



JESUS THEN AND JESUS NOW

Looking for Jesus, Finding Ourselves



GREGORY C. JENKS

This book is written from an intentionally progressive Christian perspective. It draws together multiple strands from the author's personal and professional life: critical biblical scholarship, field archaeology, parish ministry, seminary teaching, and personal religious practice.

In this book you will find a profile of what Jesus may have been like within the context of Second Temple Judaism. This is set alongside selected aspects of the Jesus tradition as preserved in the earliest Christian writings. Neither is ascribed primacy over the other, but each casts light on the other and both inform the final part of the book that traces some of the ways in which Jesus communities now might shape their collective and individual lives.

The book begins with recent research into the diverse expressions of Jewish identity and practice in the early Roman period. These chapters focus on three key issues: the villages of Galilee as the primary setting for the activity of Jesus, the politics of the Herodian succession, and the significance of continued Jewish religious aspirations for divine intervention.

This is followed by a careful consideration of the Jesus tradition in the Gospels. Four issues are considered in turn: Jesus and the kingdom of God; Jesus and the afterlife; friends and opponents of Jesus; and his death by public execution on a cross. The interplay of these four themes, together with the contextual dynamics of the previous section, generates a composite image that blends the various glimpses of Jesus into a more realistic impression.

Finally, the book explores some of the more controversial aspects of Christianity in the contemporary world. Alongside the traditional focus on the divinity of Jesus, this book celebrates the humanity of Jesus. What is the significance of resurrection in a culture where individual survival

beyond physical death is becoming increasingly meaningless? What challenges and opportunities do the multi-faith realities of our human community offer for the future of the spiritual tradition that Jesus began?

The book finishes with some reflections on the individual and public implications of Christian discipleship today. This is not a template for a 'new Reformation', but a modest statement of how at least one progressive Christian seeks to fashion a life that is 'holy' and 'true'.

The author Gregory Jenks is an Anglican priest and biblical scholar. He is Academic Dean at St Francis Theological College, Brisbane and Senior Lecturer in the School of Theology, Charles Sturt University. A long-time Fellow of the Jesus Seminar, and a former Associate Director of the Westar Institute, Dr Jenks is also director of the Jesus Database project and a co-director of the Bethsaida Archaeology Project in Israel. His recent books include *The Once and Future Bible: An Introduction to the Bible for Religious Progressives* (2011), and *Wisdom and Imagination: Religious Progressives and the Search for Meaning* (co-edited with Rex Hunt, 2014)

Val Webb says of this book ...

Biblical scholar Greg Jenks has magnificently achieved his goal—to produce a reading of Jesus that engages, not just the historical, but also the literary and theological dynamics of the questions. He modestly says:

For me, neither life nor religion is about gripping the answers. I know very little about Jesus, even less about God, and not much more about myself. Despite those serious gaps in knowledge and understanding life goes on, and I choose to live with the questions rather than fret over a lack of answers. That choice is itself an act of faith. It is my faith. Credo. (xii)

With creative and economic selection of pertinent material from a plethora of themes and sources, Jenks weaves his story, preserving his scholarly integrity while inspiring the thoughtful layperson to travel with ease this evolving adventure with him, asking the burning questions about Jesus on everyone's lips. The book's brilliance lies in its ability to make connections, to evaluate clues and to anchor and interpret this Palestinian Jew in his first century roots with a vividness I have not previously encountered. Not content with simply being the biblical scholar, Jenks then reflects personally and theologically on how the life and teachings of Jesus about God's longed for reign might translate for individuals and communities today - themes of justice, peace, ethics, other faiths and understanding ourselves. If you read no other book about Jesus, read this one!

—Val Webb, Australian theologian and author of 10 books including *Stepping Out with the Sacred: Human Attempts to Engage the Divine*.

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More endorsements ...

Greg Jenks has provided us with an important link that is sorely needed. Drawing upon his own skills in archeology and biblical research, Jenks carefully paints a vivid picture of the historical Jesus as seen by some of today's best scholars. However, he does not stop there. In the last four chapters of his book he offers ways that churches and individuals can incorporate these new understandings of Jesus, as a teacher, into our faith communities and personal practices. It is a compelling alternative to much of what we are doing now. I believe this book will be a significant tool for church leaders and interested individuals who are trying to move Christianity into the 21st century.

—Fred Plumer, President, progressivechristianity.org

Greg Jenks accomplishes three things in his book: *Jesus Then and Jesus Now*. First, he brilliantly places Jesus into the Jewish world of the 1st century. Second, he forces our current concept of Jesus into dialogue with the expanding knowledge and world view of the 21st century. Third, he establishes himself as one of the leading scripture scholars of the new generation.

—John Shelby Spong, author of *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic*

Greg Jenks has embarked on a well-traveled journey to “discover” Jesus, but has taken a seldom followed path. Along his way he combines several usually disparate lenses to view an oft depicted landscape: archaeology, history, biblical scholarship, theology, and personal reflection. He is forthright in his approach; he clearly owns that this is his “Jesus Book” and, as such, also an expedition toward his better self while exploring “Jesus Then” and “Jesus Now.”

While he admits this task is daunting, his efforts are up to the task. He employs an eclectic methodology that blends the approaches of several disciplines to focus on what he calls the crowd of the past and what he might also have called the crowd of the present. That is, he works astutely with archaeological and historical data to resolve the time and place of Jesus of Nazareth where the traditions about Jesus arose, and equally incisively employs socio-historical, theological, and biblical analysis to arrive at “what do people say about Jesus”, and why they say it. In the process he describes what is his own authentic image of Jesus. That image, he tells us, informs how he chooses to live now.

You will not find a better short synopsis of what we can say about the place and time of Jesus of Nazareth constructed from current archaeological and historical research or a more thoughtful reflection on the dynamics of the Jesus story and its implications for those who live in response to it.

—Carl Savage, Director of Excavations, Bethsaida Archaeology Project; Director, Doctor of Ministry Program and Associate Professor in the Practice of Professional Leadership and Biblical Studies, Drew University. Author of *Biblical Bethsaida: An Archaeological Study of the First Century*. (2011)

Gregory Jenks is a Jesus scholar and a Jesus follower. This marvelous book combines the spiritual wisdom and historical knowledge he has acquired during his professional lifetime. He has researched deeply who Jesus really was and what history and archaeology can tell us about the setting in which Jesus lived and ministered. Dr Jenks also makes very clear for us what exactly it should mean to us to be believers in and followers of Jesus in the operation of our lives in our day. *Jesus Then and Jesus Now: Looking for Jesus, Finding Ourselves* is a book of gratifying scholarship that will be an easy and pleasing read for Christians without specialized training in biblical studies as well as for college and seminary students. It should be required of every graduating seminarian as an essential part of the final exam for ordination. Dr Jenks digests all the key historical Jesus research and insights from biblical studies of the last half century and kneads it carefully into a whole loaf of truth and guidance, providing a gift of spiritual nurture that will both satisfy every reader's hunger to know the message of Jesus and the Bible thoroughly, and will give us exactly what we need to savor the flavor of the central truth of the Good News of the Gospel. You will want to buy two copies. One to treasure and one to share with friends whose spiritual worldview you really care about.

— J. Harold Ellens, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and Psychology at Oakland University and author of more than 180 books, including *Honest Faith for Our Time* and *Probing the Frontiers of Biblical Studies*.

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