

# Preface

After even a casual visit to a trade bookstore, the reader might ask why another book about Jesus is necessary when so many others are already available. To this very reasonable question several considered replies can be given.

Few contemporary books on Jesus focus directly on his political activity in the Galilee of Herod Antipas. While politics has long been a regular aspect of the discussion about the historical Jesus, in fact since the work of H. S. Reimarus in the eighteenth century, few contemporary books focus precisely on Jesus' attitude or intentions toward first-century power and politics. In general, during the last thirty years, several major developments have necessitated new attempts to depict his political interests and aims. The so-called Third Quest of the historical Jesus, ongoing since about 1980, has supplied a richer variety of pertinent historical materials and has crafted a more refined criticism of the Jesus traditions. (The First Quest was largely a nineteenth-century German effort. The Second [New] Quest was conducted in the 1950s by students of the influential German scholar Rudolf Bultmann.) Still, too many recent treatments of Jesus continue to treat him as merely a "religious" figure, so that Jesus is only arguing about Judean theology or religio-cultural issues, without clear conceptions of his social or political interests. These approaches can be remedied in part by placing Jesus within wider contextual frames (archaeology, Roman Galilee, the Roman Empire). Even more importantly, the emergence of self-conscious social-scientific study of the Bible has provided important models and theoretical resources for speaking about the politics of the first century and of the historical Jesus. Overcoming theological anachronism, working with a refined tradition criticism, and incorporating social-scientific models and thinking—these are paramount reasons for pursuing this present study.

Chapter 1 contextualizes the political focus in modern scholarly discussion of Jesus by returning to the eighteenth-century scholar Reimarus and tracing things down to the present. Reimarus is the starting point of all modern historical treatments of Jesus. Albert Schweitzer, for instance, began his history of

the “quest of the historical Jesus” with Reimarus but followed him only in certain respects. Reimarus, I argue, was correct in contending that Jesus’ aims were materially political and essentially different from those of his disciples after his death, but Reimarus’s view needs to be reformulated and restated today in the light of social-scientific criticism and other investigative developments. In chapter 1, I selectively review more recent modern scholarship in order to indicate the necessary themes of the present book.

Chapter 2 proposes models based in comparative social and political theory that guide my assumptions and arguments. Chapter 3 depicts the Herodian political context of Jesus, and how Jesus the peasant artisan acted within the provincial Roman political economy as well as what he had in mind in his use of the term *Kingdom of God*. Two central metaphors grounded Jesus and his group, namely, God as King and God as Father: I try to show their close interrelation. Chapter 4 explores the relationship and differences between “the tables” of the bankers (which I use as shorthand to refer to agrarian indebtedness under conditions of imperial patronage politics and Mediterranean commercial interests) and “the table” of Jesus (by which I refer to Passover freedom and its material connection to the necessities of life). Jesus understood God as a gracious patron, I argue, and Jesus was happy to broker the power of the Overlord.

Chapter 5 turns to what happened to Jesus’ aims after his death and considers the reformulated, domestic, and apolitical salvation religion of the New Testament and the early Christian movement. A number of ironies are discovered here. Chapter 6 summarizes my main conclusions and the importance of both revisiting and revising Reimarus. The Concluding Postscientific Postscript gives several reasons for thinking that Jesus’ political concerns may yet have relevance for today.

I have been at work on reconstructing the historical Jesus for over thirty-five years. My honors thesis at the University of Iowa (written for George W. E. Nicklesburg in 1975) dealt with master and slave parables of Jesus. My doctoral work focused on New Testament studies, the historical Jesus, and the social sciences. The published dissertation, *Jesus and the Economic Questions of His Day*, appeared in 1986. A variety of my publications since then have thrown various lights upon Jesus within his social context. This book therefore represents the culmination of a line of thinking. It is intended for both generally educated and scholarly audiences, as something of a companion to K. C. Hanson’s and my *Palestine in the Time of Jesus* (Fortress Press, 1998; second edition, 2008) and my *Jesus and the Peasants* (Cascade, 2008). Some of the ideas here are summarized or developed from those other two works, in which those ideas receive perhaps fuller support and substantiation. However, with matters of crucial judgment

about Jesus, or points crucial to the argument of this book, essential evidence and argument is (re)stated here. This book represents an integrated and interpretive argument, based on assumptions stated in the initial chapters. If some (even many) elements here are not entirely new, the overall picture provides something of a unique perspective on Jesus. The reader will have to judge how persuasive are the results.

