

(Chapter 1 from **John Carroll: THE
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1. THE ENIGMA OF BEING

The enigma of being confronts all of us humans whenever another walks in the door. We take in a presence. The person opposite is more than his or her attributes. Stripping away the colour of the hair, the age of the face, and whatever we know about the life story, there remains this ethereal concentration of being. In the place of empty space, a charged field of some kind of force manifests. It is a field with its own phantasmal shape. It lives more as a distillation or essence, than a character or personality. Behind each of these existential forms lies the big presence in the culture of the West—that of Jesus.

Jesus is the existential hero. A charismatic and mysterious stranger, he appears from nowhere, then is gone. He forms the Western archetype of the solitary individual, struggling along his life-path, and initially blind to direction. Uprooted from family and home, he is restless, always on the move, without occupation or worldly power. Every attempt he makes to choose followers and companions, then teach them, is thwarted. Everything he tries founders. Increasingly feared and misunderstood by those closest, he finds himself reduced to troubled introspection. Increasingly hated by the authorities, they incite the mob against him.

This is the Jesus portrayed in the earliest recording of his life, the First Gospel, that of Mark. By the end of the story, he has lost confidence in any God up above. He himself is all there is—he alone. The climax to his life is six hours of torture nailed to a cross, ending in a colossal scream as he breathes his last. There is no resurrection from the dead. The story ends with an empty tomb and three women fleeing, out of their minds with fear.

‘What is truth?’ Pilate will ask Jesus. That is indeed the question. Of course, there are material facts, like the sun rose this morning, or I had a cup of coffee half-an-hour ago; and logical truths such as two-plus-two-equals-four. And there are moral truths. To betray trust is bad, to take innocent life is evil. But these are the lower and middle orders. The question is about higher order, or ‘capital T’ truth. If Truth exists, what is its substance? Which is its domain? Or, is it an illusion?

We are haunted by the Truth we suspect lies behind things. On the surface, events and their emotional currents fill the mind. These are the things that happen between

birth and death—people encountered, children raised, jobs performed, homes built, schedules and pastimes, achievements and failures, loves and griefs. A myriad of such threads weave the cloth of an individual life.

Yet somehow, the subterranean truth is everything. It is like a mysterious stranger encountered on an afternoon walk, an intrusive and unwelcome companion who is fleetingly there, then gone. Only afterwards, in reflection, one comes to fear that this was the vital encounter, and it may have been lost.

The imagination is full with its promise. It might tap into the source of vital energy, injecting the zest and dynamism that lacks; it might bring radiance to a life; and provide the key to what it is all about, bestowing meaning. Conversely, without such a truth, or truths, life sinks into routine—lacklustre in mood, absurd in content, ultimately futile. Without these truths, we might be on the wrong train, at the wrong time, going in the wrong direction. So we fear, but are not sure. The ‘truths’ are our signposts.

So we explore ancient sites seeking some timeless authority—a blurred inscription in stone, a sculpted face, a special place with sacred presence. So we plunge into romance, dreaming that the other might be the one. So we form families in the hope of redemptive cosiness, and steadfast belonging, or a new generation that will rise higher. So we search for a central life activity—a ‘vocation’—for work that is more than a profane job. So we build nations, cities and institutions imagining that if we get the form right, then what we have made will be more than bricks and mortar, a sort of perfection that will endure. In a modest way we have similar dreams about a memo; an essay; a well-decorated, clean or orderly room; and especially a performance at sport.

When reality strikes back, as it inevitably does, much of this turns out to have been illusion. It’s an illusion that at best redeemed for a while, before popping like a soap bubble. However, if *redemptive illusion* is all there is, then the truth about human life, the whole truth—if we are honest—is that it swings between the absurd and the horrible.¹ There is nothing more. Here is the starting point for the Jesus Story.

The modern West’s most influential literary work—*Hamlet*—orbits around the question, ‘To be or not to be?’ Truth, it implies, is to do with the nature of ‘being’. And many today do seek a richer conception of the *self*—the site where it is imagined that important truth dwells. Hence the wide appeal of Eastern philosophy, with its greater emphasis on inner consciousness. Hence the prevalence of theories and therapies that promise the self more understanding of its own nature.

