

Will the **REAL JESUS**
please stand up...



a quest, inquest, conquest, request for the historical Jesus,
in the words of scholars, would-be scholars, poets,
essayists, journalists, and even theologians.

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Will the REAL JESUS please stand up...

Introduction by David Boulton

The miscellany of extracts from writings about Jesus which follow were collected for a specific occasion: a public reading in Manchester Cathedral on April 1 2000, at a one-day conference organised by the Sea of Faith Network. The conference was called "Honest to Jesus" and the principal speaker was Robert Funk, the distinguished Biblical scholar who founded the Westar Institute in California and its offshoot, the Jesus Seminar.

Funk and the group of scholars he leads in the Jesus Seminar have their own take on Jesus. Their primary interest is not the Jesus of Faith, the Jesus of theology and tradition, but the man himself, the Jesus of history, in so far as he can be separated out from myth, legend and ecclesiastical story-telling. The Jesus Seminar scholars are historians rather than theologians - and their methods have often seemed as controversial to fellow-historians as they are to the theologians they have challenged. Which is why Sea of Faith invited Robert Funk not only to talk about his own approach but to engage with evangelical, liberal and radical critics at the Manchester Cathedral conference.

Choose your Jesus

To set the scene as neutrally as possible, and as a kind of warm-up act before we led Daniel and the lions into our den, we decided to begin with readings from selected works on "the quest for the historical Jesus". Initially the idea was to confine ourselves to the scholars, from the early German proponents of Biblical criticism like Strauss, through Schweitzer to Funk, Crossan and the latest generation of expert questers. I took on the task of putting together a serviceable compilation. But it soon became apparent that to confine ourselves within the academy was to fail to do

justice to the sheer richness and variety of our subject-matter. So I found myself panning for nuggets of gold among the works of journalists and poets, essayists and novelists, Jesus-lovers and Jesus-loathers. And that is the basis of the somewhat arbitrary selection that follows - a selection which includes much which time did not permit us to use in our cathedral presentation, but which of course doesn't even begin to scratch the surface of the available Jesus literature.

Many of the excerpts are themselves lifted from anthologies (my erudition has very narrow limits). In particular I must acknowledge *Jesus: Authors Take Sides*, edited by Richard Ingrams (Harper Collins, 1999) and *The Jesus Debate* by Mark Allan Powell, 1998, Lion). Also useful was Margaret Knight's classic *Humanist Anthology*. I recommend all three for further study and stimulation.

How real is real?

A word, finally, about the title. "Will the real Jesus please stand up" hopefully signals that we can tackle serious matters (even in a cathedral) with a lightness of touch which wasn't always to the fore in the medieval theologians and German higher critics who preceded us in the quest. But it has an obvious flaw: the presumption that somewhere, whether in history or story, text or tradition, there *is* a *real* Jesus waiting to stand up and disown the unreal Jesus look-alikes. This is of course debatable! If we go on removing the peel from the onion, will we find a real Jesus at the onion's core, or will we simply find the last layer of peel, after which - nothing? To put the question differently, is the "real" Jesus the presumed-historical Galilean peasant whose fabulous words and deeds were the inspiration for a new religion, or is the only "real" Jesus we can ever know the Jesus of the Jesus Story, the Jesus made and continually remade by his followers? Maybe there is more than one "real" Jesus. The Jesus who was real to Ignatius does not seem to me the same Jesus who was real to Oscar Wilde, who in turn is not the Jesus who was so real to Dorothy Sayers.

Which is why every quest for the real Jesus ends with the Big Question with which we end our selection...

David Boulton is Editor of SoF, the bi-monthly magazine of the Sea of Faith Network (UK), and chaired the "Honest to Jesus" conference.



WHO OR WHAT?

"Jesus Christ, Superstar, who or what do they say you are?"

DEFINITION

Jesus: Jee-zuss. Personal name, late Hebrew or Aramaic form of "Joshua", meaning "Yahweh is salvation". Also an expletive.

WHO'D HAVE THOUGHT IT?

EP Sanders, Biblical scholar:

On a spring morning in about the year AD30, three men were executed by the Roman authorities in Judea. Two were brigands... The third was convicted of having claimed to be "king of the Jews". Those who looked on doubtless thought that the world would little note what happened that spring morning. It turned out, of course, that the third man, Jesus of Nazareth, would become one of the most important figures in human history.

VERY GOD

Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, early first century CE:

There is one physician, fleshly and spiritual, begotten and unbegotten, God in man, true life in death, both of Mary and of God, first passible then impassible, Jesus Christ our Lord.

DON'T ASK QUESTIONS

Celsus, 2nd century CE, skeptic whose writings were destroyed by the Church, except when quoted by churchmen to refute them:

How many other peoples have produced wonders like this?... Do you think all the other stories are legends but that your story of Jesus alone is noble and convincing?...



Christians usually flee headlong from cultured people, who are not prepared to be deceived; but they trap illiterate folk... Their injunctions are like this: "Let no one educated, no one wise, no one sensible draw near, for these abilities are thought by us to be evils. But as for anyone ignorant, anyone stupid, anyone who is a child, let him come boldly... Do not ask questions; only believe, and thy faith will save thee". And they say, "The wisdom of the world is evil; foolishness is good"... But why is it bad to have been educated... and both to be and to appear intelligent?

