



Some Enriching Readings on the Life of Jesus

by Leonard S. Kenworthy

Although many modern liberal Quakers concede the centrality of Jesus in world history and acknowledge his importance in the annals of the Religious Society of Friends, they tend personally and as a group to deemphasize him. Consequently many First-day school courses place Jesus at the periphery of their programs, Quaker publications on him are rare, and references to him in meetings for worship are infrequent.

Such a situation is understandable, as many present-day Friends have been turned off by their early experiences with the figure of Jesus. The intolerance and injustices perpetrated in his name may have alienated them. The current interpretations of "born again" television preachers and others may repel them. Furthermore, Friends are often aware of the divisive nature of discussions about Jesus in some groups.

As a consequence of such experiences, however, many individuals may have been deprived of a rich resource in their lives, becoming spiritual pygmies when they could have become spiritual giants.

This bibliographical essay is an attempt to call attention to 16 references which present graphic and enriching accounts of Jesus that should be generally acceptable to present-day liberal Friends.

Two Recent, Provocative Books on Jesus

The arresting title of a relatively recent book by Albert Nolan of South Africa is *Jesus Before Christianity* (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, N.Y., 1978. 156 pages), and the contents are almost as arresting as the title.

Attempting to remove the accretions of the centuries and to restore the original human being named Jesus, Nolan pictures him as a man of "extraordinary independence, immense courage, and unparalleled authenticity—a man whose insight defies explanation." He firmly believes that "To deprive this man of his humanity is to deprive him of his greatness." Nolan's picture of Jesus is of a member of the middle class who identified with the poor and oppressed members of the lower class. To Nolan, Jesus was one who spurned the exclusiveness of the Hebrew faith of his day and championed inclusiveness. He was indeed a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, but he was also a man of glad tidings, good cheer and joy. Jesus rejected the fatalism of many Jews and called for a faith which could overcome evil. He was one who spurned the hatred of one's enemies and preached about love as the center of religion, even love of one's enemies. His faith was applicable to the turbulent times in which he lived—and to our turbulent times today.

Andrew B. Hodges's *Jesus: An Interview Across Time: A Psychiatrist Looks at His Humanity* (Village Publishers, 1986. 307 pages) is filled with even more insights into the humanness of Jesus. It is written as if readers could hear Hodges talking with Jesus, posing the

questions so many of us have long wanted to ask. It depicts Jesus as ever so human, though also divine.

We learn about Jesus' love for Joseph and the loss he suffered at Joseph's early death; of his reliance on prayer, his laughter and his camaraderie with the disciples; and his stress on learning to wait for messages from God—one of the great tests of faith.

There is a dramatic portrayal of the confrontation of Jesus and Satan on the Mount of Temptations and vivid vignettes of the disciples.

The motif is an imaginative and daring one, fraught with dangers. But Hodges accomplishes his purpose admirably. The author knows his Bible and his psychiatry, but does not overdo his reliance on that discipline.

Four Publications on Jesus by Quakers

Books and pamphlets by so-called liberal Friends on Jesus are not numerous, but there are a few such interpretations, and they contain much for modern Quakers.

The most recent Quaker writing about Jesus is a pamphlet by John Lampen, a prominent English Friend, *Twenty Questions About Jesus* (Quaker Home Service, London, 1985. 97 pages). In it Lampen confronts the most commonly asked questions today about Jesus and answers them briefly and cogently, often presenting a variety of views. Those questions range from "Did he exist?" and "How reliable are the stories about him?" to "What did the first Friends believe about him?" and "What do Friends believe about him today?" The booklet is comprehensive, clear, and

