

The Gospels as Political Good News

Part 1.
Overcoming Common
Misunderstandings

by Andrew Parker



The Gospels as Political Good News

Part 1. Overcoming Common Misunderstandings

Hard copies of *The Gospels as Political Good News* can be purchased on <http://www.blurb.com/bookstore>.

The Gospels as Political Good News is **Volume 4** in the Bible in Cartoons series. **Volume 1** *Thinking About the Bible* (Parts 1 & 2) and **Volume 2** *God of the Marginals* (Parts 1 & 2) and **Volume 3** *Politics Before and After the Exile* (Parts 1 & 2) can also be found on this website.



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INTRODUCTION

This book is from my 'Bible in Cartoons' series.* It constitutes Part 1 of Volume 4 which is entitled 'The Gospels as Political Good News'.

Volume 1 'Thinking About the Bible' examined the texts from the ancient Near East which the Bible itself mirrors. It found that these texts are largely political works, couched in the language of myth, designed to sell the conservative and authoritarian world-views of their priestly authors.

Volume 2 'God of the Marginals' then examined the Genesis and Exodus stories with a view to ascertaining their political perspectives. It found them to be revolutionary, anti status-quo texts that put forward the world-view of a bunch of losers or 'Hebrews' (as the civilisation-bureaucrats had disparagingly labelled them). Unfortunately, it also found evidence that conservative priests from within the community had later edited these marginal texts using a blanket of religion to try and hide their unsettling marginal perspective.

In Part 1 of Volume 3 'Politics Before and After the Exile' we examined some pre-exilic texts (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings and Jeremiah) and found them to be basically revolutionary Hebrew texts though there are signs of priestly revisionist editing.

In Part 2, we examined some post-exilic texts (Ezekiel, Isaiah, Ruth, Jonah, Job and Daniel). We found them all to be revolutionary marginal works with the great exception of Ezekiel who turned out to be the archetypal conservative revisionist.

The central feature of all of my cartoon books is an extended 'Socratic' dialogue with my old friend John Rowe. He consistently puts forward a religious interpretation of the Bible, whilst I myself argue for a down-to-earth political understanding.

In order to make this central dialogue stand out I have coloured it in pink thereby distinguishing it from the biblical citations which are in brown, the notes which are in blue and other casual utterances which are presented against a normal white background.

Further to this, the reader will note that a few biblical characters are presented in black and white whilst the majority are in full colour. This is simply to distinguish individuals meant to be understood as representations from those intended to be seen as regular historical personalities whether they ever actually existed or not.

*All of the cartoon books in this series can be found on my website at: <http://bibleincartoons.co.uk>

1

Understanding the Birth Stories



Now at last we can turn to look at Jesus.

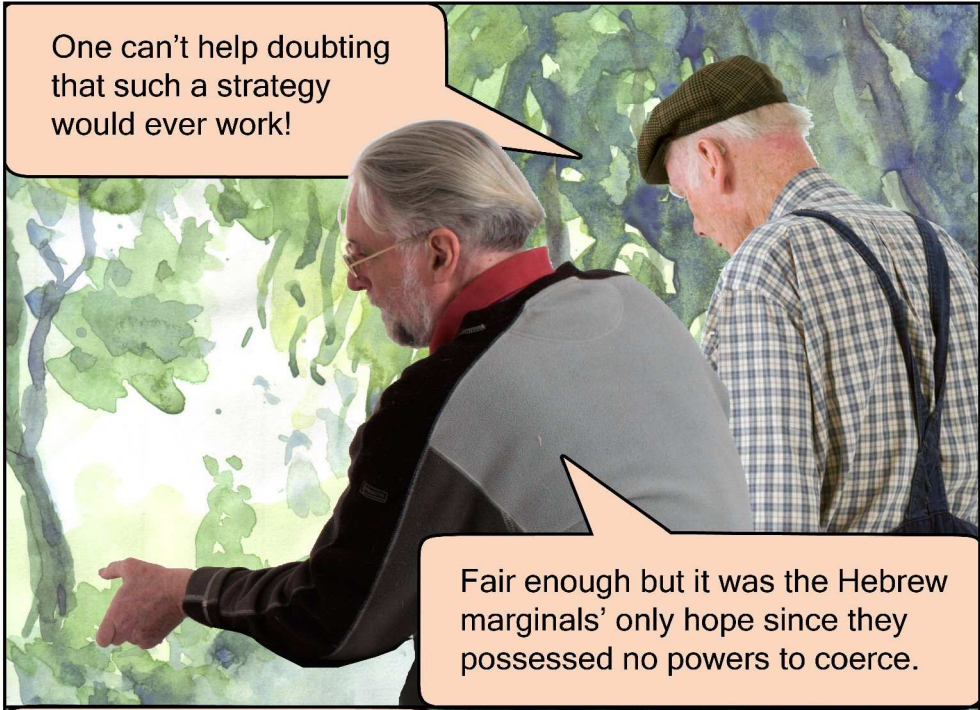
You seem in a hurry.

Of course, for Jesus was the fulfilment of the Old Testament and the Mosaic Covenant.




Just so long as you don't forget all we've learned about this covenant for without it there's no hope of understanding what Jesus was trying to achieve.





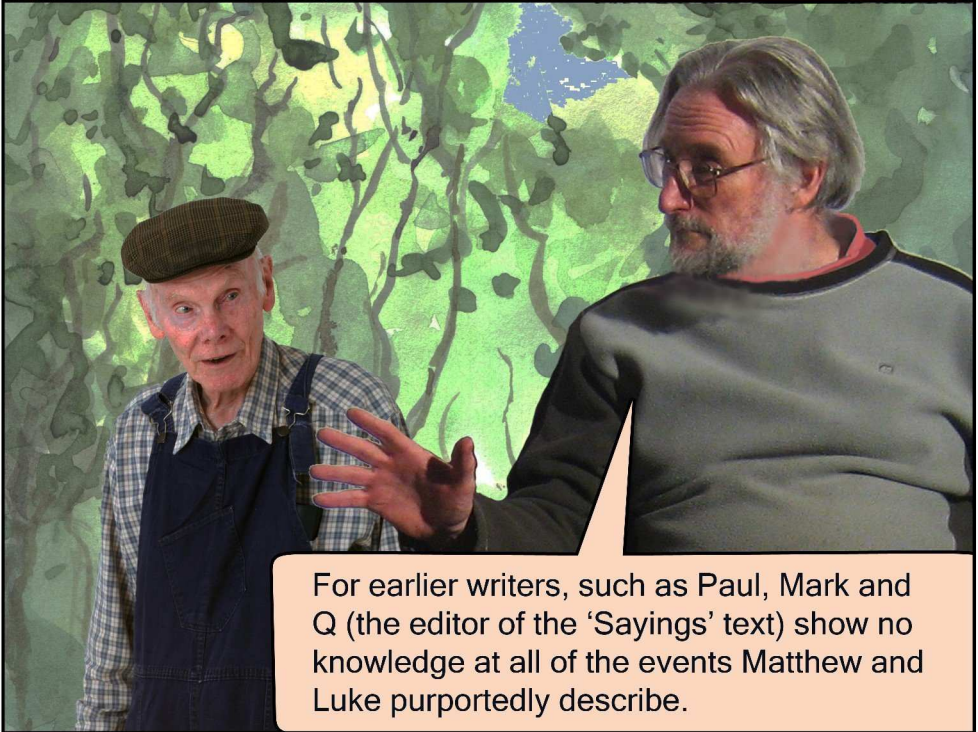
One can't help doubting that such a strategy would ever work!

Fair enough but it was the Hebrew marginals' only hope since they possessed no powers to coerce.



OK can we now turn to Jesus. Perhaps we could begin with the stories about his birth.

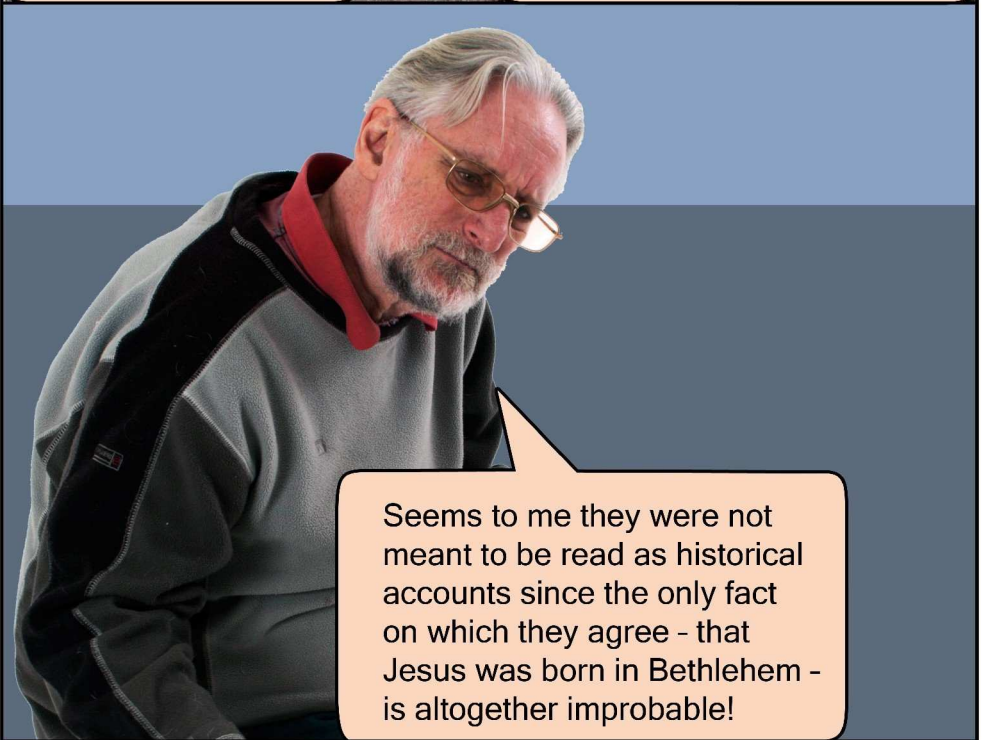
Sounds logical. However there's a problem.





Are you suggesting the stories were simply made up?

That's rather black and white. They were certainly made up but not **simply** made up.



Seems to me they were not meant to be read as historical accounts since the only fact on which they agree - that Jesus was born in Bethlehem - is altogether improbable!





There's no evidence Roman censoring involved people in having to move around the country so as to be counted. The Romans were not fools.

So, if the stories were not meant to be taken literally how were they supposed to be read?



To understand that we must go back to Paul.

How on earth can that help?



Paul's letters are by far the earliest New Testament documents we possess. However, they tell us next to nothing about the historical Jesus since Paul is careful to confine himself to the facts everyone knew.

He writes that Jesus was a true Jew born of a Jewish mother (his father being in the line of David) and that he had brothers. The only other thing he tells us is that he ate a meal with his disciples the night before he was crucified.



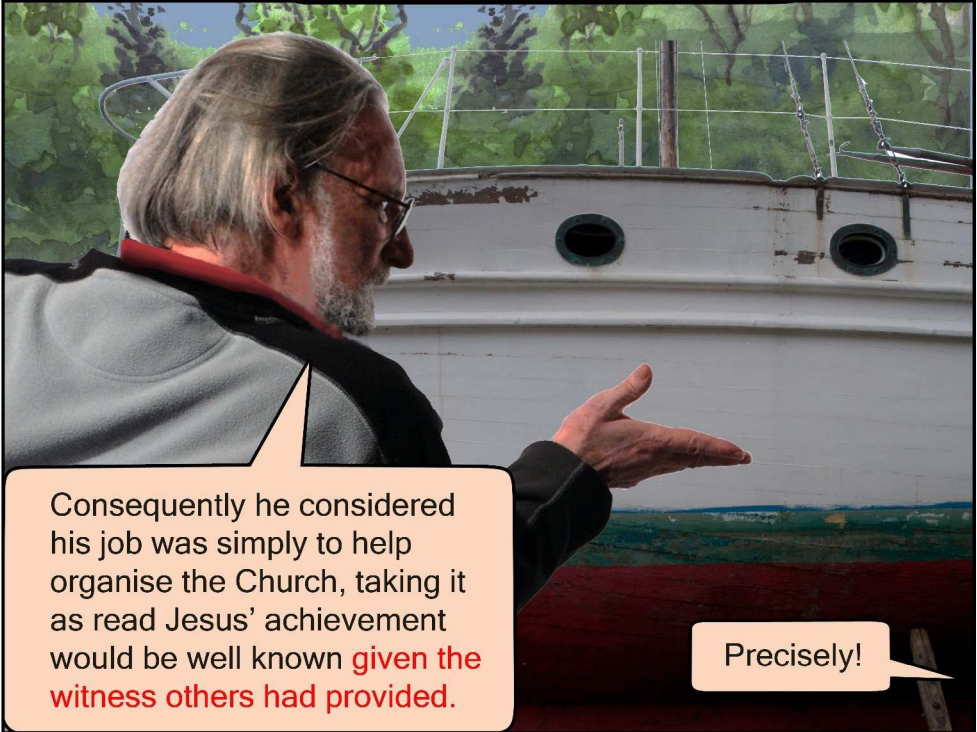
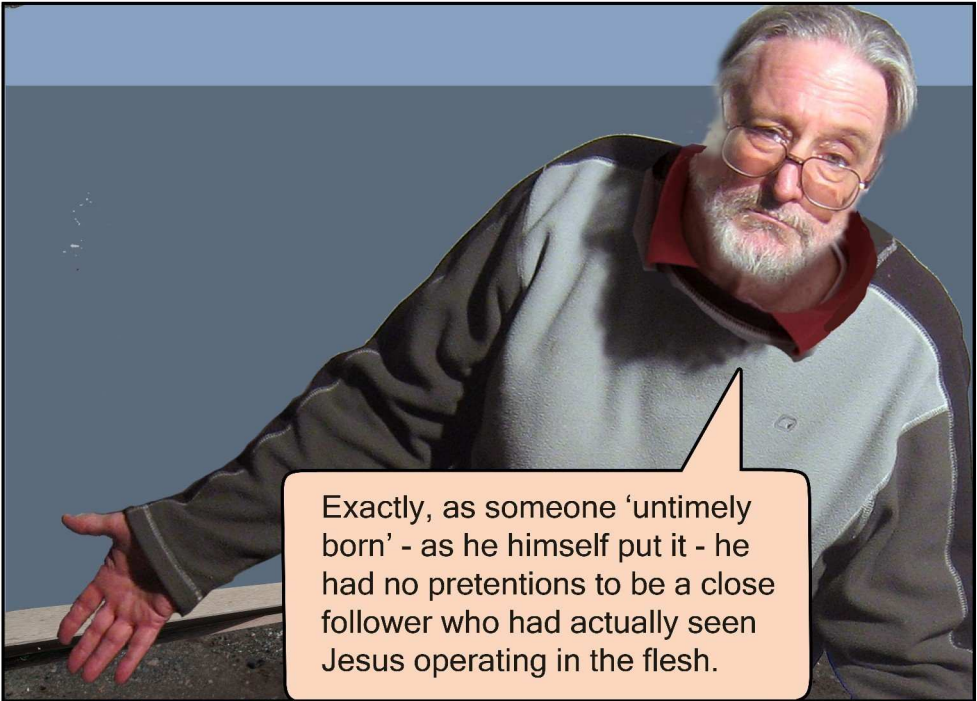
Yes, strange how little he tells us.

Don't you think that after his conversion Paul would have found the early Church buzzing with talk of what Jesus had said and done?

Absolutely!

So why this silence?

I suppose as someone who had recently persecuted the Christians he felt it was not his place to furnish such detail. That was for others... eyewitnesses and followers.





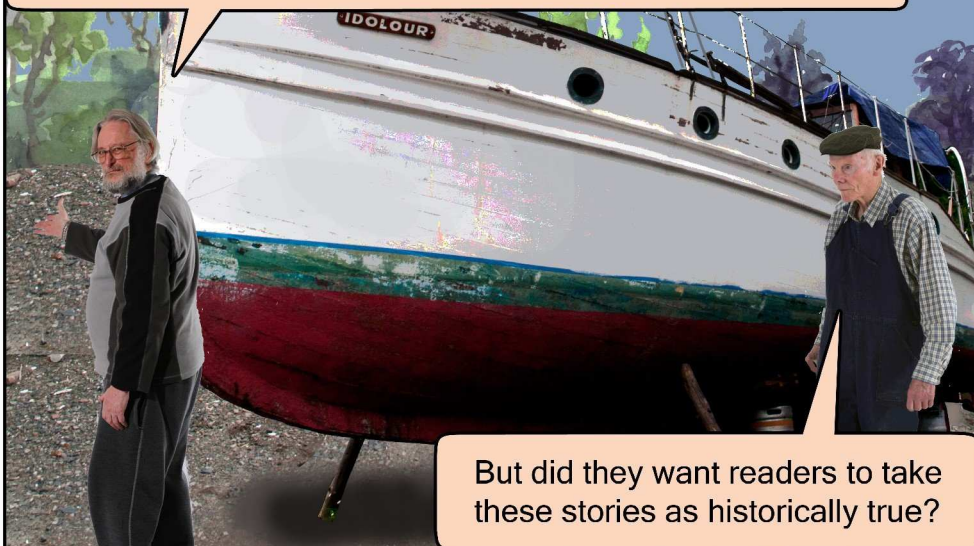
Great, so we're saying Paul presupposed people had a basic knowledge of what Jesus had said and done but it's unlikely any of this had as yet been codified.

That's correct.

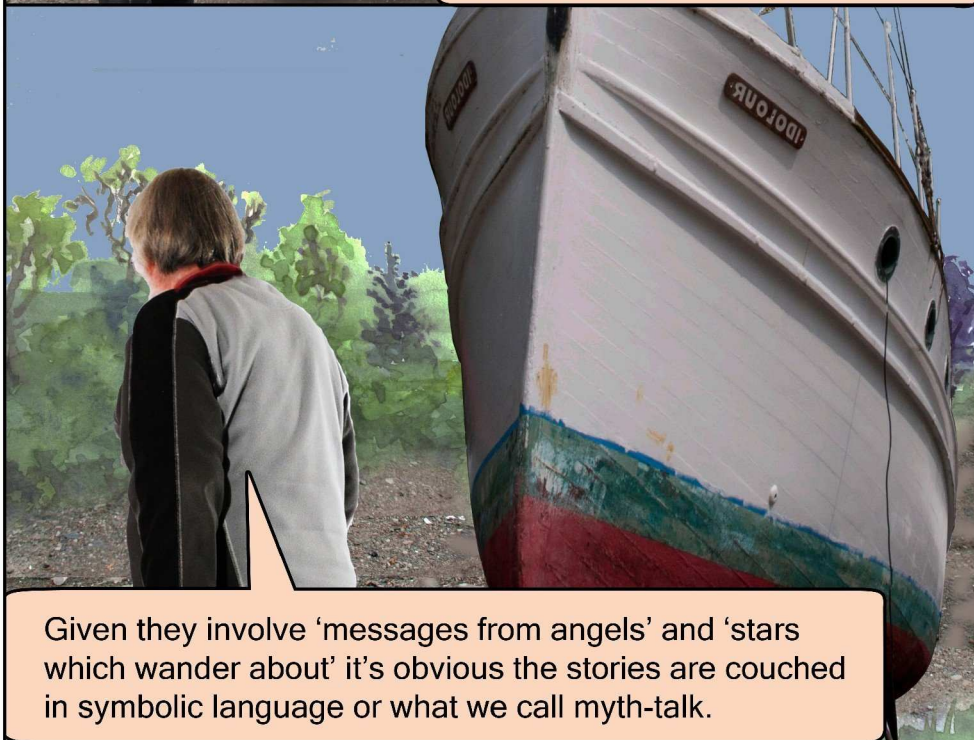
One assumes that codifying everything was the job the evangelists had taken on themselves, which explains why Matthew and Luke wrote their nativity stories don't you think?

Yes but as you pointed out Mark, the earliest Gospel writer, includes no birth story.

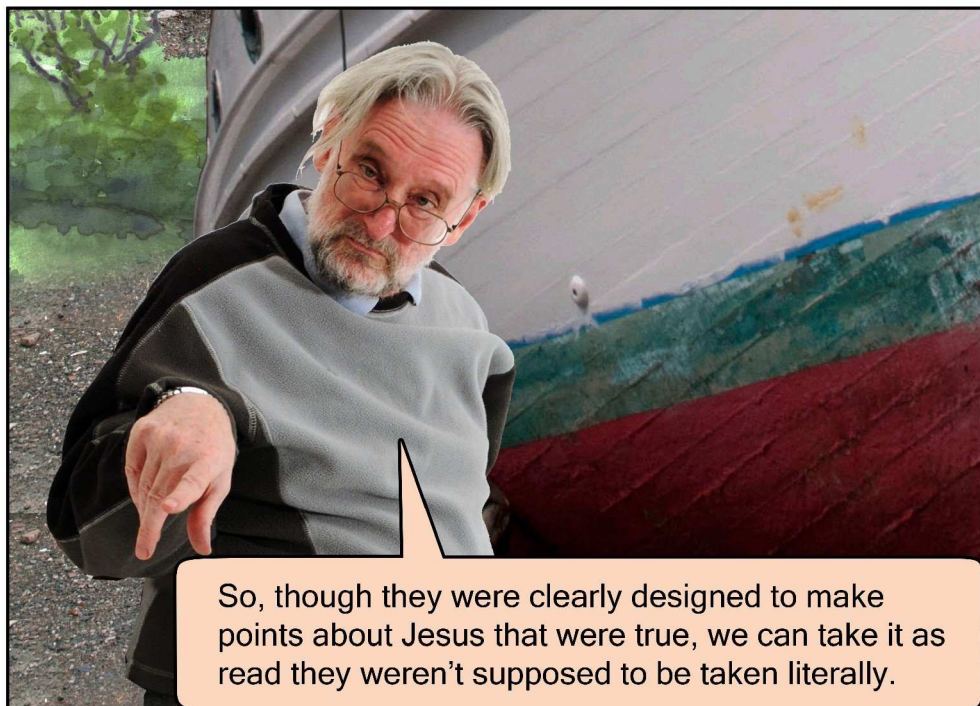
Exactly, so one must suppose Matthew and Luke wanted to firm up Mark's work by producing birth stories which underlined what Jesus had been up to, politically speaking.



But did they want readers to take these stories as historically true?



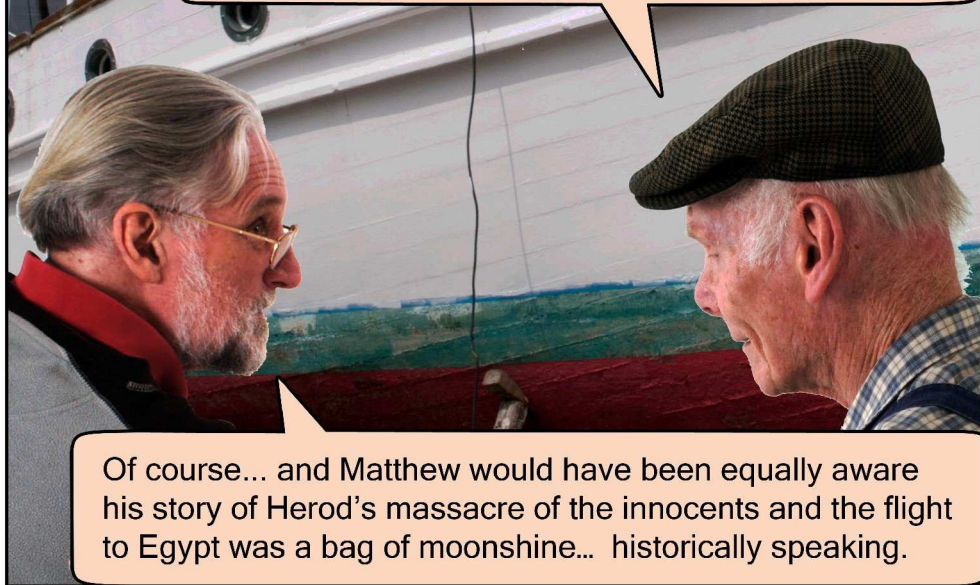
Given they involve 'messages from angels' and 'stars which wander about' it's obvious the stories are couched in symbolic language or what we call myth-talk.



So, though they were clearly designed to make points about Jesus that were true, we can take it as read they weren't supposed to be taken literally.



But would Luke have been aware his story - about Joseph being obliged to take Mary to Bethlehem so she could be censured - was not historically true?



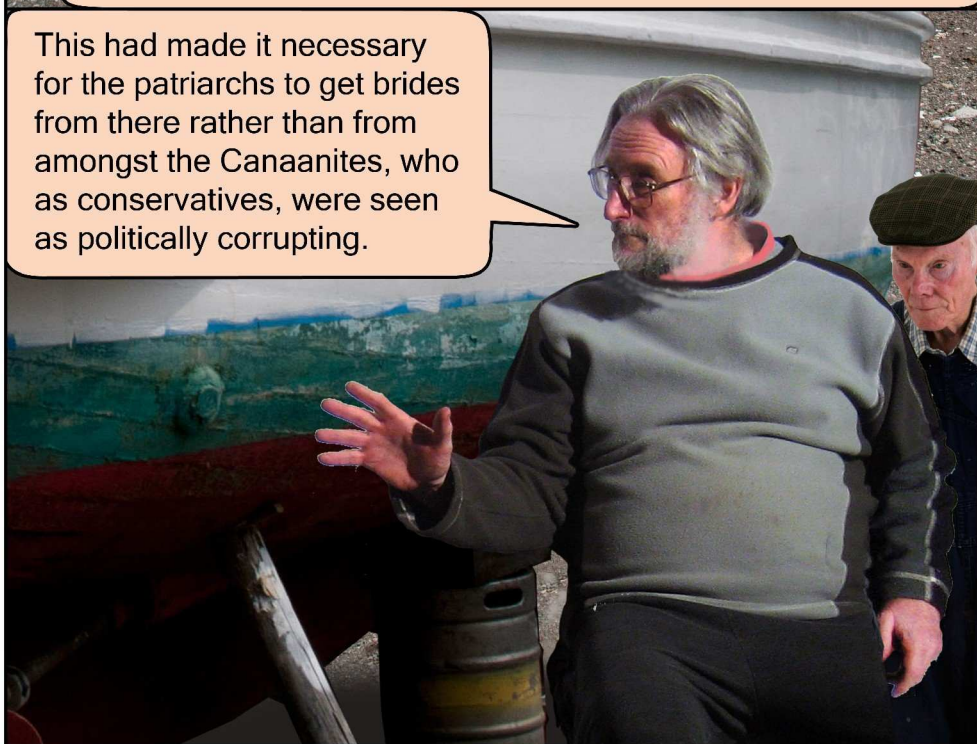
Of course... and Matthew would have been equally aware his story of Herod's massacre of the innocents and the flight to Egypt was a bag of moonshine... historically speaking.

Takes some getting used to! If you're right, what were Matthew and Luke trying to show about Jesus' ministry using these stories?



Matthew wanted to tie the Jesus event in with the Patriarchal narratives where the community called Israel is described as having its 'marginal' roots somewhere vaguely in the east.

This had made it necessary for the patriarchs to get brides from there rather than from amongst the Canaanites, who as conservatives, were seen as politically corrupting.