SWEET REASON

Gerrard Winstanley, Christian communist and Quaker, 1609-1676:

[Jesus] is not a single man at a distance from you, but the indwelling power of Reason... You are not to be saved by believing that a man lived and died long ago at Jerusalem... Neither are you to look for God in a place of glory beyond the sun, but within yourself and within every man.

CORRUPTED TEXTS

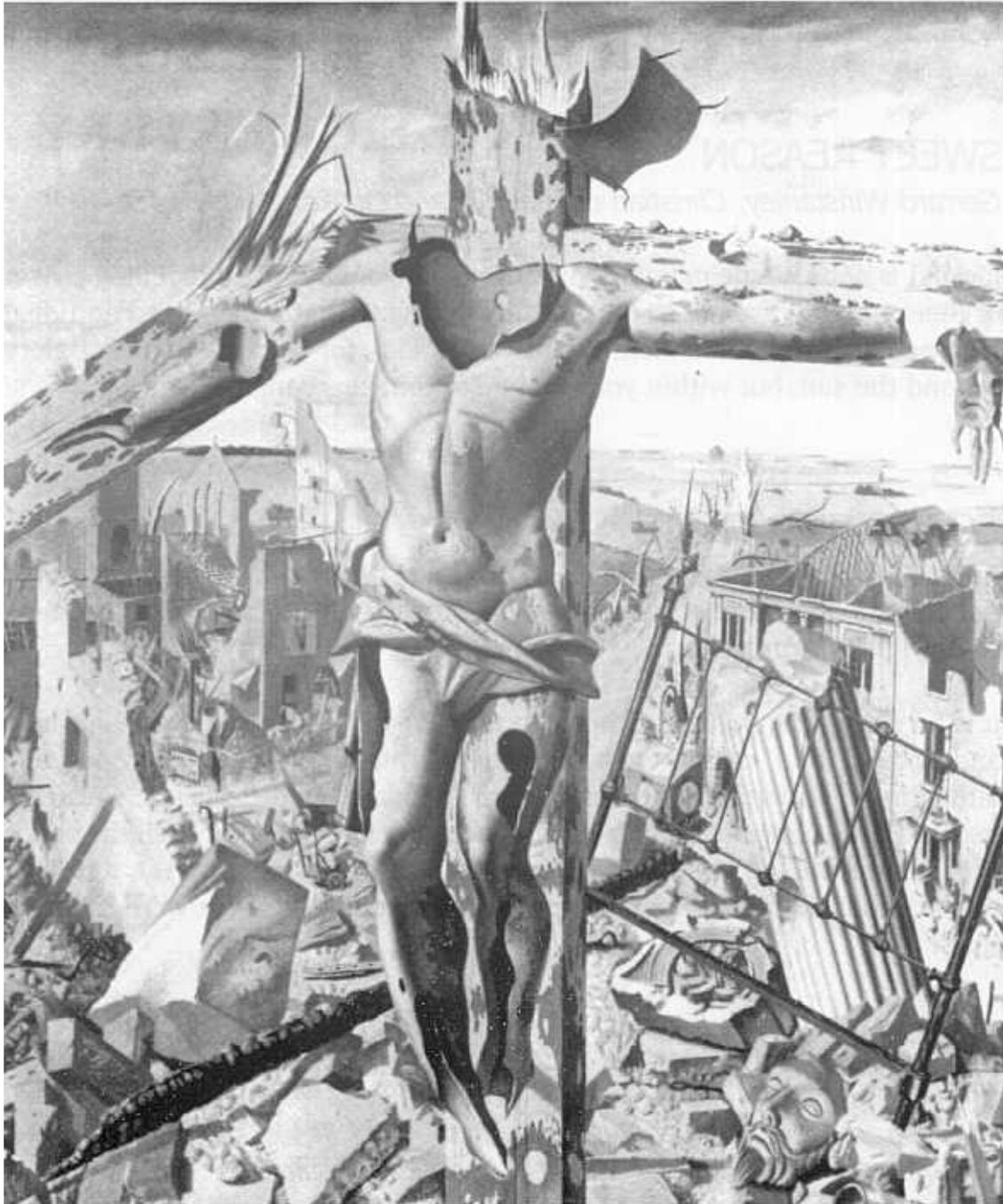
Abbe Jean Meslier, 1664-1729, who did not allow his "Testament" to be published in his lifetime because, as he wrote in his preface, "I did not wish to burn till after my death":

It is no use saying that the Gospel stories have always been regarded as holy and sacred, and that they have been faithfully preserved without any tampering... St Jerome [translator of the Vulgate] said explicitly... that the text had been corrupted and falsified, having already been through the hands of many people who added and cut out as they pleased; with the result, as he said, that there were as many different readings as there were different texts.

MADE-UP STORY

An abstract from Samuel Reimarus, pioneer of Jesus scholarship, 1694-1768, who also did not dare publish during his lifetime:

Jesus was an unsuccessful political claimant to the throne of Israel. He expected to deliver the people of Israel from bondage to the Romans and create a new and powerful kingdom on earth with himself as king... He realized in his last moments that God had failed him, that his hopes had been misplaced. His disciples, however, were unable to accept this outcome. Not wanting to return to their mundane lives in Galilee, they stole his body from its tomb, claimed he had been raised from the dead, and made up a new story about how Jesus had died willingly as an atonement for sins. Thus the new system of a suffering spiritual saviour, which no-one had ever known or thought before, was invented only because the first hopes had failed.