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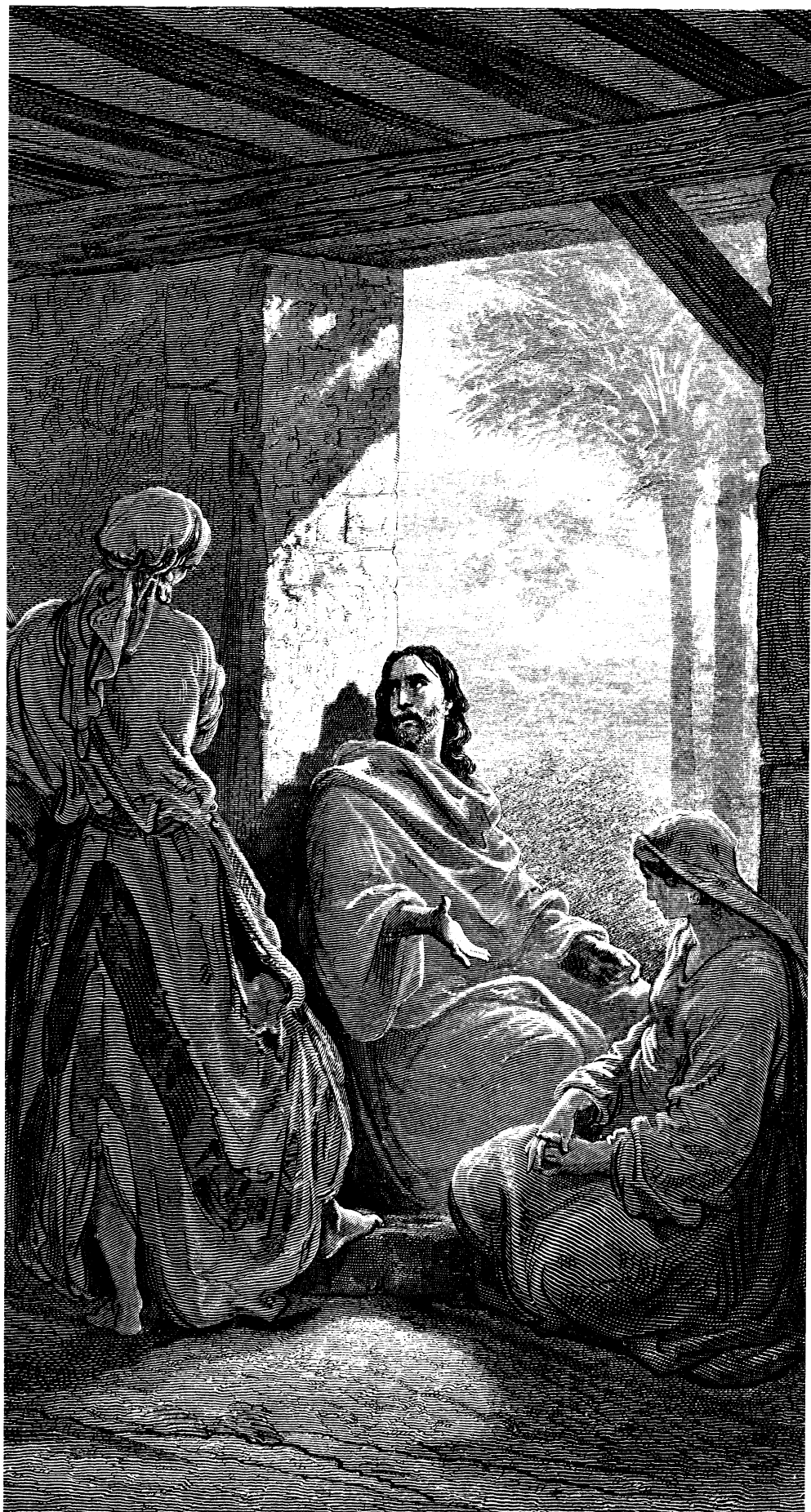
challenging—well worth reading and pondering.

Very different in length, organization, and purpose is the recent volume by Eric Johnson, *An Introduction to Jesus of Nazareth: A Book of Information and a Harmony of the Gospels* (Independent School Press, Wellesley Hills, Massachusetts, 1981. 512 pages). In the past, Eric Johnson has written about a wide range of topics. Now he has turned his talents to the Bible and the figure of Jesus. Much of this volume is devoted to a harmony of Gospel accounts of Jesus. But it also contains a wealth of related information, ranging from material about the Jewish religion and about Palestine in the time of Jesus to lists of his principal parables and miracles and a brief discussion of the relationships between religion and public education. The author has said, "Perhaps the best result this book can have is to lead you to further thought and study."

