think of defining God’s kingdom in relation to what God *does*? Do you believe that God is like that and does those kinds of things? Discuss.

Chapter 7 The Temple of Jesus

The classical attributes of God arose over time with the merger of Christianity and Greek thought, and as theologians and philosophers formalized and systematized Christian thinking. God is therefore widely seen as all-knowing (omniscient), all-powerful (omnipotent), all good (omnibenevolent), everywhere, (omnipresent), timeless or unchanging (immutable), unable to experience pain or pleasure (impassible), and simultaneously transcendent (independent of the material universe, i.e., space and time) and immanent (encompassing or found within creation). That’s a complicated list but don’t be phased by it! Christian scholars’ debate and defend various nuanced positions over those attributes, even rejecting some and significantly qualifying others. What this means is that my questioning of divine omnipresence²⁰⁰ isn’t that radical; rather, as St. Anselm said, it’s part of “faith seeking understanding.”

1. Do you have “big” questions like this that need addressing? If so, what are they? I encourage you to not let them be a barrier to faith but to pursue them on the journey, in the spirit of Anselm.
2. Where do *you* see God’s presence in the world today? How do you discern that?
3. John’s take on Jesus talking about the destruction of the temple was that Jesus was “speaking about *the temple of his body*.”²⁰¹ What do think of his notion of God’s presence—or “glory,” to use the technical term—as residing within Jesus? Do you make that connection with Ezekiel’s oracle, with Jesus approaching Jerusalem (and the temple) *from the east*?²⁰²
4. What do you think of Jesus’ statement to the Samaritan woman: “God is spirit, and the people who worship him must worship in spirit and truth”?²⁰³ Does this mean physical buildings are irrelevant? Can one be a Christian without being part of a local congregation or community? Discuss.
5. Paul speaks of the church as the “body of Christ,” the new temple, the place where God’s Spirit resides.²⁰⁴ What do you think of that idea? Discuss.
6. In TJIDKIDK p71, I mention that God’s presence in the Old Testament is most vivid in a theophany, such as in a *cloud*. How does that impact the way you understand the transfiguration story?

To better understand the transfiguration, we need to go back to Moses in the wilderness and his experience of the presence of God on Mount Sinai when receiving the Ten Commandments.²⁰⁵ God’s

²⁰⁰ See TJIDKIDK, p66–67.

²⁰¹ See TJIDKIDK, p68–70 and footnote [11]. Recall too that John writes *after* the physical destruction of the temple in 70 CE.

²⁰² Ezek 43:2; 10:19; 11:23.

²⁰³ See TJIDKIDK, p69 and footnote [14].

²⁰⁴ See TJIDKIDK, p70.

²⁰⁵ See Exod 34, esp. v29–35. (For another theophany, e.g., Moses and the burning bush, see Exod 3.)

very presence was also said to descend upon him like a cloud. When Moses came down the mountain, his face *shone brightly* because of his encounter with God, and all of Israel were afraid. Moses therefore covered his face with some kind of veil. Somewhat bizarrely, we are told that whenever Moses spoke to God or later when he relayed God’s instructions to the people, he would remove his veil; he would otherwise wear the veil. Moses was therefore functioning as a divine messenger or mediator in both a visual and audible way.²⁰⁶ Incidentally, we are told God’s presence or glory was earlier evident *at* the mountain top;²⁰⁷ however, it has now been brought *down* from the mountain via Moses *to the people*.²⁰⁸ In the transfiguration account,²⁰⁹ the appearance of Jesus’ face is described as being transformed, shining “like the sun,” and his clothes became dazzling white. This vivid imagery mirrors that Old Testament language. Most significantly, the intense divine presence is now embodied in the person of Jesus, instead of Moses.²¹⁰ Moreover, in Luke 9:31, the word translated “departure is “*exodus*” in Greek, thus alluding to Jesus taking on Moses’ role which would be “*fulfilled*” in Jerusalem. Consequently, it could be said that Jesus is being vividly revealed (to Peter, James, and John) as the new *mediator* between God and the people. I suggest that just as Moses came down the mountain bringing God’s glory or presence to the people, Jesus is symbolically doing the very same thing as he comes back down the mountain and heads toward Jerusalem – approaching Jerusalem *from the east*.²¹¹

7. Do you see the glory of God—the divine presence—being revealed as Jesus is on the cross? How does your response square with the traditional view of divine impassibility, mentioned earlier? (Perhaps now you can at least better appreciate why theologians question some of those classical attributes.)