European philosophy itself, in the twentieth century, swung back to focus on *being*.² This was a return to the beginning. At the historical start of Western culture, in

classical Greece, the inscription carved in stone over the entrance to the sacred oracle, in Delphi, commanded: *Know thyself!* The essence of each individual living human—the *I*—holds the secret. What each person really wants to know dwells here—Who am I?

The West has one supreme teacher on *being*. Only one has fathomed its depths. Through the grand course of Western culture, from Homer to us, most is to be learnt about the *I* from Jesus. His own saying was '*I am*'. This teaching is not abstract like philosophy. The philosopher, at most, supplies a body of dictums that may be pondered sagely in the mind, but fails to engage viscerally with the fundament of the self. Disembodied intelligence weaves its airy logic, and may justify almost any human behaviour—why Martin Luther cursed Reason as 'the Devil's whore'.

The Jesus teaching comes in the form of a story. As such it is down-to-earth, and graspable. It speaks through the narrative account of the life of one man—and his own wrestling with his mission. It compels us to engage with his experience and what he learns—to walk in his shoes.

It is within the mystery of the narrative that Truth resides. Such was the experience of a Reading Group I have convened for more than a decade in my university. We meet for an hour a week during Semester to discuss, one chapter at a time, books from the New and Old Testaments. The group of seven is diverse, not particularly reverent, and interested mainly in the text in itself—what it has to say, and how it says it. Twice the Group has read Mark—although with a largely different membership. Both times the experience has been astonishing—quite unlike that of group-reading any other books of the Bible. After Mark, everything else would disappoint.

From early on, a sense grew of entering a tightly closed and shadowy place in which the atmosphere pulsed with a strange charge. In spite of the confines, it was like the dizzy tang of stark mountain air. Once in, there was no way out. If only one could follow the threads, decoding as one advanced, one might enter some illuminated chamber. And there were many glimpsed illuminations. Everyone instinctively knew that for all other members themes reverberated through the intervening days, waiting to be taken up at the next meeting. Sessions regularly ended in perplexed euphoria. By the close, the group had gelled into a kind of informal sect, without doctrine, simply bound by a sense of shared awe. A journey undertaken together had, in some elusive manner, changed lives. Often on meeting later, one would just say the word *Mark* and the other's eyes would glaze over, accompanied by a knowing smile.

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Jesus, as he is commonly identified and understood, is a creation of Christianity, the religion founded in his name. This is Christ the Saviour, mediated through his churches.

Western civilisation and its culture is deeply and pervasively Christian. There is the architectural authority of the grand medieval cathedrals, from Chartres and Bourges to Cologne, Milan and Westminster Abbey. There is St Peter's in Rome, with Michelangelo's dome, Bernini's interior and his Piazza in front, the whole a projection in space and volume of the phenomenal and seemingly timeless influence of the 'Vatican'. Then, like satellites, there are the hundreds of thousands of imposing stone churches in villages and towns throughout the Western world. There is the art, from stained glass windows and medieval icons to the consummation of Western painting and sculpture—the Renaissance virtuosity of a Donatello, a Raphael, a Poussin, their work centring on Christian images and Christian stories. High poetry, just in English—from Milton, Donne and Herbert to Hopkins and Eliot—is explicitly Christian. The novel, the story and film all draw extensively on Christian archetypes. Then there is the music, from Gregorian chant to hymns, carols, requiem masses, the Western tradition reaching its pinnacle in the cantatas and Passions of Bach—devoutly Christian music.

Yet today, much of this seems like a past that has been lost. The social influence of the Christian churches has been in relentless decline for two centuries. Its influence over family life and morals, the cogency of public pronouncements by bishops, the reputation of priests, even the ceremonial control of births, marriages and funerals—all have dissipated. The modern West is overwhelmingly secular and humanist in its habits, tastes and beliefs.

The United States is sometimes cited as the exception to the secularisation of the West. Religious strains continue to reverberate in American culture. In politics, the stock rhetoric of 'God bless America' sometimes cloaks a kind of Old Testament belief in the 'chosen people' carrying out God's mission in the world. Many hundreds of Christian radio and television stations network the country. Christian books regularly chart amongst the nation's best-sellers. A third of Americans, according to opinion polls, hold to a fundamentalist belief in the literal truth of the Bible. A majority in 2002 said they believed that the apocalyptic predictions in the Book of Revelation will come true.