In 1981 Roger C. Wilson, a well-known English Friend, delivered the Backhouse Lecture at the Australia Yearly Meeting, and his talk was entitled "What Jesus Means to Me: Jesus the Liberator." The booklet based on that lecture is a personal account of Wilson's search for the meaning of Jesus in his life. His search resulted from encounters with a Roman Catholic abbot and a young Quaker radio-astronomer, as well as the tragic deaths of Dag Hammarskjöld, Martin Luther King, Jr., and John and Robert Kennedy. Primarily it is a plea that each of us find his or her own answer to the significance of Jesus and "our own pathway to the footstool of God."

Some idea of his own personal testament is contained in the powerful passage in which he says,

Jesus showed us what it means to live as in the presence of God. The Godless cosmos can be entered, purified, and sanctified by us as we commit ourselves to the guidance of God as love, transforming the temporal into the eternal. . . . This is the Jesus who in rejoining the disciples and rehabilitating them after the shattering episode of the desertion, filters through to us no more of the harsh reality of the cosmos than we can bear, liberating us from the



otherwise paralyzing burden of membership in a human society with God left out.

A few years earlier John R. Yungblut attempted, and for many people succeeded, in reconciling the widely-held beliefs of many Christians about Jesus Christ with their present world view in the post Darwinian and post-Freudian period. His conclusions are contained in a volume called *Rediscovering the Christ* (Seabury Press, New York, 1974. 180 pages).

This book is not always easy to read but it should be provocative and rewarding to study, especially to those who deny many of the long-held beliefs of Christians but are nevertheless drawn to the person of Jesus. In this volume John Yungblut separates the figure of the historic Jesus and the Christ myth and calls for a myth which asserts that "The Christ within Jesus was the same Christ within us, but released to him for a richer, more abundant life."

Books on How the Contemporaries of Jesus Might Have Seen Him

Three of the most thought-provoking books on the life and teachings of Jesus have been written from the same approach—as the authors think that various contemporaries might have seen him. One of those volumes is Harry Emerson Fosdick's *The Man From Nazareth: As His Contemporaries Saw Him* (Harper, New York, 1949. 282 pages. Paperback). The second is Mary C. Morrison's *Jesus: Sketches for A Portrait* (World, Cleveland, 1968 and 1979. 145 pages). The third is Kahlil Gibran's *Jesus: The Son of Man: His Words and Deeds as Told and Recorded by Those Who Knew Him* (Knopf, N.Y., 1928. 216 pages).

In *Jesus of Nazareth*, Harry Emerson Fosdick portrays Jesus as seen by the crowds, scribes, and pharisees, the self-complacent, the religious and moral outcasts, women and children, the first disciples, the militant nationalists, and Jews with a world outlook. The figure that emerges is not a meek and mild Jesus, but an exciting, uncompromising, vital, dynamic, and exuberant Jesus. He is a transformer and a transmitter, a teacher, prophet, and savior, a reformer with a passion for the poor and disinherited who concentrates on "inward transformation, spiritual rebirth, . . .

and all-inclusive, undiscouragable love."

Mary Morrison, known to many Friends for her courses about the Gospels at Pendle Hill, sketches Jesus as a human being, a guide, a healer, a teacher, a humorist, an antagonist, a conformist, an includer, a forgiver, a foreteller, an organizer, a leader, a revealer, and a stranger. Her sketches are drawn with skill and sensitivity, often with a provocative turn of phrase.

In *Jesus: The Son of Man*, Kahlil Gibran records descriptions of Jesus made by individuals years after the crucifixion. Many of these descriptions are gems, often couched in poetic prose and magnificent imagery. For instance, Joseph of Arimathea reflects on Jesus' departure 10 years afterward: "It is long since the cedar tree has fallen but its fragrance endures!"

Two Novels on the Life of Jesus

Frequently one can gain a better understanding of a person, institution, or country through the medium of fiction. Such is the case with our understanding of Jesus. Two novels which have meant much to me over the years are Sholem Asch's *The Nazarene* (Putnam, New York, 1939. 698 pages.) and Toyohiko Kagawa's *Behold the Man* (Harper, New York, 1941. 346 pages). From both of those books readers can gain much insight into the life and teachings of Jesus.