8. How might you personally—or your faith community—better reveal God’s presence in the world?

²⁰⁶ Terrence Fretheim writes “Moses is not simply a speaker for the word of God, in some sense he *embodies* the word. The people not only hear about word being spoken; they see it standing before them.” Fretheim, *Exodus*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Louisville: John Knox, 1991, p311. (If “embodied,” taken too literally, is troublesome to you, Jesus as the *perfect reflector* of the divine light/glory makes the same crucial point. See also [209]. This topic will be discussed further in chapter 8.)

²⁰⁷ Exod 24:15–18.

²⁰⁸ Exod 34:29–35. Later, God’s glory would *reside* in the tabernacle, the portable tent of worship among the Israelites (Exod 40:34–38). Much later, God’s presence came to reside in Solomon’s temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 8:10–11), that is until the temple was destroyed and the Babylonian exile began - at which point God’s presence or spirit departed. (See TJDKIDK, p67–68.)

²⁰⁹ See Matt 17:1–8; Mark 9:2–8; Luke 9:28–36 (see further discussion in TJDKIDK, p71–73).

²¹⁰ This theme is picked up in Paul’s complex rhetoric of 2 Cor 3:12–4:6 in response to his critics.

²¹¹ As discussed in TJDKIDK, p67–68, in the context of Ezekiel’s important visions also pertaining to God’s presence.

Chapter 8 The Supremacy of Jesus

1. What do you think of the specifically Christian view of God as *Trinity*?²¹² What aspects of this trinitarian perspective do you find most difficult to understand/grasp/accept? Discuss.
2. Regardless, and without diminishing the role or personhood of the Holy Spirit, the New Testament depiction of the *relationship* between Jesus and God (the Father) points again to the issue of the *identity* of Jesus—the underlying theme of TJDKIDK. New Testament writers develop that connection in various ways, using different metaphors and terminology. Because I am part of the Christian tradition, I believe Jesus is *divine*. This means I adopt—amongst many other things—John’s view of Jesus as the “divine Word made flesh,” as discussed earlier in chapter 4. As this final chapter highlights, the authors of Colossians and Hebrews have a similar view of Jesus as divine, though they express it differently—as does Paul in Phil 2:6-11.²¹³ What are your first impressions of the early hymn in Col 1:15-20?²¹⁴ Why not compare it to that other early hymn from Philipians 2? Explore.
3. What do you think of the claim: “For in Christ all *the fullness* of the Deity lives in bodily form”?²¹⁵ And what about the statement: “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory (i.e., God’s presence) and the *exact representation* of his being”?²¹⁶ Whether or not we agree with these authors’ views, those *are* powerful descriptions, are they not? They are, I believe, a *radical* departure from a traditional Jewish perspective.
4. The author of the hymn also regards Jesus as the *creator*: “[In Jesus] *all things* in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible . . .”²¹⁷ Compare this writer’s views with those of John.²¹⁸ What is your view on the *preexistence* of Jesus?
5. Somehow, and it is not easy to articulate precisely *how*, the writer sees God as *reconciling to himself all things* . . . through the blood of Christ’s *cross*.²¹⁹ Christians claim that’s ultimately good news, though the crucifixion itself is a human tragedy and a moral outrage. Do you see God as wanting to reconcile and restore *all* of creation as good news? How might we partner with God in that process?

²¹² See also Reddish, *Does God Always Get What God Wants?* Cascade, 2018, chapter 2 (and references therein).