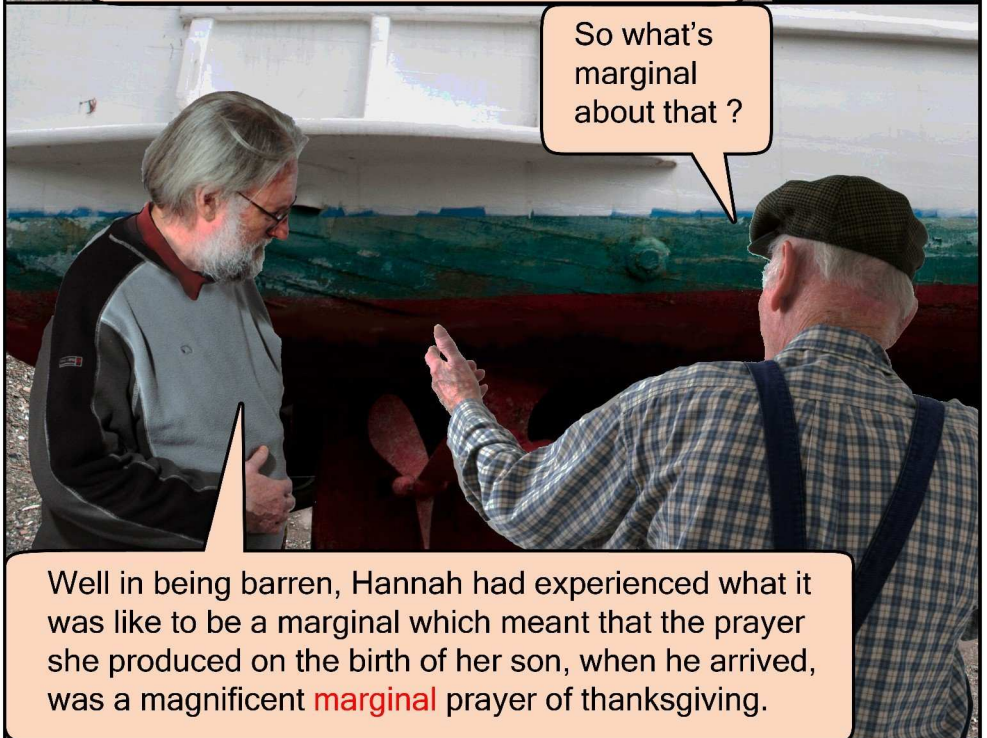
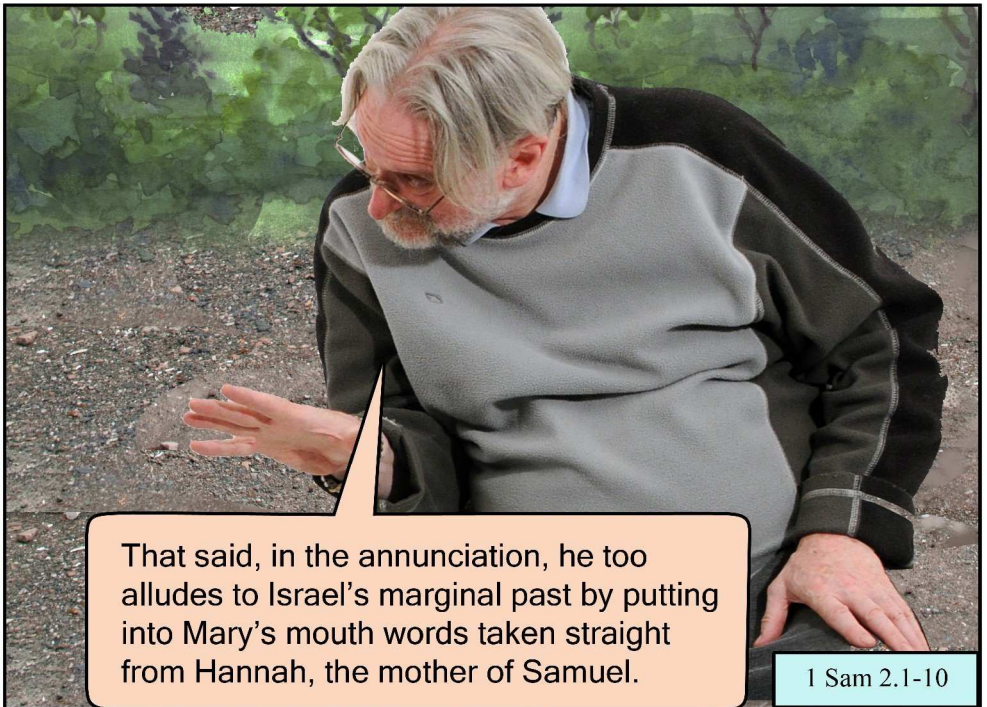


He also sought to tie it in with Moses and the Exodus narratives in which the Israelites are spoken of as Hebrews - a bureaucratic term used by Egyptian officials to designate footloose marginals.

OK so for your money Matthew wanted people to see Jesus as the epitome of marginal political activism. What about Luke?



Luke remains firmly in the present, writing that it was marginals in the form of untrustworthy vagrant shepherds (our gypsies) who were the first to recognise Jesus as 'their man'.




You have to agree both evangelists did a great job in highlighting the marginal perspective underlining what Jesus said and did...

...but to hear what they are saying you have to take on-board the symbolic nature of their language for, if you start reading their stuff as history, everything turns into religious drivell.

Which is what the Church has succeeded in doing?

Well isn't it?

A photograph of two people, a woman on the left and a man on the right, looking at a boat. The woman is wearing a grey and black jacket, and the man is wearing a plaid shirt and dark overalls. The boat is white with a red hull and a yellow life preserver. The background shows a green hillside. A speech bubble is overlaid on the top right of the image.

That's somewhat hard to swallow! You're saying the evangelists deliberately couched their nativity stories in mythological language so that people would read them symbolically rather than as history?

Of course! They were writing political introductions not religious fairytales.

2

Understanding Jesus' Relationship with John



Mark's Gospel kicks off with an account of Jesus' baptism by John.



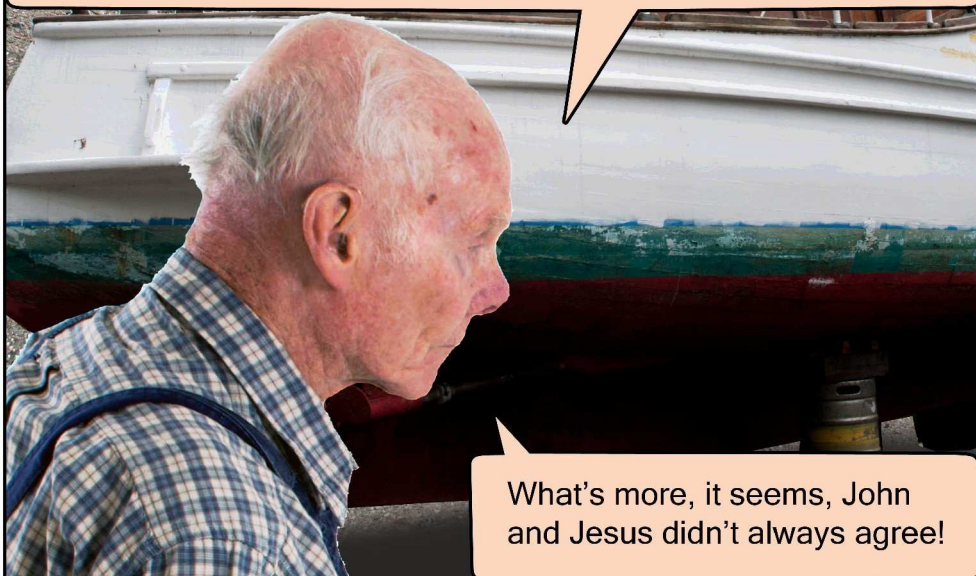
That would make Jesus John's disciple!

Yes, an undeniable fact that posed a serious problem for the followers of Jesus in the first century.

How's that?



Well, John made much more of a stir than Jesus did in those early years - something Jesus' disciples found hard to swallow.

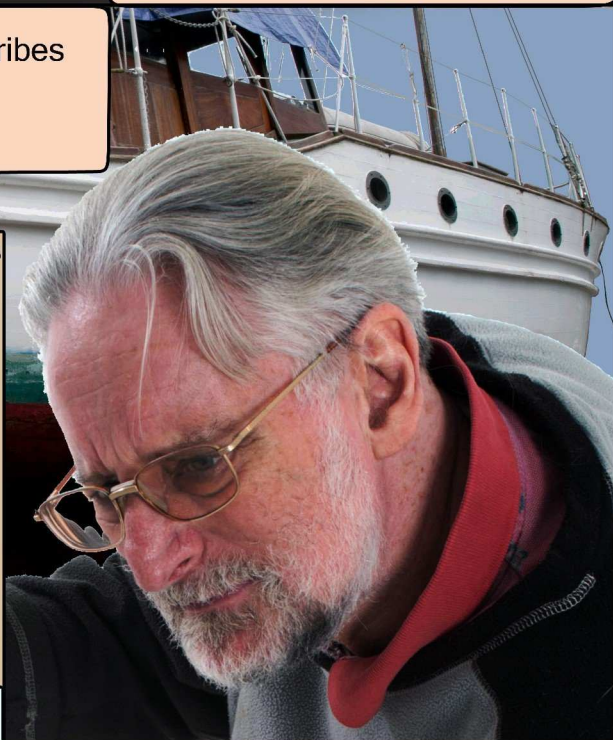


What's more, it seems, John and Jesus didn't always agree!

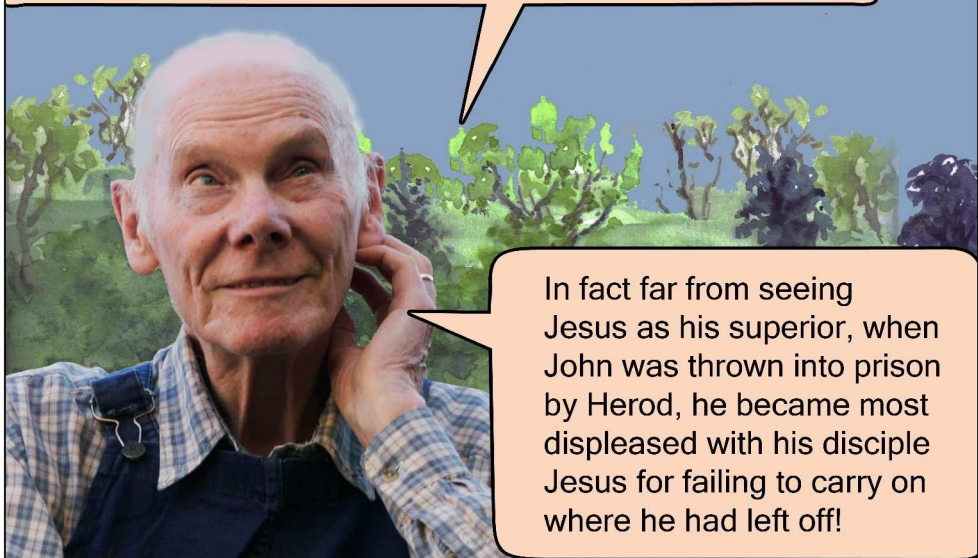
Is that why Mark describes John as downplaying his own importance?

After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptised you with water; but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.

Mk 1.7-8



Absolutely. There's no reason to suppose John thought someone greater was going to arrive on the scene. Mark simply makes that up to highlight Jesus' superiority.



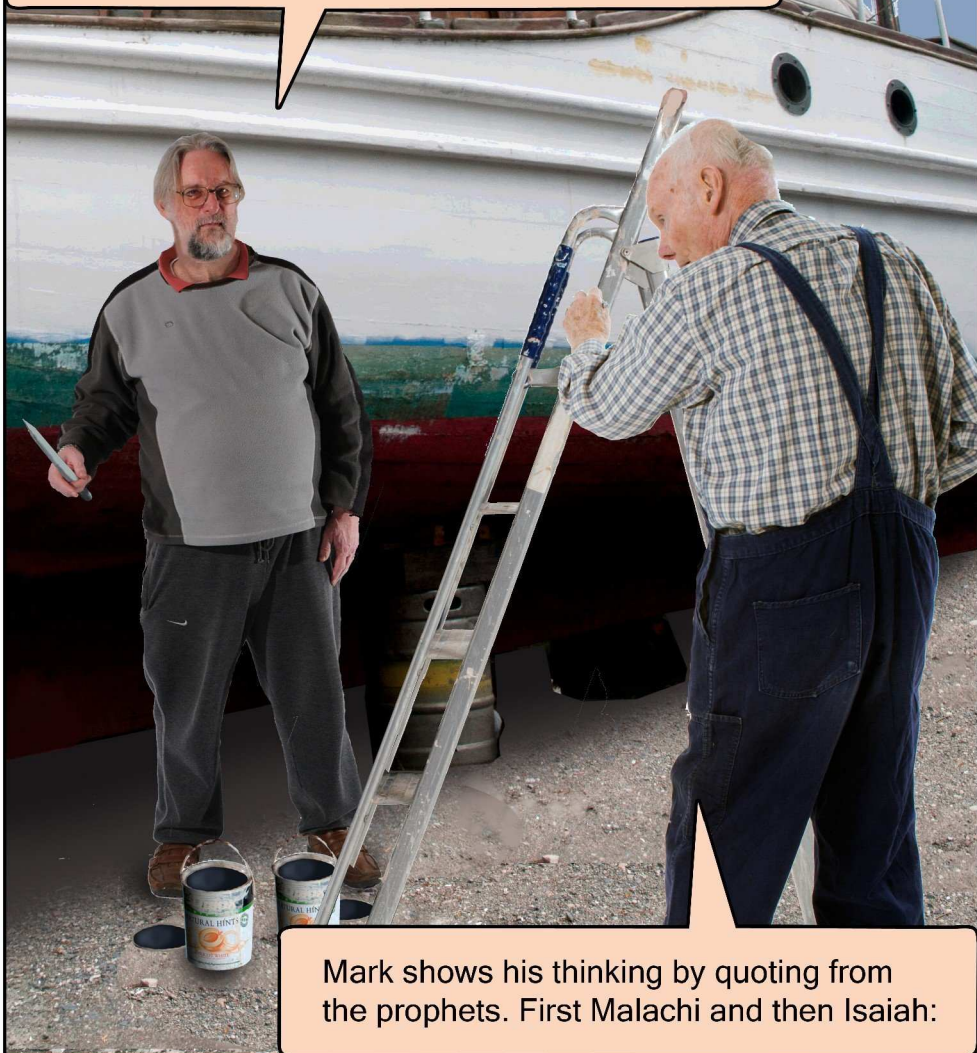
In fact far from seeing Jesus as his superior, when John was thrown into prison by Herod, he became most displeased with his disciple Jesus for failing to carry on where he had left off!

All of that information comes from the so-called Q source.



That's right. I'm referring to texts in Matthew and Luke where there's verbal agreement.

Fair enough we'll come back to them in a minute. However, for the moment I want to try and suss out what Mark thought John had been up to.



Mark shows his thinking by quoting from the prophets. First Malachi and then Isaiah:

Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way.

Mal 3.1

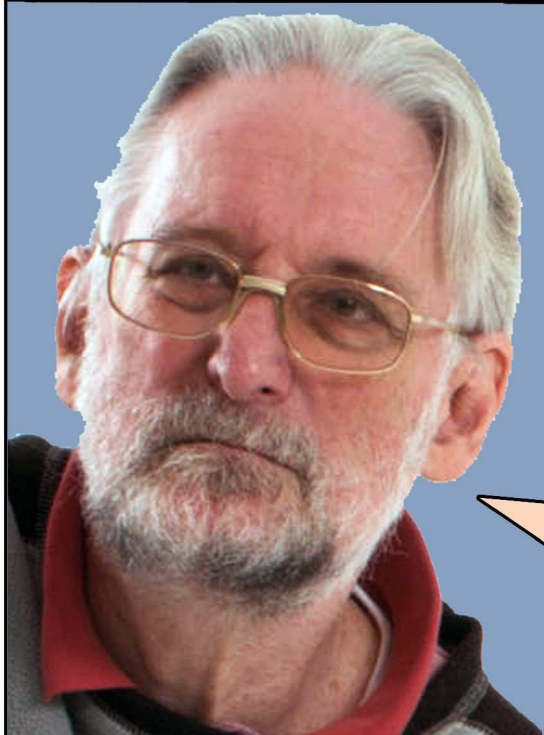
The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

Is 40.3

He also describes John as roughly dressed in a manner very reminiscent of Elijah.



Finally he has John baptising people in the river Jordan, which of course, makes one think of the entrance of the children of Israel, under Joshua, into the promised land.



So, in short, in the baptism story Mark's telling us that John was the current leader of the Hebrew marginals' covenantal cause and that Jesus threw in his lot with him. Is that a fair summary?

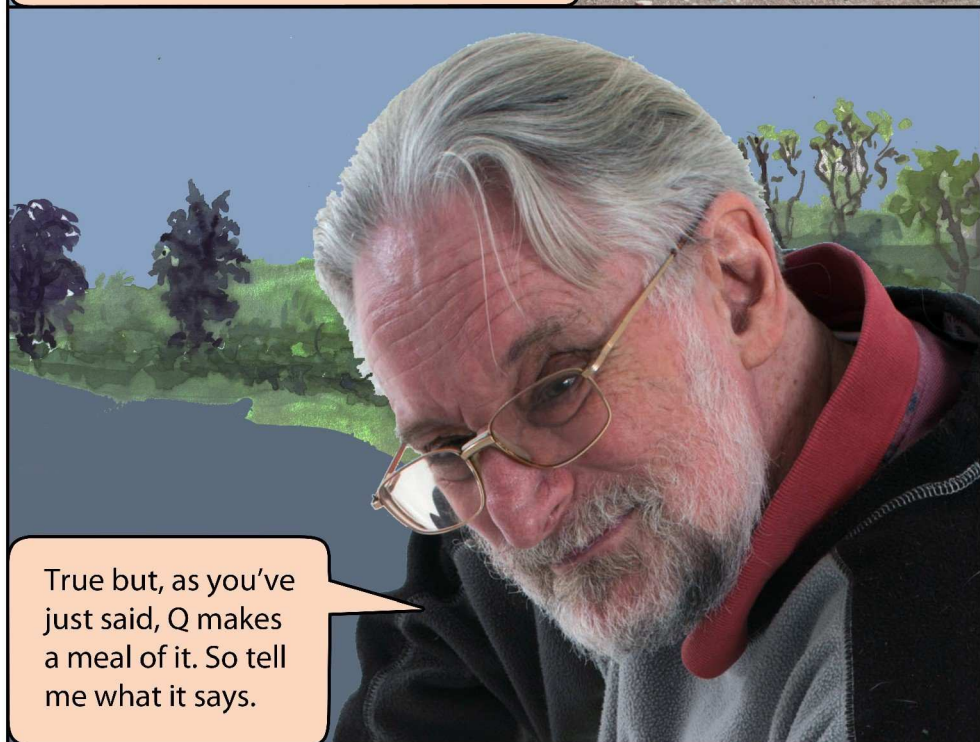
Mark goes much further than that! He claims Yahweh recognised Jesus as his son. This is surely his way of insisting Jesus had **perfectly embodied** the marginal cause, as you like to call it.


Thou art my beloved Son;
with thee I am well pleased.

Mk 1.11

Fair comment! So this was Mark's understanding of Jesus' political status which Matthew and Luke later sought to underline with their nativity stories.

Yes, now you've pointed it out,
I can go along with that.



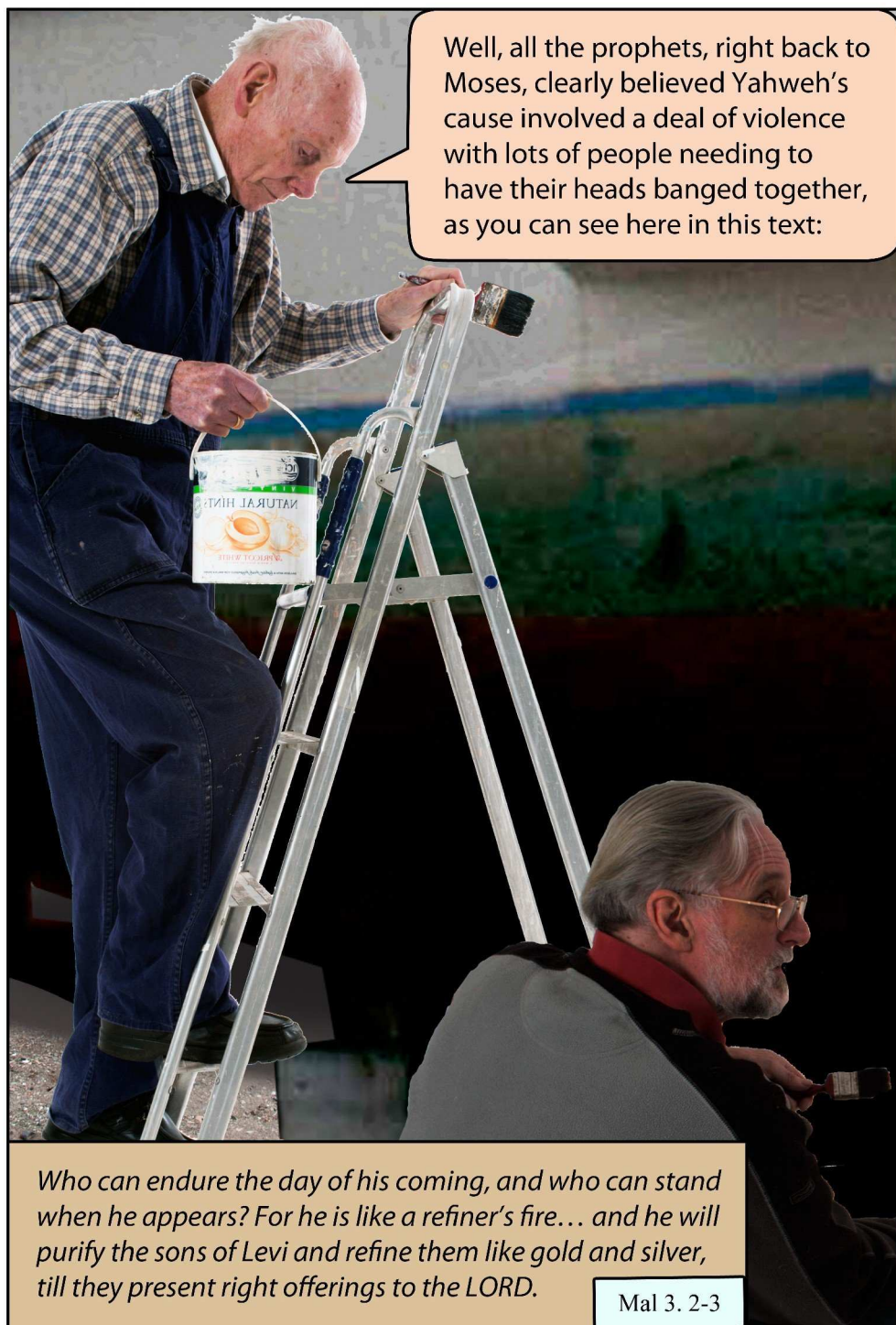
A photograph of a man in a plaid shirt and blue overalls standing on a silver step ladder, painting a white wall with a brush. He is holding a white bucket of paint with a green label that says 'NATURAL HIN'. In the foreground, a woman with short grey hair, wearing a grey jacket, is seen from the back, painting a dark red wall. The background shows a white wall and a dark red wall.

Q tells us that, incarcerated in prison where he could do nothing to advance the cause, John became increasingly agitated since, it appeared to him, Jesus was signally failing to stir things up as he should have been doing.

Go and find Jesus and ask him
'Are you he who is to come, or
shall we look for another?'

Mt 11. 2-3, Lk 7.19

What do you think
is going on here?



Well, all the prophets, right back to Moses, clearly believed Yahweh's cause involved a deal of violence with lots of people needing to have their heads banged together, as you can see here in this text:

Who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire... and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, till they present right offerings to the LORD.

Mal 3. 2-3

John... as a great prophet... was no exception to this rule:

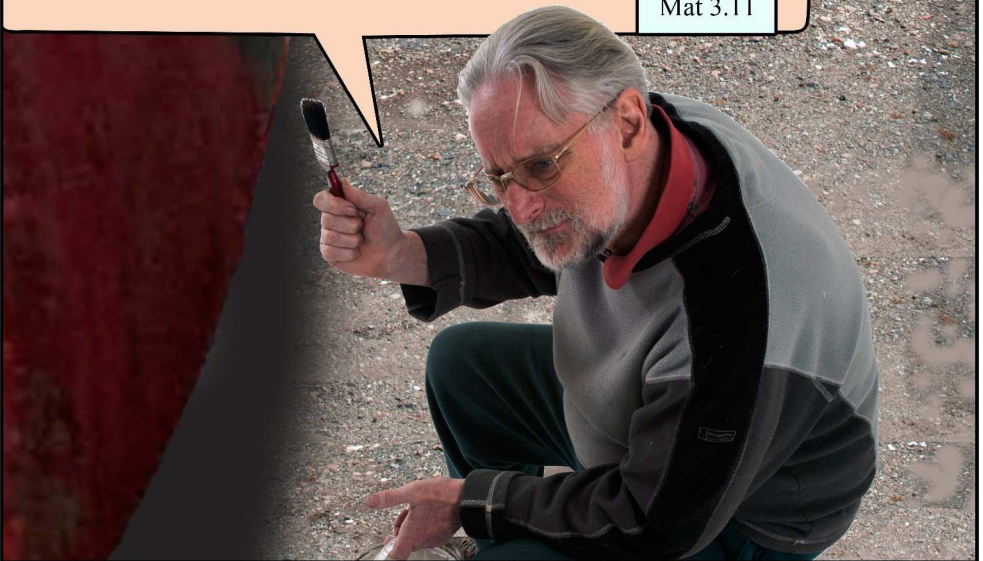


You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?... Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Lk 3.7-9

So, if John talked about a future baptism of the Holy Spirit one can take it as read he had **a baptism of fire** in mind, as Matthew makes clear.

Mat 3.11



Yes, according to Matthew, Jesus saw the prophetic tradition, right the way through to John, as a vain attempt to introduce the kingdom by force: a huge contradiction.

Mt 11.12

Say no more.
Back to the story.

Having found Jesus and delivered their master's highly critical question... which remained unanswered... John's disciples hung around to see what was going on so as to be able to report back to him what Jesus was up to.

When they were ready to leave, Jesus gave them instructions:



Go and tell John what you have seen and heard:
the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers
are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up
and the poor have good news preached to them.



As you say, not much
head banging there!
On with the story!

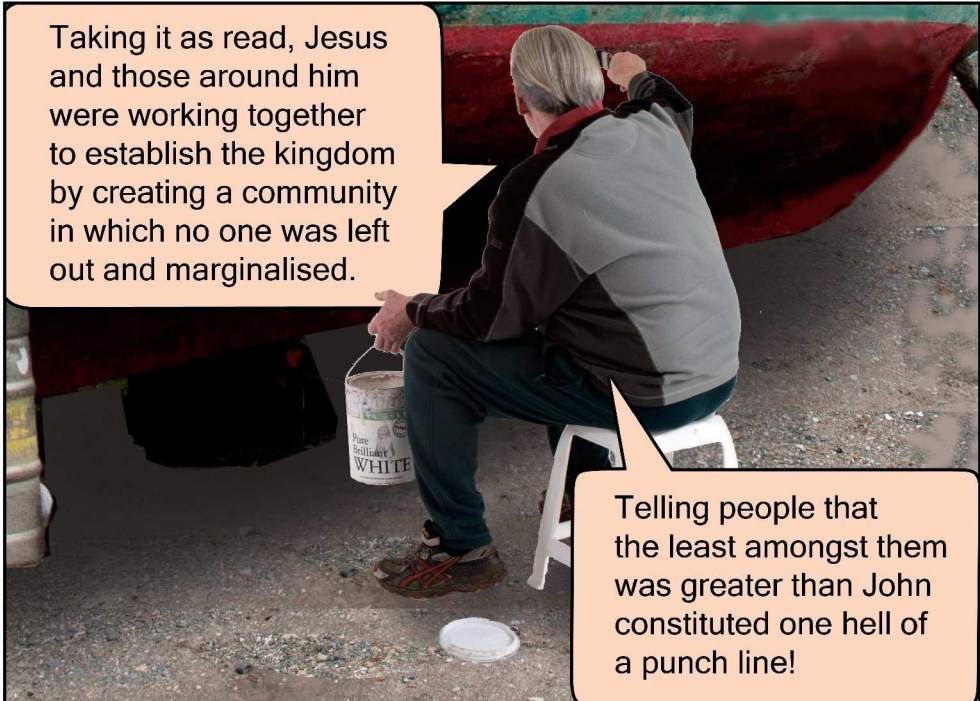
As John's disciples went away, Jesus began to talk to the crowd around him about John:

What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?

Why then did you go out? To see a man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, those who wear soft raiment are in kings' houses.


Why then did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Mt 11.7-9, Lk7.24-26

A man with grey hair, wearing a grey and black jacket and dark trousers, is sitting on a white plastic stool. He is painting the hull of a red boat with a brush. A white bucket of paint is on the ground next to him. The ground is gravelly and there is a white lid on the ground.

Taking it as read, Jesus and those around him were working together to establish the kingdom by creating a community in which no one was left out and marginalised.