AN ABSURD FABLE

Tom Paine, pamphleteer for the American and French revolutions, 1737-1809:

That such a person as Jesus Christ existed, and that he was crucified, which was the mode of execution at that day, are historical relations strictly within the limits of probability. He preached most excellent morality and the equality of man; but he preached also against the corruptions and avarice and

vengeance of the whole order of priesthood. The accusation which those priests brought against him was that of sedition and conspiracy against the Roman government, to which the Jews were then subject and tributary; and it is not improbable that the Roman government might have some secret apprehension of the effects of his doctrine as well as the Jewish priests; neither is it improbable that Jesus Christ had in contemplation the delivery of the Jewish nation from the bondage of the Romans. Between the two, however, the virtuous Reformer and Revolutionist lost his life.

It is upon this plain narrative of facts... that the Christian mythologists, calling themselves the Christian Church, have erected their fable, which for absurdity and extravagance is not exceeded by anything that is to be found in the mythology of the ancients.

HISTORY OR MYTH?

An abstract from David Friedrich Strauss, 1808-1874, Lutheran pastor and scholar, author of "The Life of Jesus Critically Examined", for which he was expelled from his academic post:

We need unbiased historical research to be done on the Gospels... These things did not actually happen in the strict historical sense, but they interpret the significance of something that did occur. Most of these stories are myths, developed on the pattern of Old Testament prototypes. The point of such tales is not to record an historical occurrence but to interpret it in the light of the religious ideas put forward by Jesus.

"THE ONE IMMEASURABLY GREAT MAN"

Albert Schweitzer, scholar, musician, missionary, 1875-1965, author of "The Quest for the Historical Jesus", 1906:

There is silence all around. The Baptist appears, and cries "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand". Soon after that comes Jesus, and in the knowledge that he is the coming Son of Man lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on that last revolution which is to bring all ordinary



history to a close. It refuses to turn, and He throws Himself upon it. Then it does turn; and it crushes Him. Instead of bringing in the eschatological conditions, He has destroyed them. The wheel rolls onward, and the mangled body of the one immeasurably great Man, who was strong enough to think of Himself as the spiritual ruler of mankind and to bend history to his purpose, is hanging upon it still. That is His victory and His reign.

TOO MANY JESUSES

Various 20th century scholars:

Jesus was an hallucination, induced by a magic-mushroom-eating sect...

Jesus was a married man...

...a gay...

His real burial place is India...

...Africa...

...America..

...the South of France...

...Glastonbury.

His secrets are kept by the Gnostics...

.the Knights Templars..

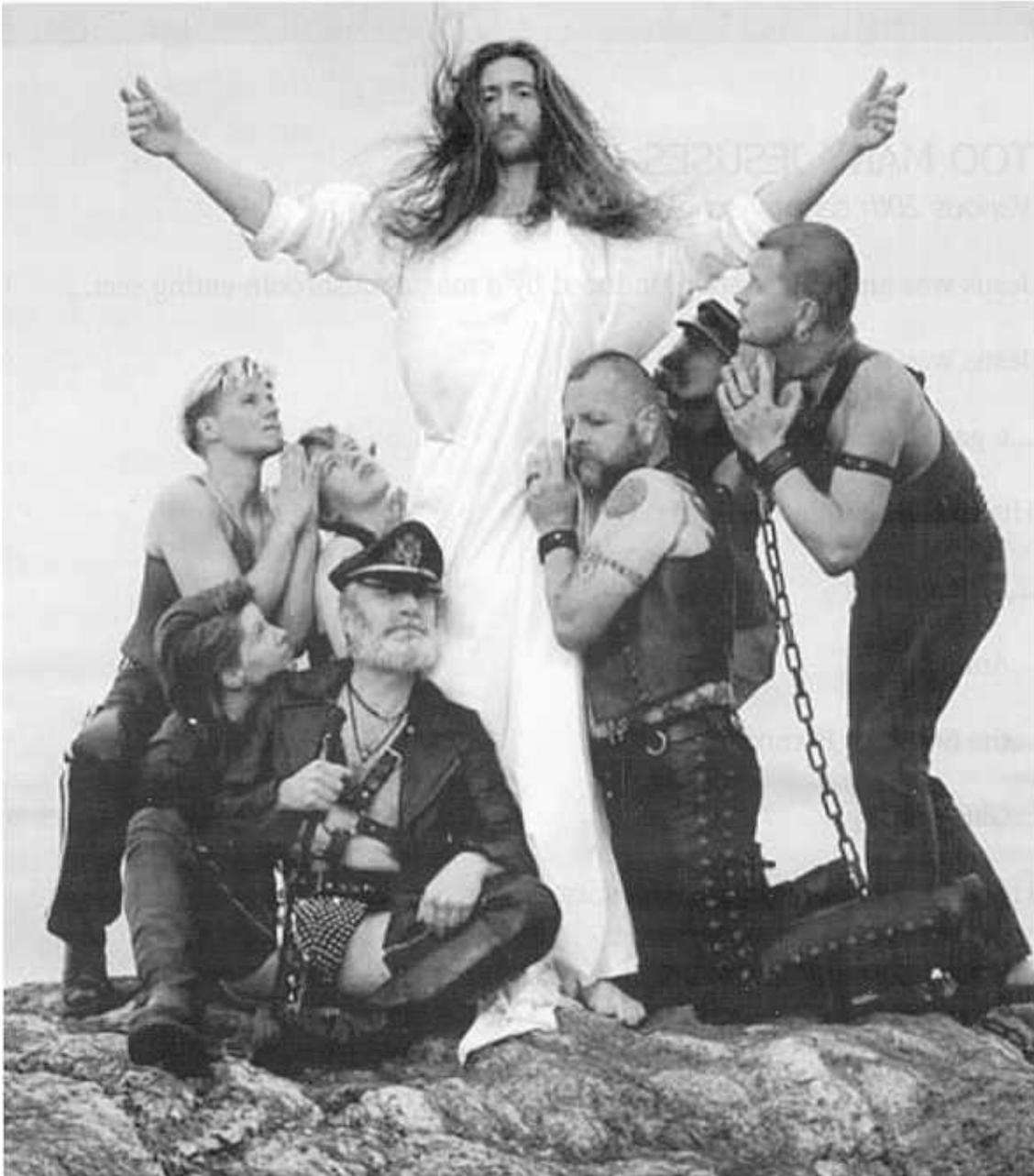
.aliens...

