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MINI-PRESENTATION

LEARNING ABOUT JESUS THR0UGH WRITING FICTION

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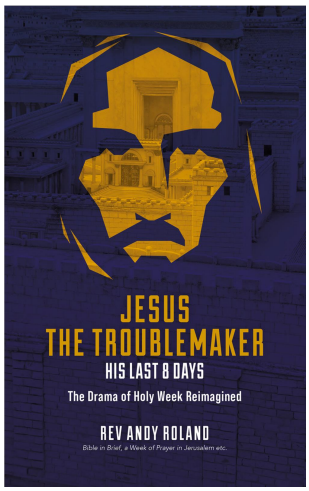

1 How I came to write a novel

I am someone who likes to communicate, but am not particularly imaginative. Since retiring I have written books aimed at making sense of the Bible. Back in September 2019 I was planning to write a biblical analysis of Holy Week, and was making notes as Linda and I drove back to London from Plymouth. Suddenly the sentence popped into my mind, "It was hot in the Jordan valley." I realised that this was the start of a novel, so I decided to write a historical novel on the last eight days of Jesus' life, and call it 'The Troublemaker'. The best decision I have made for some time.

2 The benefit of fiction

I discovered that writing historical fiction is a much more demanding exercise than writing devotionally. It imposes a strict discipline of thinking through issues of location, timing and emotional sense. For instance, Mark tells us that Jesus was late in arriving at the temple. Why was he late? Because he had just walked eighteen miles uphill from Jericho! If he had started out at 6.00 am, he would have reached Bethany at 3.00 pm. And where had he stayed in Jericho? With Zacchaeus the tax collector (Luke 19).

a) Location: I have visited Jerusalem seven times and on every occasion I have visited the Holy Land model of first-century Jerusalem, now in the Israel Museum. So I am familiar both with the layout of the 1st century Jerusalem as well as the present-day Old City. I believe that the site of the Last Supper is more likely to be in the orthodox traditional site of St Mark's Chapel rather that the more popular Crusader Cenacle. This would place it in the middle of the wealthy Upper City, just south of the City Market and close to the Hippicus Gate by Herod's palace. This would have led Jesus and his disciples on the way to Gethsemane to within a hundred yards of Golgotha. No proof, but a reasonable supposition.

b) Emotional Sense: I also had to make emotional sense of the people involved in the story. The big puzzle is of course Pilate. He carried out several brutal actions, yet in the gospels seems to be a fair-minded judge. I thought that a useful model to base him on was Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer, the man responsible for the Amritsar Massacre. He ordered a peaceful crowd to be fired on and at least 380 people died. To the end of his life he thought he had done the right thing, and that the Indians had to be 'taught a lesson'. So in my novel, the key statement which for me encapsulated Pilate (also a military man) was, "High Priest, I don't need you to teach me how to keep order."

3 The quest for history

In my youth I went to Oxford University and studied history. That has informed the way I read the Bible. The Books are an amazing source for events of the distant past, but some writers are more reliable than others. All my life I have been convinced that in Mark we have the equivalent to first-person accounts of the ministry of Jesus. It has the most detailed accounts of the incidents he reports. I have no difficulty in believing that the gospel writer was the young man who almost got caught by the soldiers in Gethsemane and ran away naked, and later was the companion of Simon Peter.

Matthew and Luke can be judged by the way they both handle Mark. Luke recounts the incidents in Mark fairly. Matthew, I am sorry to say, editorialises, in the interest of a higher Christology. I always check Matthew against the other two synoptics and am sceptical about incidents which only he reports, for example Peter walking on the water.

I used to be quite sceptical as to the historical value of John's gospel. Richard Baukham's book 'The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple' persuaded me that John's gospel was written by a Jerusalem disciple called John, or Yochanan. This makes sense of the fact that apart from chapters 6 and 21, only 22 verses of the entire gospel take place in Galilee. It also makes John a valuable witness to the events which he recounts, such as the midnight questioning of Jesus by the former high priest Annas.

