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WITHOUT ILLUSION**

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**THE NEW TESTAMENT
WITHOUT ILLUSION**

JOHN L. McKENZIE

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The New Testament Without Illusion

By McKenzie, John L.

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Series Foreword

MARK TWAIN ONCE RUMINATED, “It ain’t the parts of the Bible I can’t understand that bother me; it’s the parts I do.” John L. McKenzie, commenting on the same subject from another perspective, wrote, “The simple see at once that the way of Jesus is very hard to do, but easy to understand. It takes real cleverness and sophisticated intelligence to find ways to evade and distort the clear meaning of what Jesus said.”

But McKenzie, like Twain, was himself a person of exceedingly high intelligence, distinctively witty, with a double-edged sword’s incisiveness. As the first Catholic elected President of the Society of Biblical Literature, President of the Catholic Biblical Association, fluent in ten languages, sole author of a 900,000-word Bible dictionary, of over a dozen books and hundreds of essays, John McKenzie attained worldwide recognition as the dean of Catholic biblical scholars.

But again like Twain, McKenzie possessed a cultivated reservoir of abiding empathy—cognitive and emotional—for ordinary people and what they endure, millennia-in and millennia-out. He insisted: “I am a human being before I am a theologian.” Unlike many who become entrenched in a hermetic, scholarly world of ever-multiplying abstractions, McKenzie never permitted his God-given faculty of empathy to atrophy. To the contrary, he refused to leave his fellow human beings out in the cold on the doorstep of some empathically-defective theological house of cards. This refusal made all the difference. It also often cost him the support, or engendered the hostility, of his ecclesiastical and academic associates and institutional superiors—as so often happens in scholarly, commercial and governmental endeavors, when unwanted truth that is the fruit of unauthorized empathy is factored into the equation.

Series Foreword

John McKenzie produced works of biblically “prophetic scholarship” unlike anything created in the twentieth century by any scholar of his stature. They validate, with fastidious erudition, what the “simple see at once” as the truth of Jesus—e.g., “No reader of the New Testament, simple or sophisticated, can retain any doubt of Jesus’ position toward violence directed to persons, individual or collective; he rejected it totally”—but which pastors and professors entrenched in ecclesiastical nationalism and/or organizational survivalism have chronically obscured or disparaged.

In literate societies, power-elites know that to preemptively or remedially justify the evil and cruelty they execute, their think-tanks must include theologians as part of their mercenary army of academics. These well-endowed, but empathically underdeveloped, theological hired guns then proselytize bishops, clergy, and Christians in general by gilding the illogical with coats of scholarly circumlocutions so thick that the opposite of what Jesus said appears to be Gospel truth. The intent of this learned legerdemain is the manufacturing of a faux consensus fidei to justify, in Jesus’ sacred name, everything necessary to protect and augment an odious—local, planetary and/or ecclesial—status quo.

John McKenzie is the antidote to such secular and ecclesial think-tank pseudo-evangelization. Truths Jesus taught—that the simple see at once and that Christian Churches and their leaders have long since abandoned, but must again come to see if they are to honestly proclaim and live the Gospel—are given superior scholarly exposition via McKenzie. This is what moved Dorothy Day to write in her diary on April 14, 1968, “Up at 5:00 and reading *The Power and the Wisdom*. I thank God for sending me men with such insights as Fr. McKenzie.”

For those familiar with McKenzie this re-publication of his writings offers an opportunity to encounter again a consistent scholarly-empathic frame of consciousness about Genesis through Revelation, whose major crux interpretum is the Servant of Yahweh (Isaiah 42). Ultimately embodied in the person of Jesus, the Servant is the revealer of Abba almighty—who is “on our side,” if our means each person and all humanity. For all Christians, John L. McKenzie’s prophetic scholarship offers a wellspring of Jesus-sourced truth about the life they have been

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chosen to live, the world in which they live, and the Christ in whom they
“live and move and have their being.”