.the Jesus Seminar.

"A JESUS WHO BITES"

SCM pamphlet "No More Mr Nice Guy: a New Look at Jesus", 1995, edited by Caroline Bailey and Martin Davies

The sugar-coated Jesus has to go. There is no place... on the threshold of the third Christian millennium for Jesus as universal Mr Nice Guy, an image as familiar and as comforting as a shabby teddy-bear, and as much use. It is time for us to think afresh about Jesus, to shed the sentimental imagery in favour of a Jesus who *bites*.



[A range of biting Jesuses are presented for our consideration. There is Jesus the man-made Messiah; the Angry Young Jesus; the radical activist, mad, bad and dangerous to know. There is the genderless Jesus; the "peace 'n love" Jesus; the sexy Jesus, straight or gay, of modern cinema - a Jesus for all seasons].

The Gospels are stories of a man who was subversive towards current ideas about God; who undermined the social, political and religious status quo; who... named systematic and systemic injustice wherever he saw it and raged in the streets against government and religious hypocrisy. He took



sides with the outcasts and the dismissed, the untouchables and the social scapegoats.

[Of the historical Jesus] we have no rock-solid certainties, nothing we can pin down and prove irrefutably. But then, any story by which we can live is never "true" because of "proof". Any truth there is is in the living the story inspires. We have only the faith by which we live, an on-going conversation between past, present and a potential future; a continuous interaction with the stories of this mysterious and profoundly challenging figure: Jesus the man-made Messiah.

AN ACADEMIC EMBARRASSMENT

John Dominic Crossan, Jesus Seminar scholar:

Historical Jesus research is becoming something of a scholarly bad joke. There were always historians who said it should not be done because of historical problems. There were always theologians who said it should not be done because of theological objections. And there were always scholars who said the former when they meant the latter...

Competent and even eminent scholars [are] producing pictures of Jesus at wide variance with one another... That stunning diversity is an academic embarrassment. It is impossible to avoid the suspicion that historical Jesus research is a very safe place to do theology and call it history, to do autobiography and call it biography.

POOR PEASANT

HG Wells, novelist and essayist, 1866-1946:

Jesus was a penniless teacher, who wandered about the dusty sun-bit country of Judea, living upon casual gifts of food; yet he is always represented clean, combed and sleek, in spotless raiment, erect, and with something motionless about him as though he were gliding through the air. This alone has made him unreal and incredible to many people who cannot distinguish the core of the story from the ornamental and unwise additions of the unintelligently devout.



A 2nd CENTURY INVENTION

Alvar Ellegard, Swedish scholar:

Jesus was not born at the time of Augustus. He was not baptized by John. He was not sentenced to death by Pilate. He never roamed Palestine as a wandering preacher and wonder-worker. In fact, Jesus' supposed contemporaries never saw him in the flesh. Rather, Jesus appeared to them in visions, as the Christ raised by God to Heaven... The Jesus of the Gospels is a 2nd century invention... If Jesus had any historical reality, it was probably as the Teacher of Righteousness of the Essene sect, one hundred years before Christ!



FANTASY

Burton Mack, American scholar:

The Gospels' portrayal of Jesus is fantasy... the result of a layered history of imaginative embellishments of a founder figure.