²¹³ See also TJDKIDK, p85.

²¹⁴ See TJDKIDK, p77.

²¹⁵ Col 2:9; 1:19.

²¹⁶ Heb 1:3.

²¹⁷ See TJDKIDK, p79 (Col 1:16–17 and John 1:1–3, 14.)

²¹⁸ See TJDKIDK, p34; John 1:1–5, 14.

²¹⁹ See TJDKIDK, p80 (Col 1:19–20). This discussion on “atonement theory,” to use the technical word, is beyond the scope of this book. It is, however, introduced and discussed in Reddish, *Does God Always Get What God Wants?* Cascade, 2018, chapters 2 and 6 (and references therein).

Afterward

By way of concluding the study group, I encourage you to read *together* the short, reflective *Afterward* and then discuss it.

1. Having finished the book, what have *you* discovered about the *identity* of Jesus from *The Jesus I Didn't Know I Didn't Know*?
2. Have your views concerning the identity of Jesus changed in any way? How?
3. What difference will that make to your life moving forward? Where do you go from here?

Appendix: On Christian Baptism

One obvious observation from just a glance at church history is that the church is made a hash of a lot of things! And one of those things is baptism. First recall that the baptism of John the Baptist, which was only about repentance,²²⁰ is *not* the same as Christian baptism—although it certainly has its roots there.²²¹ That’s one reason why the word “baptism” in the New Testament can be confusing. Another reason is that the church, over its long history, has added to that confusion with its doctrines, dogmas, and practices. Christian baptism was originally meant to *unite* a diverse group of people into one faith, it has now become the waters that *divide*.²²² Regardless of your views on baptism, let’s have a brief excursion into this topic.

Christians say that baptism is a sacrament, which is the Latin equivalent of the Greek word *mysterion*, meaning “mystery” or “secret.” St. Augustine described a sacrament as “a visible sign of God’s invisible grace.”²²³ Many Protestant churches have just two sacraments, Holy Communion and Baptism, the ones Christ himself commanded his followers to do.²²⁴ Recall that at the Last Supper, Jesus told his disciples to re-enact that feast of bread and wine in remembrance of his death.²²⁵ And Matthew tells us the risen Jesus commissioned his disciples, saying: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”²²⁶ Evidently, a feature of the sacraments is that through everyday things—bread, wine, and water—*God acts*. But let’s not think that the bread, wine, and water themselves have some kind of magical powers—they don’t. They are, however, more than symbols and signs because, through the sacraments, God’s Spirit communicates *to us* and is present *with us*. The sacraments, therefore, have an emphasis on what *God has done and is doing*, together with our response. They are given to sustain us on our pilgrimage and reassure us of God’s promises.²²⁷ They are, I believe, therefore important.

²²⁰ See TJDKIDK, p11–12.

²²¹ See also Acts 1:5,8; 18:24–25; 19:1–7.

²²² Donald Bridge and David Phipers, *The Waters That Divide*. Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, (1998).

²²³ Alternatively, “Sacraments are an outward expression of an inner reality that God has generously done.” The ultimate sacrament (mystery) is, of course, the incarnation: literally, “God made flesh” in Jesus the Messiah, the one who supremely reveals God’s grace and love toward us—see TJDKIDK, chapter 8.

²²⁴ The Roman Catholic church and Eastern church have seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penance, ordination, marriage, and anointing of the sick (or “extreme unction”). It is *not* that Protestants dismiss the merits of the other five; it is simply their connection to Jesus Christ.

²²⁵ See Luke 22:19; 1 Cor 11:23–25. (Paul’s letter reveals this was indeed the *practice* of the early church—even before the Gospels were written.)

²²⁶ Matt 28:18–20a. Note this very early *trinitarian* formula in the practical life of the Church. (See also TJDKIDK, p75, footnote [7].)

