

JESUS, RIGHT WHERE YOU WANT HIM

YOUR BIGGEST QUESTIONS.
HIS HONEST ANSWERS.

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INTRODUCTION:

Jesus, Right Where You Want Him

When Jeremy Paxman managed to corner the former British Home Secretary live on television, he famously refused to take no for an answer. In a brutal *Newsnight* interview that quickly went viral, the BBC presenter repeated the same question to a beleaguered Michael Howard a dozen times.

“Did you threaten to overrule him?”

“I was not entitled to instruct Derek Lewis and I did not instruct him.”

“Did you threaten to overrule him?”

“The truth of the matter is that Mr Marriot was not suspended.”

“Did you threaten to overrule him?”

“I did not overrule Derek Lewis.”

“Did you threaten to overrule him?”

“I took advice on what I could or could not do.”

“Did you threaten to overrule him, Mr Howard?”

“I did not overrule Derek Lewis.”

“But did you threaten to overrule him?”

“Mr Marriot was not suspended...”

“I note you are not answering the question whether you threatened to overrule him.”

“The important aspect of this, which it’s very clear to bear in mind...”

“I’m sorry, I’m going to be frightfully rude. It’s a straight yes or no answer. Did you threaten to overrule him?”

“I gave him the benefit of my opinion in strong language.”

“With respect, that is not answering the question of whether you threatened to overrule him.”¹

A lot of people imagine that Jesus of Nazareth was a bit like that – a slippery talker who mastered all of the right moves to sidestep people’s toughest questions. A lot of people assume that Jesus got as tongue-tied as Michael Howard: in a corner, on the ropes and looking for an exit. But the real Jesus wasn’t anything like that at all.

When we read the most reliable accounts of the life of Jesus, we discover that he was a teacher who thrived

¹ Jeremy Paxman gave Michael Howard this roasting on the BBC’s *Newsnight* programme on 13th May 1997.

on giving answers to people's toughest questions. Matthew and John were two of his twelve disciples, and two of the most common phrases in their eyewitness accounts of his teaching are "*Jesus answered*" and "*Jesus replied*". They use those two phrases eighty-six times in total, because answering tough questions was one of the things that Jesus really enjoyed doing. Mark and Luke wrote two more contemporary accounts of Jesus' life and teaching, based on extensive interviews with eyewitnesses, and they also use those same two phrases sixty-nine times. All of these first-century writers tell us that Jesus constantly placed himself right where people wanted him. He gladly gave them honest answers to their toughest questions, and when they ran out of questions, he was willing to offend them in order to provoke them to ask some more. If we take the time to read the eyewitness accounts of what Jesus of Nazareth was really like, it is very surprising. He was nothing at all like Michael Howard at the hands of Jeremy Paxman.

That's why I think that you will find this short book so refreshing. I have spent my life studying the words of Jesus as recorded by his contemporaries and, in particular, I have been fascinated by his responses to our biggest questions. I have written this short book in order to give you a window into the answers given by the greatest teacher in human history to your toughest questions about life: Doesn't religion poison everything? Hasn't science freed us from the need to believe in God? How can we really trust what

the Bible says? Why hasn't God put an end to all the suffering and violence and racism in our messed-up world? Why do so many Christians seem so arrogant and intolerant and homophobic? What about those passages in the Old Testament that made Richard Dawkins spit and shout so much in his book *The God Delusion*? This short book will give you Jesus' answers to all of those questions and to many more.

Jesus has put himself right where you want him. He has done so gladly. He isn't looking for the door, because he wants to meet you where your questions have placed you. Jesus is ready to give his honest answers to your biggest questions. So take a seat and ask away. As you read this book, you have Jesus right where you want him.

CHAPTER 1

Hasn't Religion Been the Cause of Appalling Violence?

It happens every single day. You see it almost every time you turn on the TV news. Somebody somewhere always seems to be doing something evil in the name of religion. Muslim terrorists are kidnapping Christian girls in northern Nigeria. Jewish soldiers are shelling Muslim Palestinians in Gaza. Islamic fighters are butchering the Christian minority in Iraq. It is therefore little wonder that one of the first questions that most people want to ask Jesus is *“Hasn't religion been the cause of appalling violence?”*

Most people expect Jesus to be put out by such a question. That's because they know so little about him. They have forgotten that he lived in an era of intense religious violence. He was its most vocal opponent and its most high-profile victim. The first time he preached at the Jewish synagogue in Nazareth, the congregation tried to kill him. When he preached at another synagogue in Galilee, the rabbis plotted how to persuade the Roman governor to crucify him. When

they succeeded in their plan, the pagan soldiers who hammered nails through his hands and feet made a mockery of his claim to be the fulfilment of ancient Judaism. The crown of thorns they rammed down on his head was their response to his claim to be a greater king than Jupiter or Caesar. It therefore shouldn't surprise us when Jesus answers our first question very simply. His disarming response is "*Yes, obviously.*"

I'm glad that Jesus doesn't duck our first question. Frankly, we are in dire need of his answer. We would need it even if this were a past-tense question – didn't religion cause terrible violence in the past, such as the seventh-century Arab invasion of North Africa, or the medieval Crusades, or the French Wars of Religion when the River Seine reputedly ran red with Huguenot blood? But sadly this isn't a past-tense question at all. Appalling violence in the name of religion is on the rise and it has become one of the biggest issues of our age. That's why Richard Dawkins reacts so strongly: "*It is fashionable to wax apocalyptic about the threat to humanity posed by the AIDS virus, 'mad cow' disease, and many others, but I think a case can be made that **faith** is one of the world's great evils, comparable to the smallpox virus but harder to eradicate.*"¹ We need Jesus to give us his answer to this first question.