THERE IS NO JESUS OF HISTORY

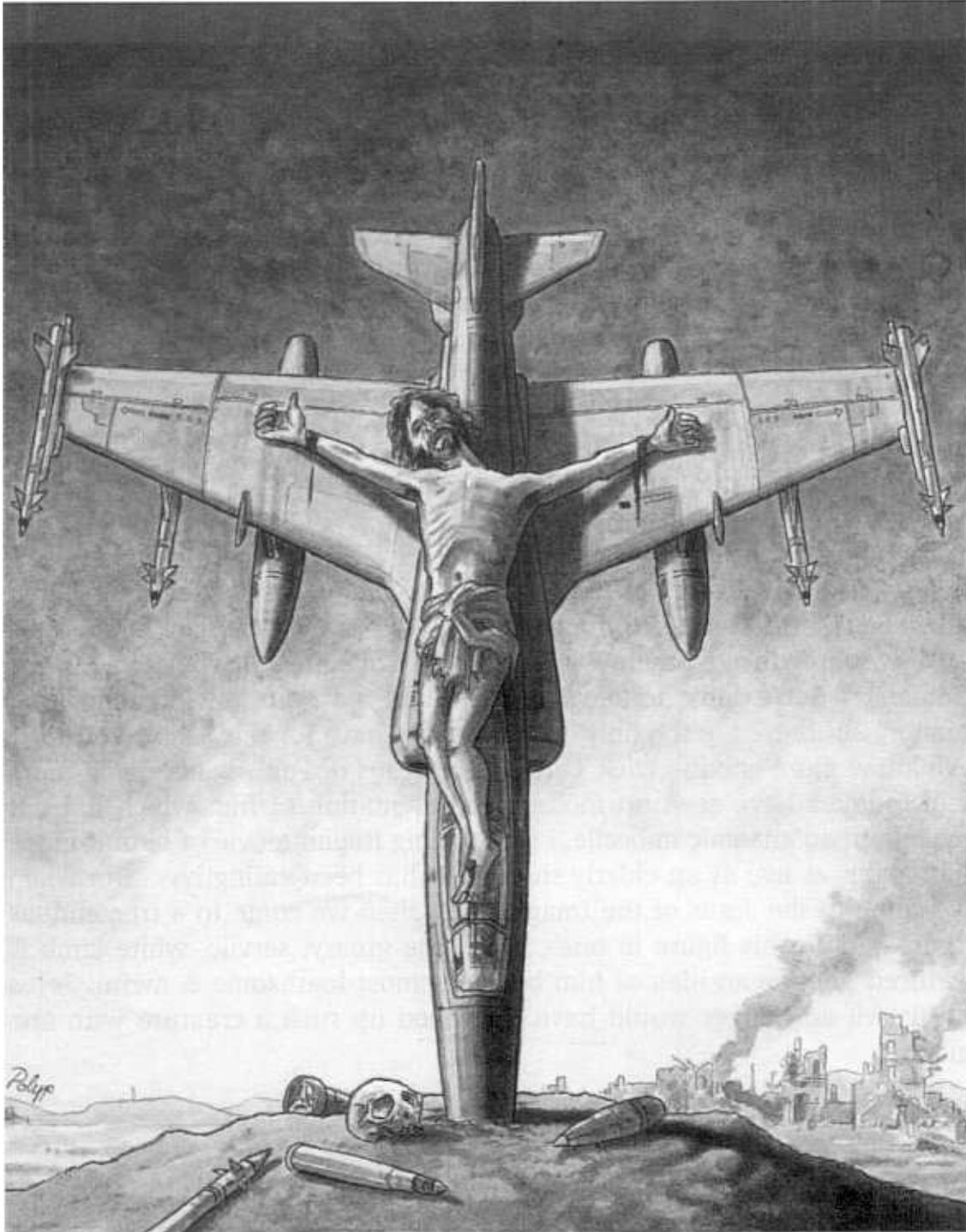
John Masefield, poet, 1878-1967:

You ought not to bother about the Jesus of History. There is no Jesus of History. The only history of Jesus is Mark, & what a wretched skimpy ill told tale it is... Matthew hated the Jews & gave them some nasty jabs by the way. Luke was an educated man who wanted to make the story palatable to the Romans. I don't think he knew Christ at all, nor Matthew either for that matter. But these are the only authorities we have for the Jesus of History. We know more about... Dick Turpin. The Jesus of Faith is not much more real today. I have seen no modern representation of him which did not make him an anaemic imbecile. I saw the big Italian movie of him. It made him about as live as an elderly sheep that has been eating ivy... But when we come to the Jesus of the Imagination, then we come to a tremendous figure... With this figure in one's heart, the greasy, servile, white lamb & tortured gentleman idea of him becomes most loathsome & awful. Jesus in his wit and anger would have shrivelled up such a creature with one glance.

PEOPLE LIKE HIM SHOULD BE LOCKED UP...

Havelock Ellis, radical and sexologist, 1859-1939

Had there been a Lunatic Asylum in the suburbs of Jerusalem, Jesus Christ would infallibly have been shut up in it at the outset of his public career. That interview with Satan on a pinnacle of the Temple would alone have damned him, and everything that happened after could but have confirmed the diagnosis. The whole religious complexion of the modern world is due to the absence from Jerusalem of a Lunatic Asylum.



BEWARE THE CLAP-TRAP OF EDUCATION

Kathleen Raine, poet and critic, born 1908:

The sublimity of Jesus is self-evident to anyone who reads the Gospels with head unturned by the clap-trap of "education" or perceptions undulled by some sentimental or stupid presentation.