²²⁷ As Theologian Alistair McGrath puts it: “Sacraments are conveyors of grace that strengthen faith, enhance unity, and reassure us of God’s promises to us.”²²⁷ A. E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 5th ed. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell (2011), 407–411. Moreover, when Christ returns, we shall no longer need sacraments, because we shall encounter that to which they now point.

Christian baptism is the sacrament of initiation into life in Christ.²²⁸ It marks the beginning of the journey of faith and discipline that lasts throughout one's life. The practice of baptism entails the person being immersed in water, or water is poured or sprinkled on them, in the "name" (or authority) of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It doesn't matter on the quantity of water that's used—the meaning is the same! And note that because we baptize in the name of the Trinity, the person is being initiated into the world-wide Church, not simply a particular congregation or denomination.

There are many rich images in the New Testament for baptism and all of them are significant. We are, after all, using metaphors to describe a profound mystery. I will simply mention four of them, and all of them are just as relevant for us today as they were in the first century. Baptism is described as a dying and rising with Christ.²²⁹ The descent into water signifies the Christian's identification with Jesus' suffering and death, whereby the power sin has in the old way of life is broken. And the ascent from the water signifies participation in the new life of the Spirit, based on the power of the resurrection. Baptism is also treated as a cleansing from the sin-stained life and God's forgiveness washes away the sin of the truly penitent.²³⁰ Those who are thus pardoned by Christ receive, in baptism, a fresh start in life and a new ethical orientation in God's kingdom. Baptism is also portrayed as a rebirth by the Holy Spirit.²³¹ Another image of baptism is a welcome into a new community of promise, i.e., becoming members of a new family and citizens of God's new society.²³² This latter point is important because, for Jews, the sign of their mutual covenant with God is—of course—circumcision. But in the New Testament, that sign was replaced by baptism.²³³ Paul famously writes:

“In Christ Jesus you are *all* children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are *all one* in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants and heirs according to the promise.”²³⁴

The shocking power of those inclusive words cannot be understated. They transcend the traditional barrier between Jews and non-Jews. Baptism is, therefore, the key sign of church unity within its obvious diversity of social status and ethnicity. Furthermore, just as it is nonsense to speak of being circumcised more than once, so baptism is a one-time act. As it says in Ephesians, “There is one body and one Spirit . . . one Lord, one faith, *one baptism*; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”²³⁵

All this symbolism is very well, you may say, but why did I say at the outset that the church has made a dog's dinner of baptism? That is because the *practice* of baptism still creates confusion, mainly because

²²⁸ See 1 Cor 3:23, 6:19; 2 Cor 10:7, Gal 3:27.

²²⁹ Rom 6:3–4; Col 2:11–13. That's not meant to be morbid or as only pointing to life after death.

²³⁰ 1 Cor 6:11. Repentance (Greek: *metanoia*) means changing direction, or U-turn, toward God (cf. John's baptism).

²³¹ John 3:5; Acts 2:38.

²³² Eph 2:19; Gal 3:28.

²³³ See Col 2:11 – 13.

²³⁴ Gal 3:26–29 (italics added).

²³⁵ Eph 4:4–6 (italics added). Ideally, baptism should therefore be done in public, not private, as part of a community.

while many churches baptize babies, others will only baptize adults. Moreover, baptism can be merely seen as a social rite of passage that results in a certificate that we simply file away, only to magically present to St. Peter at the pearly gates!²³⁶ This trivializes baptism and belittles the sufferings of Jesus. So let's now briefly consider the *practice* of baptism.