Yet the counter-case is just as plausible. Whilst 85% of the American population is nominally Christian, only around 20% regularly attends church, and the figure is falling—a smallish but significant minority.³ This compares with around a miniscule 5%

of the population in other Western countries.⁴ Moreover, examining what Americans spend their time doing, and with what degree of passionate engagement, gives one of the most telling readings of the culture. Work, sport, family, and leisure prevail. All of them are thoroughly permeated by the consumer way of life. One of the best indicators today of popular taste is the content of the most-watched television shows—the list is pervasively secular, dominated by sport, soap opera, police and medical drama, comedy, sitcom, ‘reality’ and chat shows.

The waning of Christianity as practised in the West is easy to explain. The Christian churches have comprehensively failed in their one central task—to retell their foundation story in a way that might speak to the times. Their Jesus is the wooden residue of tired doctrine about a benevolent and omnipotent Lord God up above, the Trinity, the forgiveness of sins, Holy Communion, resurrection from the dead, and so forth—little of which has cogent mainstream resonance today.

This is not just a recent problem. From the outset the churches have practised a systematic negation of the Jesus of the First Gospel. And Mark provides the definitive telling of the story that governs the three that follow—Matthew, Luke and John. The churches have not wanted anything to do with Jesus the teacher of the deep truths about human identity. They have made him superficial and boring, a background prop for their own creeds, rituals and power. This history of denial and falsification has finally caught up with the clerical elites and their priesthoods.

It is a mark of the cultural and psychological maturity of the modern West that individuals have come to make their own judgments about what they find plausible in answer to the three big questions of meaning. ‘Where do I come from?’ ‘What should I do with my life?’ ‘What happens to me when I die?’ In the end, the highest authority has become the individual’s own conscience. The vast majority has turned its back on the churches, and has come to roll its eyes dismissively at Christian doctrine.

It is not, moreover, that the churches may claim some other source of authority on the life and teaching of Jesus. The four stories are all we have—except for two accounts found later, attributed to Thomas and Peter, which add very little, as do the Letters of Paul. There is no independent evidence about the historical figure of Jesus. The only two non-Christian testimonies to mention him, one Jewish from around 90AD, and one Roman from two decades later, record little more than that a Jesus Christ lived, and he was crucified.

Churches have a necessary logic they must obey if they are to survive. They are communities of individuals. To bind those individuals together into a cohesive whole, and make them dependent, they must build a body of moral laws—‘Thou shalt nots’—then

proclaim and sanction them, punishing those who break them. Churches are ethical institutions. To gain legitimacy here, they are in need of a charismatic foundation figure who was a moral teacher.

They also usually call for a Jesus who is benevolent and forgiving, one who comforts those who suffer. Hence he is projected as the Good Shepherd—Jesus the meek and mild, a gentle figure of sweetness and light. From such a characterisation derives the children’s ‘little Lord Jesus’ who ‘lays down his sweet head’.

Mark’s Jesus is not remotely like any of this—and he is not interested in ethical teaching. Worse, he identifies all churches with the withered and stonyhearted. He exposes their nature as innately driven to suppress Truth. Truth is their lethal enemy.

This conflict comes to a head over the word ‘sin’. As if to confirm hostilities, Church Christianity has distorted Mark’s text—through skewing the translation in a direction to suit itself. It has falsely projected the image of a moralistic Jesus, preoccupied with *sin*. The Greek word used by Mark—*hamartia*—means ‘character flaw’ or ‘missing the mark’, as in a faulty spear-throw. Mark’s Jesus is concerned with the righting of being, or the restoring of a character that is out of balance. This is an issue of *being*, not of *morals*.

Churches are not the only groups Mark targets. A church is one example of human community. It is not inherently different from others—whether family, club, society, school, company, suburb or town. It is merely representative.

Mark’s Jesus teaches that the person is the locus of Truth. His perspective is individual-centred and anti-tribal. Whatever the virtue and necessity for human well-being of community—most commonly in the form of *family*—that is not where a person will find who he or she is, or what is meant to be. Indeed, group traits and attachments have to be stripped away. Matthew, in referring to the Jewish intellectuals, will coin the image of the ‘whited sepulchre, beautiful on the outside, but inside full of dead men’s bones’. In effect, Mark portrays all churches as whited sepulchres.