"A STORY CONCOCTED BY HALF-STARVED VISIONARIES"

Robert Graves, poet, novelist and scholar, 1895-1985:

The glamour of the early Jacobean prose in which the Gospels are now clothed, and their judicial authority, are most deceptive. Judged by Greek literary standards, they are poor; by historical standards, unreliable; and their doctrine is confused and contradictory. The late-Victorian atheist (was it Bradlaugh?) may be excused for remarking that they read as though "concocted by illiterate, half-starved visionaries in some dark corner of a Graeco-Syrian slum".

"JESUS DIDN'T EVEN OWN A TOOTHBRUSH"

Henry Miller, writer, iconoclast and libertine, 1891-1980:

As often as I've read the Gospels I've never run across a single reference to the baggage that Jesus toted around. There is not even mention of a satchel, such as Somerset Maugham made use of when walking about in China... Jesus, by all accounts, didn't even own a toothbrush. No baggage, no furniture, no change of linen, no handkerchief, no passport, no identity card, no bank-book, no love letters, no insurance policy, no address-book. To be sure, he had no wife, no children, no home (not even a winter palace) and no correspondence to look after. As far as we know, he never wrote a line. Home was wherever he happened to be. Not where he hung his hat - because he never wore a hat... He set out to prove the absurdity of living by the sweat of one's brow. *Behold the lilies in the field.*

HOW HE LOOKED AND WHAT HE SAID

AN Wilson, novelist and biographer:

What does it matter whether he was short or tall or fat or thin or married or unmarried or a carpenter or a rabbi. The words shout at you.

IN NEED OF A GOOD WOMAN

DH Lawrence, novelist, 1885-1930

No man is a blooming marvel for twenty-four hours a day. Jesus or Napoleon or any other of them ought to have been man enough to be able to come home at tea-time and put his slippers on and sit under the spell of his wife. For there you are, the woman has her world, positivity: the world of love, of emotion, of sympathy. And it behooves every man in his hour to take off his shoes and relax and give himself up to his woman and her world. Not to give up his purpose. But to give up himself for a time to her who is his mate. And so it is one detests the clock-work Kant, and the petit-bourgeois Napoleon divorcing his Josephine for a Hapsburg - or even Jesus, with his "Woman, what have I to do with thee?"... They were all failures.

NOT IN NEED OF A GOOD WOMAN

George Bernard Shaw, playwright and critic, 1856-1950:

The mere thought of Jesus as a married man is felt to be blasphemous by the most conventional believers; and even those of us to whom Jesus is not a supernatural personage, but a prophet only as Mahomet was a prophet, feel that there was something more dignified in the bachelordom of Jesus than the spectacle of Mahomet lying distracted on the floor of his harem whilst his wives stormed and squabbled and henpecked around him.

"A TEACHER WHO NEVER FLATTERED OR PATRONIZED"

Dorothy Sayers, writer, 1893-1957, in "Are Women Human?":

Perhaps it is no wonder that the women were first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. They had never known a man like this Man - there had never been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, who never flattered or coaxed or patronized; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them either as "The women, God help us!" or "The ladies, God bless them!"; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously, who never mapped out their sphere for



them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no axe to grind and uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unselfconscious.

There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words of Jesus that there was anything "funny" about woman's nature. But we might easily deduce it from his contemporaries, and from his prophets before him, and from His Church to this day.



MEN ON TOP

Father...

Lord...

Master...

King...

King of kings and Lord of lords..

A second Adam...

Son of Man...

A husband to his bride, the Church...

"THE MAN WAS A MAN. THAT MATTERS"

"Rebecca", an anonymous interviewee in "Found Wanting: Women, Christianity and Sexuality" by Alison Webster, 1995:

Jesus - I hadn't really thought about him for ages. I knew he was a nice person, and I'd carefully compiled lists of serious conversations he'd had with women, but what was it I was supposed to find unique about him, anyway? The more I tried to locate it, the more it slipped away. The "kingdom" seemed like a pointless jargon word for a vision of a more just world that I'd found as convincingly described in all kinds of other places. The line that claims Jesus "experienced everything we can experience" never did wash with feminists - crucifixion is clearly nasty, but it's not a synonym for everything, and women's potential for pregnancy and childbirth are not incidental. The man was a man. That matters. And salvation, or even atonement, the idea that my relationship with the divine, even when it was muddied by fear or by doubting or hating myself, could undergo some startling one-off change because of a dying god, or dying man, or both, or something - that was crazy. I'd tried hard to trust it at various times in my life, but now it seemed long-gone. The divine broke into my life every now and then, but these were not "Christ-events". They wore a wild or womanly face.



WAS JESUS A FEMINIST?

Mary Daly, feminist, philosopher, theologian, 1973:

When no longer condemned to the role of "saviour" perhaps Jesus can be recognisable as a free man. It is only female pride and self-affirmation that can release the memory of Jesus from its destructive uses and can free freedom to be contagious...

A student of mine once told me, "I think Jesus was a feminist". I said, "I don't care whether he was or not. I am".

"BRAVE...WITTY...PETULANT...SUPREME"

Dennis Potter, playwright and journalist, 1935-1994:

There's this brave, witty, sometimes oddly petulant man striding around in an occupied territory knowing and then not wanting to know that he's bound to die and to die painfully. And in the middle of it all, to say things



that have never been said, and are still not said, about love. As a model of what human behaviour can be like, it still stands supreme.

