

The Essential Jesus

What Jesus Really Taught

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To my colleagues in the Department of Religious Studies, DePaul University, Chicago

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Prologue

Scattered across the countryside one may observe certain wild animals, male and female, dark, livid and burnt by the sun, attached to the earth which they dig and turn over with invincible stubbornness. However, they have something like an articulated voice and when they stand up they reveal a human face. Indeed, they are human beings. . . . Thanks to them the other human beings need not sow, labour and harvest in order to live. That is why they ought not to lack the bread which they have sown.

Jean la Bruyère, French moralist of the late seventeenth century (cited in Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 1 [1973])

Imperial Rome
Is full of arcs of triumph. Who reared them up?
Over whom
Did the Caesars triumph?

Caesar beat the Gauls. Was there not even a cook in his army?

Each page a victory, At whose expense the victory ball? Every ten years a great man, Who paid the piper?

So many particulars. So many questions.

Bertolt Brecht, A Worker Reads History

If no Christian had written anything about Jesus for the first hundred years after his death, we would still have two succinct accounts from those not counted among his followers. One account dates from the last decade of the first century and comes from the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus in his Jewish Antiquities 18.63:

About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man. . . . For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. . . . When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first

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place come to love him did not give up their affection for him. . . . And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.

His description is carefully neutral or, at most, mildly critical. The text was both preserved and interpolated by Christian editors, but I cite it without their proposed improvements.

The next account dates from the first decades of the second century and comes from the pagan historian Cornelius Tacitus. Having told how a rumor blamed Nero for the disastrous fire that swept Rome in 64 C.E., he continues in *Annals* 15.44:

Therefore to scotch the rumour, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christians, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilatus, and the pernicious superstition was checked for the moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue.

Despite the differences between the studied impartiality of Josephus and the sneering partiality of Tacitus, they agree on three rather basic facts. First, there was some sort of a movement connected with Jesus. Second, he was executed by official authority presumably to stop the movement. Third, rather than being stopped, the movement continued to spread.

There remain, therefore, these three: movement, execution, continuation. But the greatest of these is continuation.

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Contexts

We want everybody to work, as we work. There should no longer be either rich or poor. All should have bread for themselves and for their children. We should all be equal. I have five small children and only one little room, where we have to eat and sleep and do everything, while so many lords (*signori*) have ten or twelve rooms, entire palaces. . . . It will be enough to put all in common and to share with justice what is produced.

Unnamed peasant woman from Piana dei Greci, province of Palermo, Sicily, speaking to a northern Italian journalist during an 1893 peasant uprising (cited by Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* [New York: Norton, 1965])

A double constraint has always been at the heart of Mediterranean history: poverty and the uncertainty of the morrow.

Fernand Braudel

In the straitened world of the Mediterranean, the kingdom of Heaven had to have something to do with food and drink.

Peter Brown

What Is Essential About Jesus?

Two major problems arise as soon as the term *essential* is applied to *Jesus*. The first one is whether we are talking about the canonical or the historical Jesus. The canonical Jesus is the figure that fills the four official gospels from the New Testament scriptures of the Christian churches. One possible interpretation of the term *essential* would mean that official Jesus as portrayed exclusively in those approved texts. But I have chosen, instead, to interpret *essential* as meaning historical, as designating not the Jesus described by Christian believers in gospels written forty to sixty years after his death but rather that Jesus you might have seen in Lower Galilee during his actual life. Imagine, for example, these responses from different observers, all of whom have heard and seen exactly the same words and deeds from that historical Jesus:

He's dangerous, let's oppose him. He's criminal, let's execute him. He's divine, let's follow him.

A historical account must be able to explain *all* of those different responses or it is inadequate to what happened.

In this book, therefore, the essential Jesus means not the canonical but the historical Jesus. I will not simply go through the four New Testament gospels, pick out the best-known sayings of Jesus, and retranslate them. I present instead those sayings that, in my best historical judgment, are original with Jesus. I have already defended that judgment in two preceding books, 1 so this present one concludes a trilogy on the historical Jesus.