(Rev.) Emmanuel Charles McCarthy

September 2008

Brockton, Massachusetts

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CHAPTER

1

THE WORLD IN WHICH JESUS WAS BORN

WRITERS of modern fiction have sometimes exercised their imaginations in presenting a scene in which Jesus appears in the modern world. The exercise is not without danger, since the writer may suffer from little knowledge of the "historical" Jesus or little understanding of the modern world. Yet I believe many students share my own impression that the world of Roman Hellenism, when it is closely studied, strikes a familiar chord in the mind and the heart of the student. The western world of the twentieth century is more like the world of Roman Hellenism than any world period which lies between the two. The imagined response of our world to a personal encounter with the historical Jesus can be well projected from the response of the world of Roman Hellenism to Jesus. That response, as we know, was general indifference tending to utter ignorance, but locally and personally hostile to the point of procuring the violent death of Jesus.

In spite of the prolonged and intense disputes of scholars over the reality of "the historical Jesus," he must be accepted as a historical person, however dimly known. He was a Palestinian Jew who was born and died in the first half of the first century of our era. The obscurity which many find in his person and history does not extend to the world and the times in which he lived. At the risk of superficial generalization, this book must include some reference to that world.

I used the term Roman Hellenism to define this world; this

term signifies the political unity of the world under the government of the Roman Empire and the cultural unity of the world in a Greek civilization. Within this world there were many smaller “worlds,” as there are in our western “world.” It seems difficult to say of Jesus, as we say so easily of any other historical personage, that he was the product of the world in which he lived. The remark seems to deny the transcendence which Christians have long believed to be proper to the Son of God. Yet when we speak of the “historical” Jesus, we mean a man who was born in a particular place at a particular time. If we believe that Jesus was no more and no less human than we are—and orthodox belief accepts nothing else—then he, like us, was born in a culture which he did not create and spoke a language which he did not invent in a society which he did not organize.

To understand anyone is to understand the social and cultural forces which produced a defined and recognizable human being. This human being could further define his individuality only within the social and cultural framework within which he was born, which both equipped him to develop his individuality and set the limits within which development was possible. I happen to be a native of the United States of America, baptized in infancy in the Roman Catholic church. Even if I had renounced both of these affiliations, I would remain their product. Every person of historical importance modifies the world in which he was born. We believe this of Jesus.

It is, then, of importance that Jesus was born a subject of the Roman Empire. This empire endured about three hundred years before it began to fail in the functions of government; it was probably the most successful political

system ever devised, if one can test success by the maintenance of peace, law and social stability. It met Jefferson's canon of the consent of the governed as the source of the power of just governments better than any government before or since; yet, by no more than a superficial standard of justice the Roman Empire was not a just government. It was a government of religious tolerances; persecutions of Christians and Jews were infrequent episodes in a tolerance generally maintained because the government did not think religion was important enough to deserve a policy of repression. Religious indifference has always been that political attitude which best assures religious tolerance.

In modern times we should be able to understand the Roman subjects' appreciation of Roman law. Before the Empire it was scarcely possible for a man to make a journey by sea or by land, even to the nearest market town, without a heavy risk of piracy or robbery. Pirate and robber gangs pillaged small cities. The traveler who was aided by the Good Samaritan was an example of a condition which the Romans ultimately eliminated. Thus a free interchange of goods and ideas was possible over an area which included all of western Europe south of the Rhine, the Mediterranean coasts, the island of Britain south of the Roman Wall, the modern countries of North Africa, and western Asia west of the Euphrates. These territories were governed by a single political authority, administered under a single legal system, used a common language, and were protected from barbarian raids by the legions of the frontier which, at their peak, numbered thirty-six.

At the same time this political system did not impose cultural uniformity; this will become clearer below. The

Roman Empire was far from perfect; I have said before that I found it impossible to study the ancient Romans closely and remain sympathetic to them. When I say that they probably elaborated the most successful political system ever devised, possibly I have not said much. To the subjects the Empire seems to have been much like the weather: more often agreeable than disagreeable, creating the conditions in which we lead our accustomed lives, often the object of complaint but never of revolution.

The Roman poet Virgil wrote, not without a tinge of envy, that others might write the philosophy, tragedy and poetry, and carve the statues; it is yours, O Roman, to rule. Virgil was talking about the Greeks, of whom a later Roman poet wrote about his own city that he could not stand a Greek city. Whether the Roman political world could have survived without the unifying principle of Hellenistic culture is a historical question of the type which is interesting but insoluble.