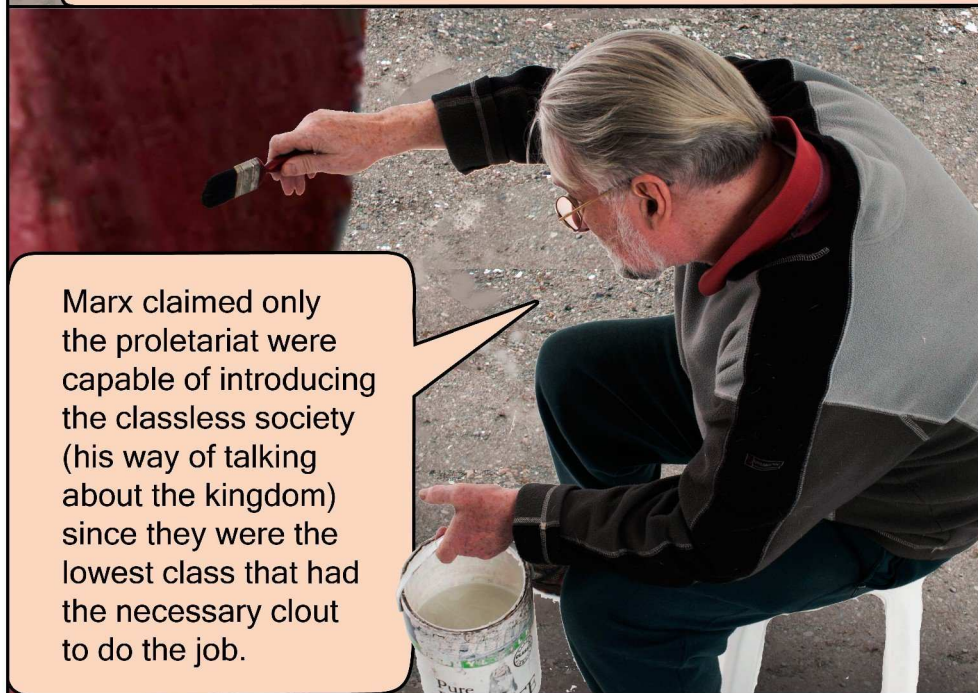
Telling people that the least amongst them was greater than John constituted one hell of a punch line!

A man with grey hair and glasses, wearing a grey and black jacket and dark trousers, is sitting on a white plastic stool. He is painting a wall with a brush. A white bucket of paint is on the ground next to him. A ladder is leaning against the wall behind him.

What do you make of it?



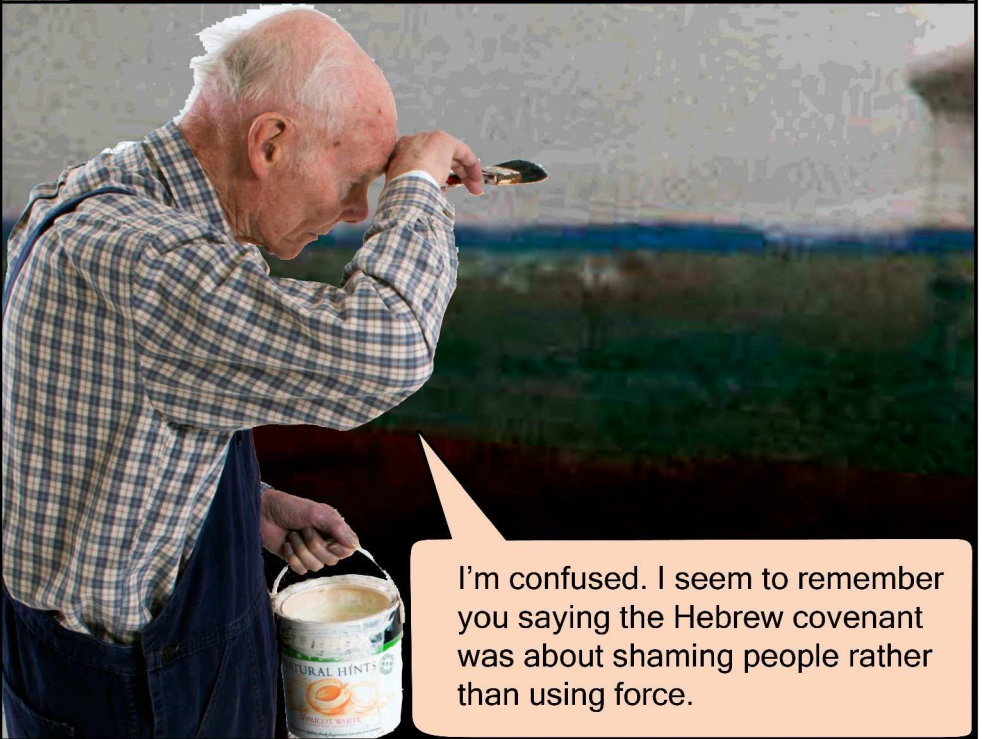




So Jesus would have thought
Karl Marx was wrong as well!



He would have gone a lot further than that. He would have
considered all of us beyond the pale since none of us can
conceive of society being changed without the use of force.

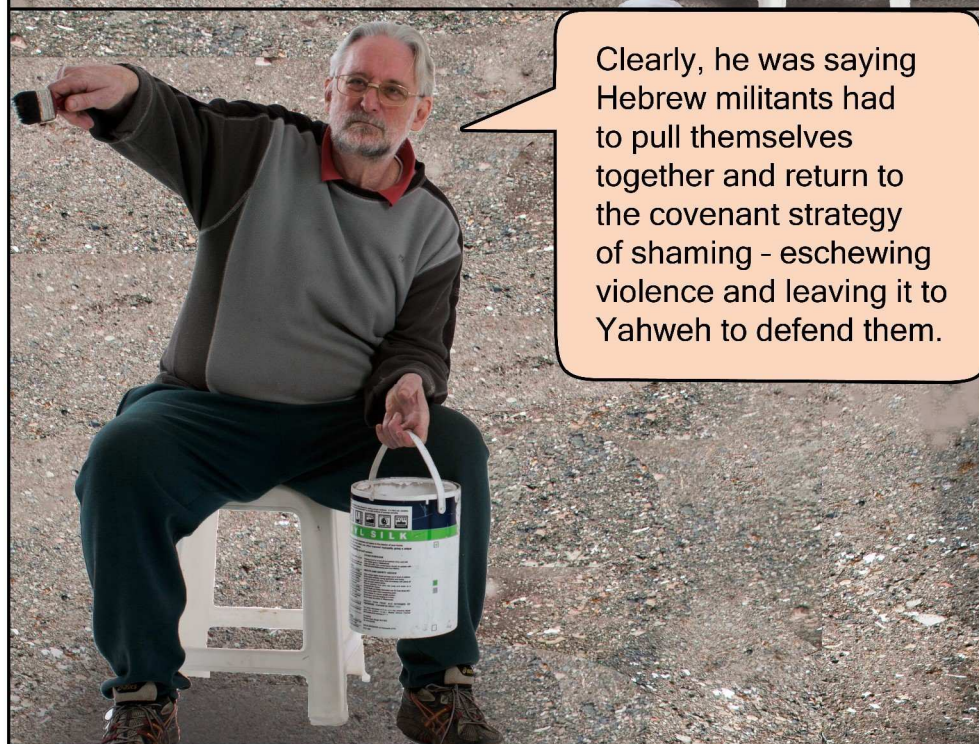


I'm confused. I seem to remember
you saying the Hebrew covenant
was about shaming people rather
than using force.



That's right. However, when trying to put this shaming strategy into effect even the greatest exponents of the Hebrew covenant resorted to violence... understandably as we would say.

So what was Jesus saying then for goodness sake?



Clearly, he was saying Hebrew militants had to pull themselves together and return to the covenant strategy of shaming - eschewing violence and leaving it to Yahweh to defend them.

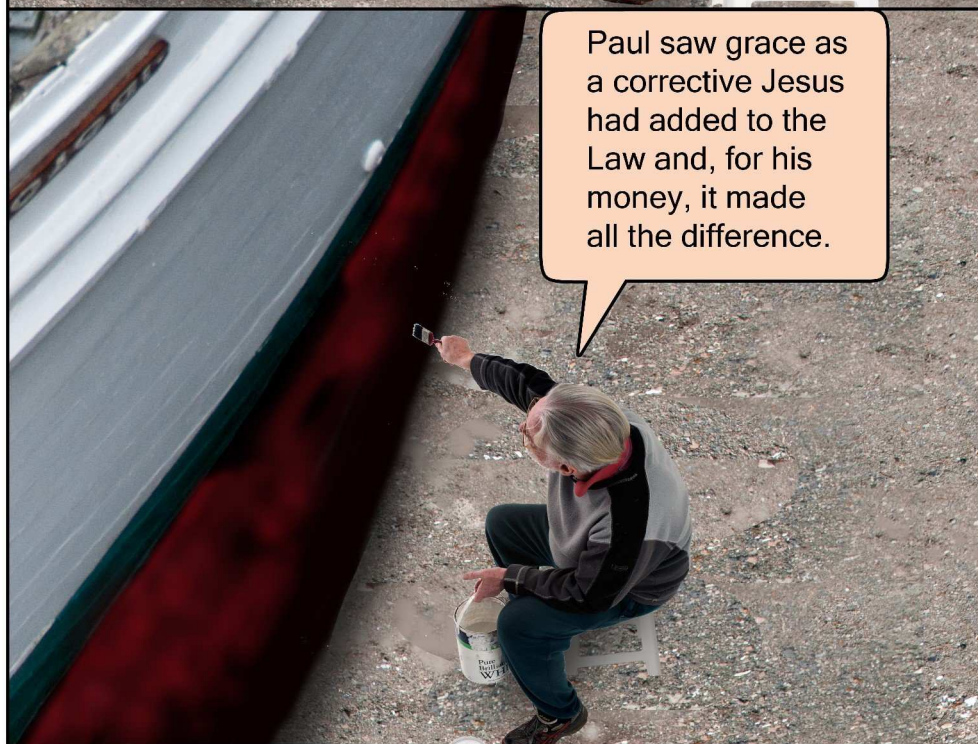


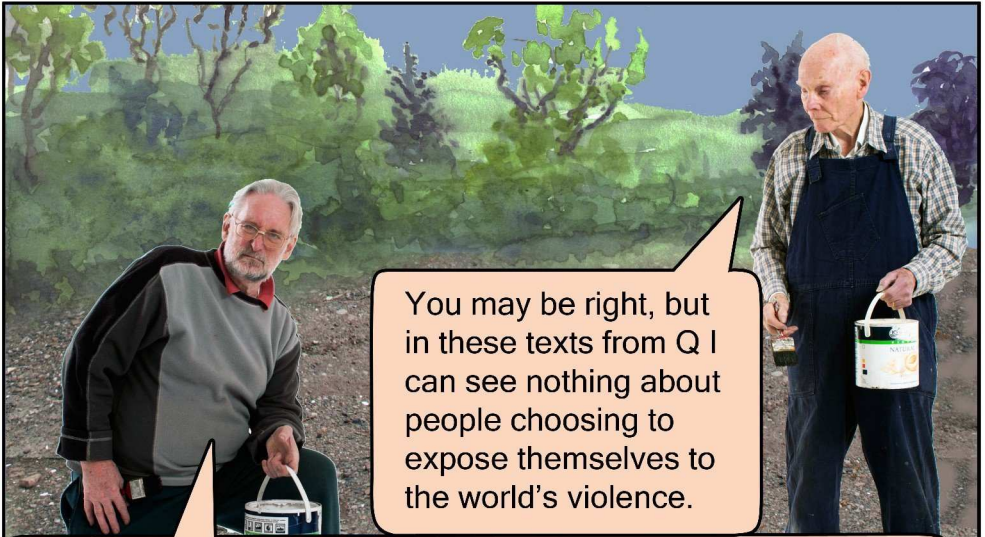
But goodness we've just agreed it was out of the question God would miraculously intervene to defend his cause...

...so, all your shaming strategy amounts to is Hebrew militants madly exposing themselves to the world's violence while eschewing all defensive measures.

Being prepared to endure violence is an important part of the picture, but not the whole story, for there was always Paul's 'hope against hope'...

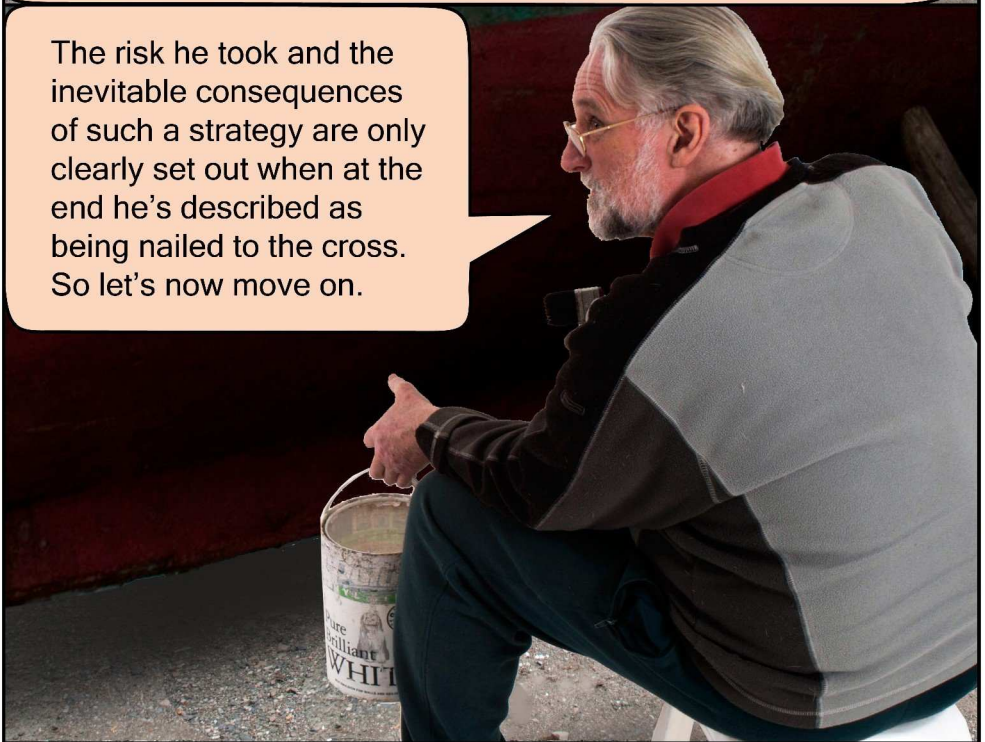
...the belief that, when properly carried out, the strategy would eventually work... but I take your point.





You may be right, but in these texts from Q I can see nothing about people choosing to expose themselves to the world's violence.

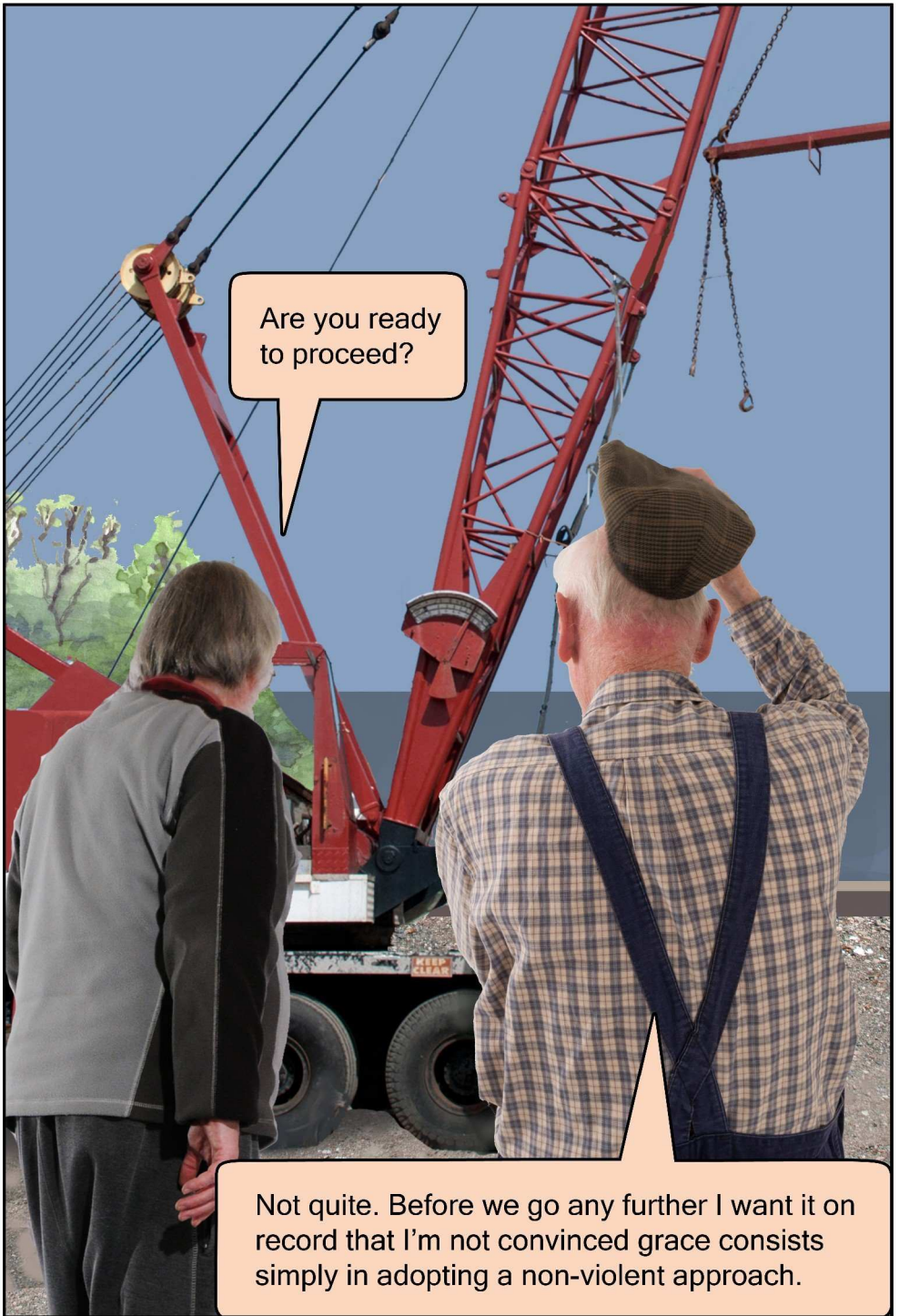
True, but It's early days and Q is presenting the other side of the coin using miracle-talk to describe Jesus' shaming activity in restoring people's sight and raising them from the dead.



The risk he took and the inevitable consequences of such a strategy are only clearly set out when at the end he's described as being nailed to the cross. So let's now move on.

3

Understanding Grace





That sounds very lordly and condescending to me... the sort of remark one would expect from someone like Ezekiel... but it doesn't ring true of Paul!



Why not?



Well allow me to back-track there a bit. I can certainly see Paul advocating your lordly and religious kind of grace **before** his conversion.



So what was it about Jesus that got up Paul's nose if it wasn't his mercy?

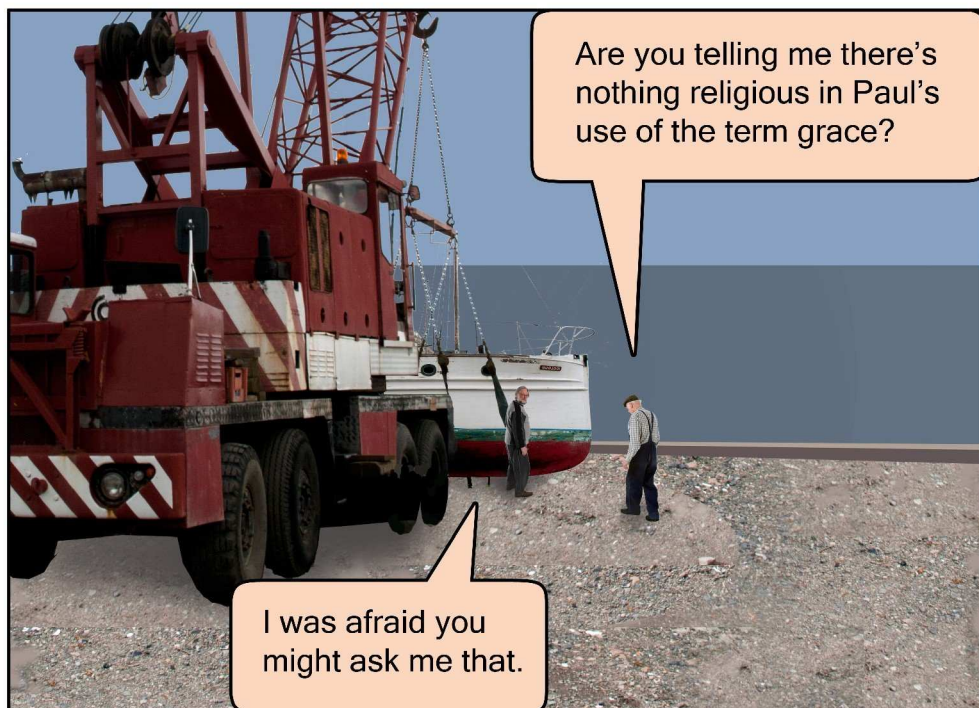


What he couldn't stomach was Jesus' grace; his lack of domination and control.

You're telling me it was Jesus' grace that got under Paul's skin... till finally he cracked and was converted.



Absolutely and it's unlikely he found this grace a problem **because it was disconcertingly religious** since we're agreed he had nothing against religion.



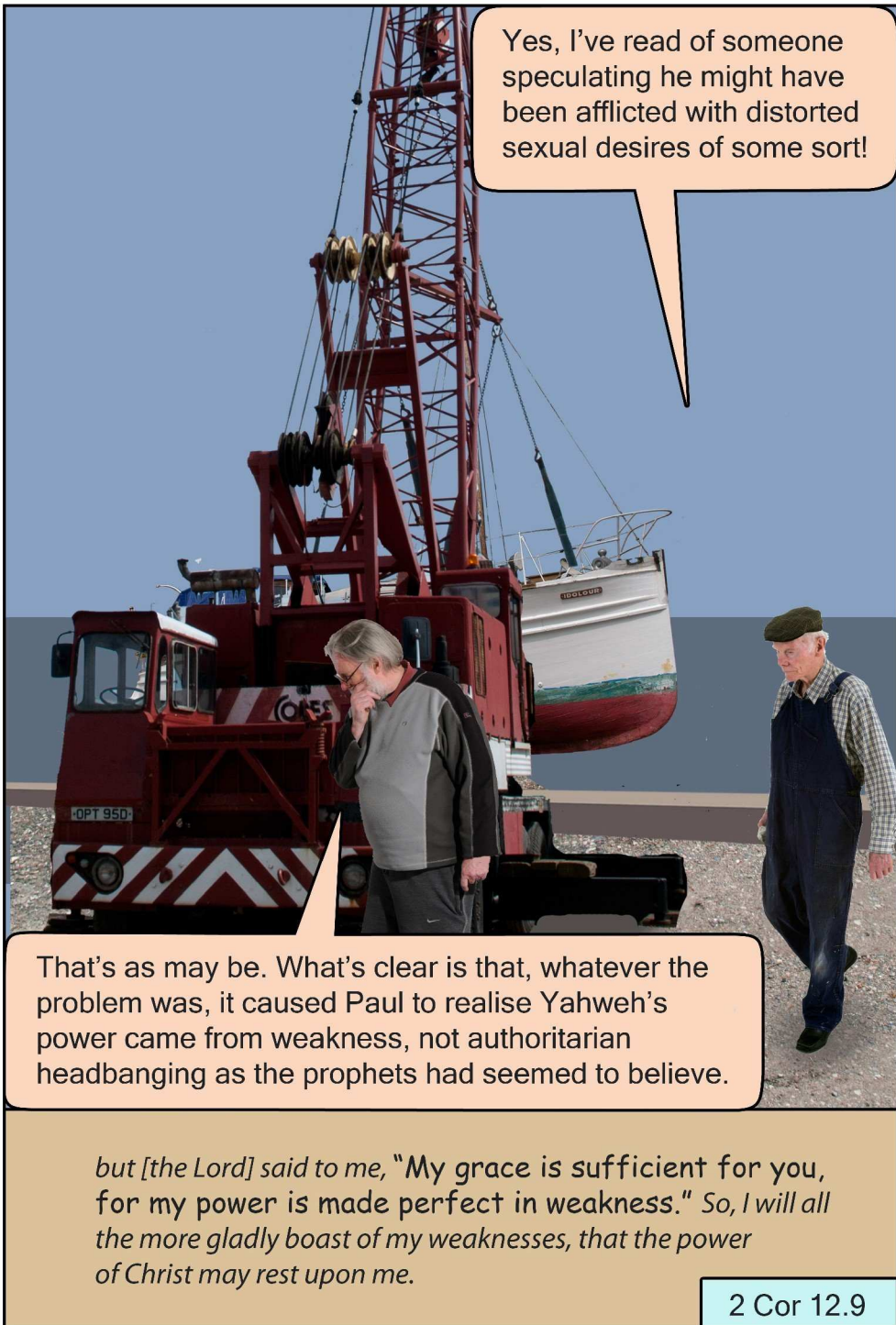
Are you telling me there's nothing religious in Paul's use of the term grace?

I was afraid you might ask me that.



Go on!

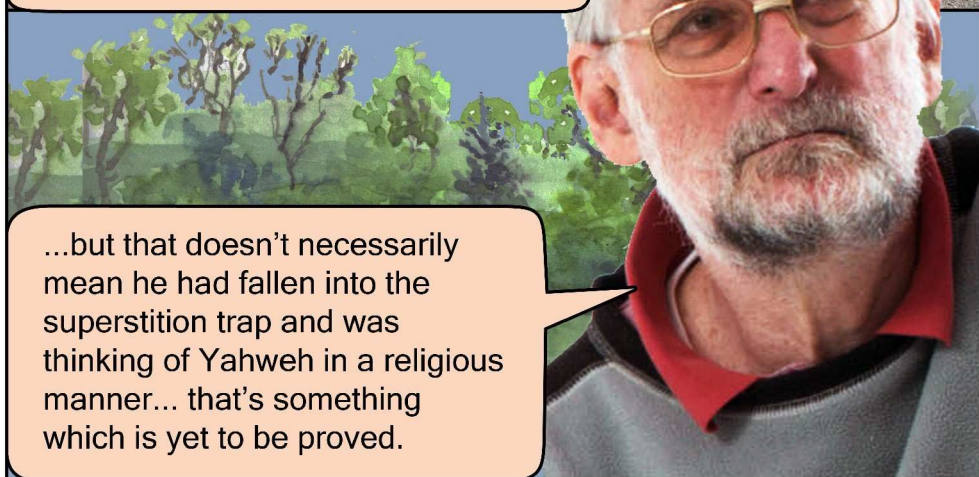
Well on one occasion Paul recounts how he had begged God to remove some shameful defect in his make-up... something he obliquely referred to as 'a thorn in his flesh'.



