

## BEFORE

To my surprise, in recent decades the amount of attention the general culture gives to the historical Jesus has been increasing. Every year as Easter approaches, there are numerous media features about Jesus. This past Easter, *Newsweek* religion editor Lisa Miller explained that “Easter is . . . a celebration of the final act of the Passion, in which Jesus rose from his tomb in his body three days after his execution. . . . The Gospels insist on the veracity of this supernatural event. . . . Jesus died and rose again so that all his followers could, eventually, do the same. This story has strained the credulity of even the most devoted believer. For, truly, it’s unbelievable.”<sup>1</sup>

In his article “Myth or History: The Hard Facts of the Resurrection” for *The Times* (UK), Geza Vermes poses this question: “At the heart of the message of Christianity lies the resurrection of Jesus. The chief herald of this message, St. Paul, bluntly proclaims: ‘If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile.’ How does his statement, reinforced by two millennia of theological

## *Before*

cogitation, compare with what the Gospels tell us about the first Easter? Is it myth or does it contain a grain of history?”<sup>2</sup>

Nanci Hellmich reported in *USA Today* that “Two researchers analyzed the food and plate sizes in 52 of the most famous paintings of *The Last Supper* and found that the portion sizes in the paintings have increased dramatically over the past millennium.”<sup>3</sup> The popular press has a lot to say about Jesus.

And of course, they aren’t the only ones. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that the subject of Jesus is its own genre, featuring carefully researched biographies, scholarly textual commentaries, historical criticism, speculative fiction, antimythologies, and everything in between.

Into this seemingly inexhaustible current of words and thought about Jesus, I gingerly lay this volume. It is an extended meditation on the historical Christian premise that Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection form the central event of cosmic and human history as well as the central organizing principle of our own lives. Said another way, the whole story of the world—and of how we fit into it—is most clearly understood through a careful, direct look at the story of Jesus. My purpose here is to try to show, through his words and actions, how beautifully his life makes sense of ours.

## **A True Life Story**

If we want to investigate that life, to discern whether Jesus really did live and die and rise again, to know if the Easter story contains even “a grain of history” or perhaps even the key to history, we need to go to the Gospels, the historical documents that tell Jesus’s story. These Gospels are named after their authors: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.