We give the name of Greek or Hellenic culture to the civilization which was centered about Athens in the fifth century B.C. We give the name of Hellenistic to the more diffused form of Greek culture which was produced in Greece as a whole in the fourth century B.C. after the political collapse of Athens. This was the culture which was transmitted by the conquests of Alexander the Great in the latter fourth century to most of western Asia and which then passed to those areas which by the end of the first century B.C. had become the territories of the Roman Empire. In the Hellenistic-Roman world each of the regions of the Empire had produced its own form of Hellenistic culture; the result was a remarkable diversity in unity which has not been

rivalled until the movement of western culture into other continents in the twentieth century.

The qualities of Hellenistic culture which were responsible for its dominance need not be explained to those who know how much Hellenistic culture endures in our own civilization. The Romans, as the quotation from Virgil shows, knew that the ability to create armies, build bridges and roads, and administer vast territories were not the qualities which produced art and literature; and the heritage which we have from Hellenism is more enduring than the heritage which we have from Rome. It may be necessary to explain that no one doubts that Jesus spoke Greek; it is highly unlikely that he spoke Latin, and it is still uncertain how much he spoke Greek and how much he spoke Aramaic, the language of the country of his nativity. This is not merely a question of ideas, whatever we may mean by that; archaeology shows that the pottery used in Palestinian villages of the time of Jesus was Greek in type and in some instances Greek in manufacture. In modern times we have learned that those who manufacture our goods also affect our thinking.

Two features of Hellenistic culture which were profoundly important in the diffusion of the Gospel throughout the Roman world immediately become obvious; these were a common language and a network of easy communication. Paul once mentioned the perils of travel (2 Corinthians 11:25-27). Roman roads and Roman patrol of the highways and the seaways had much reduced these perils. A common language means much more than verbal exchange. It means shared patterns of thought, common social and political institutions, common values. A Jew who was not, like Paul,

steeped in Hellenistic culture, would never have used the athletic contests of the games as an example of the moral discipline of the Christian life (I Corinthians 9:24-27). Jews, like later Christians, found the games morally objectionable, a sentiment which Paul does not express.

I said above that the student often feels at home in Roman-Hellenistic culture. One familiar note which strikes an echo is the nearly total irreligiosity of this civilization. Our witnesses for this are, of course, the writers and artists; but everything suggests that those who did not write literature were no more religious. Greek philosophy employed the tools of rational criticism on traditional mythological religion; of course the religion could not withstand these attacks.

Well before the Christian era it is clear that the religion of the temples, the festivals and the myths, the religion which was the background of epic and tragedy, was taken seriously as a religion by no one; it was a part of civic cult, a way of attesting one's citizenship. For the educated, philosophy was a substitute for religion. It presented a rational deity (quite impersonal) and a rational code of conduct. The natural law was adopted by later Christian moralists from Stoicism. The vast majority of people, who were not educated, replaced religion with superstition. Magic and divination were flourishing industries; and some philosophical works have survived in which these superstitions are taken quite seriously. An authentic religious experience, it seems, was found only in the mystery cults, survivals of the fertility rites of the ancient Near East. These had the attraction of the exotic, an attraction which our contemporaries still feel.

These observations, sketchy as they are, will suggest that

the world in which Jesus was born was no more ripe for the Christian message than the world in which we live. The Hellenistic-Roman world had tried a thorough secularism, and they could have said that it works. They were not receptive to the suggestion that the world they had created lacked anything; and if it did, it was not religion, and certainly not a religion from the most obscure and backward corner of the Roman dominions; for that is what Palestine was.

The name of Syria Palestina for the territories south of the mountains Lebanon and Hermon goes back to the second century B.C. The life of Jesus was almost entirely passed within two subdivisions of this territory, Judea and Galilee, both governed by satellite kings like the Herods or by a Roman officer called a procurator, subordinate to the governor of the province of Syria. The changes in political administration within the single lifetime of Jesus are too complex for treatment within the space available. These two regions were remnants of the ancient kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and the Jews who dwelt there were the ethnic and religious descendants of the peoples of Israel and Judah.