Whether a role of any significant depth remains for ‘church’—both in itself and as paradigm of community—will be taken up later in this book. A church strives, at best, to become a *sacred community*, bound by some enthusiasm that inspires its members with more than just the practical or functional business of the group.

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The sociological signs are that the modern West has entered a post-church era. It seeks its answers to the big questions outside the stone walls, and especially in everyday

life in the secular world. Its new altars are modest and obscure—at home, at work, in sport, and in nature.⁵ However, without the security of community or institution—to provide boundaries and direction—it is all the more in need of a Teacher. So it is time to return to the beginning, before the churches were built, when there was Jesus alone, and his story. Who was this man who shaped the Western world?

There are four distinct characters projected in the different versions of the story—Mark’s Jesus, Matthew’s Jesus, Luke’s Jesus and John’s Jesus.

What do we know with some confidence about the four Lives of Jesus, or Gospels? They were all written in Greek; not the Aramaic that Jesus himself almost certainly spoke; and not the Hebrew that was the written literary language of the Jewish culture from which he came. This is surprising and significant.

No manuscripts have survived from the first century. The oldest discovered fragments of the stories date from the early second century, a hundred years after the death of Jesus. The oldest complete manuscript dates from around 350AD. None of this is surprising, given an age in which manuscripts had to be copied by hand—for comparison, the oldest complete surviving manuscript of Plato’s writings is from a thousand years after his death.

The most authoritative version of the Lives today, *The Greek New Testament*, has been produced by the collaboration of Biblical scholars, working eclectically with the manuscripts and fragments, trying to find the most plausible and consistent variants—around 3,000 of these manuscripts exist, copied between the second and seventeenth centuries.⁶ Wholly authentic or autograph Gospels, in the sense of exactly what the author wrote, or dictated, do not exist—only approximations. Nevertheless, little controversy remains over the content of the four texts.⁷

We do not know the identities of any of the storytellers for certain, or indeed whether one person wrote each Life. Many scholars assume that the original texts received heavy editing at the hands of others, which helps to explain contradictions between the stories, and discontinuities within the narratives. According to this view, it is the heavily-edited versions that became accepted as canon in the second century, when collections of Christian writings were being brought together to form what would become the New Testament. Indeed, there are troublesome sections in all four Lives that the reader is tempted to explain away as bad editing, or faulty copying.

The consensus today is that Mark wrote first, around 70AD.⁸ Then came Matthew, who worked from Mark—copying out something like 80% of his text virtually word for word, with minor amendment. He added significantly—his text is more than 50%

longer than Mark's. For example, the story of the birth of Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount first appear in Matthew. Matthew, in complete contrast with Mark, presents a handbook for building churches. Matthew's is the most Jewish Jesus, his role spelt out as a continuation and fulfilment of Old Testament themes.

Chronologically, Luke comes third, also working off Mark's text, repeating much of it whilst reorienting Jesus towards the Good Shepherd figure taken up later by the churches. Luke adds important stories—Mary Magdalene at the house of Simon the Pharisee, the Supper at Emmaus—and he alone recounts the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. Matthew and Luke are the Gospels that have been favoured by most churches. Indeed, the early church showed little interest in Mark's Gospel, which fell into disuse.⁹

Compared with Mark, Matthew lacks pungency, terseness and subtlety; the narrative is clumsy, and dramatically incoherent. Luke has moments of literary flair, and adds key episodes and parables, but lacks the dramatic lucidity and intensity of Mark. Neither Matthew nor Luke exhibits any of the depth and challenge of the First Gospel.

Most Biblical commentators have taken John to be different in style and intent from the first three Lives, which are referred to collectively as the *Synoptic* Gospels—meaning, viewing Jesus from the same perspective, or point of view. Scholars assume John wrote a couple of decades later than Mark—although there is no hard evidence supporting this. The argument put here will be that John, like Matthew and Luke, writes with Mark in front of him, but he was the one, the only one, who understood the profundity of the very difficult text he was reworking. He develops those parts of the First Gospel that he finds important, but embryonic or sketchy in the original, and he provides short narratives to flesh out some of Mark's most cryptic teachings. His Jesus is different—magisterial, detached from his own trials, in control of his destiny, knowing exactly what he does. John's Jesus complements Mark's.