In infant baptism, the decision to baptize is obviously made by the parents. The New Testament does not explicitly forbid this practice, and while it includes no specific references to infant baptism, there are texts that certainly suggests that possibility.²³⁷ More importantly, this practice was normal by the second or third century, and its widespread acceptance influenced later theological debates. When we baptize young children today, we are proclaiming that God's love is a sheer gift. It's a powerful expression of the fact that *God loves us even before* we begin to respond to God in love and trust.²³⁸ Because of that, we *never* need to live in fear or guilt over the eternal salvation of an unbaptized child. Nevertheless, infant baptism is a wonderful opportunity to publicly affirm that "God loves this child." The family is responding to God saying, "We belong to God and God is journeying with us." Moreover, a commitment is being made in the parent's faith that the child will grow up within the Christian community, in the prayerful hope that the child will embrace that faith for themselves as an adult. Therefore, infant baptism is only the first step, a "down-payment" so-to-speak; the second step is sometimes called "confirmation." While confirmation doesn't have scriptural authority, the Reformers retained it in various forms and today some traditional denominations refer to confirmation as an adult "profession of faith" or an "affirmation of baptism." Personally, I think this is an excellent thing because churches ought always to encourage people who want to publicly affirm their faith; it is a sign that the Holy Spirit is at work in their life.

To help visualize this two-step process, I suggest we see the act of infant baptism as God's gift of a signed bank cheque to the helpless child. This emphasizes *God's* initiative and grace. Since baptism is a sign of the mystery of grace, the gracious things for us to do is simply "let the little children come to Jesus."²³⁹ But we are also honouring the parents' faith, and that of the wider church community, as together we pray and work for the day when the child responds and claims that faith for themselves. Until the person fills in their own name on the cheque, and "cashes it," it remains in the parents' trust.

Now to adult baptism or "believers" baptism, as it is sometimes known. Clearly, the decision to be baptized is made by the recipient, not their parents. This therefore emphasizes the faith response of the individual. It also stresses public confession and a personal commitment to the new Jesus way. Though certainly biblical, we should be aware of its dangers. Sometimes the sacrament of baptism becomes all about having a spiritual experience and thus the person under-plays *God's* grace and

²³⁶ However, it would appear that the simple act of baptism does not *guarantee* our place in heaven (see, for example: Matt 7:21–13; Luke 6:20–26), although I admit that Christian *liturgy* can give that impression.

²³⁷ See Acts 2:38,39; 16:15, 31–33 to recognize "household" baptism.

²³⁸ 1 John 4:19.

²³⁹ Matt 19:14.

initiative. Furthermore, adult baptism can become too individualistic and overlooks the fact we are becoming part of a global community and need to grow in faith within a specific congregation. Nevertheless, properly understood, adult baptism is a powerful experience.

Since baptism is all about God's grace, I suggest churches perform both kinds of baptism. With adults, the options are to sprinkle water or do full immersion—in a church, river, lake, or a bathtub! But, for the reason stated earlier, re-baptism makes no theological sense. There is, however, an important connection between Christian baptism and John's baptism that we can't overlook. All four Gospel's have Christ's baptism near their beginning. Baptism is therefore *not* the end of the process; it's a mistake to think we can all sit back and relax, affirmed in the knowledge that God loves us.²⁴⁰ No, baptism is also a public commissioning²⁴¹ and the *start* of the journey. Moreover, since through baptism we are—as mentioned earlier—reborn of the Spirit, let's internalize this vital sustaining truth. This means that the same divine Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead also *lives in us* and, consequently, we are to now live confident that nothing can separate us from the love of God—not even death itself.²⁴²

In conclusion, baptism has been an endless source of debate and division; don't let it be. Instead, let baptism be the means of promoting unity, enhancing faith, and celebrating God's goodness. And let's not forget God is much bigger than our theological schemes and the quirks of church history, because God is *gracious*.

²⁴⁰ Just as the baptism of Jesus affirms *his* identity; in the similar way, our baptism both establishes and affirms *our* identity. We have been adopted into God's family and therefore God looks at us and says, "you are my dear child, and I am delighted with you." Those are powerful words of acceptance; let's therefore be grounded and stabilized by them.

²⁴¹ This is often linked to confirmation in the case of infant baptism—and even if confirmation/adult baptism isn't the actual start our faith journey, it is a significant milestone.

²⁴² Rom 8:37–39. The young Martin Luther had agonizing doubts as to his identity as a forgiven child of God, which were eventually addressed by focusing on this profound meaning of baptism.