I called these territories obscure and backward; this summary of the opinion of the peoples of the Roman Empire is based upon the paucity of references to the Jews and Palestine in the Greek and Roman writings of the period, and upon the contemptuous tone of the majority of these references. Contrary to much modern popular belief, anti-Jewish prejudice is not a Christian invention. Palestinian Jews had by deliberate choice remained outside the world of Hellenistic culture as much as possible, and emigrant Jews who settled in the large Mediterranean cities lived in their own quarters of

these cities, again by deliberate choice. The foundations of prejudice were laid when Jews refused to assimilate themselves to the dominant culture.

It was Jewish belief that ritual worship could be paid to God only on Mount Zion, which he had chosen for the dwelling place of his name. The temple which Jesus saw on Zion was the third temple on the site (leaving out of account the Canaanite temple which certainly stood there before the temple of Solomon). This was the temple of Herod, not yet finished when Jesus died. Most Jews therefore worshipped in the local assembly called the synagogue; this worship was not ritual and was not conducted by priests. The first three Gospels place Jesus seldom in the temple but often in the synagogues; this was probably the average experience of the Palestinian Jew who dwelt outside Jerusalem. Synagogue worship consisted of regular readings of the Bible with some brief explanation and community hymns and prayers.

The essential element of Jewish religion was the observance of the Torah, the Law of Moses. Observance of the Law was the main reason for the Jewish exclusiveness mentioned above. The exclusiveness of the Jews was compounded by the interpretation of the scribes (also called doctors and lawyers in the Gospels), which even in its more generous forms we would call strict. The laws of ritual cleanliness made it impossible for Jews to live in Gentile neighborhoods or to do more than essential business with them; and ordinary social intercourse between the two groups was extremely difficult.

Gentiles thought Jews arrogant and supercilious. The Jewish law imposes a rigorous moral code in a world which was morally more tolerant even than our own. The Jews

regarded the Gentiles as hopeless sinners devoid of even elementary human decency. They had no use for Gentile literature, which was a litany in praise of sin. Gentile wisdom was folly to the Jews; their sacred writings contained all the wisdom God had given to man, and these writings alone were worthy of serious study. Jews could not attend the theatre or the games, not could they disport themselves in the public baths. The nudity which was so common and accepted in the Hellenistic world was appalling to the Jews. So was the common and socially quite acceptable prostitution and homosexuality. The Second Commandment made it impossible for them to admire, much less to imitate the art of the Hellenistic world. Art was idolatry.

There is some question as to how faithfully Jews observed the Law with its strict interpretation. The Jewish sources of this period come from rabbinical scribes who recognize nothing but strict observance. But they do speak of the *amhaaretz*, a phrase which had come to mean a nonobservant Jew (which a Victorian Jewish novelist, Israel Zangwill, preserved as "Earth-People," from its original Hebrew meaning, "people of the land"). The life of the peasant or working man, it seems, hardly permitted the time and the trouble involved in strict observance of the Law. Even in the Jewish quarters of the large cities it must have been impossible to avoid contact with the unclean. The words of Jesus in the Gospels describe the observance as a burden impossible to bear. There were others besides Jesus who uttered similar criticisms.

That Judaism is not a monolith was a truth too subtle for the Gentiles of the Roman-Hellenistic world, as it is too subtle for most Gentiles of the modern world. The New Testament

has made us familiar with the Pharisees and the Sadducees, but the serious student must go beyond the New Testament for further information. The Sadducees are still obscure. It appears that they were members of the priestly families and the landowning aristocracy. It is not surprising that they are described by scholars as political and religious conservatives; clergy and landowners usually are such. Religiously they accepted only the Torah as Bible and rejected all beliefs not found in the books of Moses—for example, the resurrection of the dead. Politically they believed in accommodation with Rome; in modern terms, they supported law and order. There were Sadducee scribes and interpreters of the Law, but only the Pharisee interpretations have survived in Jewish literature. The Sadducees as a religious and political sect were wiped out in the Jewish rebellion against Rome which destroyed Palestinian Judaism in 66-70 A.D.