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This book is in two parts. Part I retells Mark's story of Jesus. It is accompanied by interpretation. I have based the translation from Mark's Greek into English in the main on the King James Authorised Bible. Account has been taken of scholarly commentary, and more recent translations, especially the New Revised Standard Version. Occasionally, I have used the William Tyndale translation from 1526 that provided the core for the King James edition, and many of the poetic phrases and lines formative to modern

English. I have translated at times more literally from the Greek—especially where Mark’s directness or pungency has been compromised. As one example, Mark writes ‘they feared the great fear’, which has usually been lamely rendered, ‘they feared exceedingly’. Also, crucial terms like ‘sin’, ‘Holy Spirit’, ‘forgiveness’, and ‘faith’ are translated differently, with explanation.

Everyone who becomes absorbed in the story is going to try to make their own sense of it—that is how this extraordinary work functions. This means wrestling with the text in order to translate it into terms that live today.

My own experience has been that immersion in the story, struggling with it, forced me into the position, again and again, of asking *Who am I* in the narrative. Different answers appear. It is as if this story’s method is to possess the reader through its characters, in order to provide a range of mirrors back on the viewing *I*.

In effect, this is a story with six characters. There is Jesus, and there are five distinct modes of response to his teaching and his presence. Part II of this book—*Struggling to Be, They Who Follow*—looks at the five characters who represent the different reactions to Jesus. Part II draws heavily on John’s *Life of Jesus*.

Truth is mythos. This is the axiom that underpins this book and its method. *Mythos* was the classical Greek understanding of culture—as a body of timeless, archetypal stories from a long time ago. This is myth in the sense of charged narrative about larger-than-life—even semi-divine—figures whose lives set the pattern for the way things human have been ever since, and always shall be. Homer’s *Iliad* showed the way.¹⁰ *Mythos* is not ‘myth’ in the sense of the merely fictitious—tales that project events that did not really take place.

Mythos, however, is not concerned with the historical Jesus—what this man actually did and said in Palestine around the year 30AD. It happens, of course, that we know virtually nothing about him. The only point worth making here is a negative one: that if it could be categorically proved that Jesus never lived, then there would be a problem for the story. The same is true for the Trojan War and the credibility of *The Iliad*. There is this odd ambiguity about *mythos* in the Western tradition, that its two pivotal stories are not based on historical evidence, yet both depend on some belief that their characters lived and the events happened.

Much Biblical scholarship since the mid-nineteenth century has been in search of the historical Jesus, and in particular what Jesus actually said. It scrutinises the Gospels for the ‘authentic’ Jesus, deciphered from the hybrid one that it presupposes was fabricated by the four storytellers and the other editors writing decades after the crucifixion.

In part, the aim is to bring legitimacy to Christian doctrine, aspiring to base it on what the real Jesus taught. This tendency turned into a caricature of itself in 1985, with the foundation of ‘The Jesus Seminar’, a group of fifty or so scholars who meet regularly to vote on what Jesus actually said and did. They have produced their own colour-coded Gospels: red text for Jesus definitely said it, pink probably, grey for his ideas but not his words, and black for altogether false.

The academic quest for the historical Jesus is paralleled by tourists or pilgrims visiting the city of Jerusalem today. Their expectation of finding the actual sites where the key events happened is satisfied by ruins, churches, gardens, streets and tombs that mark the spot. All are fanciful. Many, like the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, are ludicrously fake.

The example of the Via Dolorosa, marked out by the Crusaders, is typical of this exercise in historical futility. There is negligible chance that this street, supposedly marking the path Jesus trod carrying his cross from the place of trial to execution, is genuine. The trial probably took place at Herod’s Palace, on the opposite, west side of the city to where the Via Dolorosa starts. And the crucifixion might have taken place almost anywhere in the densely-built rabbit warren of alleys which comprises the northern part of the Old City today, or even beyond.

The one plausible parallel is that Jesus himself found Jerusalem a cold, hostile, unholy city, occupied by zealous, moralistic clerics, squabbling religious sects, money-grubbing merchants, and dense swarming crowds. Modern Jerusalem is not so different.