I am grateful to Pacific Lutheran University for a sabbatical to enable the writing of this book, as well as to the members of the Context Group for ever-perceptive comments on work in progress. I am especially thankful to my colleague Dr. Samuel Torvend, whose courses in Rome have immeasurably enriched my understanding of early Christianity in the context of the Roman Empire. Moreover, Professor Torvend has steered me toward several important resources on food and drink within that first-century social world. I also received generous comments and suggestions on drafts from Dennis C. Duling, David B. Gowler, K. C. Hanson, and John S. Kloppenborg. Of course, none of these colleagues can be held responsible for my final opinions or conclusions.

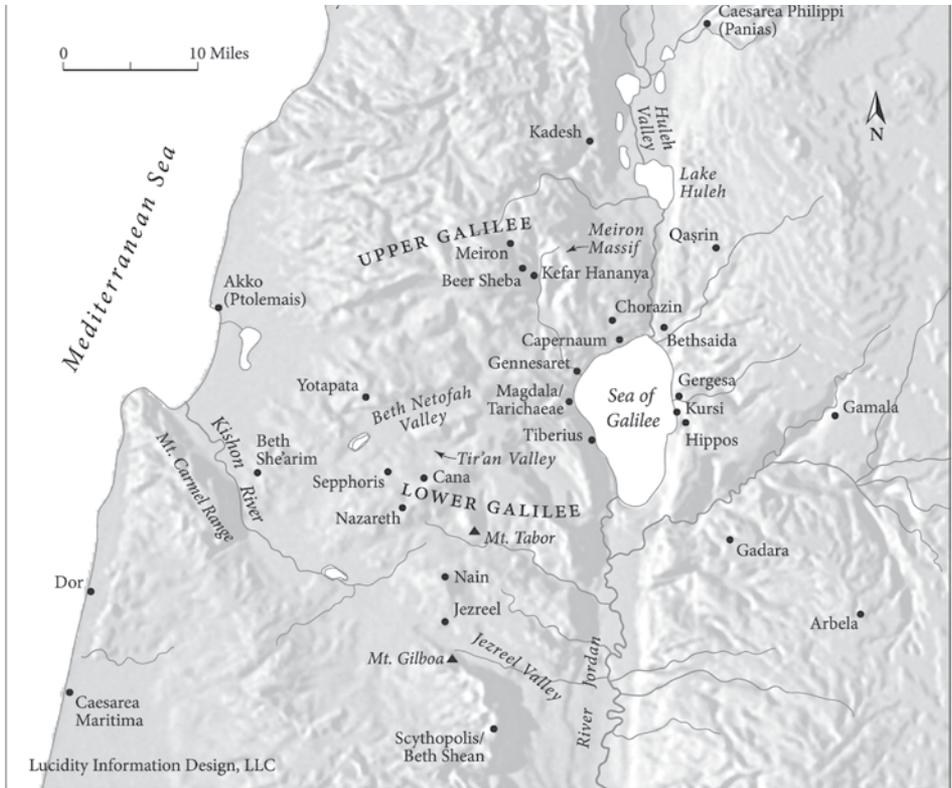
I have dedicated this book to the memories of Douglas R. Edwards (1950–2008), Gary “Termite” Lindstrom (1942–2009), Jack D. Olive (1949–2012), and to Harold Van Broekhoeven (currently Associate Professor of Biblical Studies and Early Christianity at Denison University), who enticed me into the archaeological fields of Galilee and led me into deeper understanding of the social context of Jesus.

Neil Elliott of Fortress Press encouraged me to write this book. Years in the role as Dean of Humanities kept me from timely completion, but Neil has waited patiently. My dear wife, Deborah, has also supported me through thick and thin during the composition process. I have kept in mind the twenty-first-century world that faces my two sons, Justin and Jonathan, and their lovely wives, Joanna and Karen, together with my two beautiful granddaughters, Sarah and Sophia. I hope to have encouraged them to apply the spiritual-material aims and values of Jesus to the pressing political questions of our time. The Power has overcome the powers, and the “Fifth Force” still effects its gravity-like pull.

In a time when constitutional democracies are endangered by narrow, self-serving interests and suicide bombers commit horrible terrorist acts for the sake of vague political ends or otherworldly promises, a serious conversation about constructive and hopeful political aims, and their grounding in the world of Spirit, seems warranted. And, refreshed memories of a political Jesus stand ready to inspire that task once again. To reverse the sentiment of St. Paul: if for the next life only we have hoped in Jesus, then we are of all people most to be pitied!



**Map 1. Greater Palestine in Jesus' Day**



**Map 2. Galilee in Jesus' Day**