Jewish scholars have long protested that the Gospel portrayal of the Pharisees is a malicious caricature. We may say at once that it is generally (but not totally) hostile, Pharisees appear in the Gospels as earnest seekers of truth. Scholars believe that most Jewish Christian members of the primitive church were drawn from the Pharisees. Paul himself was a Pharisee, and his opponents in the Jewish-Christian controversy appear to have been Pharisees or pupils of the Pharisees. Nevertheless, the English adjective “pharisaical” sticks to the Jewish hide like a burr (as the adjective “jesuitical” sticks to the hide of the Jesuits). Both are unfair but not totally mendacious.

Jewish literature supports the rigorism which Jesus is said to have criticized. The popular history which is the source of the Gospels does not make the fine distinctions which we

expect in modern scientific history. In taking the rigorists as representative the popular tradition did not create a non-existent class. They were not unaware of others nor were they silent about them. The best explanation of the hostility toward Jesus and Christians which the New Testament attributes to the Pharisees is that the Pharisees were hostile to Jesus and Christians. If the criticisms of rigorism which the gospels report of Jesus represent anything close to his words, it is hard to see how the Pharisees as a class can have been anything but hostile. These criticisms attack the very basis of their religious leadership.

The recent discovery of a previously unknown Jewish sect at Qumran is indeed of interest to New Testament studies, but not relevant to my purpose in this essay, except that the sect shows that the Jewish world was more diversified than we had thought. Of more interest is that movement (we can hardly call it a sect) which was called by ancient historians the Zealots. Where the Sadducees accepted Roman dominion and the Pharisees awaited the deliverance of God, the Zealots believed that Roman dominion was an invasion of God's sovereignty which it was sinful to accept. Their tactics were what is now called guerrilla warfare. They are in the same line with the Maccabees of the second century B.C., the Jewish "freedom fighters" of the 1940s, and the Palestinian liberators of the 1970s. They were and are all terrorists, and whether their cause was just or not does not justify their tactics. The Romans called them bandits and treated them as such; that is, they crucified them. The Zealots ultimately destroyed themselves and their own people by raising the rebellion against Rome in 66 A.D.

A few recent scholars have proposed that Jesus was a

Zealot. They base this assertion mostly on the fact that Jesus was executed as a bandit; the Gospels tell us of the penalty and of his company. They are undeniably obscure on the exact charge; and the Romans did not execute people without a legal process, which does not of necessity imply justice. The most likely charge was rebellion; precisely the claim of kingship.

The teaching of the Gospels on violence is so patently opposed to terrorism that the few scholars who have supported the theory of Jesus the Zealot have found this an embarrassment too great to handle. The sources of this teaching are indeed open to examination and discussion, for the doctrine is too novel and too original to be treated casually; but to attribute such a revolutionary moral principle to a bandit chieftain certainly passes all the bounds of credibility. About this view, as about some other views of the life and teaching of Jesus, we may say that it can be maintained only on the hypothesis that we know nothing about Jesus.

CHAPTER

2

THE REAL JESUS

MANY Christians learn sooner or later that no one knows what Jesus looked like. The conventional portrait which has been adopted in pictures and statues is entirely the work of the imagination of artists. Many of these pictures are obviously too saccharine to be trustful, but if they were anything else they would have no better foundation in historical memory. If we had contemporary representations of Palestinian peasants these would at least furnish a type within which we could more safely place Jesus; but even such typical images are lacking.

Most Christian artists have made Jesus resemble somewhat their own people, retaining the conventional image with some Italian or German features, modified by what they thought was a foreign look. No early literature describes any features of Jesus; and one of the earliest known pictures of Jesus as the good shepherd represents him as beardless, which we can feel sure is purely imaginative. Most men in the Roman Empire of the first century shaved, as Paul apparently did; but Palestinian villagers did not.