^{1.} The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991. Paperback edition, 1993. Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994.

The second problem is both as difficult and as important as the preceding one. Is the essential Jesus a matter of word without deed, of idea without action, of vision without program? Imagine, for example, a book on the essential Gandhi or the essential Martin Luther King, Jr.: Would it be enough to take a judicious selection from their words and ignore their practices? Would that not deny what is most essential to them, namely, their conjunction of vision and program, of life and death? So also with the essential Jesus. He had both a religious dream and a social program, and it was that conjunction that got him killed. The Roman Empire may have regularly abused its power, but it seldom wasted it. It did not crucify teachers or philosophers; it usually just exiled them permanently or cleared them out of Rome periodically. Indeed, if Jesus had been only a matter of words or ideas, the Romans would have probably ignored him, and we would probably not be talking about him today. His Kingdom movement, however, with its healings and exorcisms, was action and practice, not just thought and theory. But how can you show a program in a book? It is possible, of course, to note those words where Jesus refers to his program or enacts its procedures. We are still, however, trapped in words and texts. In order to see a program in action, you need images, preferably, of course, from-the-scene satellite transmissions! My solution. in the absence of archival videos from ancient Galilee, depends on the images interspersed with the sayings in the body of this book. These images are emphatically not just decorations. They are the earliest depictions of Jesus' program and thus an absolutely necessary counterpoint to the translations of Jesus' words. In this book, in summary, the essential Jesus is the historical Jesus in both his vision and his program.

The Age of Augustan Peace

The Roman world was an agrarian empire, which meant that the peasantry, the vast majority of the population, lived close

to subsistence level and thereby supported political and religious elites whose levels of luxury they could hardly even imagine. The term *peasant*, by the way, is not just a romantic or old-fashioned word for farmer. It denotes a relationship of exploitation in which the vast majority who produce the food on which everyone and everything depends are consistently relieved of their surplus, so that a small minority have a huge surplus while most remain at subsistence level. Simply: a peasant is a systemically exploited farmer. The Roman Empire, however, was no longer a traditional but rather a commercialized agrarian empire, and the Jewish peasantry was being pushed into debt and displaced from its holdings at higher than normal rates, since land became, under the commercialized Roman economy, less an ancestral inheritance never to be abandoned and more an entrepreneurial commodity rapidly to be exploited. In a traditional or uncommercialized agrarian empire, business or investment intrudes minimally if at all between aristocrats and peasants. The situation, in which peasants produce and aristocrats take, is almost static. appearing as an almost inevitable or natural process. Peasants resist, of course, much as they resist other unfortunate but implacable phenomena, such as storm, flood, or disease. But with commercialization, even the guarantee of owning one's own familial plot of well-taxed land is gone, and the peasantry, having learned that things can change for the worse, begin to ponder how they might also change for the better, even for the ideal or utopian better. As commercialization, let alone modern industrialization, intrudes into an agrarian and aristocratic empire, the barometer of possible political rebellion and/or social revolution rises accordingly. That was precisely the situation in the Mediterranean world of the first century, since Roman civil war, from Julius Caesar against Pompey to Octavius against Anthony, had ended with Octavius emerging victorious to become Augustus and Princeps, first among equals with all the equals dead.

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Dreams of the Oppressed

The Jewish peasantry was prone, over and above the covert and overt resistance expected from any colonial peasantry, to refuse quiet compliance with heavy taxation, subsistence farming, debt impoverishment, and land expropriation. Their traditional ideology of *land* was enshrined in the ancient Pentateuchal laws. Just as God's people were to rest on the seventh or Sabbath Day, so God's land was to rest on the seventh or Sabbath Year:

For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard. (Exodus 23:10–11)

When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a sabbath for the Lord. Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the Lord: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. (Leviticus 25:2–4)

On that seventh or Sabbath Year, moreover, Jewish debts were to be remitted and Jewish slaves were to be released:

Every seventh year you shall grant a remission of debts. And this is the manner of the remission: every creditor shall remit the claim that is held against a neighbor, not exacting it of a neighbor who is a member of the community, because the Lord's remission has been proclaimed. Of a foreigner you may exact it, but you must remit your claim on whatever any member of your community owes you. . . . If a member of your community, whether a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you and works for you six years, in the seventh year you shall set that person free. And when you send a male slave out from you a free person, you shall not send him out empty-handed. Provide liberally out of your flock, your threshing floor, and your wine

press, thus giving to him some of the bounty with which the Lord your God has blessed you. (Deuteronomy 15:1–3, 12–14)

Finally, there was even a Jubilee Year, the year after seven sets of Sabbath Years. In that fiftieth year all expropriated lands and even village houses, but not city ones, were to revert to their original or traditional owners:

You shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. . . . But if there is not sufficient means to recover it [a piece of property], what was sold shall remain with the purchaser until the year of jubilee; in the jubilee it shall be released, and the property shall be returned. (Leviticus 25:10, 28)

It is hard to know now what is ideal and what is real, what is ideological and what is actual, in those decrees. Most likely the Jubilee Year was not implemented at all by the first century, but the Sabbath Year was probably still more or less enforced. My point, however, is that those ancient laws, precisely as ideal vision or ideological promise, refuse to see debt, slavery, or land expropriation simply as business transactions. The land is a divine possession not a negotiable commodity, or as Leviticus 25:23 put it, "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants." The Jewish peasantry, therefore, in distinction from say the Egyptian peasantry, had a long tradition in flat contradiction with a first-century boom economy that saw land accumulation as sensible business practice and debt foreclosure as the best and swiftest way to accomplish it.

The Kingdom of God

The Galilean peasantry may well have had their own very particular pressures at the time of Jesus. Sepphoris, about

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four miles to the northwest of Nazareth, and Tiberias, about twenty miles to the northeast, alternated as capitals of Galilee in the first century. Sepphoris was burned and its population enslaved as the Romans reestablished control over those several sections of the Jewish homeland that had broken into open rebellion in 4 B.C.E. after the death of Herod the Great. His son, Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee between 4 B.C.E and 39 C.E., rebuilt the city in the early years of his reign and made it, according to Josephus, "the ornament of all Galilee." But then, around 18 C.E., he built another city on the western shore of the lake in, again according to Josephus, "the best region of Galilee." He created the first predominantly Jewish city with a Hellenistic city structure and administration, he named it after the Roman emperor Tiberius, and he transferred his capital there from Sepphoris. But that conjunction of two cities in close temporal and spatial proximity and also in administrative competition may well have increased demands and exactions on the local peasantry both for food and investment. Jesus, for example, never even mentions the names of Sepphoris and Tiberias even though he had grown up only a few miles from the former city. Did that silence bespeak not ignorance, of course, but implicit criticism or even open antagonism? Later, Josephus, who was in charge of Galilee during the winter of 66-67 C.E. at the start of the First Roman-Jewish War, tells us that his peasant and brigand conscripts were very eager to burn down those two cities, since "they had the same detestation for the Tiberians as for the inhabitants of Sepphoris." Their first impulse once armed was to destroy the debt archives and revenge themselves on those cities that administered their exploitation and oppression.

A phrase such as *Kingdom of God* must be understood within, first, that absolute conjunction of religion and politics and, second, that situation of imperial domination and colonial exploitation. The phrase evokes an ideal vision of