Jesus diagnosed the heart of the problem. He told the great religious thinkers of the first century that "*Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites;*

1 Richard Dawkins said this in an article entitled "Is Science a Religion?", published in *The Humanist* magazine (January / February 1997).

as it is written: 'These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me'' (Mark 7:6). They were furious. They understood that he was telling them that the problem doesn't lie with religious faith. The problem lies with people who use religious words as a cloak to hide the evil thoughts that fill their hearts.

If we take a step back, we can see that this diagnosis makes perfect sense. When we read about the way in which the soldiers on the Fourth Crusade sacked Constantinople (a Christian city, not a Muslim one) in April 1204 AD, raping nuns and smashing church altars to pieces in order to plunder their gold, it is very difficult to believe that their true motivation was Christian piety. When we read about the way in which Catholics and Protestants planted car bombs for one another in Northern Ireland, it is hard to believe that worshipping the friend of prostitutes and lepers was ever at the forefront of their minds. There was even a joke that made the rounds during the Northern Irish Troubles. A group of men accost a stranger on the Shankill Road in Belfast and ask him, "*Which church do you go to?*" He replies, "*I don't really go to church.*" They shoot back, "*We know that. But **which** church don't you go to?*" People throughout history have used religious dogma to justify their tribal conflicts. Jesus says the problem isn't religious faith. It's human hypocrisy.

If you are religious, you need to hear this. It is all too easy to react against this question by asserting that the world would be a better place if only churches were a little fuller on a Sunday. But Jesus doesn't do that.

He is not naïve. British churches were full when British soldiers used Maxim guns on the spear-wielding Zulus and Sudanese in order to extend their empire across the world. American churches were full when thousands of Africans were shipped across the Atlantic Ocean to work as slaves in the cotton fields. Christopher Hitchens has a point when he argues that “*Religion has been an enormous multiplier of tribal suspicion and hatred.*”² When religious faith gets hijacked by our own self-centred agenda, it is toxic. People can do very evil things when they justify their actions through a false belief that they have God on their side.

Sociologists make a distinction between *superstition*, which attempts to manipulate God in order to promote our own agenda, and *religion*, which lays down our own agenda in order to serve God. I find that distinction very helpful when I consider Jesus’ diagnosis of the problem. He rejects the knee-jerk reaction of Richard Dawkins or of the song where John Lennon imagines what the world would be without any heaven or any religion. We don’t have to imagine. We already have a place on earth with no religion. It’s called North Korea. Outlawing religion is not the solution. Jesus says that the solution isn’t less religion, but more genuine religion. “*You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: ‘These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules’*” (Matthew 15:7–9).

2 Christopher Hitchens says this in his book *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (2007).

Genuine religion means *surrendering our own ambitions to God*. The symbol that has been used by Jesus' followers throughout the past two thousand years to represent his message is not the sword, the arrow or the spear. It is the cross. Genuine religion means remembering the words of Jesus when he prayed in agony in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before he was crucified: "*My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will*" (Matthew 26:39). Religion that attempts to manipulate God to fulfil our own agenda is toxic. Religion that surrenders everything to God's agenda is heroic. Think of Francis of Assisi or Mother Teresa or William Booth and his Salvation Army. That's what they understood from the teachings of Jesus. It's what we need to understand if we want to change our increasingly violent world too.

Genuine religion means *trusting in God to set things right*. It leads to prayer, not warfare. When you hear about Islamic terrorist attacks or about rogue Christian gunmen outside American abortion clinics, it helps if you remember the way that Jesus corrected the religious leaders who opposed him: "*Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God?*" (Mark 12:24). If we believe that God is weak enough for us to manipulate, it stands to reason that we will also believe he needs us to fight on his behalf. However, if we believe that God is so great that our own agenda must die, it stands to reason that we will also believe he is far too powerful to need any acts of

violence on our part in order to promote his cause. Jesus taught this very firmly when a religious ethnic sect known as the Samaritans rejected him.

Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" But Jesus turned and rebuked them. Then he and his disciples went to another village. (Luke 9:51–56)

When I first read Luke's account of this incident, I was surprised that two of Jesus' disciples would ever have thought that violence was the best way to promote God's agenda. But then I took a step back. That's precisely what happened during the Crusades: Jerusalem has fallen, so God needs his people to go to war! It's what lies behind Islamic terrorism today: the West is decadent, so God needs us to teach them a lesson. It's often what motivates homophobia or racism or religious hatred – society is changing, so God calls the faithful to rise up and fight. Jesus rebukes this strongly. He tells us to trust God to be God, without needing any help from us.

Jesus practised what he preached. When he was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, he forbade his followers from resisting his crucifiers: "*How then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?*" (Matthew 26:54). When he was nailed to the

cross and tormented by pagan soldiers and by Jewish rabbis, he responded with a prayer: *“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing”* (Luke 23:34). The Bible tells us that this is very significant. *“He offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission”* (Hebrews 5:7).

Jesus modelled genuine religion for us, and his prayers were answered because of his reverent submission. Although he died, three days later rumours began to circulate that many people had witnessed that he was alive. The Roman soldiers and the Jewish rabbis were forced to admit that his tomb was empty and that they had no clue where his body was. Today, Jesus of Nazareth is the most famous man in history. More songs have been sung about him, more books have been inspired by him and more movies have been made about him than about anybody else, ever. Jesus has shown us what happens when we surrender our own agenda to God and stop trying to tell him what to do. He doesn't just answer our question. He personifies the answer.

You are right: superstition is toxic. But the answer isn't to eradicate religion. It is to discover genuine religion as it was taught by Jesus. That's the message our violent world so desperately needs to hear.