The fact that we do not know what Jesus looked like, if one reflects upon it, will lead us to reflect further that there is much more than his appearance that is unknown to us. The few who visit the modern Palestinian village for a longer time than it takes to drive through are likely to be bewildered by the fact that these people would be more at home with Jesus than they themselves are. A friend of mine once observed rather

sagely that if Abraham Lincoln were to return to Illinois he would most quickly strike up an acquaintance with X, naming one of the more unsavory politicians of Illinois at the time. This is not to say that X really understood Lincoln, but merely that he spoke the same language; and this is all I mean about the Palestinian villagers. The Gospels tell us that the villagers contemporary with Jesus did not understand him; but they knew him better than we do. We flatter ourselves that we have an understanding of him which they lacked.

The simple vital statistics about Jesus are not available with the accuracy we would desire. Neither the date of his birth nor the date of his death are known exactly. He was born during the reign of Augustus, who died in 14 A.D., and died during the reign of Tiberius, who died in 37 A.D. He was called Jesus of Nazareth, because that is where he spent most of his life. Both Matthew and Luke, however, place his birth in Bethlehem. It is my duty to point out that a large number of historians regard the Bethlehem birth as a theological imagination, placing the birth of the Messiah in the town of David, the ancestor of the Messiah.

The parents of Jesus were Joseph and Mary, and both of them were endowed in early Christian belief with Davidic ancestry. A messianic title was Son of David. Joseph was a carpenter and Jesus was trained in the trade of his father. Modern scholars show a prudent reserve in dealing with the early years of Jesus, on the principle that the early years of famous men are not often remembered unless they are the sons of famous parents. Even the period of the life of Jesus in which the Gospels are interested is never defined exactly in terms of years and months. The geography is equally vague; most of the incidents are not exactly located.

It would be a mistake to think that Jesus was simply a product of his background. People who achieve distinction in anything are more than products of their background; Abraham Lincoln and John Dillinger were not routine products of rural Illinois and rural Indiana. Mark tells us (3:20-21) that "his own people" (relatives or friends?) thought he was out of his mind and wished to put him under restraint. We know nothing of these "people" except a few names scattered through the Gospels. Much as it may wound traditional devotions, we know next to nothing about Joseph and Mary as persons. There are few words attributed to Mary in the Gospels, and each of them creates a problem of interpretation. The words attributed to Joseph are even fewer.

With this kind of information, the key to the understanding of Jesus does not lie in his family or his village. But in fact if we knew all about his family and his village we still should not have the key. Jesus, like all men who rise above the average, was too subtle for the people who knew him and too subtle for his historians.

For well over a hundred years biblical scholarship has engaged itself in the pursuit of the real Jesus, what scholars called "the historical Jesus" or "the Jesus of history." It was thought that the Gospels presented not the Jesus of history but the Christ of faith, not the man who had walked and talked with his fellow men and lived and died like them but the pre-existing Son of God who would return on the clouds to judge the living and the dead. This figure, the scholars believed, was mythological rather than real, a figure who represented what his followers believed he was and not what they had experienced. Reasonable men, they thought, could not believe in a figure of mythology; and it was hoped that by

recovering the simple uncomplicated Palestinian villager they might discover a figure who was credible.

In support of this effort one might appeal to other transformations of historical figures whose stories are told in the light of the greatness which they achieved at the climax of their careers. In candid fact they did not always manifest this greatness. The Abraham Lincoln of history was not the great brooding figure enthroned in the monument. Yet that monument does symbolize the greatness which he did achieve and which allows us to forget that Lincoln was capable of the small as well as the great. One might retort that the monument is not dedicated to his smallness but to his victory over his smallness. It is possible that the historical Lincoln might obscure the real Lincoln.

Scholars of whatever shade of belief now generally accept that Jesus did not present himself and was not apprehended by those who knew him by experience as the pre-existent Son of God who announced that he would return upon the clouds to judge the living and the dead. They believe these traits were attached to him by his followers, and this rather early in the history of Christianity.

This preoccupation with the “real” or the “historical” Jesus was not shared by Paul, the first Christian to put his beliefs in writing. Paul had not experienced the real Jesus, but he felt no sense of loss. For him Jesus still lived. It was the Christ event, what God had wrought in Jesus the Christ, that was all important; he summed this up in a single sentence when he wrote that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19). Paul rarely quotes the words of Jesus, never directly, and never alludes to miracles or other deeds. The saving act of Christ was all Paul preached.