political and religious power, of how this world here below would be run if God, not Caesar, sat on the imperial throne. As such it always casts a caustically critical shadow on human rule. It includes especially a basic, fundamental, radical, utopian, counter-cultural, or eschatological rejection of the world as it is currently run. I use all those adjectives interchangeably and insist that, while eschatology has to do etymologically with an ending of the world (literally: about the last things), such world-endings or world-negations come in many different forms. There are, for instance, apocalyptic, sapiential, cynic, gnostic, monastic, hermitic, anarchic, or even nihilistic eschatologies. The former two are of immediate present importance. Apocalyptic eschatology announces the apocalypse (Greek for "revelation") of imminent and cataclysmic divine intervention to restore peace and justice to a disordered world. Whether afterward there will be heaven on earth or earth in heaven is left rather vague, but the evil they will be gone forever and the holy we will be in charge under God. Examples of apocalyptic eschatology's divine revelatory promise are, from the ancient world. John of Patmos, Greece, and, from the modern world, David Koresh of Waco, Texas. Sapiential eschatology, on the other hand, emphasizes the sapientia (Latin for "wisdom") of knowing how to live here and now today so that God's present power is forcibly evident to all. Examples of sapiential eschatology's radical lifestyle challenge are, from the ancient world, Diogenes of Greece living in his barrel, and, from the modern world, Gandhi of India living in nonviolence. Apocalyptic eschatology is world-negation stressing imminent divine intervention: we wait for God to act; sapiential eschatology is world-negation emphasizing immediate divine imitation: God waits for us to act. The former is the message of John the Baptist; the latter that of Jesus. But in any case, the Kingdom of God has as little to do with pie in the sky when, by-and-by, you die as did those temples that Caesar and

Augustus erected in and around the Roman Forum in that same period. Both have to do with religio-politics or politico-religion here and now in this world.

From Texts to Images

The aphorisms and parables of the historical Iesus often describe a world of radical egalitarianism in which discrimination and hierarchy, exploitation and oppression, should no longer exist. This is his utopian dream of the Kingdom of God, in which both material and spiritual goods, political and religious resources, and economic and transcendental accesses are equally available to all without interference from brokers, mediators, or intermediaries. Think, for example, of his parable about The Feast, where the servant finally brings in anyone he can find so that female and male, married and unmarried, slave and free, pure and impure, and rich and poor can all be gathered together in open and indiscriminate commensality for the same meal. But there was also a program behind that vision, a political challenge behind the poetic rhetoric. The place where one can most clearly see that program in action is in the following texts from three independent sources, two of which date from the earliest stratum of the Jesus tradition. Notice, as you read these texts, that there is mandated a reciprocity of free healing and open eating. The members of the Kingdom movement must eat with those they heal and that conjunction enacts the Kingdom itself. Notice, above all, that they are not just sent out to bring others back to Jesus. It is not a matter of Jesus' power but of their empowerment. He himself has no monopoly on the Kingdom. It is there for anyone with the courage to embrace it.

When you go into any land and walk about in the districts, if they receive you, eat what they will set before you, and heal the sick among them. (*Gospel of Thomas* 14:2)

Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and salute no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace be to this house!" And if a son of peace is there, your peace shall rest upon him; but if not, it shall return to you. And remain in the same house, eating and drinking what they provide, for the laborer deserves his wages; do not go from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and they receive you, eat what is set before you; heal the sick in it and say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you." But whenever you enter a town and they do not receive you, go into its streets and say, "Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off against you; nevertheless know this, that the kingdom of God has come near." (*Q Gospel* in Luke 10:4–11 = Matt 10:8–14)

He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics. And he said to them, "Where you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. And if any place will not receive you and they refuse to hear you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet for a testimony against them." So they went out and preached that men should repent. And they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them. (Mark 6:8–13 = Matt 10:8–10a, 11 = Luke 9:2–6)

Jesus called his practice and program the presence of the Kingdom of God, but that expression must be interpreted primarily in the light of what he himself did and what he also challenged his companions to do. It did not mean for Jesus, as it could for others, the imminent apocalyptic intervention of God to set right a world taken over by evil and injustice. It meant the presence of God's Kingdom here and now in the reciprocity of open eating and open healing, in lives, that is, of radical egalitarianism on both the socioeconomic (eating) and the religio-political (healing) levels. I exemplify the Kingdom's enactment with the following description used in both my earlier books on the historical Jesus. It describes Jesus himself at work, but it is equally true for his earliest companions.

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