One commentator has condemned the very quest for the historical Jesus as idolatrous.¹¹ And indeed, such a quest is not only largely futile, but it searches for Truth where it does not dwell, in the sort of material evidence that is studied in a science laboratory. We shall see how Mark mocks those who seek truth in the surface facts. We only know Jesus through his story—as *mythos*. Oscar Wilde, in *De Profundis*, referred to the ‘four prose-poems about Christ’.¹²

Anyone who writes on Jesus today is reliant on a mountain of Christian theology, textual scholarship, and Biblical commentary. Furthermore, theologians have made their own diffuse contribution to Western culture, well beyond the bounds of their field. Many of the modern disciplines in the Humanities derive wholly or in part from medieval theology—philosophy, literary criticism, iconography, philology, just as works of literature, art and music have been informed by Biblical interpretation.

However, Biblical scholars have shown a striking incapacity to step outside their discipline to understand the way narrative works. This is a notably acute handicap in

relation to Mark, given his tactical use of enigma, and the interweaving throughout of themes which typically surface with no more than a hint, or an obscure conundrum. He repeatedly uses his subtext to tangle the threads of surface meaning. Part of Mark's working method is dramatic paradox. Mark is a virtuoso storyteller who cannot be understood from outside the logic of his own art.

Also, most Biblical commentators are practising Christians, and their work periodically suffers from doctrinal blinkers. Even the doyen of modern scholars, Raymond E. Brown, whose work has been invaluable to the background research for this book, has times when the fact that he is a Roman Catholic blights his interpretation. At one point, he even makes explicit that because later Christian theology won't allow a particular reading of Mark's text, it cannot be valid.¹³ The Protestant theologian, Rudolf Bultmann, concludes that Jesus' main message was an extension of the Old Testament. It was intended to focus on the end of the world and the Kingdom of God.¹⁴ This is a bewilderingly implausible reading of Mark, as the work to follow should demonstrate.

Two of the most eminent recent literary critics, both secular men, have acknowledged the superiority of Mark's Gospel as a work of literature. Harold Bloom writes, 'A substantial number of Americans who believe they worship God actually worship three major literary characters: the Yahweh of the J writer, the Jesus of the Gospel of Mark, and Allah of the Koran.'¹⁵ The British critic, Frank Kermode, devoted a whole book to Mark—*The Genesis of Secrecy*.

The Genesis of Secrecy has been more useful to this study than all the Biblical scholarship taken together. Kermode explores how story works, through textual analysis of what is arguably the most cryptic and enigmatic major narrative in Western culture—Mark's Life of Jesus.¹⁶

The major aid in reading Mark's text has been John's own Life of Jesus, and vice versa. It is extraordinary that one story should attract two storytellers of peerless rank. We cannot imagine a second Homer, or a second Shakespeare.

Also, three of the Masters of Western art have provided ways into the *mythos* that Mark and John created. Donatello, Raphael and Poussin rethink the Jesus story, and translate it into visual imagery. After John, they are the ones who have seen what Mark saw.

Why, it might be asked, yet another book on Jesus? For two millennia this story has been told and retold, interpreted and reinterpreted many thousands of times—in writing, painting, sculpture, drama and music. The Bible—that is, its Jesus sections—is, and by a vast margin, the most published, and written about, work in the West.¹⁷

The justification for this book is simple. We cannot live without *mythos*,

without answers to the three big questions. As the Australian Aborigines put it in relation to their own quite different *mythos*—which they called the Dreaming—if you lose contact with the founding, archetypal stories you wither away and die. It is only the conjoining of an individual's own story with the Dreaming parallel that inspires life, transforming it out of profane ordinary time and its banal routines.

Jesus is the core of the Western Dreaming. His presence is vital to our civilisation and its individuals. He is known by his story. Mark composed the first and most potent version. It is time to retell the First Gospel, and reflect upon it in the context of today. My principal aim is to restore the story, a bit like an Old Master, the painting grimy with stained varnish and the encrustations of time. The hope is to introduce new viewers, in a new time, to the splendour of the work; and to suggest those already familiar with it, take another look.

What emerges is a mysteriously enigmatic, existential Jesus, whose story has not been retold elsewhere; and whose teachings have not been spelt out as they are here.