Because he was born and raised as a Jew, Sholem Asch was able to provide a great deal of authentic background for his novel to help readers understand the setting for the life of Jesus. With rare beauty and deep insight, the author presents the power and overwhelming attraction of Jesus to a member of the inner circle of Roman oppressors.

Toyohiko Kagawa was one of the great Christians of this century who lived and worked with the poor and downtrodden in his native Japan. He had an unusual talent in writing, which he used to spread the Christian gospel far and wide.

His account in *Behold the Man* concentrates on Jesus' life and teachings as seen by his disciples and the common people with whom he associated. In vivid phraseology and dramatic incidents, Toyohiko Kagawa helps his readers see the strikingly attractive and persuasive figure of Jesus—tall, lean, ra-

diant, virile. He follows Jesus through fields, into homes of friends and admirers, and up hillsides to pray.

To Toyohiko Kagawa, Jesus spoke little of sin but much of forgiveness and love. Where John the Baptist saw into the minds of men and women, Jesus saw into their hearts. There is much about beauty, too, in this novel, as when Jesus is reported to have said to his disciples, "Go and study by the side of the road, listen for the wind at nightfall and the sound of children's steps. Make a holiday in the field with the grass to whisper to you. Take a flower from the mountain and breathe its fragrance."

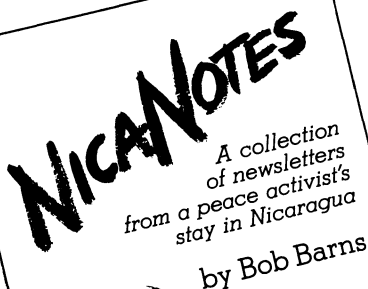
Especially human are his sketches of the disciples—of Judas and his yen for money, or Peter and his dislike of crowds and his desire for the dramatic.

The Lighter Side of the Life of Jesus

For those who have been turned off by the portrayals of Jesus as a meek and mild man, acquainted with sorrow and burdened with grief, there are a few accounts which stress the lighthearted side of his life and his joy.

My favorite account is a leaflet by A. Barrett Brown called *Man of Joys* (Pennsbury Leaflets, Philadelphia, undated. 8 pages) in which he speaks of the gospel as "good news" and "glad tidings of great joy." He writes of the Kingdom of God as one of "justice, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit." The author grants that Jesus was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, but then captures Jesus' lighter side by remarking about "His sheer joy—joy in life, His delight in nature, and His love of human fellowship."

Elton Trueblood delved even deeper into this aspect of the life of Jesus in his book *The Humor of Christ* (Harper, New York, 1964. 125 pages). In it he writes of the universality of Christ's humor, his use of irony, his strategy of laughter, and the many humorous parables he told (citing 30 of them). Among the better known examples of his humor are the incidents where Jesus asserts it is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God; his account of the man who was so deeply concerned about the speck in another person's eye that he was unconscious of the fact his own eye had a beam in it; or the blind guides who strained out the gnat and swallowed the camel.



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Space precludes many more summaries of the host of helpful books and pamphlets about Jesus. Brief references to three must suffice.

The most enticing account we have of that unrecorded period is the classic written by John Oxenham, *The Hidden Years* (MacKay, New York, 1935 edition. 244 pages) based upon what that writer thought might have occurred. That attempt to recreate those many years is told by a lad who lived next door to Jesus and therefore knew him well.

Another volume which is well worth reading is Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1969. 112 pages/paperback). Written by a well-known and much-loved black clergyman, it is a powerful, provocative, and penetrating account of the Spirit at work in the lives and hearts of people, which enables them to overcome discrimination. This is a personal testament, written with deep conviction and persuasive power based on the testimony of Jesus that hate is harmful both to the hated and the hater. Thurman's belief is that only through adherence to the teachings of Jesus will people learn to live in peace and justice together.

Then there is the remarkable compendium brought together by Cynthia Pearl Maus called *Christ and the Fine Arts* (Harper, New York, 1959 edition. 813 pages). It is the most complete collection I have ever seen of poetry, prose, pictures, and stories connected with the life of Jesus. It is invaluable reading and an excellent reference. Several indexes should enable people to find the type of material they want. Meeting libraries can serve many by having this volume available.