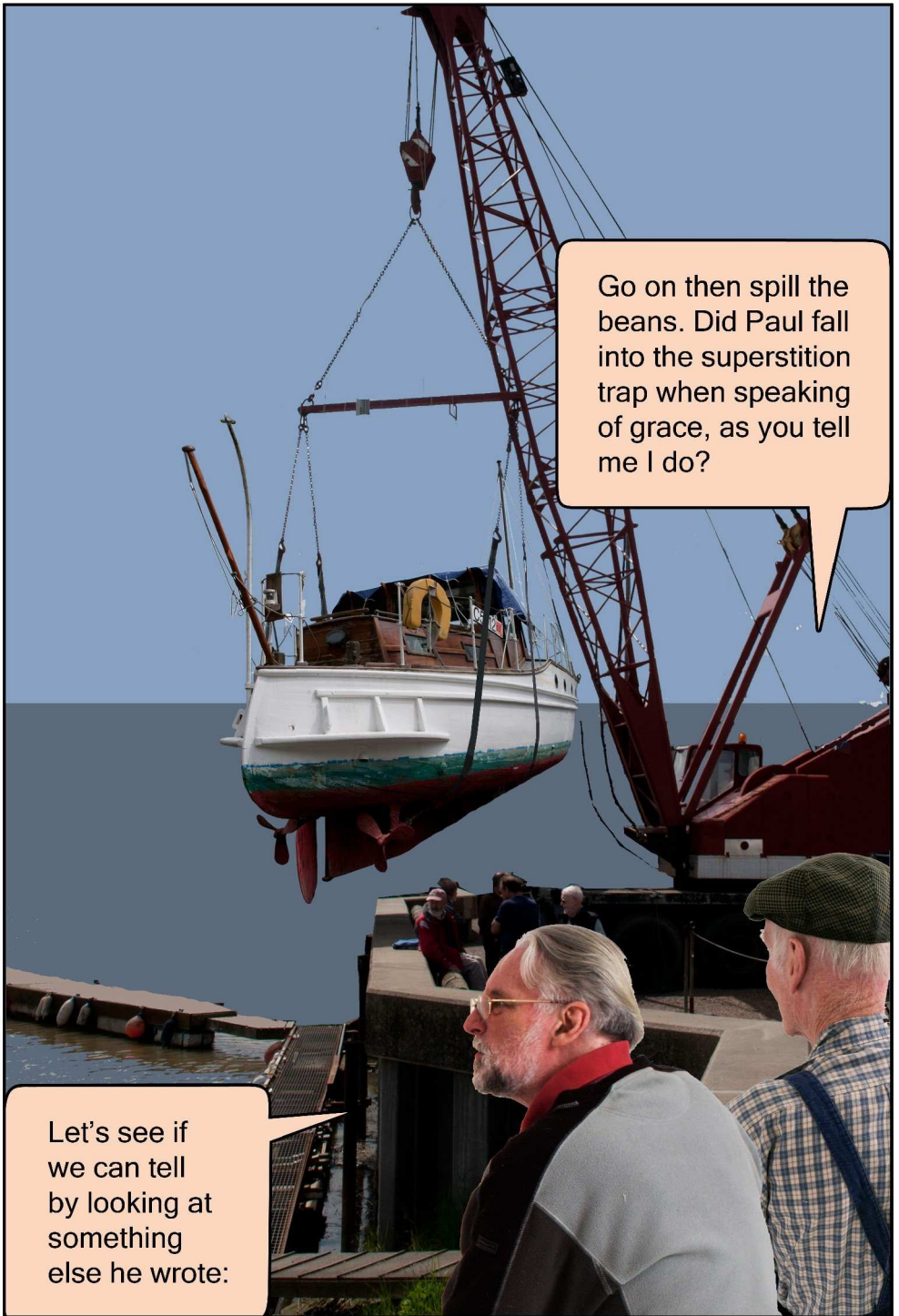
Doesn't this voice from heaven,
Paul speaks about, indicate that
he was a religious believer!



Well, like most people of his day -
including Jesus - Paul certainly
expressed his thoughts about the
world using mythological language...



...but that doesn't necessarily
mean he had fallen into the
superstition trap and was
thinking of Yahweh in a religious
manner... that's something
which is yet to be proved.

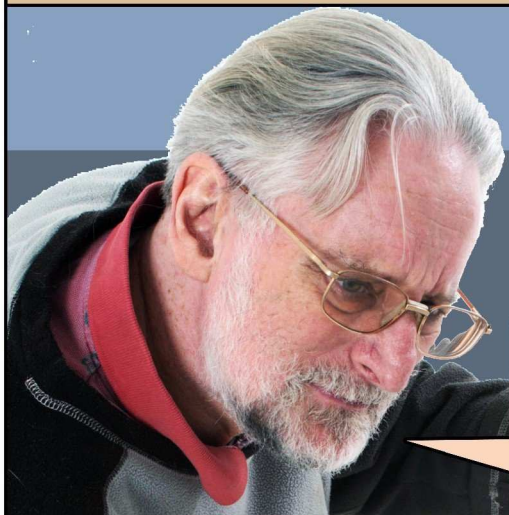


Go on then spill the beans. Did Paul fall into the superstition trap when speaking of grace, as you tell me I do?

Let's see if we can tell by looking at something else he wrote:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand.

Rom 5.1-2



What's interesting here is the inference that we can't be gracious naturally of our own accord.



As Paul sees it we can only manage to behave graciously - against our corrupt and selfish animal nature - by having **faith in Jesus**.

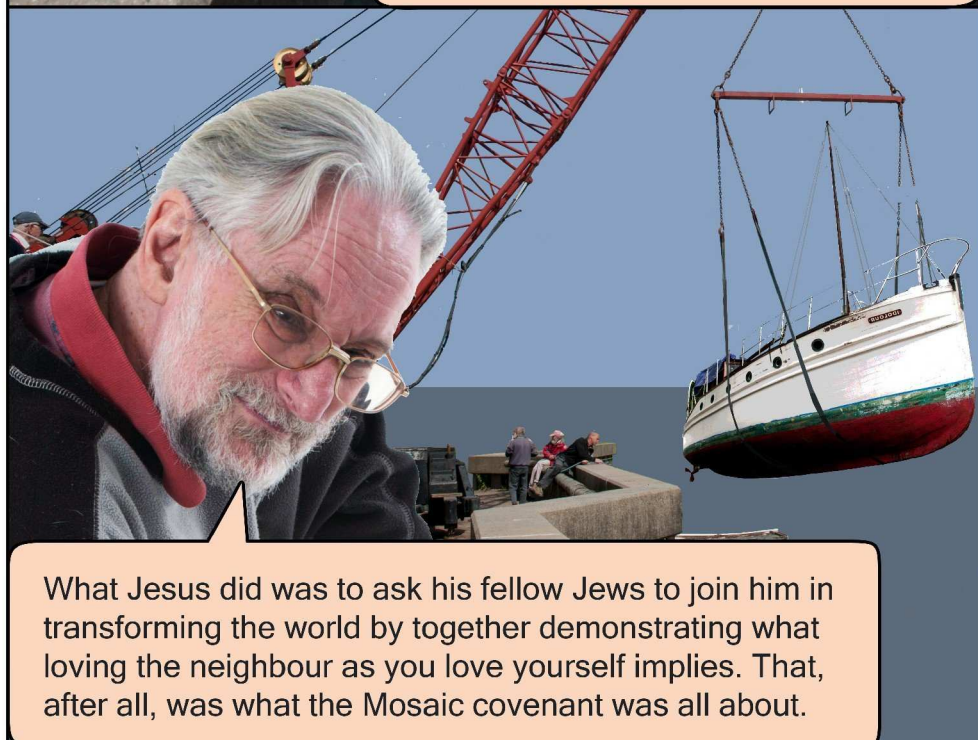
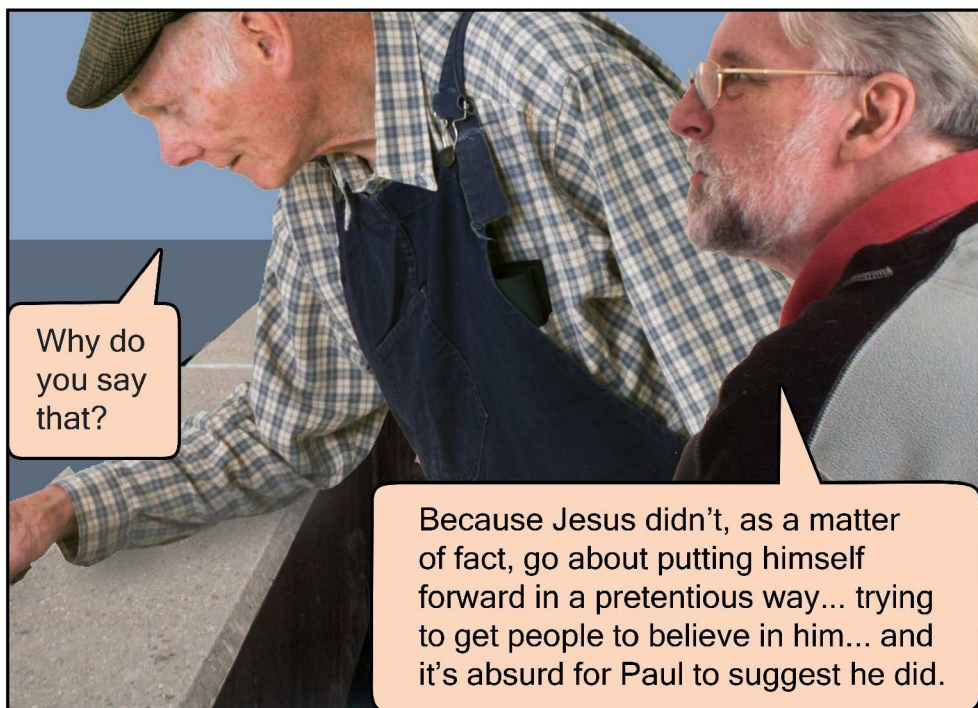
'Faith in Jesus' sounds religious to me!

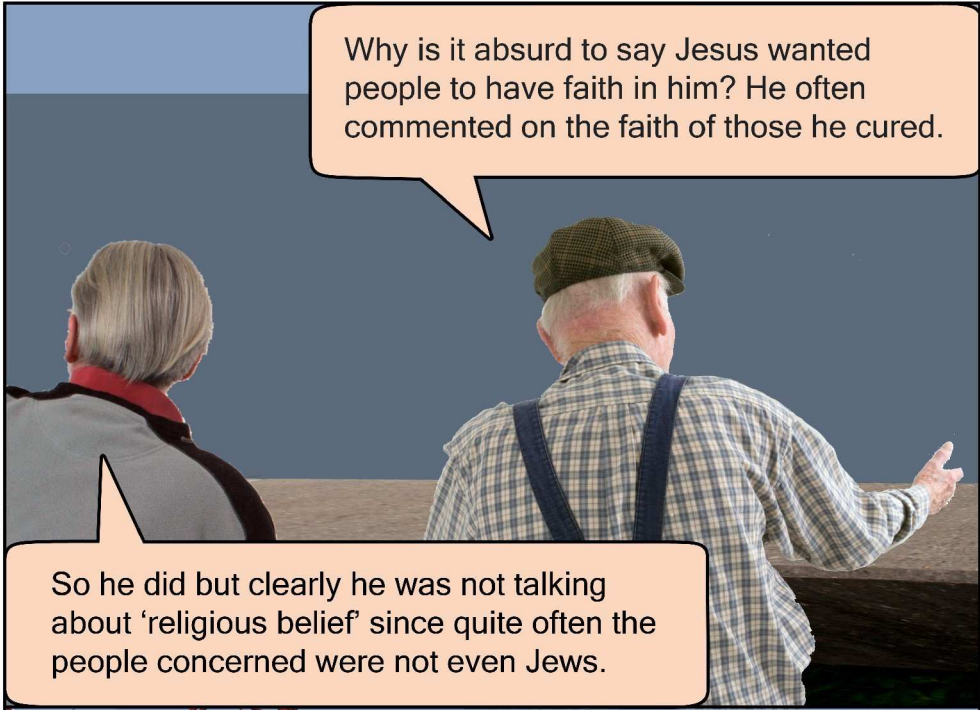
Indeed it is! However, though I heartily agree with Paul that the power of Jesus' grace lay not in his lordliness but rather in his lack of it... a feature which radically distinguished him from everyone who had preceded him in the tradition...



...the fact is everything Jesus said and did contradicts Paul's religious talk about people needing to acquire something of Jesus' divine spark by having faith in him.

See Rom 3. 21- 25

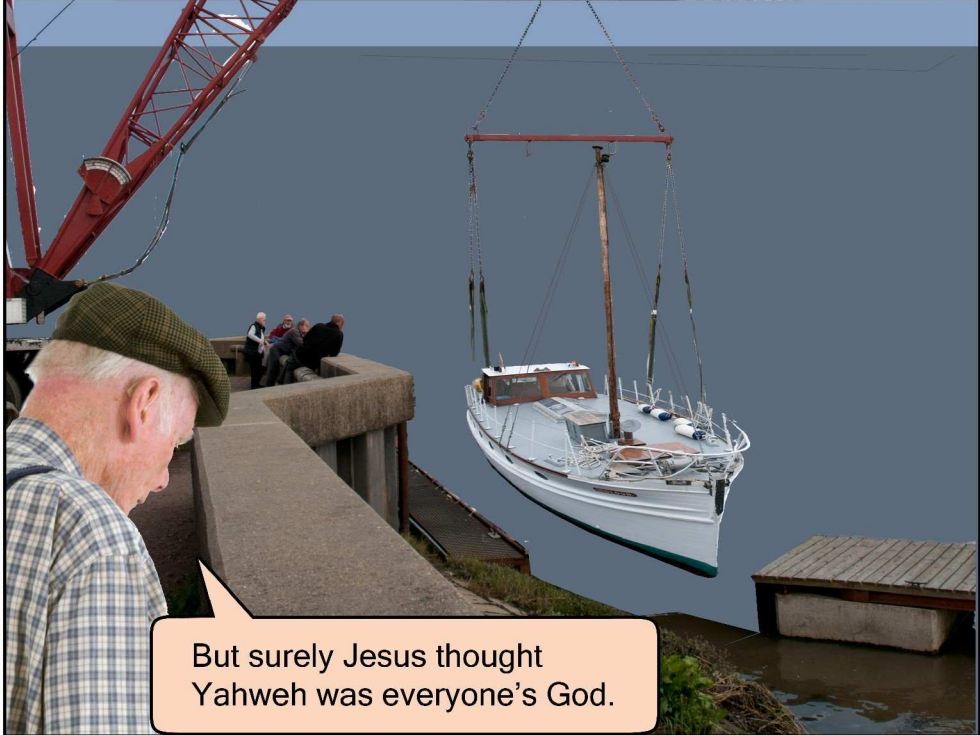




Why is it absurd to say Jesus wanted people to have faith in him? He often commented on the faith of those he cured.

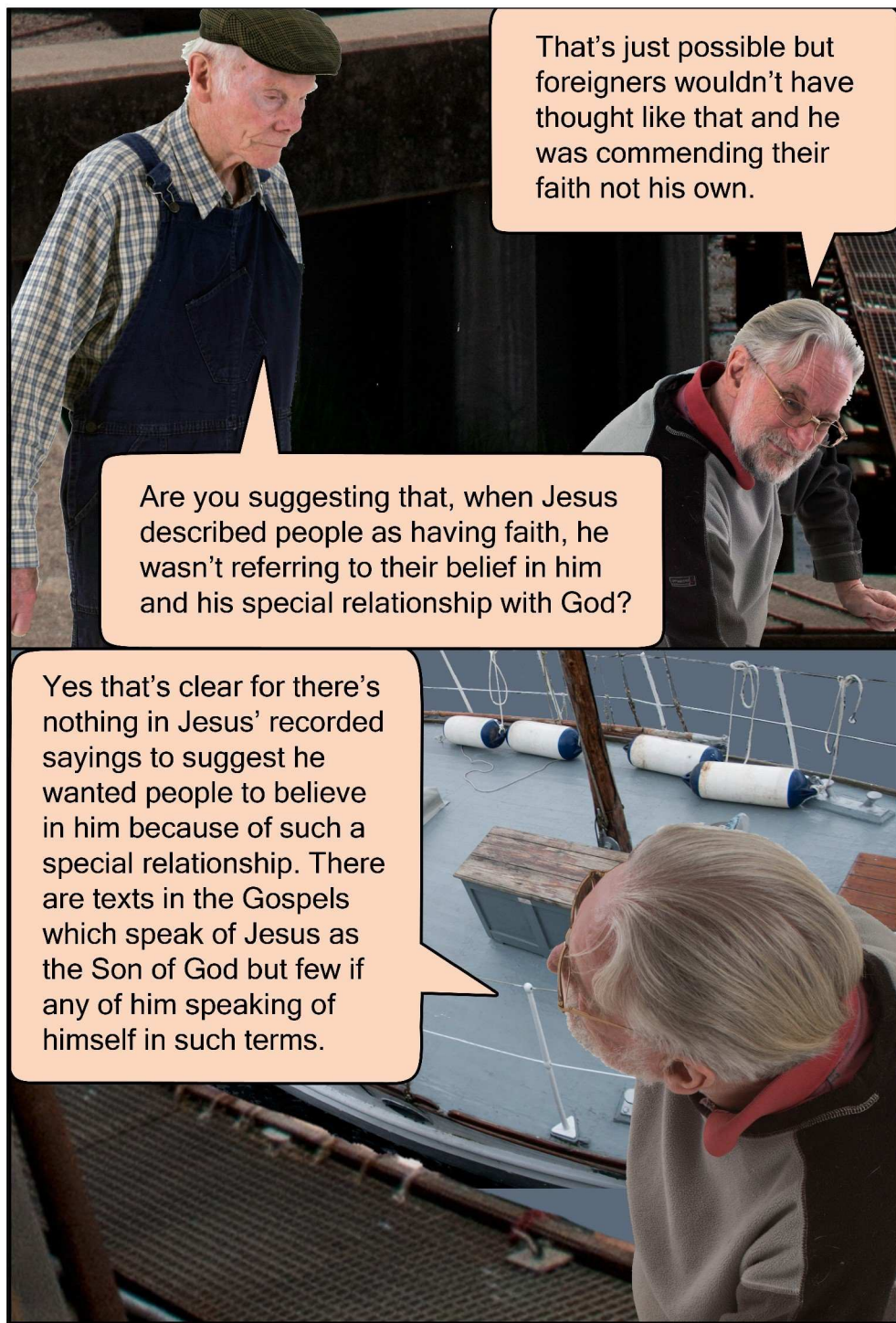
The image shows two men from behind, looking out at a dark sea under a blue sky. The man on the right is wearing a green flat cap and a plaid shirt with blue suspenders. The man on the left has short grey hair and is wearing a grey jacket with a red collar. A speech bubble from the man on the right contains the text.

So he did but clearly he was not talking about 'religious belief' since quite often the people concerned were not even Jews.



The image shows a man in a green flat cap and plaid shirt with blue suspenders looking down at a white sailboat being hoisted by a red crane. The boat is suspended in the air by chains. In the background, a group of people are sitting on a concrete wall. A speech bubble from the man contains the text.

But surely Jesus thought Yahweh was everyone's God.



That's just possible but foreigners wouldn't have thought like that and he was commending their faith not his own.

Are you suggesting that, when Jesus described people as having faith, he wasn't referring to their belief in him and his special relationship with God?

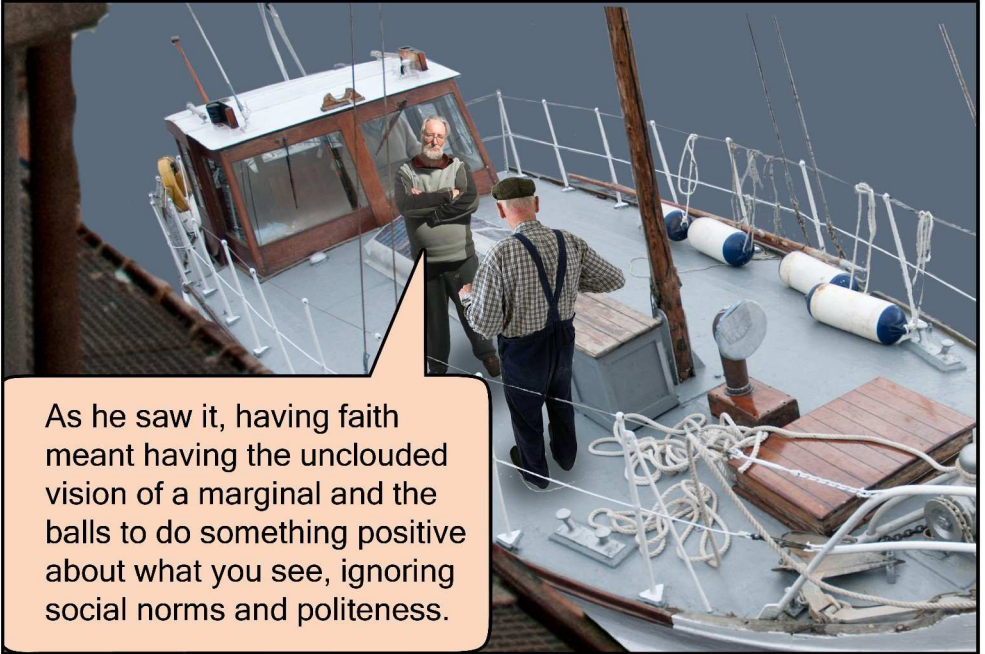
Yes that's clear for there's nothing in Jesus' recorded sayings to suggest he wanted people to believe in him because of such a special relationship. There are texts in the Gospels which speak of Jesus as the Son of God but few if any of him speaking of himself in such terms.

His usual way of referring to himself was as 'the son of man'. This was a political title taken from the book of Daniel indicating those faithful to the covenant who had not given in to the authoritarian rule of the beasts.



So what then did he mean by people having faith?





As he saw it, having faith meant having the unclouded vision of a marginal and the balls to do something positive about what you see, ignoring social norms and politeness.

Take for example the story of the paralytic:

And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. And when they could not get near him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and when they had made an opening, they let down the pallet on which the paralytic lay.

Mk 2.3-5

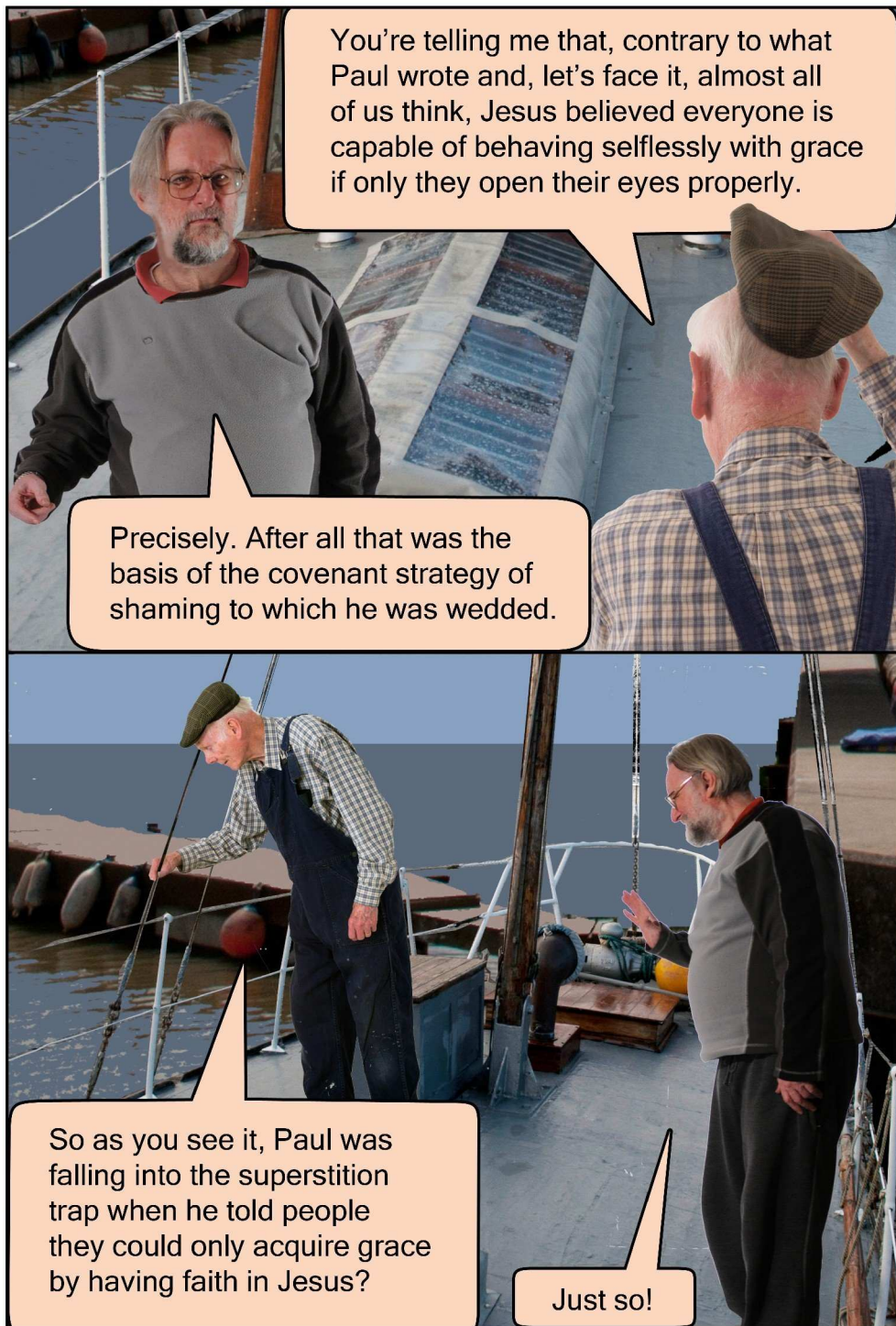




*And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic,
"My son, your sins are forgiven."*



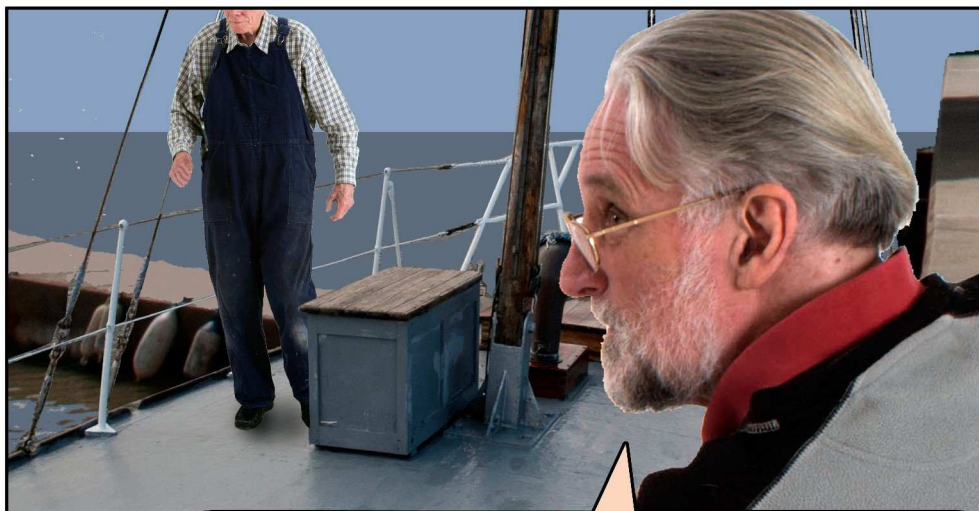
Notice Jesus doesn't, as you might expect, commend the paralytic for his belief. Rather he recognises the faith which the four friends displayed when, in a most uncouth manner, they broke in through the roof!



You may be right. However, you must admit people do find it impossibly hard to behave graciously like Jesus.

Fair enough, but it was a terrible mistake for Paul (and the early Church) to make out that following Jesus was a religious affair.

Yes but they held onto Jesus' politics. They didn't get rid of the god-of-the-marginals, replacing him with an authoritarian religious God, as you say Ezekiel and Co previously did.



Very true. Given what Jesus had achieved, they couldn't possibly deny his marginal politics. Indeed, they were so sold on it that they tried to guarantee it for all time by turning it into religion.



Why was that such a terrible mistake?

Because it wasn't true. Jesus' ideology was political and liberationist, not to say anarchic, whereas religion tends to be authoritarian.





Nothing if you're an authoritarian like Paul but for Jesus - as a follower of the marginal ideology - there was never any excuse for closing your eyes for doing so inevitably leads to hypocrisy.



Grace has to be understood in the light of the Mosaic covenant. It's the demeanour you have to adopt if you want to transform the world by putting on a shaming demonstration.



Precisely! But grace doesn't end there for it involves doing this job properly with no head-banging or violence.



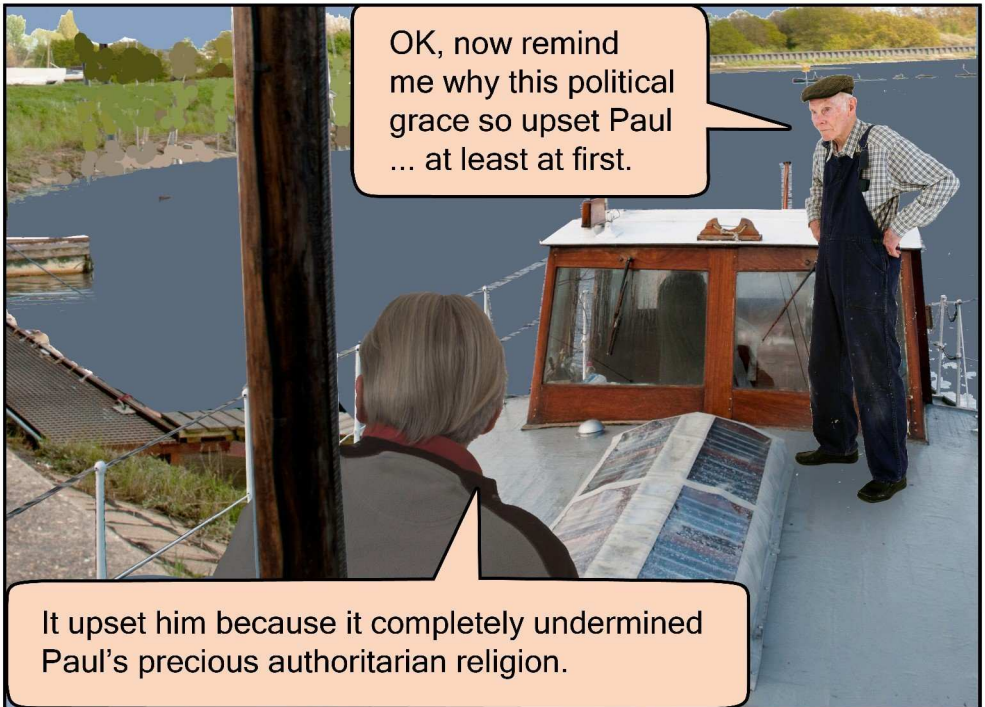
Just so... Furthermore, it also involves doing this job knowing it will mean exposing oneself to a violent backlash; for the truth is the world does not take kindly to being shamed.