This Jesus learns through his own bitter experience to reject temples and churches. What he finds himself left with is nothing, apart from his own story. So he invites those who have ears to hear to join him, to stand in his shoes, and learn from his tragic journey. By the end, the total accumulation of what he has done, and what he has said, is stripped back to one single teaching: All you need is my story. You don't even need me, only what my story teaches—about *being*. Mind, he himself is that mysterious stranger intruding on the afternoon walk, fleetingly there and then gone, his own presence everything.

The story is a self-contained numinous object. It is like a precious stone with complex internal faceting, flickering planes of light within which shadows—strangely difficult to glimpse—flit and shimmer. Here dwells the radiance.

¹This is Nietzsche's formulation, in the theory of culture developed in his *The Birth of Tragedy*.

²The turn of philosophy back to *being* was led by Martin Heidegger.

³Gallup polled regular American church attendance at 35% in December, 2004. However, this was a poll-based survey—asking people themselves about their behaviour—rather than a count-based one registering numbers entering the church doors. Sociologists have calculated that poll figures for church attendance should be discounted by as much as a half, to take account of the degree to which people exaggerate or lie on this subject—whether out of guilt, self-deception, or in the belief they will help the local church by claiming they attend regularly when they don't.

For instance, C. Kirk Hadaway and P. L. Morler studied Protestant and Catholic attendance counts and found the rate at about half the poll figure—'Did You Really Go to Church This Week? Behind the Poll Data', *The Christian Century*, May 6, 1998. Hadaway's 2005 figure is 21% regular attendance (private communication).

What we may conclude is that between 17% and 25% of Americans regularly attend church in the early years of the twenty-first century.

⁴In Australia, the 2001 National Church Life Survey put the weekly attendance at Christian churches as 8.8% of the total population (*2001 Church Attendance Estimates*, Occasional Paper No.3, J. Bellamy and K. Castle, February 2004). The Catholic component was 15% of Catholics attending weekly, which equates to 4% of the total population. This figure seems pretty reliable as it was based on comprehensive surveying of parishes across the country over four weeks (information from Bob Dixon, Director of Pastoral Projects Office of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference). The Protestant figures appear more vulnerable, and need discounting. We may conclude that between 6% and 8% of the Australian population attended a Christian church weekly, in 2001. The figure is declining.

The British figure looks like roughly 5%, with France and Germany lower again.

⁵I have explored this search for secular altars in the everyday world in an earlier book—*Ego and Soul, the Modern West in Search of Meaning*.

⁶I shall be using the Fourth Revised Edition, edited by Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martini, and Bruce M. Metzger, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart, 1994. This is the United Bible Societies Greek NT edition, derived from the famous Nestle-Aland edition, first printed in 1898.

⁷The two significant changes since the time of the King James translation are the excision of John's story of the woman taken in adultery, and of the second half of Mark's final chapter (16: 9-20). Neither appear in the earliest manuscripts.

⁸R. E. Brown assumes some time in the 60s or just after 70. He assumes Matthew and Luke wrote 10 to 20 years after Mark, and John between 90 and 100 (*An Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 7)

⁹Moloney, *Mark*, pp. 7 & 9.

¹⁰Aristotle uses *mythos* in a narrower sense in his theory of tragedy (*Poetics*, s. 1450). *Muthos* means the narrative plot—the synthesis of doings, or, differently put, the combination of actions (*sunthesin tōn pragmatōn*). Aristotle holds *muthos* to be the foundation (*archē*) and soul (*psuchē*) of tragedy—in contrast with the other elements of individual character (*ēthos*) and thinking (*dianoia*). Aristotle held Homer to be the master of tragedy.

¹¹L. T. Johnson, 'The Quest for the Historical Jesus', in Crossan, J. D., Johnson, L. T. & Kelber, W. H., *The Jesus Controversy*, p. 89.

¹²Oscar Wilde, *Complete Works*, p. 929.

¹³R. E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, pp. 153-4.

¹⁴Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 1, p. 4.

¹⁵Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare*, Riverhead, New York, 1998, pp. xviii-xix.

¹⁶Essays by another modern literary critic, George Steiner, have also proved helpful—especially the collection, *No Passion Spent*.

¹⁷To provide just one indicator, Stephen Prothero records that in 2003 the American Library of Congress held 17,000 or so books about Jesus, the figure mounting rapidly. It was twice as many as on the runner-up, Shakespeare (*American Jesus*, p. 11).