Of course there are incidents which are described differently in different gospels. In a novel you don't have the luxury of believing both. You have to make a judgement. For instance, Mark places the feast at Bethany two days before Passover. John has it six days before Passover. In my novel I compromised on four days, but I actually think John is right and that Jesus entered the temple on Palm Thursday.

4 Lessons learned

a) One thing that surprised is that, if you ignore Matthew, the Pharisees are hardly mentioned in the whole of Holy Week. Jesus' attacks are on the temple establishment, the high priests and the scribes. It was only after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD that the Pharisees became the sole Jewish authorities, replacing the Sadducees and scribes.

b) I came to have a new respect for the temple and its worship. 'The Temple' by Edersheim (1875) gives a detailed description of the daily worship so I could place Jesus in that context. I made Jesus as fully as I could a first century Jew, with his name Yeshua Ish-Natzeret, and similar Jewish names for everyone in the story. The Last Supper is a fully Jewish celebration. I continue to have a shock whenever I hear the words 'This is my body', 'This is my blood of the covenant'.

c) To my surprise, all the trials of Jesus made sense if you consider their location. The first interrogation under Annas is plausible as it was the first major building in the Upper City when you enter the city from Gethsemane.
I opted for the trial under Caiaphas to be in his palace rather than the Hall of Unpolished Stone in the Temple. There was a hall large enough to hold a quorum of twenty-six Sanhedrin members, and it did have a useful (recently discovered) dungeon. I always thought that Luke's inclusion of an additional interrogation by Herod Antipas was unlikely simply because of the time constraints. But this becomes possible, even likely, if you consider the location. The probable place for the prefect's headquarters is in the Roman barracks, occupying the northern wing of Herod I's great palace. The southern wing was the Jerusalem residence of Herod Antipas, just a 5 minute walk

across the mosaic pavement, the 'Gabbatha'. And, conveniently, just a ten minute walk to Skull Hill.

d) Solving the Easter Enigma. In my book, Lazarus felt at risk after the crucifixion, and went with a companion to the town of Ephraim where Jesus had recently taken refuge (John 11.54). The companion's wife was Salome (Shlomit) and she wrote him a letter describing all the events that happened after the Sabbath had ended. You can see in her letter how I think I have solved the Easter Enigma, namely the disjunction between the gospels of Mark and John, with the simple question, 'Where was Peter?'

e) Jesus. Above all I came to a greater respect and admiration for Jesus; both for his forthrightness, his courage, his clarity of vision, as well as for his tenderness, humour and patience; and his ability to be emotionally present at what was in front of him at any moment. There is no one else I want to follow.

EDITIONS

'Jesus the Troublemaker - his last eight days' is available as an ordinary paperback for £9.99, on Kindle for £3.60 for and as an audiobook (3.75 hours) on Scribd.com, audiobooks.co.uk, audio bookstore.com, and others but not currently Audible.

The larger coloured edition includes 24 colour photos of Jerusalem taken by the author and is £14.99, Kindle still £3.60. Very suitable as a present!

All books are available with no p&p from www.bibleinbrief.org.

Sister Hilda Mary CSC wrote, *"Well! Holy Week has come alive in a new way and will never be the same again. The book has finally removed set images and confusions stuck in my mind from so many years and something much more vibrant and alive has replaced them."*

'Journey through Lent with Jesus' is a fifty day immersion in the final week of Jesus' life. Each day has a gospel passage, a section from 'Jesus the Troublemaker', an historical comment, a devotional reflection and a suggestion of something to do.

Bishop Michael Ipgrave wrote in the foreword, *"The joy of this book is that, even as it establishes the strangeness of the Messianic story, it also provides lots of ways through which its unsettling and transforming power can reach deep inside us: reimagined dialogue, personal anecdote, historical explanation, spiritual guidance are all there to hook the story and its reality into our lives."*