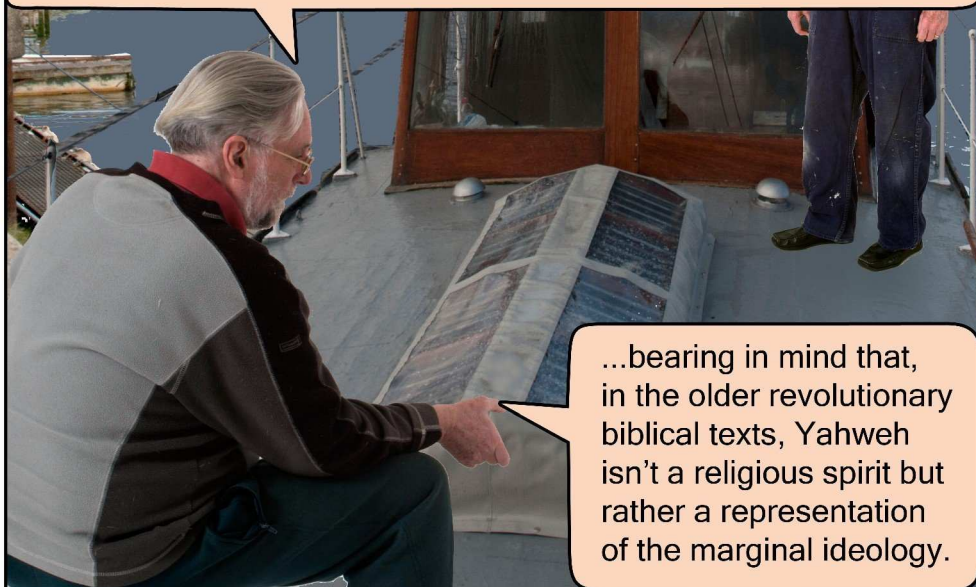
You're saying there's nothing religious in any of that?



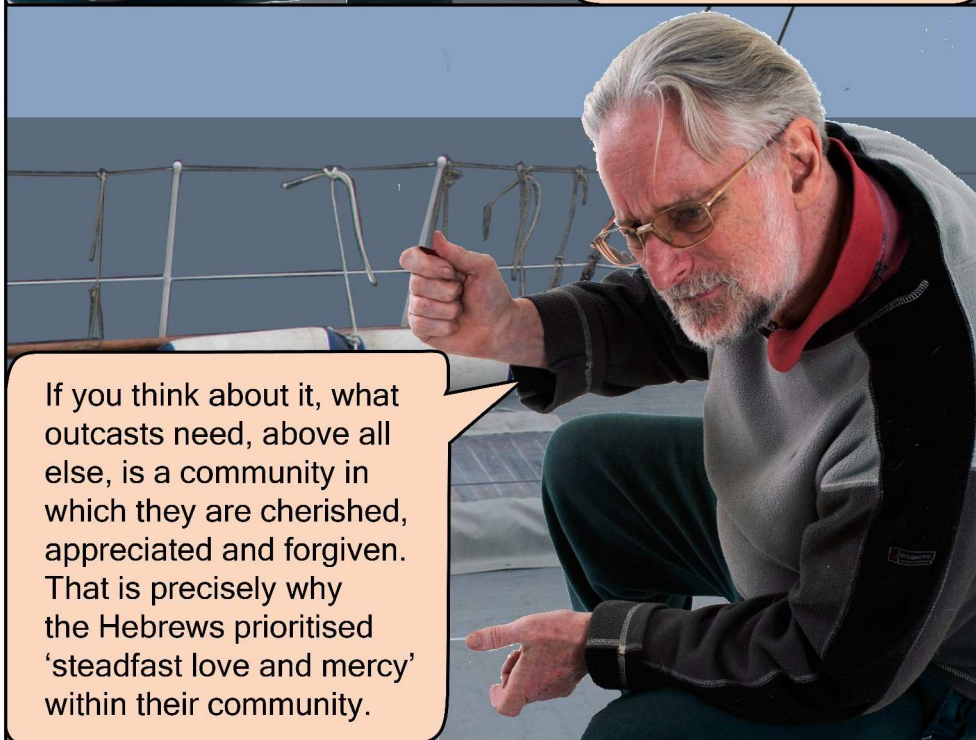
If there is I can't see it! It seems to me political from first to last.



Hesed is generally taken as the word used to describe Yahweh's character in the Old Testament and I'm quite happy with that...

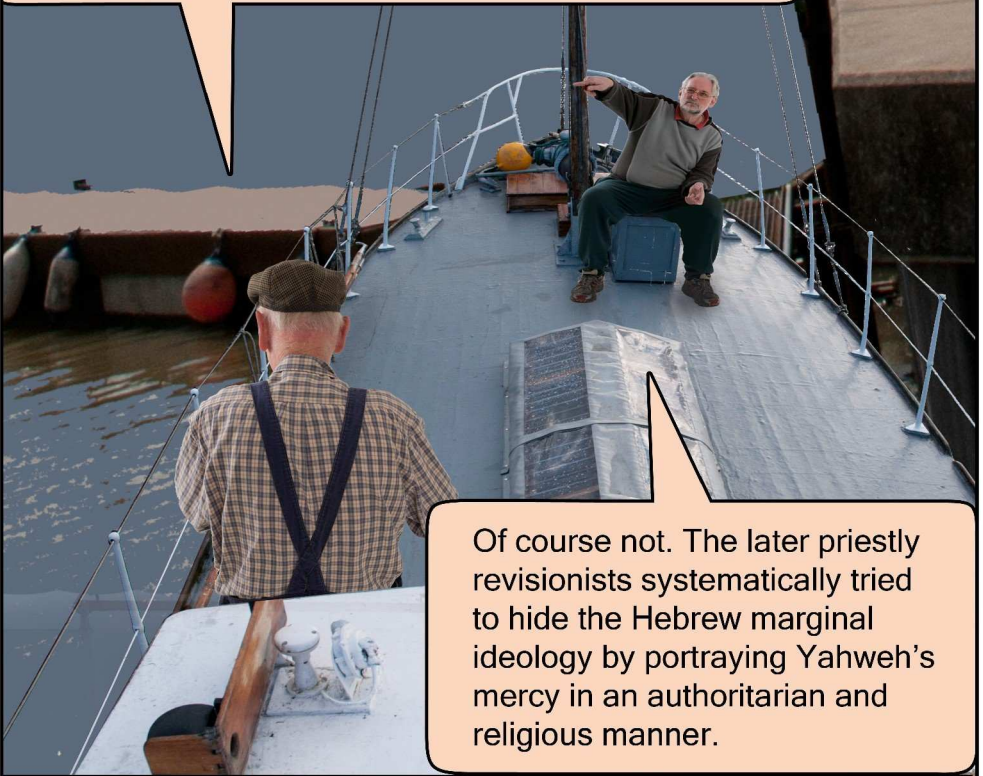


...bearing in mind that, in the older revolutionary biblical texts, Yahweh isn't a religious spirit but rather a representation of the marginal ideology.



If you think about it, what outcasts need, above all else, is a community in which they are cherished, appreciated and forgiven. That is precisely why the Hebrews prioritised 'steadfast love and mercy' within their community.

But you wouldn't deny there are texts in the Bible in which this concept of Hesed is used religiously?



Of course not. The later priestly revisionists systematically tried to hide the Hebrew marginal ideology by portraying Yahweh's mercy in an authoritarian and religious manner.



To put it baldly they used the superstition trap to mislead people.

And unfortunately that's not all for the revolutionary Hebrew writers too were always liable to fall into the superstition trap, though in their case inadvertently. For example Jeremiah crazily argued that Yahweh had withdrawn his steadfast love and mercy because of Israel's infidelity.



Thus says the LORD: Do not enter the house of mourning, or go to lament, or bemoan them; for I have taken away my peace from this people, says the LORD, my steadfast love and mercy.

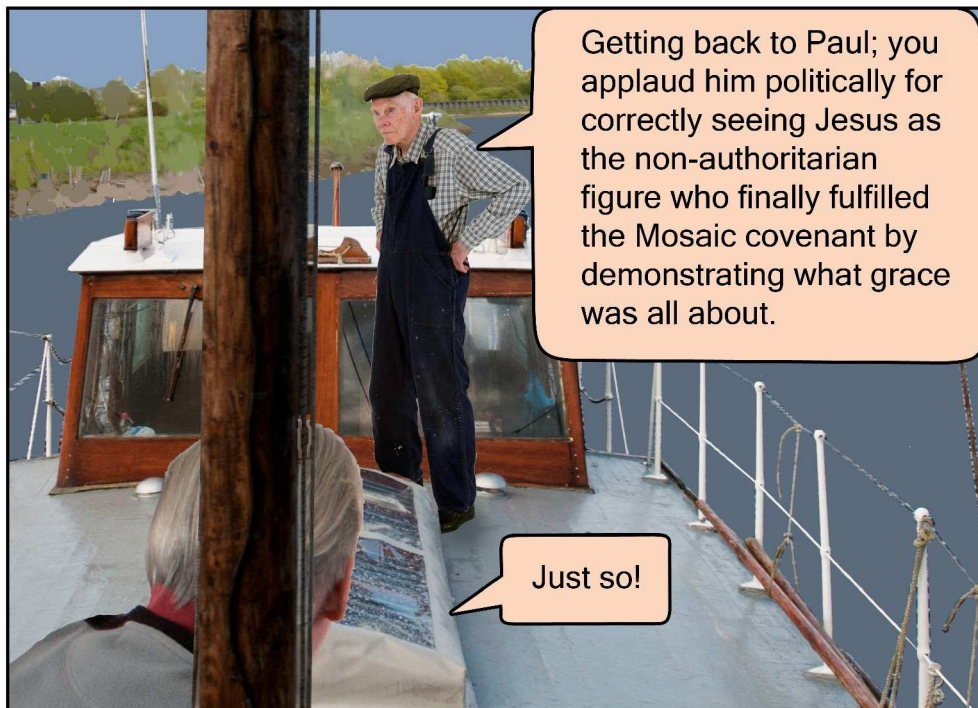
Jer 16.5

Why call that crazy?



It's crazy because Yahweh was not a religious spirit capable of sometimes being merciful and at other times not...

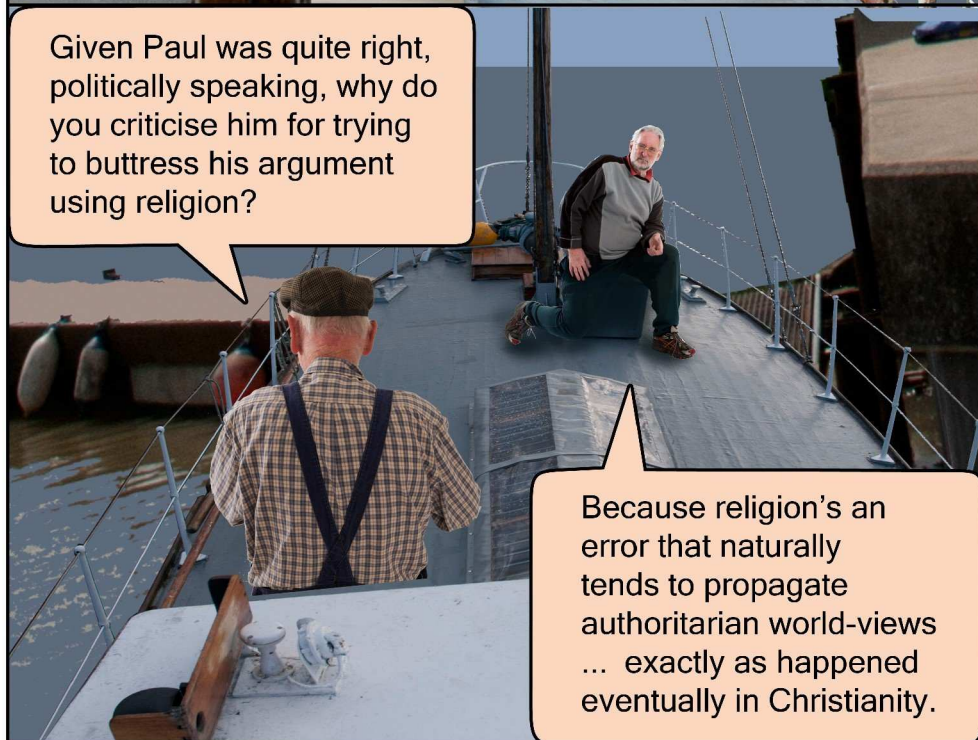
He was the god who represented the world-view of the Hebrew outcasts and, as such, he couldn't ever change.



Getting back to Paul; you applaud him politically for correctly seeing Jesus as the non-authoritarian figure who finally fulfilled the Mosaic covenant by demonstrating what grace was all about.

Just so!


Given Paul was quite right, politically speaking, why do you criticise him for trying to buttress his argument using religion?




Because religion's an error that naturally tends to propagate authoritarian world-views ... exactly as happened eventually in Christianity.

4

Understanding the Miracles



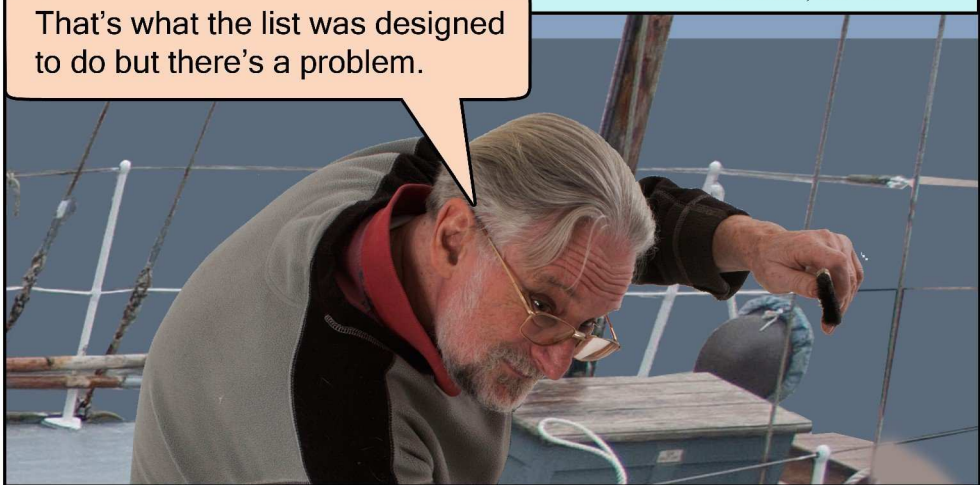
Let's now look at Q and at John the Baptist's criticism of Jesus for failing to cause a stir.



According to Q, Jesus sent John's disciples away with a list of miraculous transformations that demonstrated his new approach.

... the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.

Mt 11.5; Lk 7.22



That's what the list was designed to do but there's a problem.

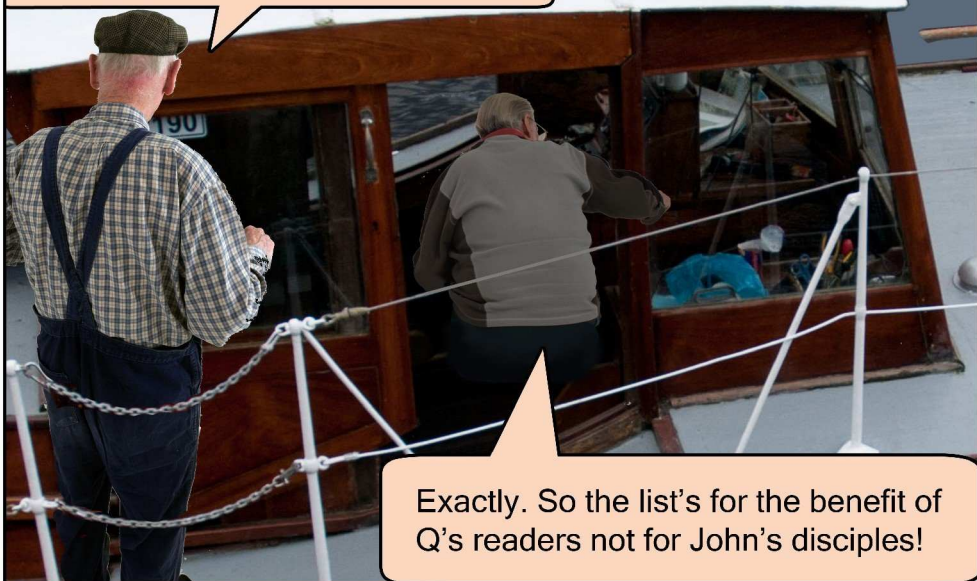
You see it's almost certain
such a list never existed.

What makes
you say that?

John's disciples had witnessed everything themselves so
the list was quite unnecessary. All Jesus would have said
was 'Go and tell John all you have seen and heard.'

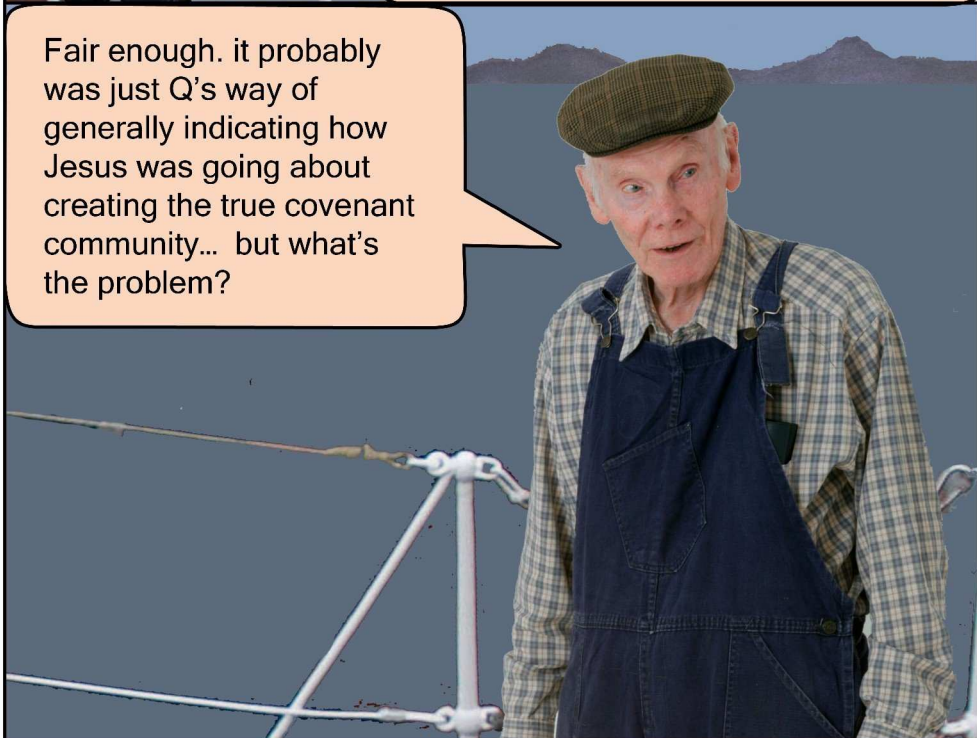


Yes, but Q's readers would have had no idea what had happened.



Exactly. So the list's for the benefit of Q's readers not for John's disciples!

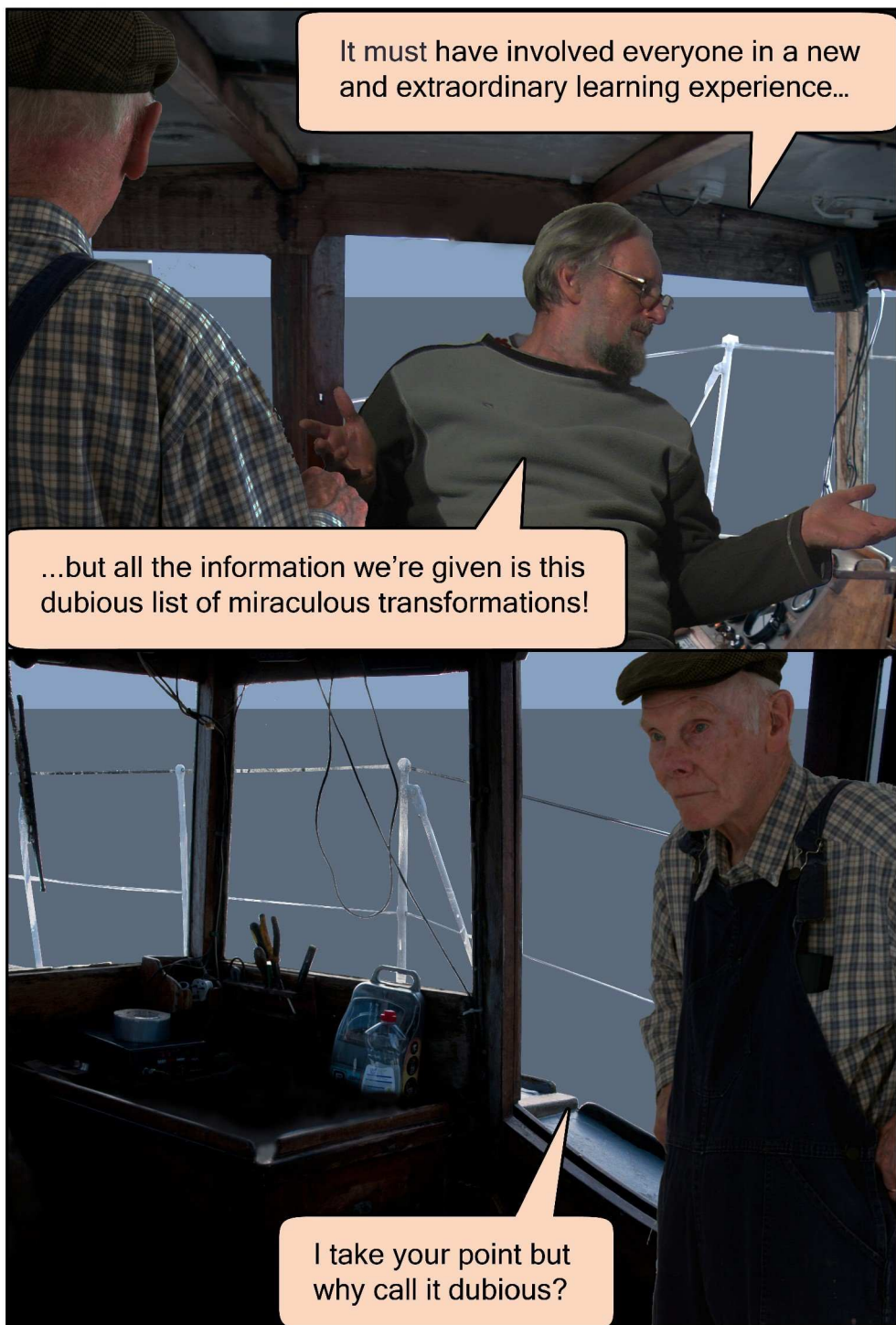
Fair enough. it probably was just Q's way of generally indicating how Jesus was going about creating the true covenant community... but what's the problem?



What you and I want to know is how Jesus set about getting people to demonstrate how to live together in a way that would shame the world out of its oppressive ways.



Fair enough.

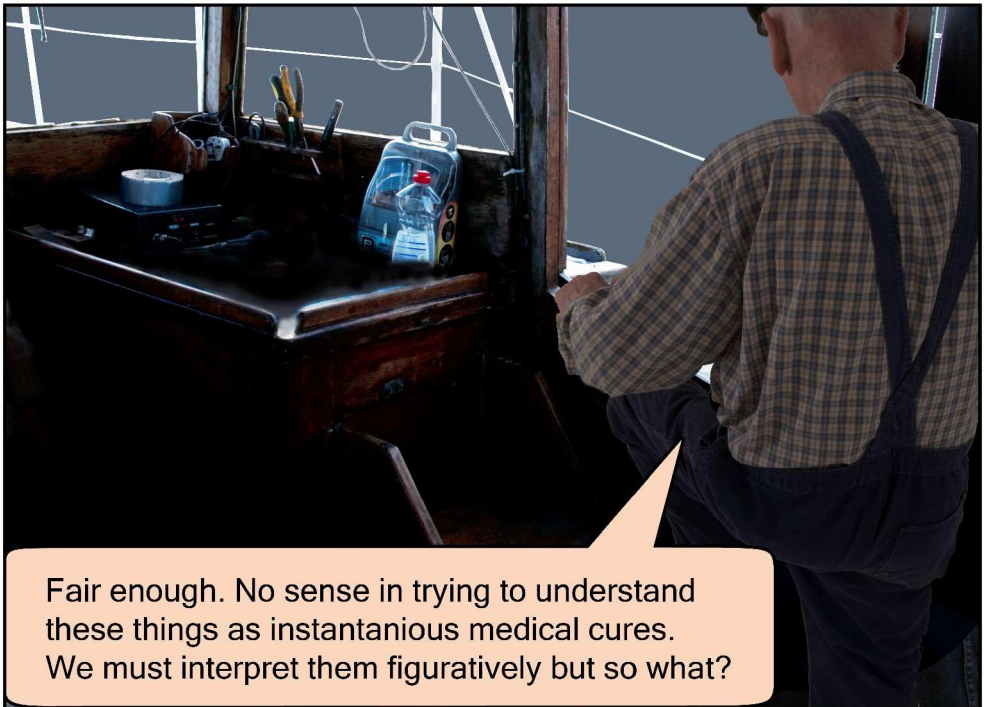




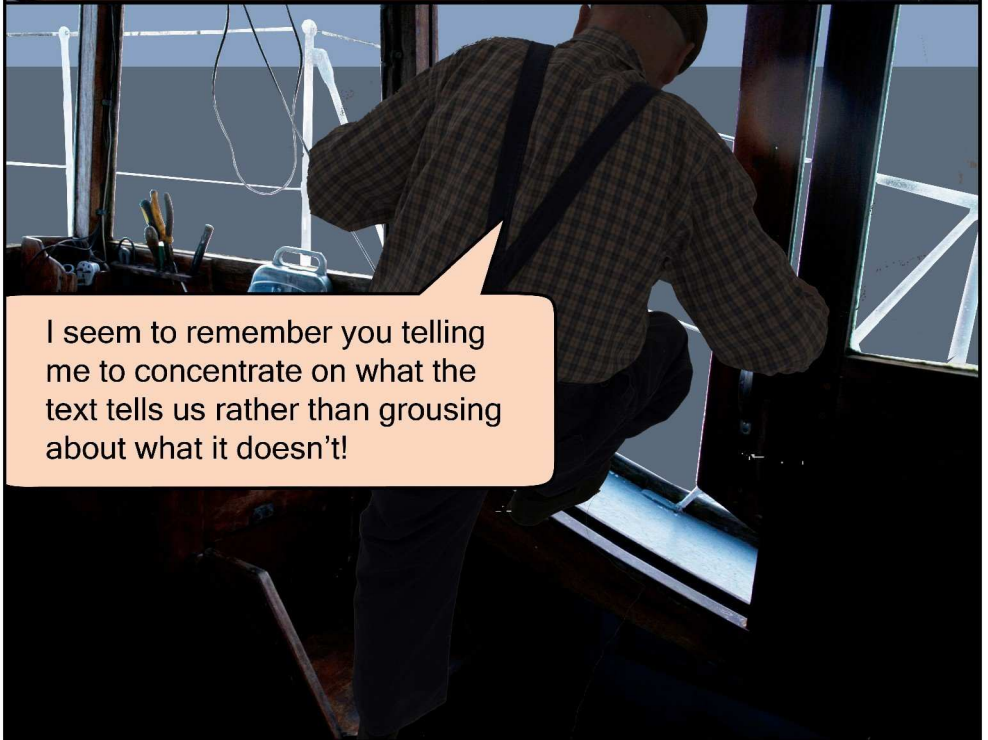
Well, if we take these transformations at face value we find Jesus pictured as a vulgar magician - which is puerile.

whereas if we take them as symbolic all they do is obliquely suggest things in a hidden way which, let's face it, is not what we're looking for!