JESUS AS SINNER

Philip Toynbee, journalist, 1916-1981

The idea that any man could be speaking for God all the time seems quite inconceivable, even absurd. How much that Jesus said must have been utterly mundane and everyday - e.g. "I wonder what there'll be for supper tonight?" or "I'm feeling a bit tired this morning"...

...This man is a humanly contradictory figure who sometimes failed to live up to his own highest teaching. The man who warned us against judging others continually judged the scribes and pharisees with virulent anger: the man who told us to love our enemies sometimes condemned those who refused to accept him to burn everlastingly in hell. It is an irony of the New Testament that not even Jesus himself could always keep the new and high law which he had given to mankind.

JESUS AS ARTIST...

Oscar Wilde, writer, moral martyr, 1854-1900, in "De Profundis":

I see a far more intimate and immediate connection between the true life of Christ and the true life of the artist; and I take a keen pleasure in the reflection that long before sorrow had made my days her own and bound me to her wheel I had written in *The Soul of Man* that he who would lead a Christlike life must be entirely and absolutely himself, and had taken as my types not merely the shepherd on the hillside and the prisoner in his cell but also the painter to whom the world is a pageant and the poet for whom the world is a song...

Christ's place indeed is with the poets. His whole conception of humanity sprang right out of the imagination and can only be realised by it. What God was to the pantheist, a man was to him. He was the first to conceive the divided races as a unity. Before his time there had been gods and men,



and, feeling through the mysticism of sympathy that in himself each had been made incarnate, he calls himself the Son of the one or the Son of the other, according to his mood. More than anyone else in history he wakes in us that temper of wonder to which romance always appeals. There is still something to me almost incredible in the idea of a Galilean peasant imagining that he could bear on his shoulders the burden of the entire world.

...AS SOCIALIST...

Paul Potts, anarchist, socialist, bohemian and Zionist, 1911-1990:

There is as much socialism in the Sermon on the Mount as there is in the Communist Manifesto, and better prose. For He told the laughed-at, the insulted and those they jeer, that they were kings and that their kingdoms were waiting for them inside themselves. He was a harp on which the finest poetry of which the human heart is capable played out its necessity and its need. If anyone doubts this, I hope this language will give me a reference. For truth is more important than infallibility, and truer. And don't ever forget that a slave is always a free man in chains.

...AND AS REVOLUTIONARY

Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1792-1822, poet, romantic revolutionary, expelled from Oxford for atheism:

The belief in all that the Bible contains is called Christianity. A Roman governor of Judea at the instance of a priest-led mob crucified a man called Jesus eighteen centuries ago. He was a man of pure life, who desired to rescue his countrymen from the tyranny of their barbarous and degrading superstitions. The common fate of all who desire to benefit mankind awaited him. The rabble at the instigation of the priests demanded his death, although his very judgement made public acknowledgment of his innocence. Jesus was sacrificed to the honour of that God with whom he was afterwards confounded. It is of importance, therefore, to distinguish between the pretended character of this being as the Son of God and the Saviour of the world and his real character as a man who for a vain attempt to reform the world paid the forfeit of his life to that overbearing tyranny which has since so long desolated the universe in his name. While the one is a hypocritical demon, who announced himself as the God of compassion and peace even while he stretches forth his blood-red hand with the sword of discord to waste the earth, having confessedly devised this scheme of desolation from eternity; the other stands in the foremost list of those true heroes who have died in the glorious martyrdom of liberty and have braved torture, contempt, and poverty in the cause of suffering humanity.

"PIOUS FRAUDS"