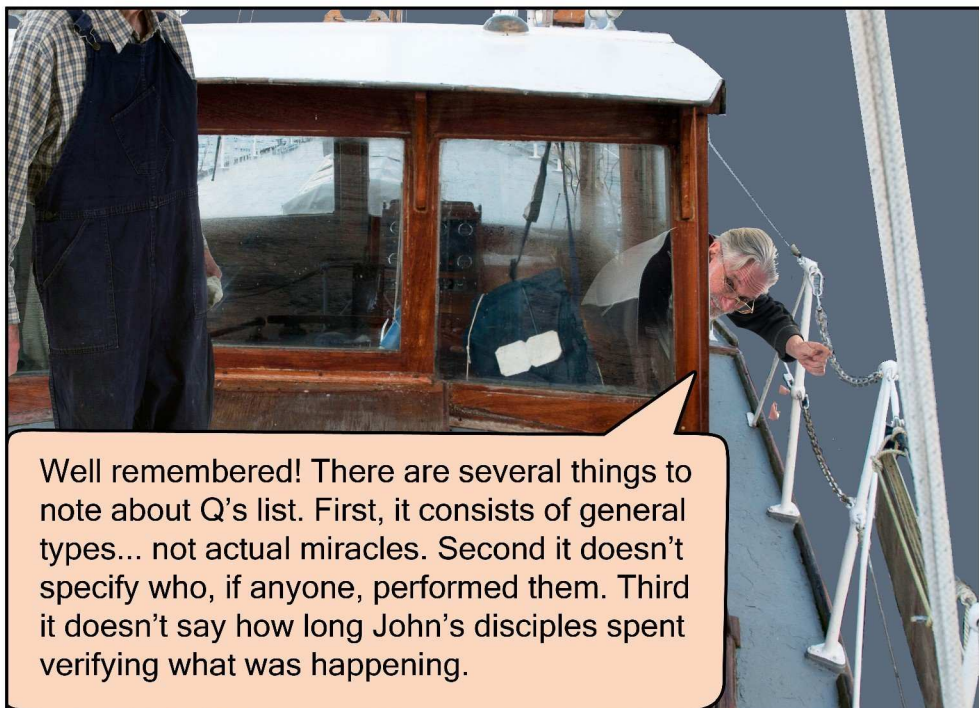




Fair enough. No sense in trying to understand these things as instantaneous medical cures. We must interpret them figuratively but so what?



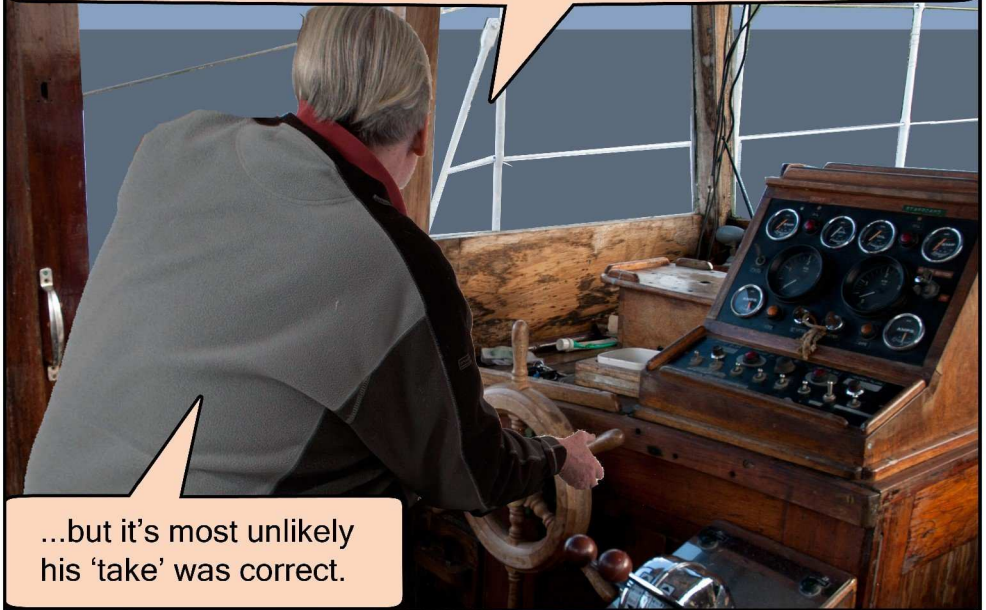
I seem to remember you telling me to concentrate on what the text tells us rather than grouching about what it doesn't!



In that hour he cured many of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many that were blind he bestowed sight.

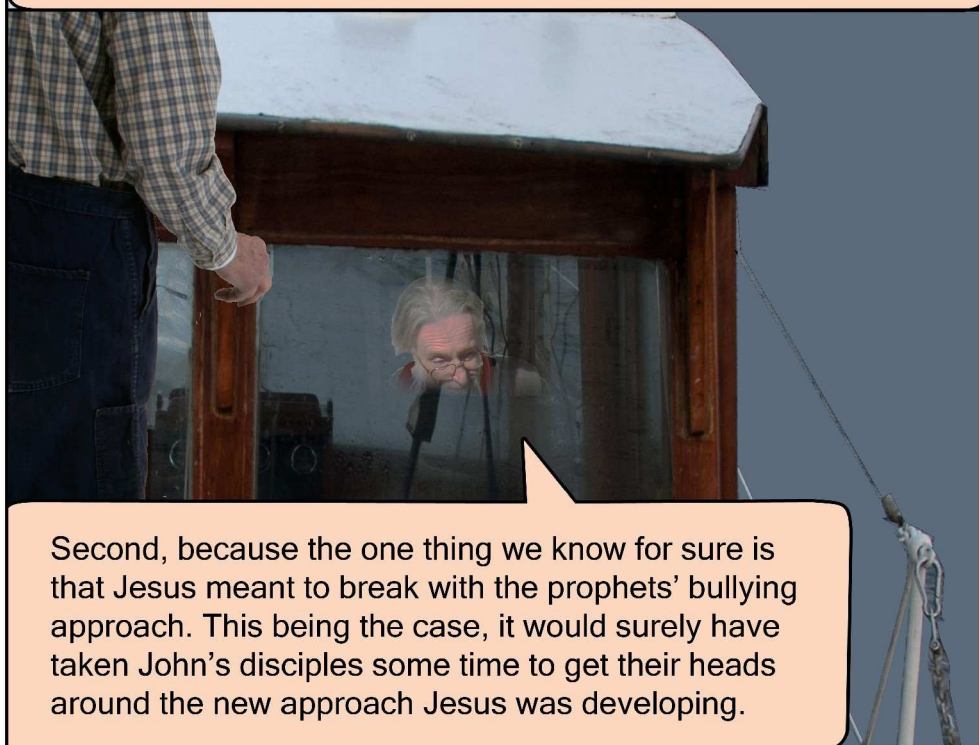
Lk 7.21

Yes, it's easy to understand why Luke wanted readers to view the events as on the spot virtuoso performances by Jesus, since glorifying Jesus was what the Early Church was all about...





First, because Q is deliberately vague both about the miracles themselves and what they represent... as well as about who, if anyone in particular, was performing them. This speaks volumes.



Second, because the one thing we know for sure is that Jesus meant to break with the prophets' bullying approach. This being the case, it would surely have taken John's disciples some time to get their heads around the new approach Jesus was developing.



Are you suggesting these miracles were not medical cures brought about by Jesus - as Luke maintains - but rather socio-political transformations brought about by everyone in the community working together?



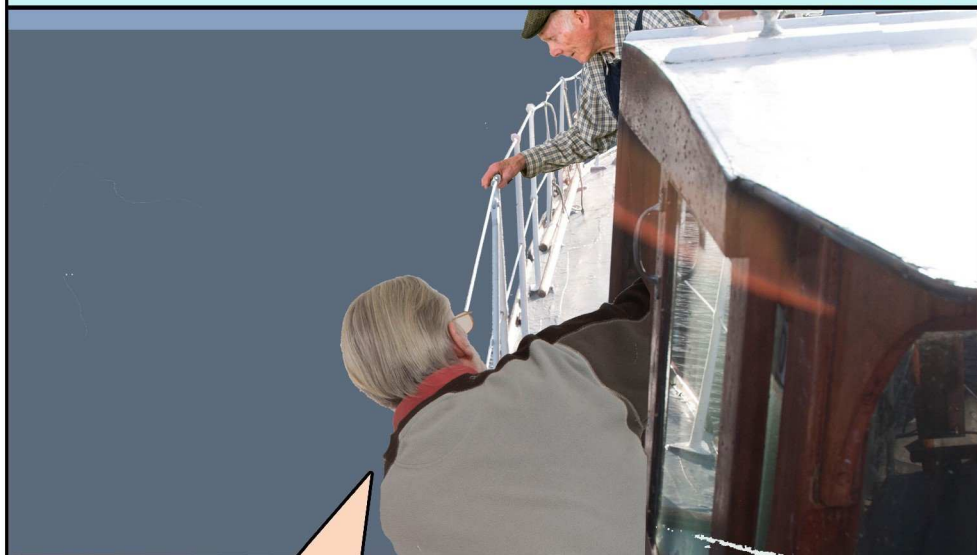
You're looking in the right direction. However, to be sure we're correctly understanding Jesus' new approach we must first be clear how the old approach worked... that's to say the defective tactics Jesus was seeking to remedy.

Well, Luke describes John's approach as simply 'telling folk how to behave':



He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise.

Lk 3.11




Says it all doesn't it! Having recommitted themselves to the covenant in baptism - and been properly scolded by John into the bargain - everyone is sent back home furnished with clear guidelines about the way people should behave.

Fair enough, it was a bit authoritarian,
but surely the marginal politics were right!

Yes, the politics were certainly right, but you can't
advocate marginal politics in an authoritarian manner
since the one tends to undermine the other.


OK so how did
Jesus propose
to do things
differently?

By adopting
a **reactive**
approach.

A man wearing a green flat cap, a plaid shirt, and dark suspenders is seen from behind, working on a boat. He is leaning over a wooden structure, possibly a table or part of the boat's interior. The background shows a window looking out onto a bright, overcast sky.

You're going to have to unpack that a bit for me.

As I understand it, a reactive approach means taking no initiative but simply responding to situations, Surely you can't be saying that's what Jesus was doing!

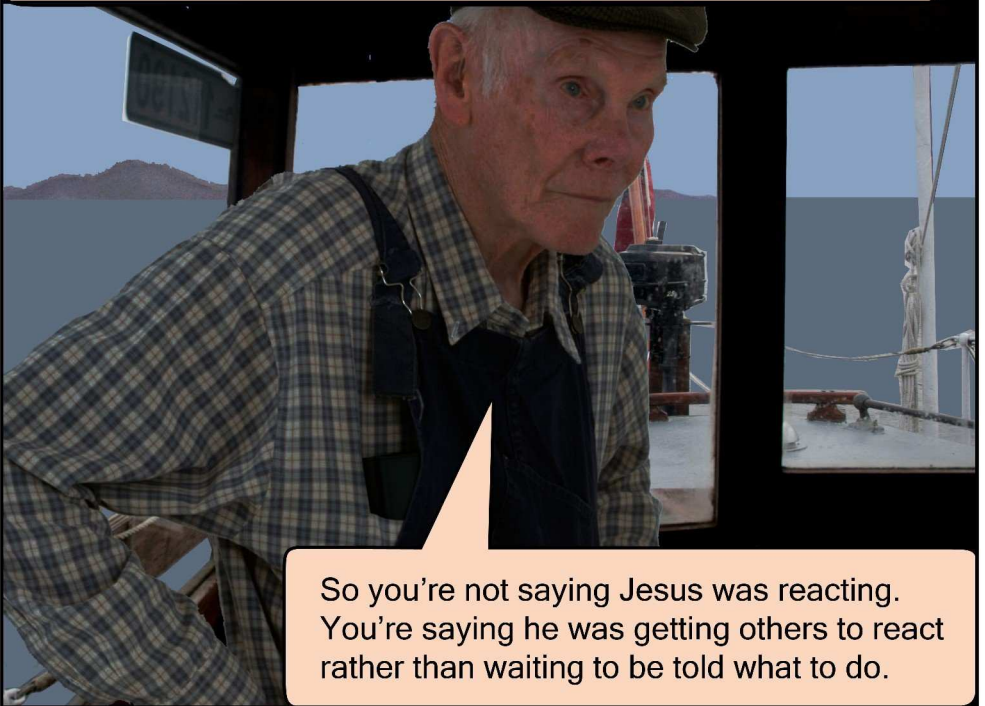
A close-up profile of an older man with white hair, a beard, and glasses. He is looking towards the right. The background is slightly blurred, showing what appears to be the interior of a boat with some equipment.

No I'm not saying that. As we've seen, John's approach was proactive in being **authoritarian**.

It involved establishing a remote base where he could train disciples and then send them back into their communities fully furnished with the marginal ideology for them to distribute.



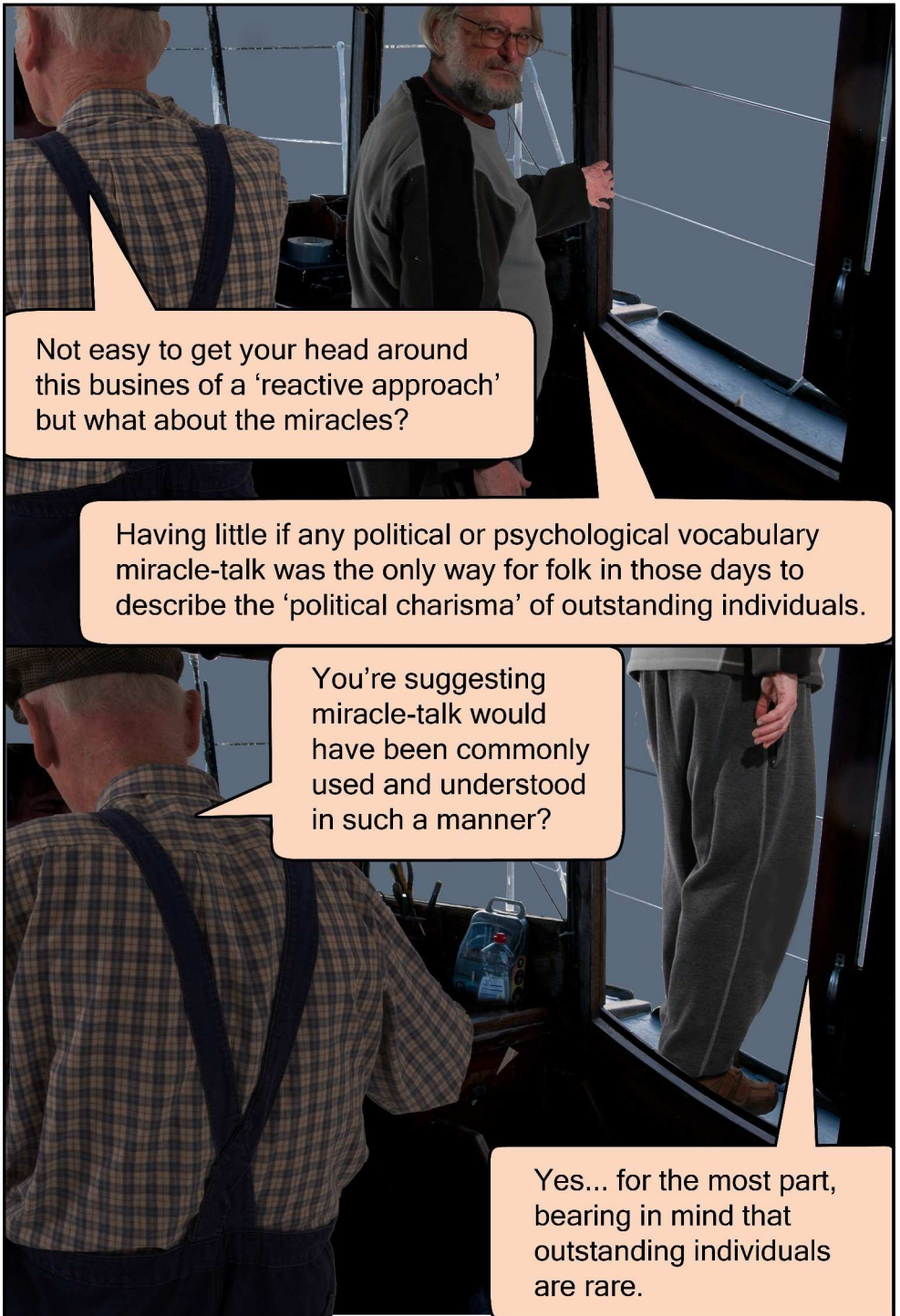
In Jesus' alternative reactive approach there was no question of working from a base... and, instead of telling folk how to behave, he himself went into communities to help people **discover for themselves** how everyone ought to behave.



So you're not saying Jesus was reacting. You're saying he was getting others to react rather than waiting to be told what to do.



That's it! He was helping people to live life well by being fully aware of what was happening so that they could **react in a healthy manner**. As he put it, he was getting people **to open their eyes** instead of keeping them tight shut as is invariably the case with us hypocritical folk.

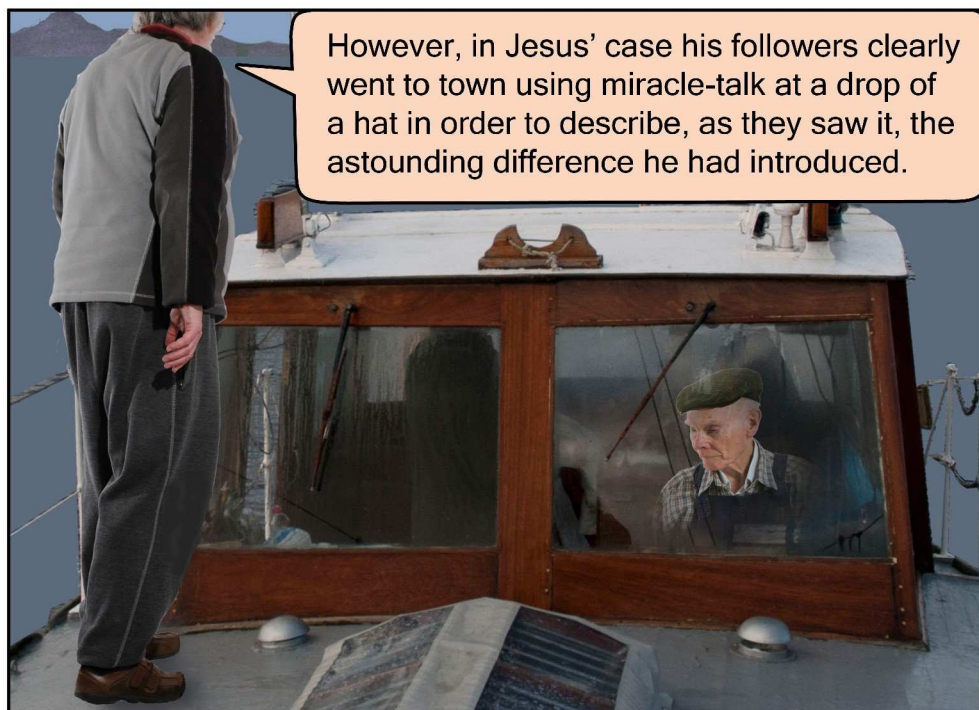


Not easy to get your head around this business of a 'reactive approach' but what about the miracles?

Having little if any political or psychological vocabulary miracle-talk was the only way for folk in those days to describe the 'political charisma' of outstanding individuals.

You're suggesting miracle-talk would have been commonly used and understood in such a manner?

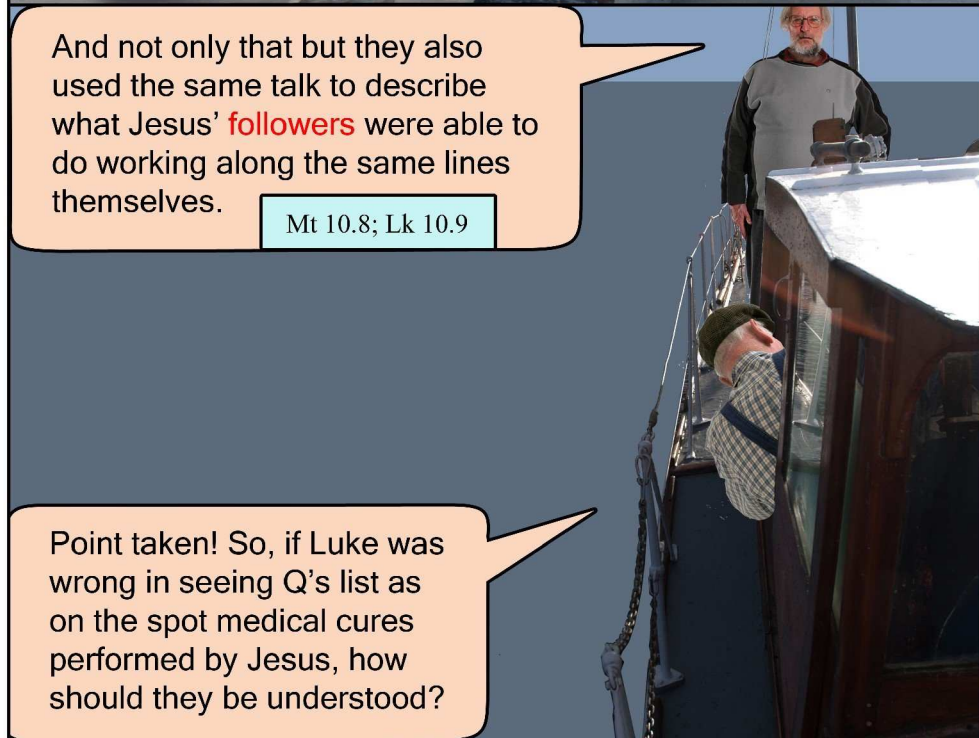
Yes... for the most part, bearing in mind that outstanding individuals are rare.



However, in Jesus' case his followers clearly went to town using miracle-talk at a drop of a hat in order to describe, as they saw it, the astounding difference he had introduced.

And not only that but they also used the same talk to describe what Jesus' **followers** were able to do working along the same lines themselves.

Mt 10.8; Lk 10.9



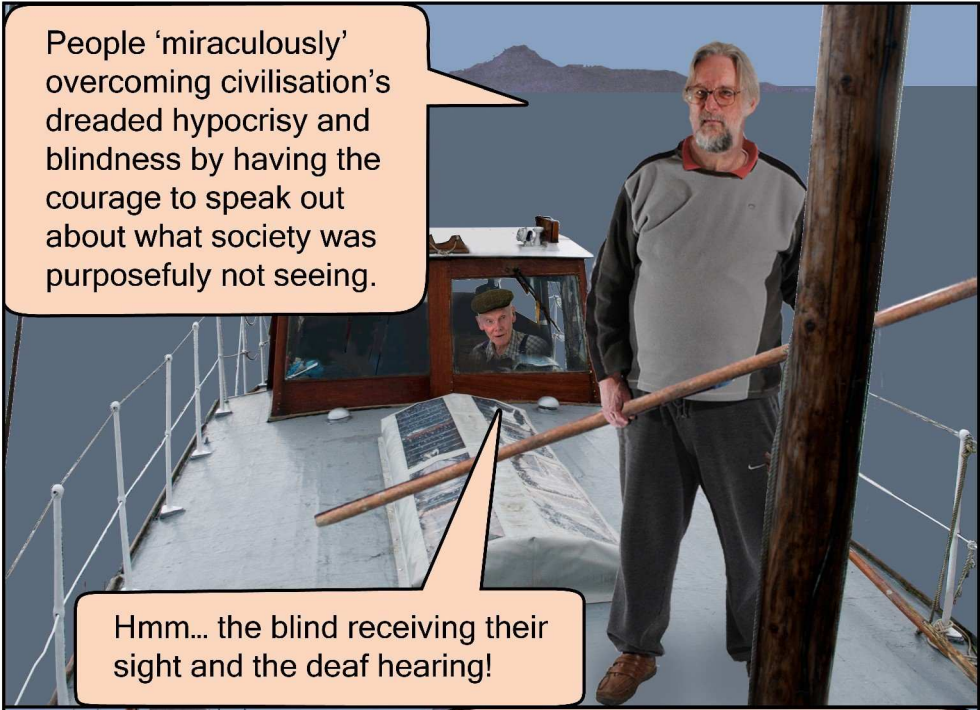
Point taken! So, if Luke was wrong in seeing Q's list as on the spot medical cures performed by Jesus, how should they be understood?

Well, had 'magical cures' occurred (which of course was not the case) They would have constituted **proactive interventions** perpetrated by someone with special powers and authority.

True.

So doesn't everything indicate that what we're talking about here are transformations of a quite different kind brought about by people's **personal reactions** to what Jesus had enabled them to see.

For example?

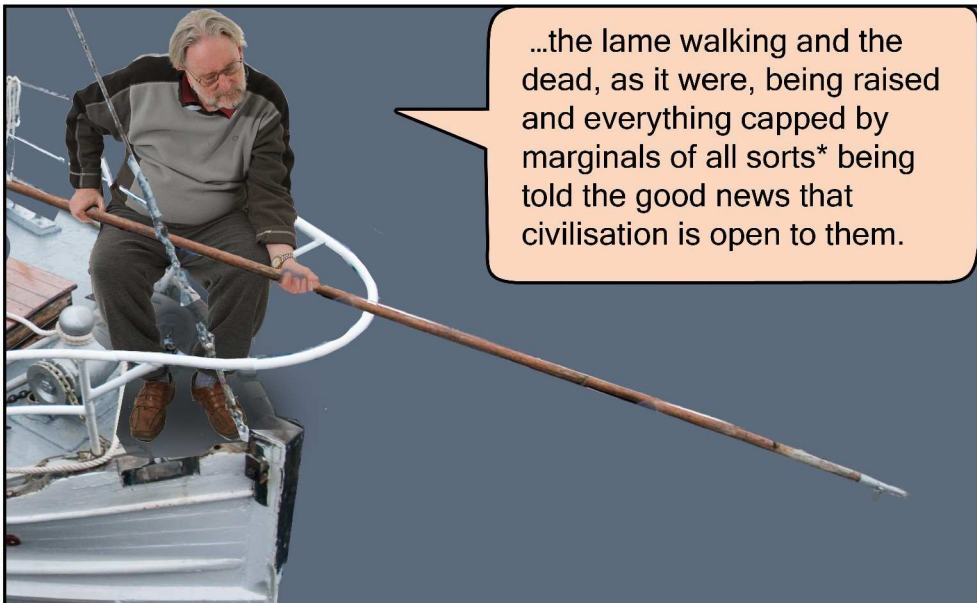


People 'miraculously' overcoming civilisation's dreaded hypocrisy and blindness by having the courage to speak out about what society was purposefully not seeing.

Hmm... the blind receiving their sight and the deaf hearing!

Or people forcibly excluded for the wellbeing of society - lepers for instance - 'miraculously' being made welcomed and included...

Yes, I'm beginning to catch your drift!

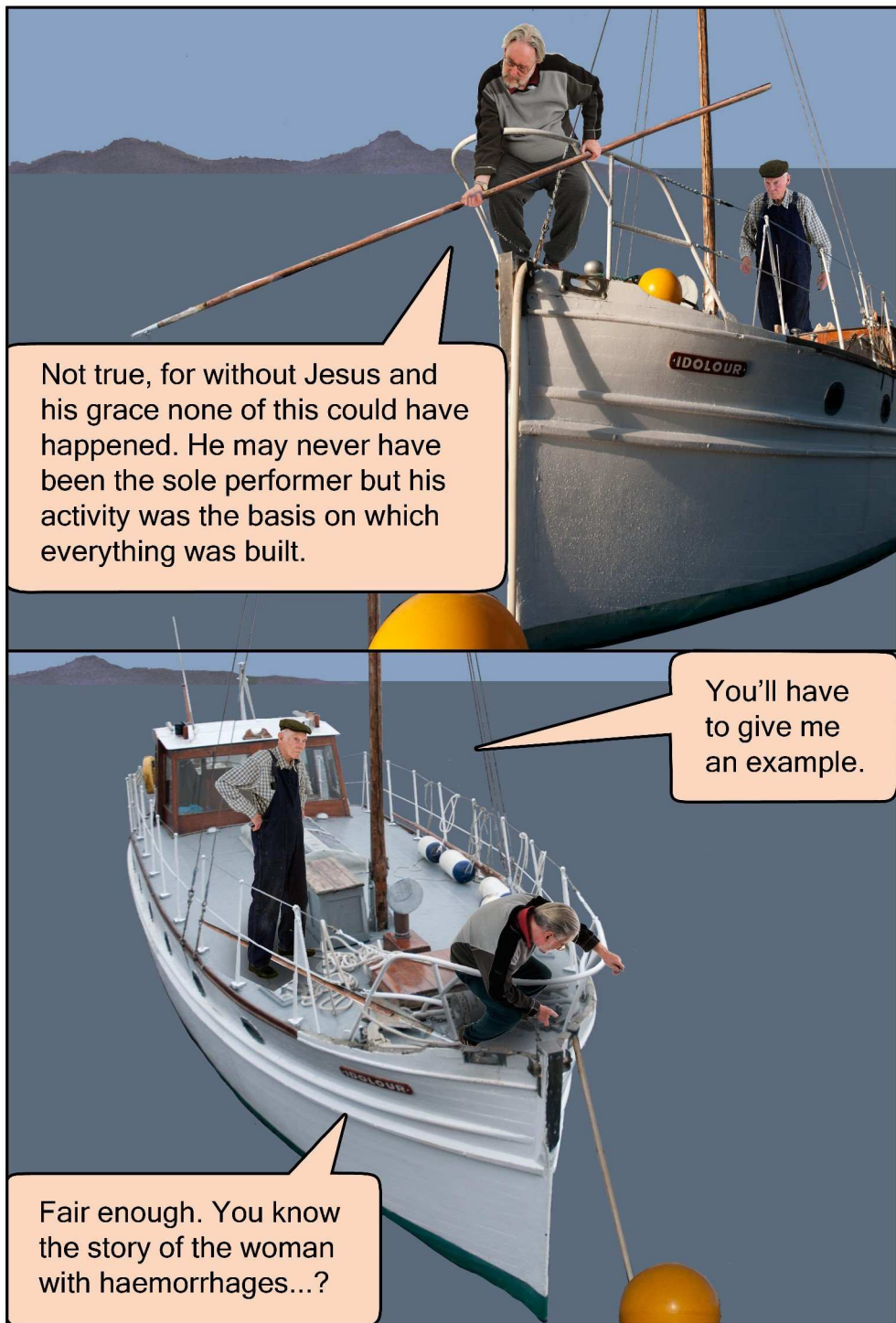


...the lame walking and the dead, as it were, being raised and everything capped by marginals of all sorts* being told the good news that civilisation is open to them.

* In the Bible the poor does not mean the lowest level of society. Rather it designates the marginals: those who no longer have any place within it.

That's odd. You claim Luke was wrong in saying Jesus was the sole instigator of all of these miracles but you've somehow managed to exclude Jesus altogether!





Now there was a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages of blood for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse.

Mk 5.25-34; Mt 9.20-22 Lk 8.43-48

This is not simply the story of someone suffering from a debilitating disease...

No, the woman's condition meant she was completely excluded from society since her impure state was seen as contagious.

So there was no likelihood of her publicly touching people?

No but given the circumstances, she overcame her scruples...

She had heard about Jesus and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak.

If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.

Immediately her haemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease.

So who performed the miracle in this story ?

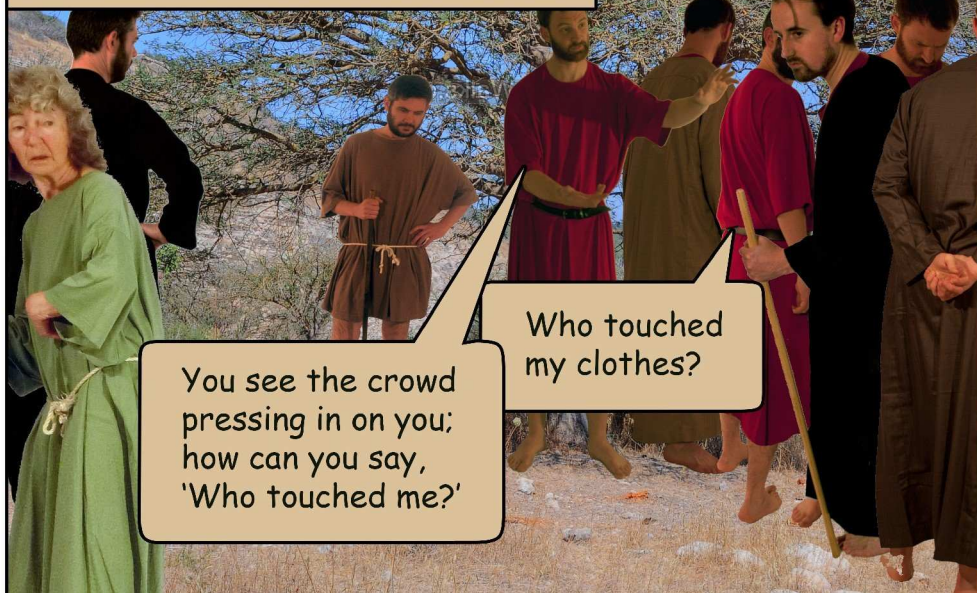


Hang on we've not yet finished.

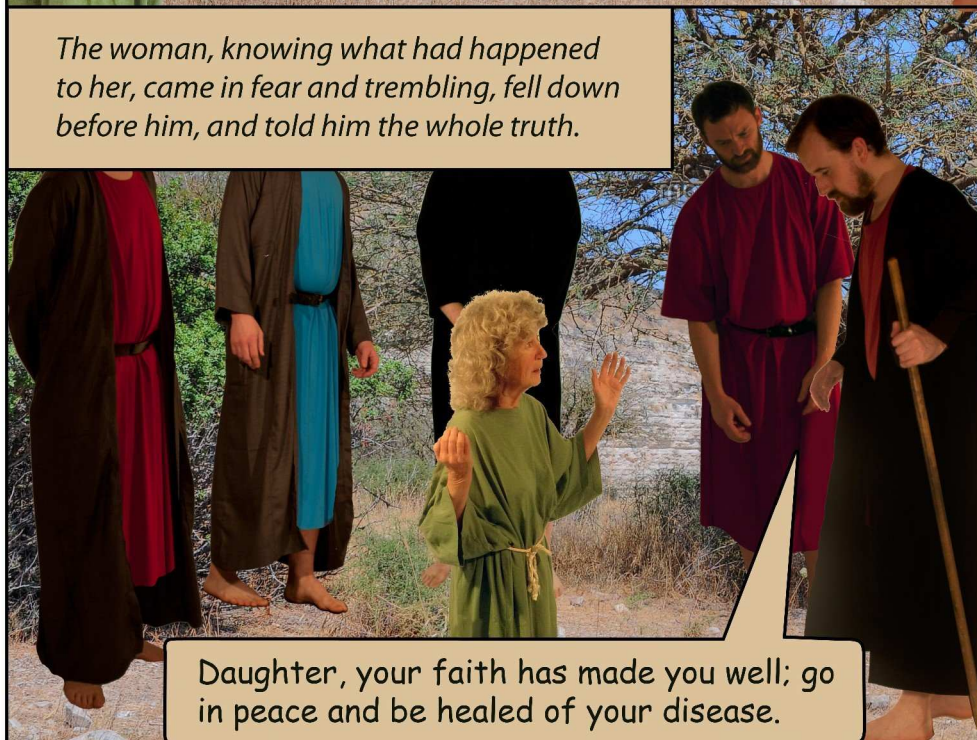
Yes but **the miracle has already taken place** and what happens next only shows **Jesus wasn't the person who performed it.**



Aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd.



The woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth.



True and it's interesting that when Mathew comes to tell the story he alters things so that the miracle only happens **after** Jesus has spoken his final words.*

* See Mt 9.22

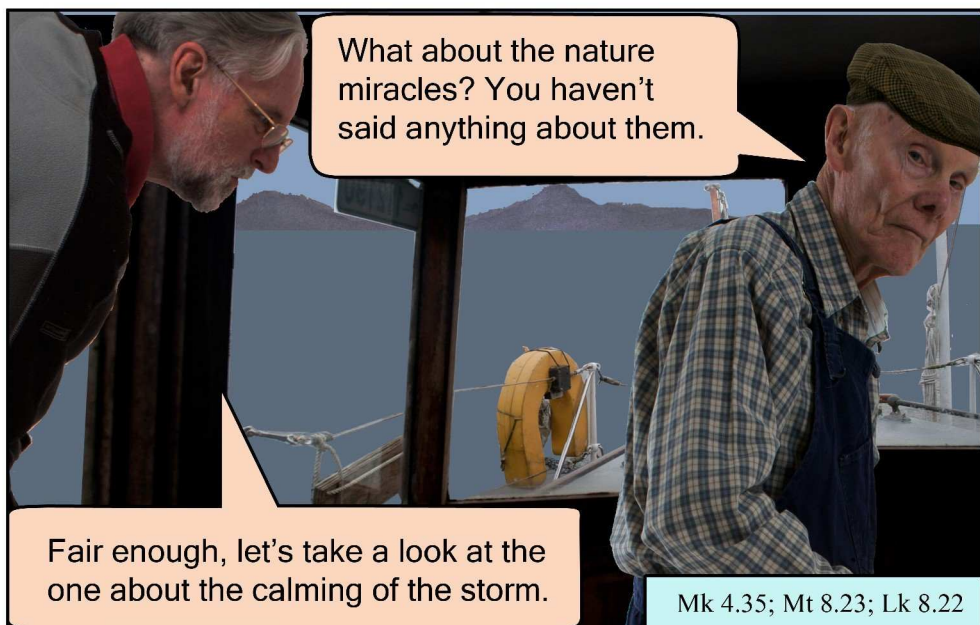
Yes, in their desire to make Jesus the centre of everything the evangelists found it difficult to deal with his reactive approach but even here Matthew can hardly deny Jesus was insisting it was **the woman's faith in overcoming her civilisation scruples** that did the trick, not anything he had done.

But surely the woman's faith was **in Jesus**.

You have to be careful in talking about '**faith in Jesus**' remembering that in the Synoptic tradition faith doesn't mean religious belief. It means having your eyes properly open and living boldly.

Fair enough but the woman was clearly aware Jesus had something she desperately needed.

True, that was the basis of her act but it was her audacity in daring to touch him in defiance of social norms which so impressed Jesus, leading him to pronounce her cured.



You know the story: exhausted by his teaching exertions, Jesus asks his disciples to rescue him from the crowd by taking him away in their boat to the other side of the lake.

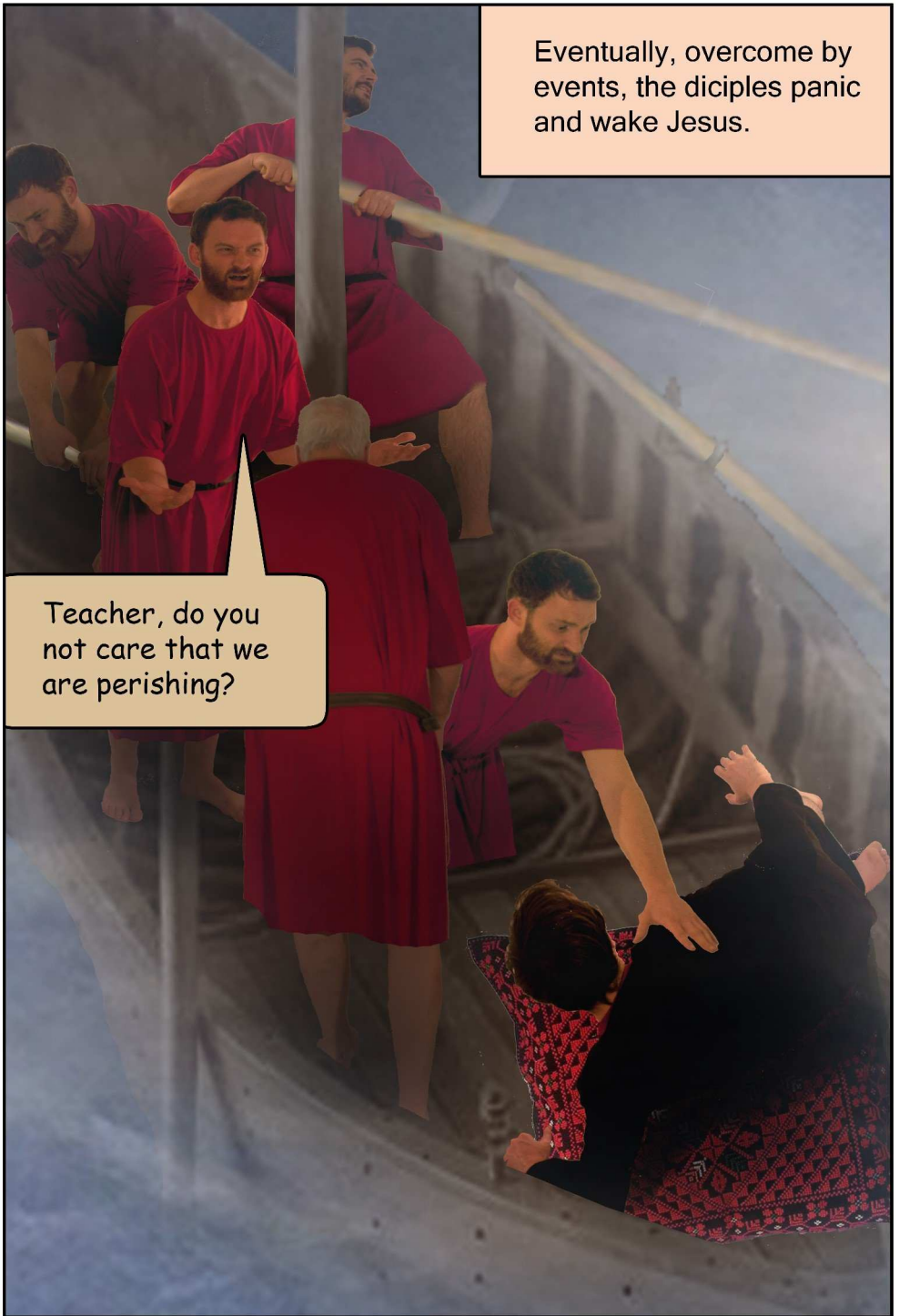


As soon as he is safely installed, Jesus goes to sleep on the cushion in the stern of the boat.



Consequently, he is blissfully unaware of his disciples' plight when a short time later they are overtaken by a sudden storm which risks swamping the boat and drowning them all.





Eventually, overcome by events, the disciples panic and wake Jesus.

Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?

Whereupon he gets up
and rebukes the wind
and the waves:



Immediately, the wind ceased and there was a dead calm.

Why are you afraid?
Have you still no faith?



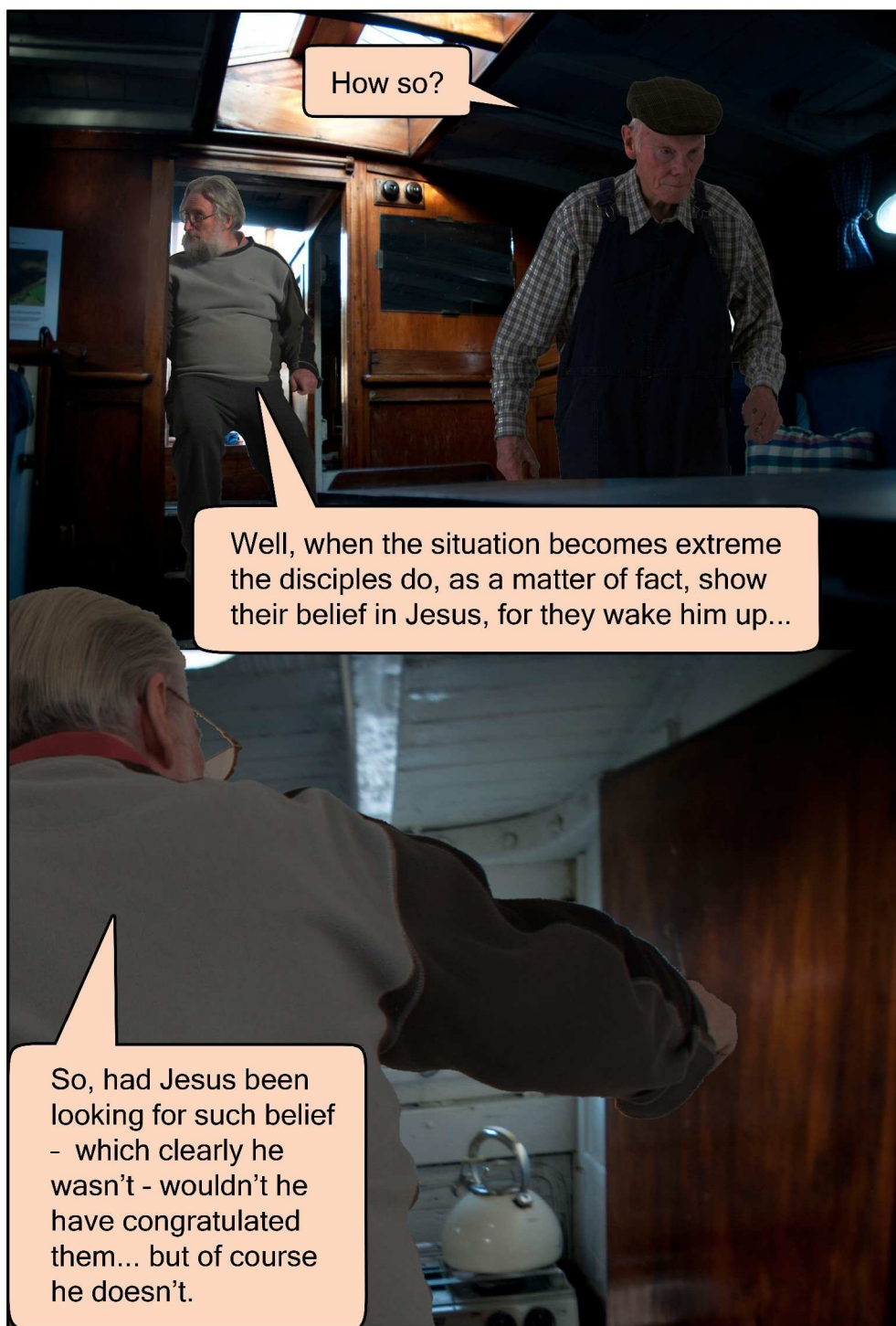
And the disciples were filled with great awe.

Who then is this,
that even the wind
and the sea obey him?



You must admit this looks very much like the story of a miracle-worker who chides his disciples for their lack of belief in him.

Does it? I would have thought that read like that, in a religious manner, the story's a load of nonsense!

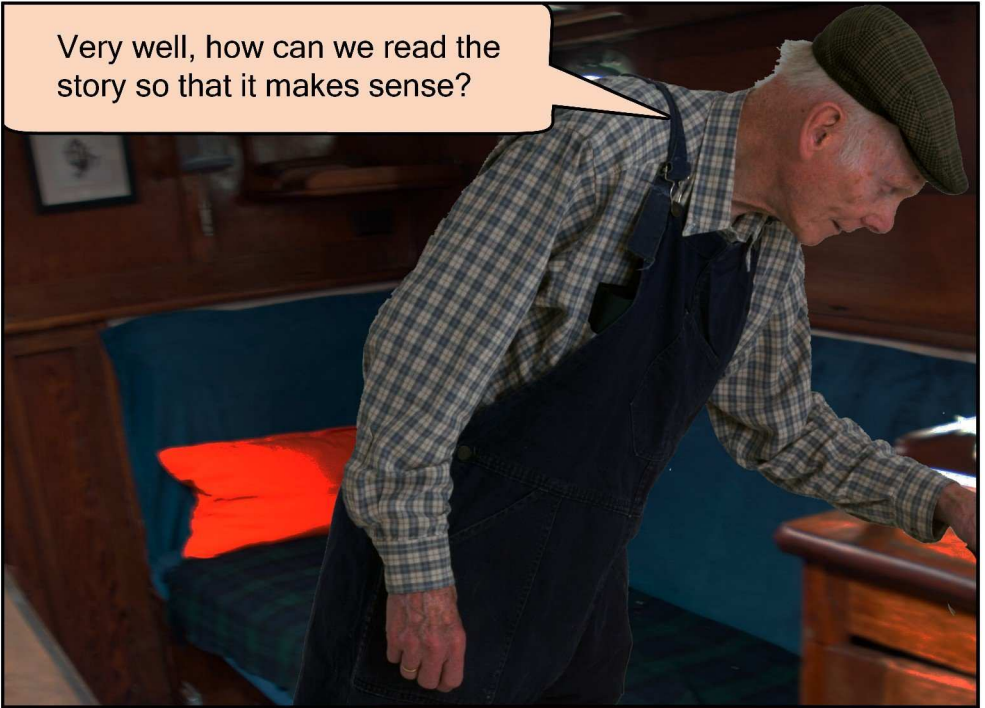


How so?

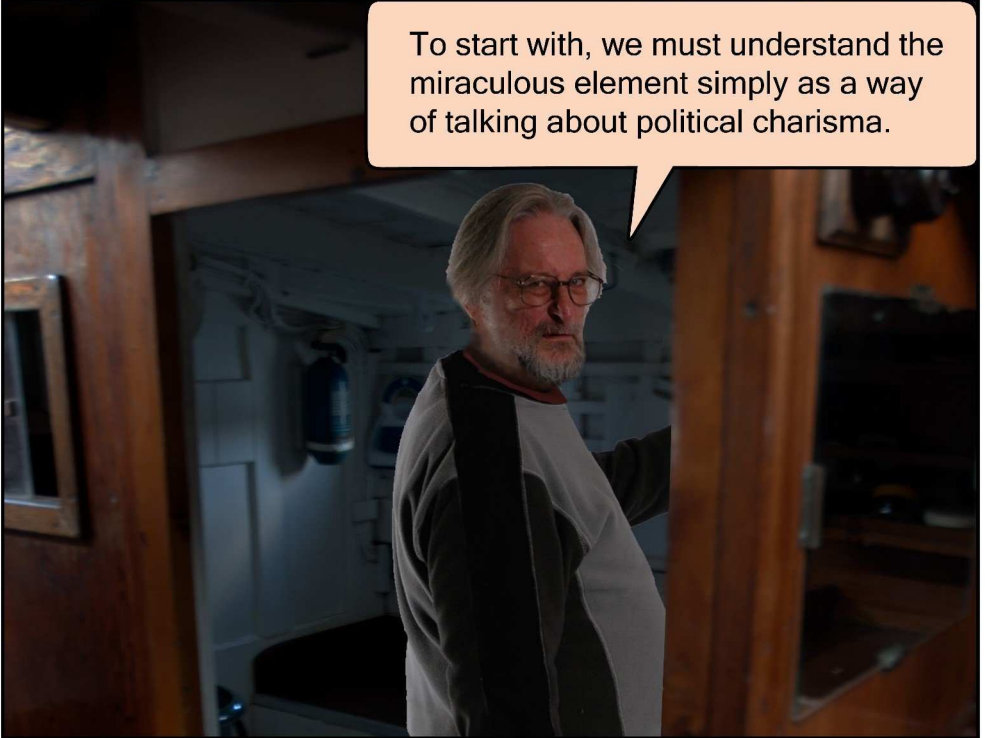
Well, when the situation becomes extreme the disciples do, as a matter of fact, show their belief in Jesus, for they wake him up...

So, had Jesus been looking for such belief - which clearly he wasn't - wouldn't he have congratulated them... but of course he doesn't.

Very well, how can we read the story so that it makes sense?



To start with, we must understand the miraculous element simply as a way of talking about political charisma.



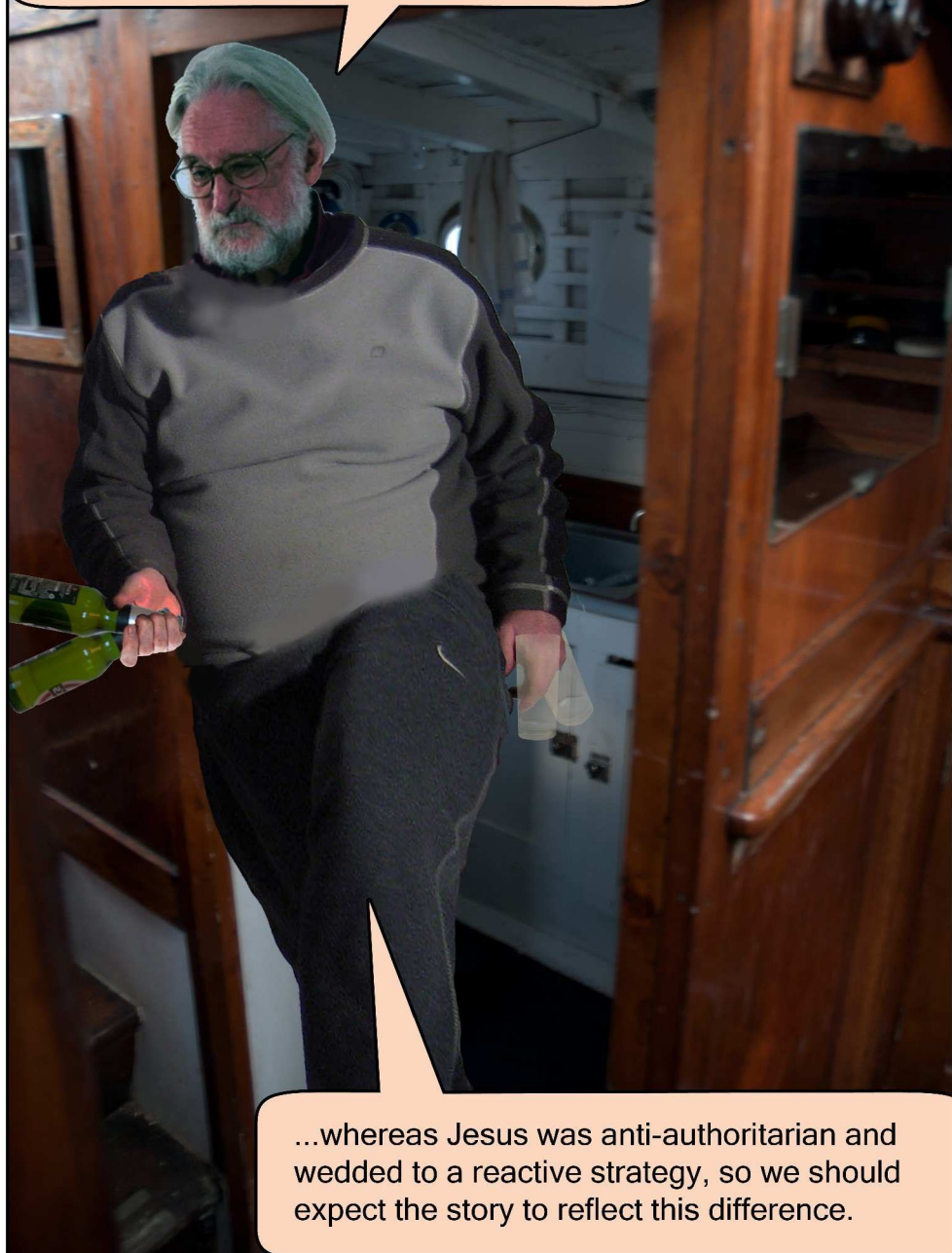
After Waterloo, people in England talked about the battle almost as if Wellington had won it single-handedly ...



That was not the case, of course, but the political charisma Wellington displayed was so impressive that that was how people spoke about the victory.