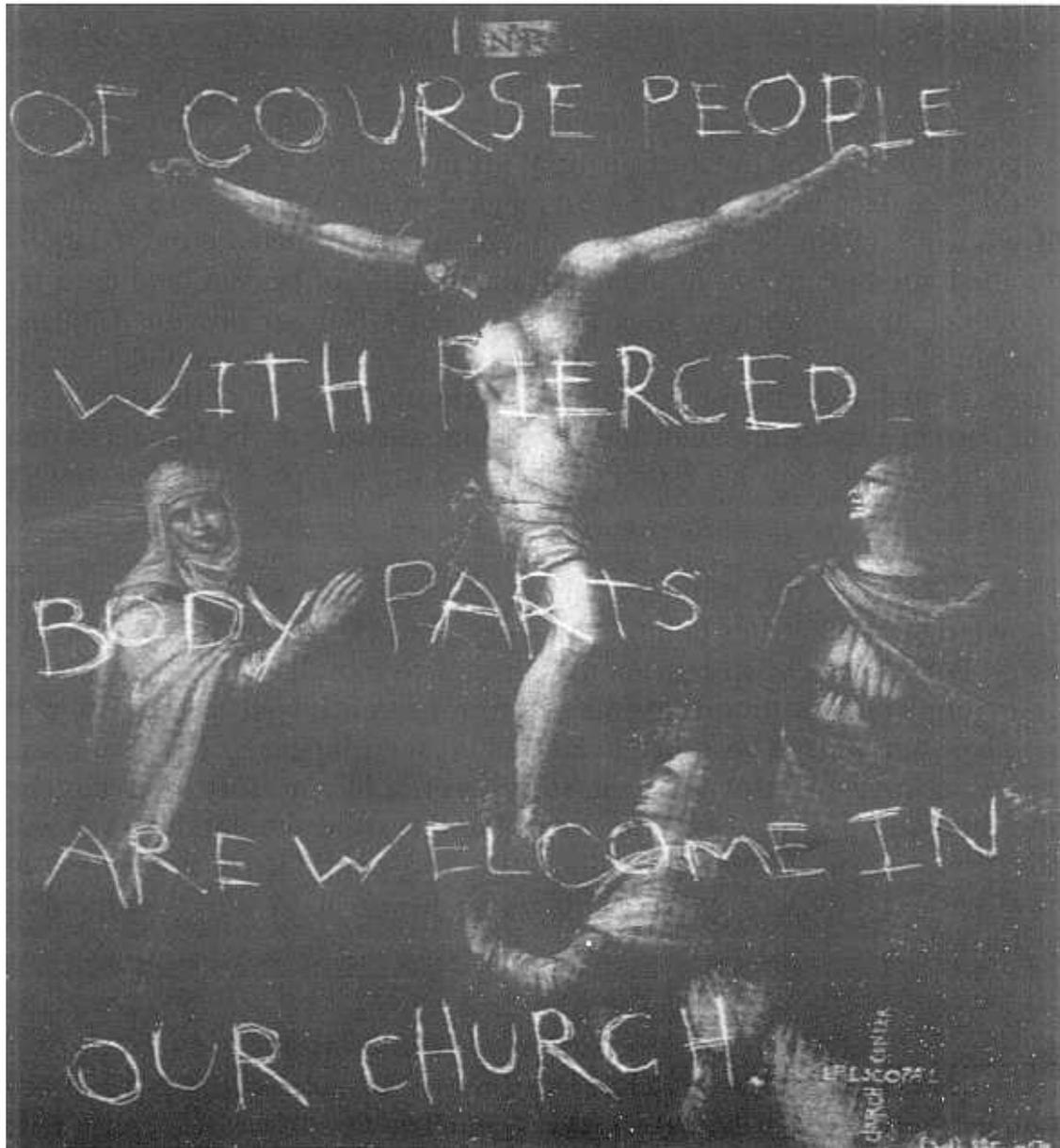
John Keats, poet, 1795-1821:

It is to be lamented that the history of [Jesus] was written and revised by men interested in the pious frauds of Religion.

THE HISTORICAL JESUS

From "Sea of Faith" magazine, March 2000:

I don't care a hoot if an historical holy man named Jesus "really" taught that the poor were privileged over the rich, the despised and wretched over the



powerful and pompous. I'm sure that a number of impassioned and inspired agitators have proclaimed as much. I honestly couldn't care less whether or not a bare-footed magician or wonder-worker "really" stood on the Mount of Olives and said those amazing, revolutionary (and baffling) words. But someone said them: or at least someone or several someones collected them, strung them together, edited them, and fashioned them into a text. And they ring true, convicting and convincing us, regardless of whether they were or were not spoken in peasant-Aramaic by a single historical person named Jesus on one of his better days.

The Jesus of the Jesus story is much bigger than any Jesus of history. The *storical* Jesus remains more influential than any *historical* Jesus. Who



inspired some of the greatest pictorial art in both the western and eastern worlds, the deepest poetry, the most magical music? Who gave us a glimpse of what we might be, and fired millions to make their heroic if largely doomed attempts to live in the life of the republic of heaven, and even try to model human society after such a vision? Not an obscure Galilean peasant of whose "real" historical life we can know little or nothing, but the Jesus created in the man-made biblical literature, the Jesus of the story, who was born in a stable and died and rose again, as surely as the Hamlet of that story heard and saw his father's ghost and drove Ophelia to her watery grave.

Thank God for the scholars whose painstaking work enriches our knowledge of what lies behind the story. But, rather, thank God for the story. For all the cheap sentiment, oppressive moralism, ugly patriarchy and sloppy superstition that has so often been allowed to overlay it, it is one of humanity's best, brightest and most enduring stories. For some it will always be "the greatest story ever told", a story that can be enriched and illuminated by historical and textual scholarship, but will always stand on its merits as literature and poetic saga, regardless of how we are advised by the scholars to locate it in our documented histories.

SETTING JESUS FREE

Robert Funk, founder of the Jesus Seminar:

The aim of the quest is to set Jesus free. Its purpose is to liberate Jesus from the scriptural and creedal and experiential prisons in which we have incarcerated him, What would happen if "the dangerous and subversive memories" of that solitary figure were really stripped of their interpretive overlay? Were that to happen, the gospel of Jesus would be liberated from the Jesus of the gospels, and allowed to speak for itself. The creedal formulations of the second, third and fourth centuries would be de-dogmatized, and Jesus would be permitted to emerge as a robust, real, larger-than-life figure in his own right. Moreover, current images of Jesus would be torn up by their long affective roots and their attachment to pet causes severed. The pale, anemic, iconic Jesus would suffer by comparison with the stark realism of the genuine article.



THE BIG QUESTION

Mark 8: 27-29, late First Century CE, author unknown:

Jesus went on with his disciples to the village of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him

"John the Baptist"

and others

"Elijah";

and still others,

"one of the prophets".

He asked them, "*But who do you say that I am?*"...