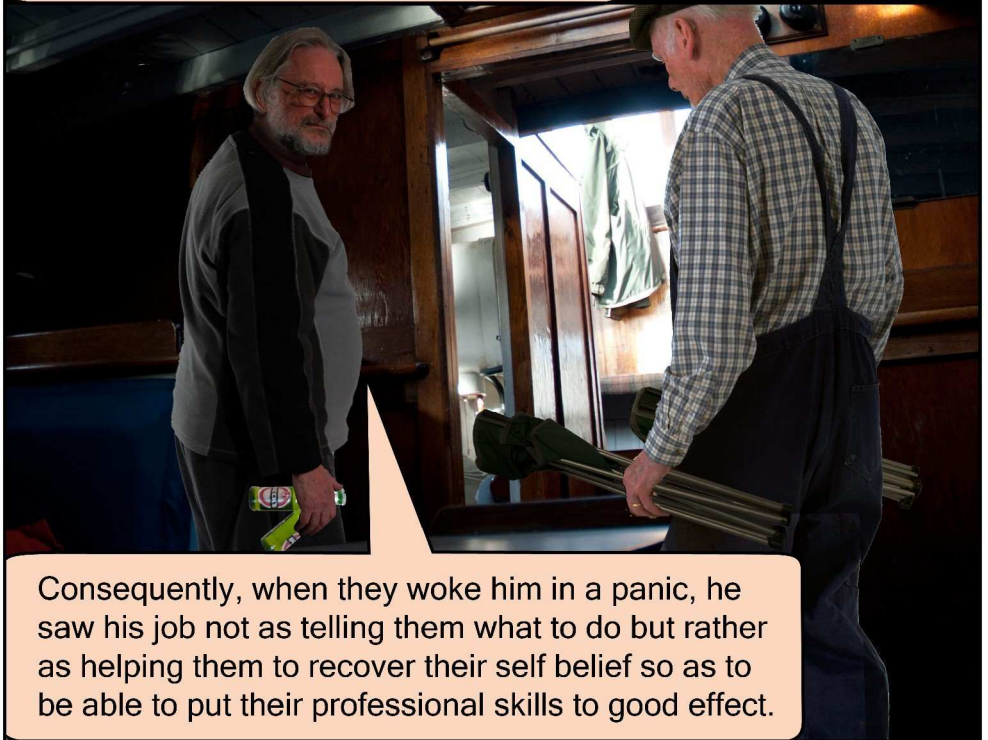
Wellington, of course, was a conservative authoritarian who believed in taking a decidedly proactive approach...



...whereas Jesus was anti-authoritarian and wedded to a reactive strategy, so we should expect the story to reflect this difference.

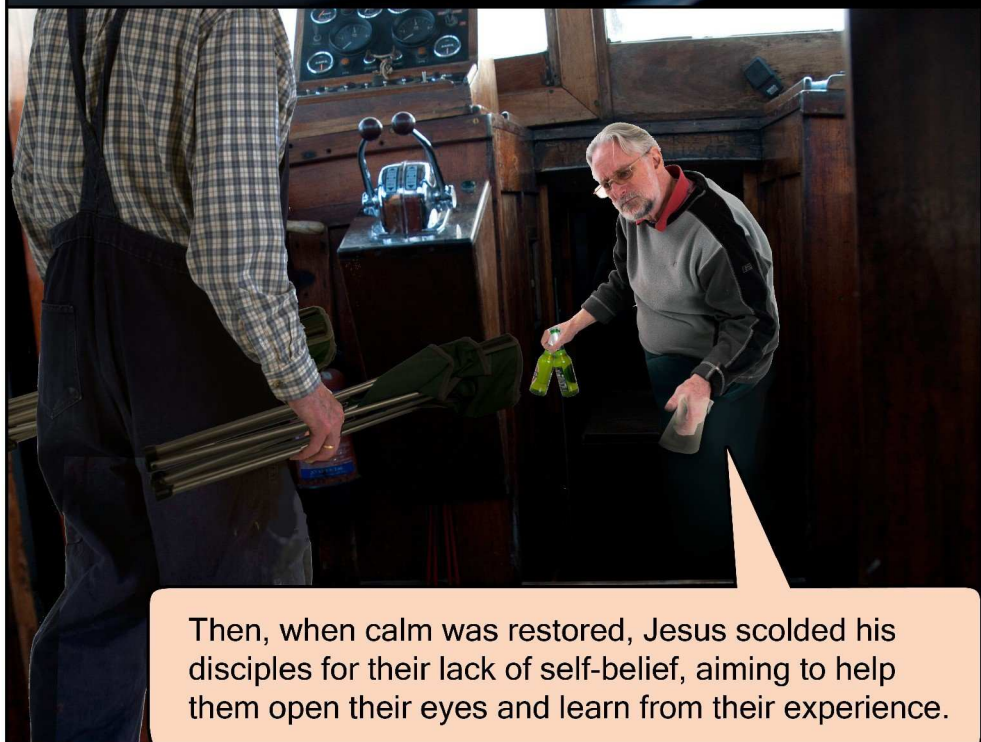


Since Jesus was no mariner, when it came to handling the boat, he had to rely entirely on his disciples' expertise.



Consequently, when they woke him in a panic, he saw his job not as telling them what to do but rather as helping them to recover their self belief so as to be able to put their professional skills to good effect.

Apparently, his extraordinary political charisma proved so effective that it wasn't long before his disciples had got things under control and the storm was safely ridden out.



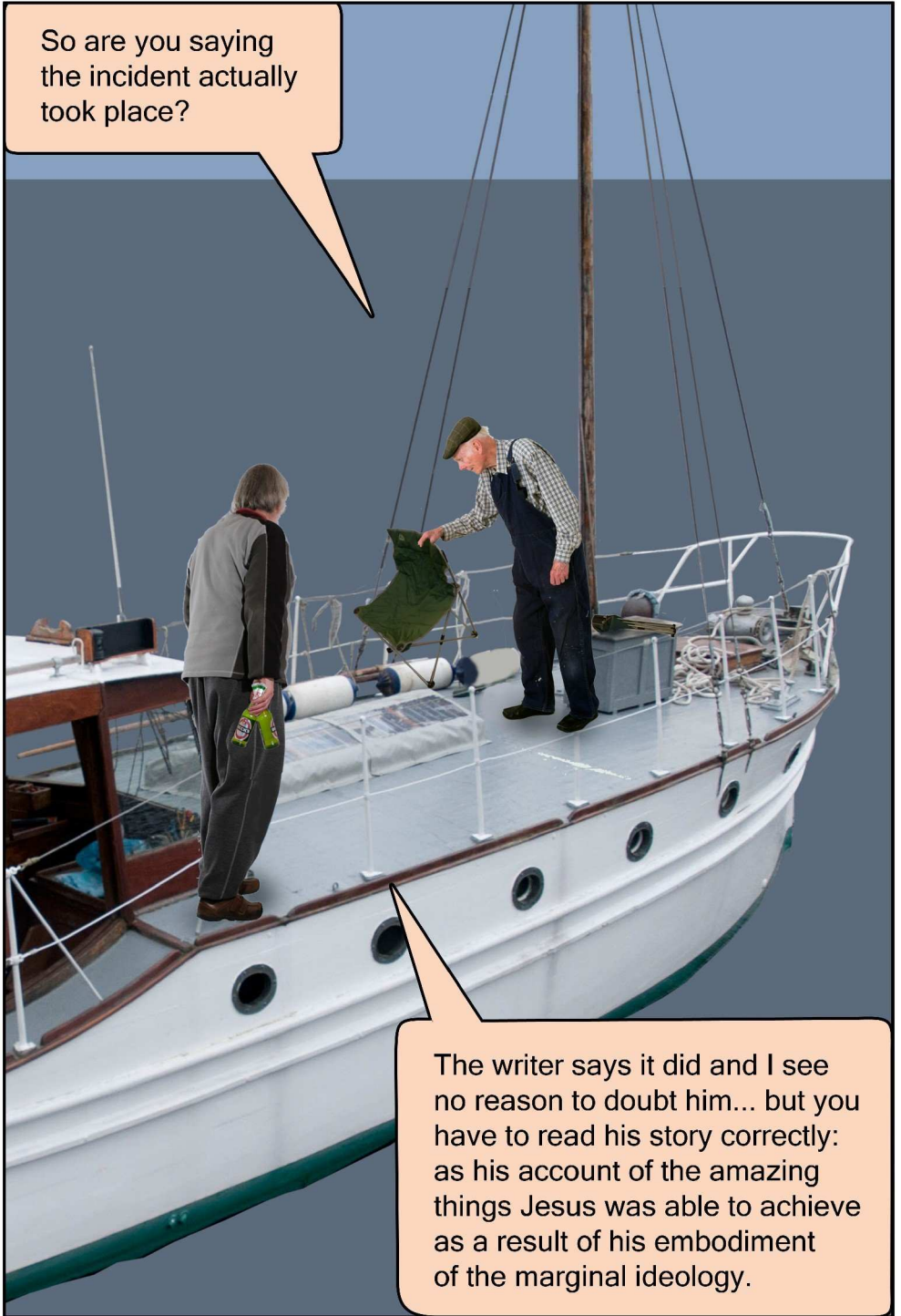
Then, when calm was restored, Jesus scolded his disciples for their lack of self-belief, aiming to help them open their eyes and learn from their experience.

I agree the story makes good sense read like that but it's not how I naturally understand it.

That's because of its myth-language. It's easy for us to describe such events using our political and psychological vocabulary but people in the first century were obliged to rely on miracle-talk.



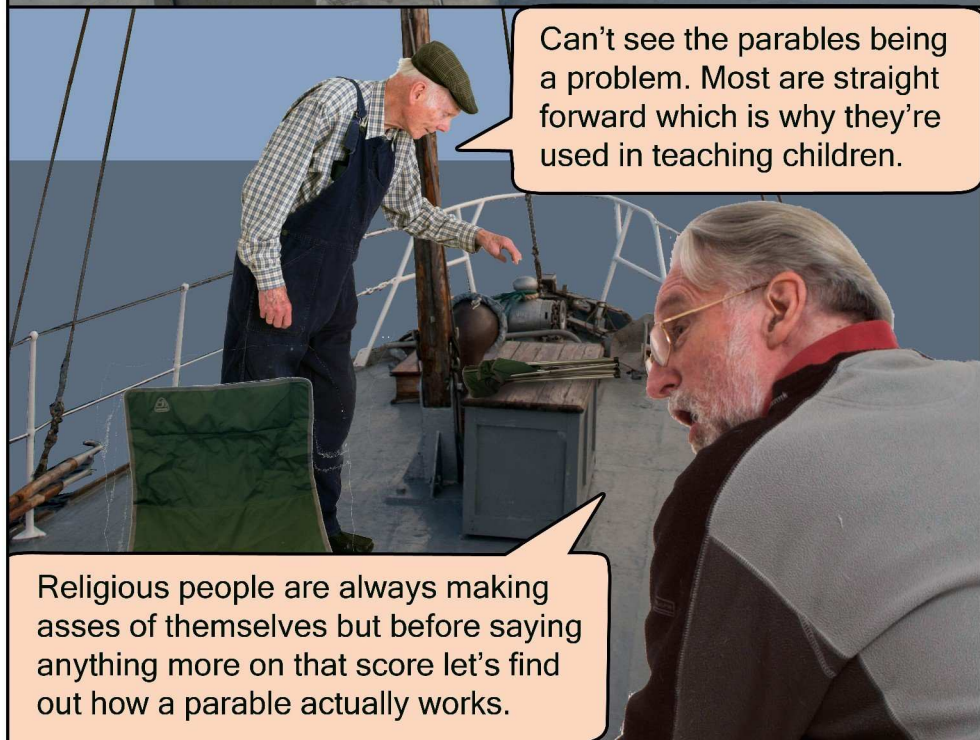
So are you saying
the incident actually
took place?

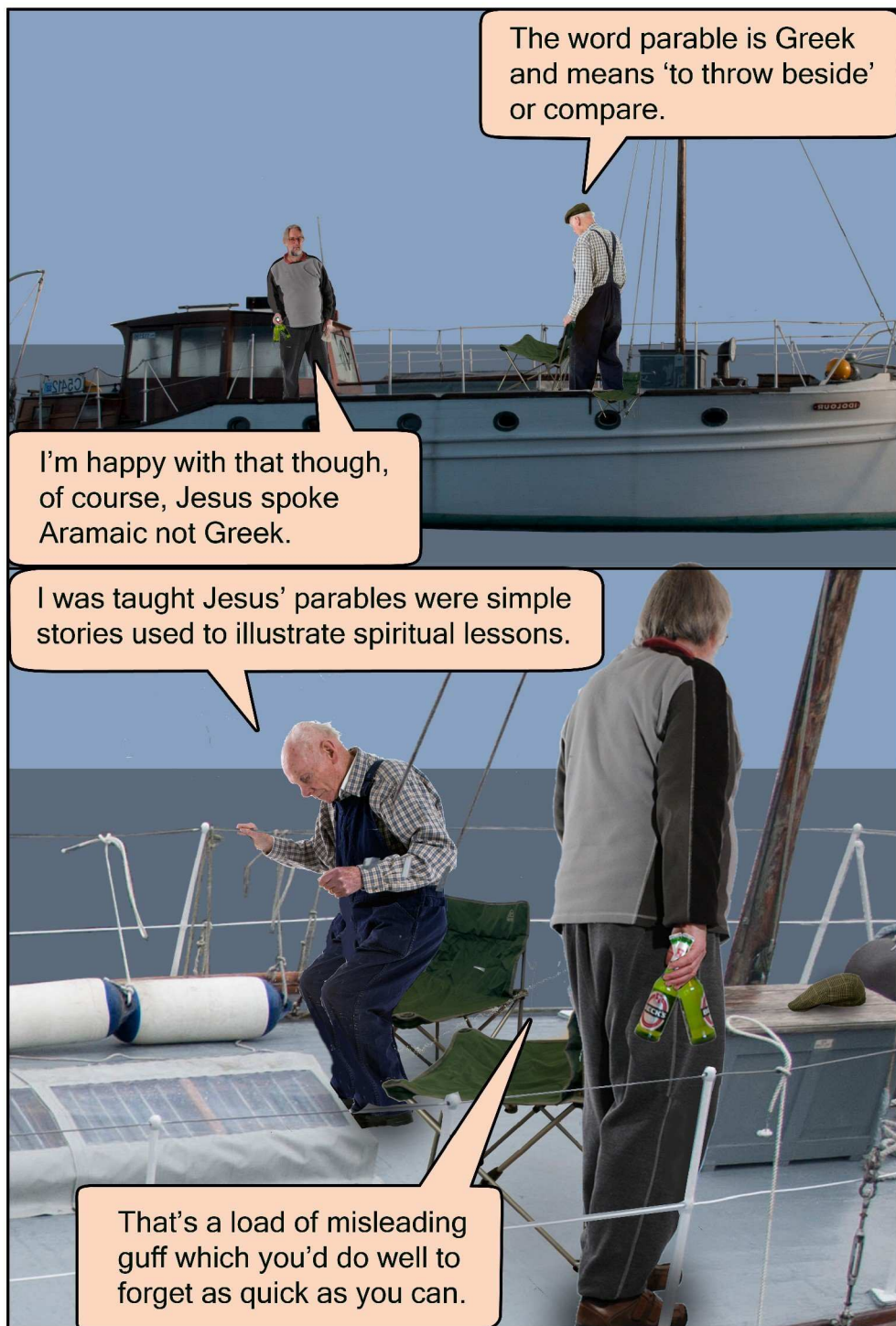


The writer says it did and I see
no reason to doubt him... but you
have to read his story correctly:
as his account of the amazing
things Jesus was able to achieve
as a result of his embodiment
of the marginal ideology.

5

Understanding the Parables





The word parable is Greek and means 'to throw beside' or compare.

I'm happy with that though, of course, Jesus spoke Aramaic not Greek.

I was taught Jesus' parables were simple stories used to illustrate spiritual lessons.

That's a load of misleading guff which you'd do well to forget as quick as you can.



In that case I crave enlightenment.

Let's take things slowly beginning at the beginning. We've agreed that a parable is a two-dimensional speech form where something is illustrated by laying it alongside something else.

So far so good!

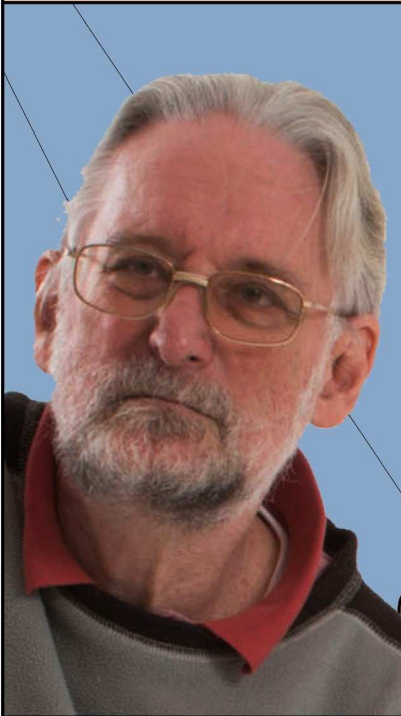
Today we commonly use three types of two-dimensional speech forms:

First, **representations** where one thing **stands for** another thing.

Second, **illustrations** where one thing **is like** another thing.

Third, **examples** where one thing **is an instance of** another thing.

Fortunately we can forget examples since the biblical writers, living in a pre-scientific era, hardly ever used them, Deuteronomy 19.4-5 being a rare exception.



So, in the Bible we're left with just **representations** and **illustrations**.

Can't think why you want to introduce more speech forms into our conversation. I thought we were discussing parables.

Just thought it worth noting that representations - generally used when explaining how things stand - are **proactive forms** whereas illustrations are clearly **reactive forms** since they are designed to get people to see things for themselves.



In a simile, the subject matter is **a characteristic or set of characteristics** for example: here 'harassed and helpless'.

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

Mt 9.36

In a complex simile the subject matter is **a phenomenon**: here 'thirst'.

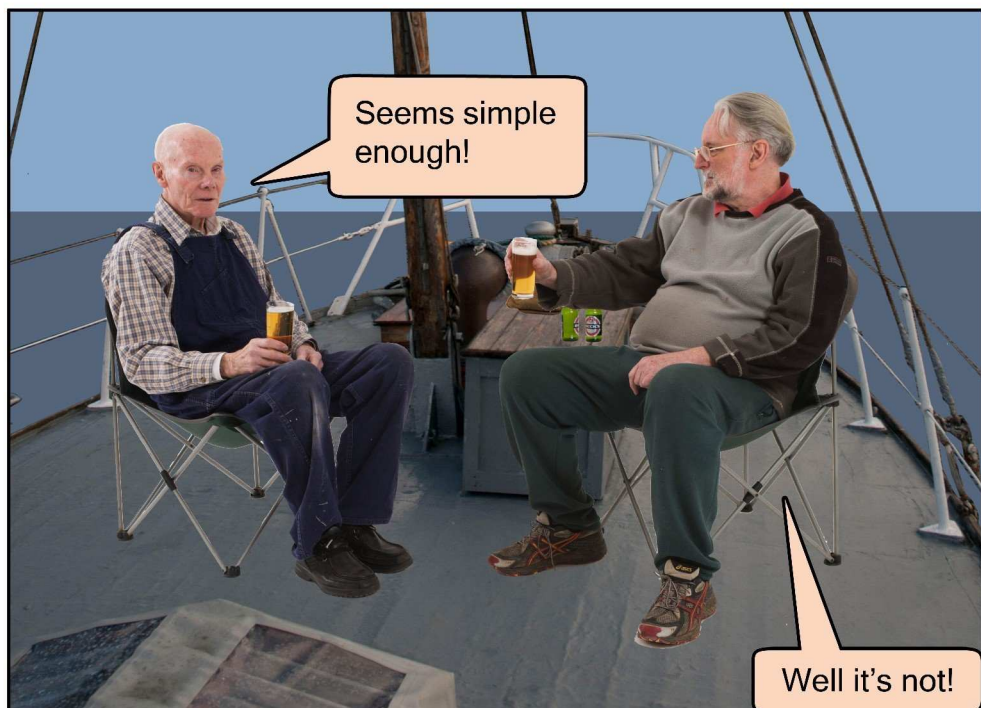
As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.

Ps. 42.1

In a parable, the subject matter is more complex still taking the form of **an 'if ... then...' proposition, or 'logic'**.

A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.

Mt 5.14



The examples I gave of a simile and complex simile were complete with illuminating illustrations laid alongside clearly defined subject matters...

Subject matter

The crowds were harassed and helpless

My soul longs for you
O God

Illustration

like sheep without a shepherd

As a deer longs for flowing streams.

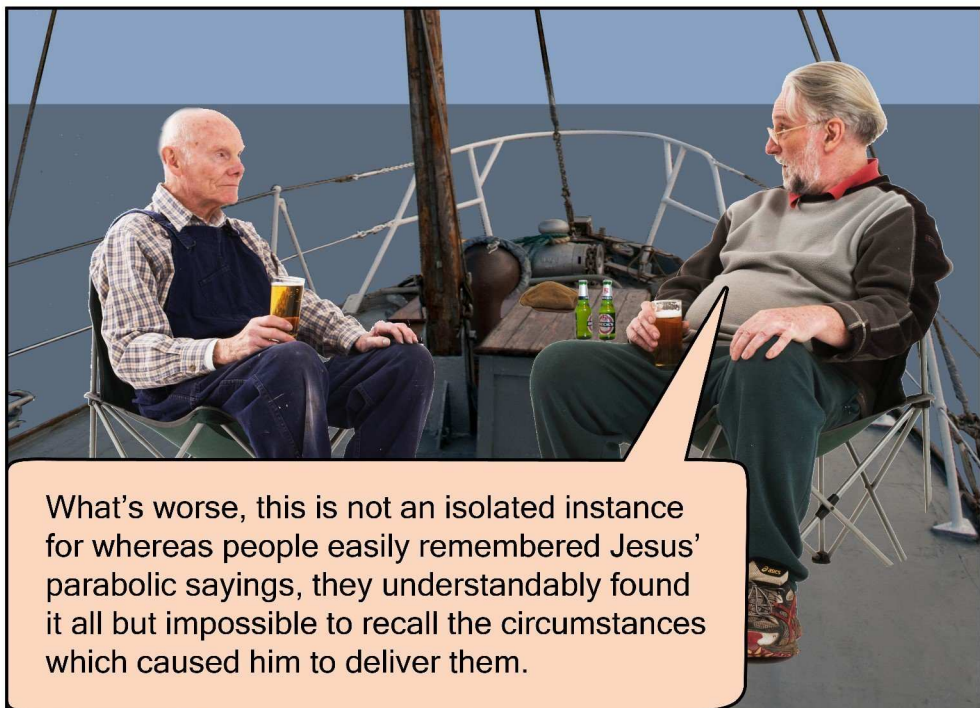
However, the example I gave of a parable was incomplete since Matthew failed to provide any information about the subject matter Jesus was seeking to illuminate with his saying.

Subject matter

?

Illustration

A city set on a hill cannot be hidden




What's worse, this is not an isolated instance for whereas people easily remembered Jesus' parabolic sayings, they understandably found it all but impossible to recall the circumstances which caused him to deliver them.




So, the evangelists were left to guess and manifestly Matthew here found himself at a loss... though I think I know the answer.

Well go on, tell me!

A high-angle shot of two elderly men sitting on folding chairs on the deck of a boat. The man on the left is wearing a grey and black striped sweater over a red shirt and green trousers. The man on the right is wearing a plaid shirt under dark blue overalls and dark trousers. They are both holding glasses of beer. A small wooden table between them holds two more beer bottles. The background shows the boat's rigging and a blue sky.

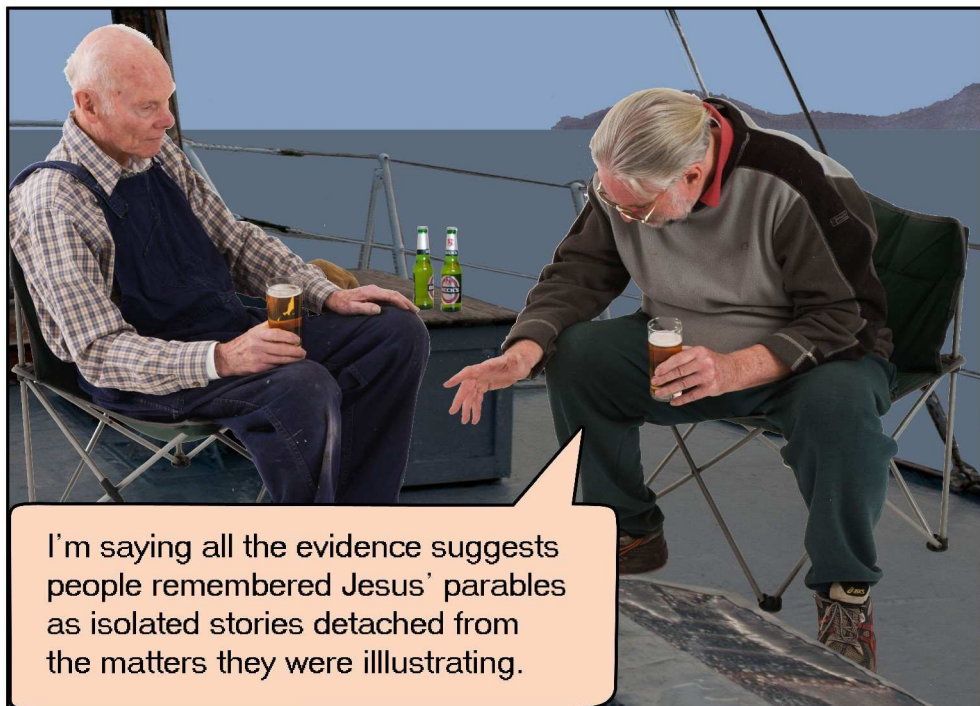
Given Jesus was making powerful enemies, don't you think his friends would have urged him to adopt a lower profile?

Certainly!

A medium shot of the same two men from the previous panel, now sitting closer together on the boat deck. The man on the left is looking towards the man on the right, who is gesturing with his right hand while holding his beer. The background shows the boat's interior and rigging.

So my guess is, what we have here is Jesus trying to get them to see you can't adopt a low profile if your objective is to shame society.

I'm shocked! You're not really telling me **none** of Jesus' parables have survived in a complete state?



I'm saying all the evidence suggests people remembered Jesus' parables as isolated stories detached from the matters they were illustrating.



What about the parables of the Rabbis. Did they suffer the same fate?

No, as a matter of fact they didn't. Here are a couple of examples and as you can see they are complete.

Don't judge a scholar by his age. Look not at the vessel, but at what it contains, many a new vessel is full of old wine and many an old vessel has not even wine in it.

Subject matter

Don't judge a scholar by his age.

Illustration

Look not at the vessel, but at what it contains. Many a new vessel is full of old wine and many an old vessel has not even wine in it.

Whosoever studies the Law and does not teach it to others is like a man who sows but does not reap.

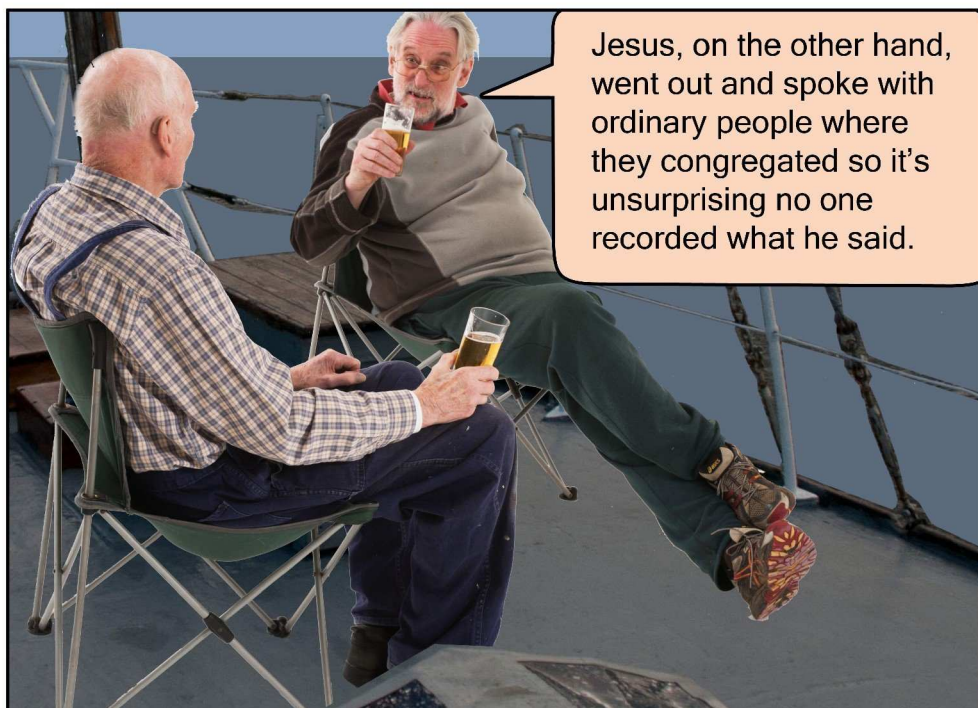
Subject matter

Whosoever studies the Law and does not teach it

Illustration

is like a man who sows but does not reap





Jesus, on the other hand, went out and spoke with ordinary people where they congregated so it's unsurprising no one recorded what he said.



However, he made such an impact people desperately wanted to remember what he had said and the parable stories - though not their targets - were particularly easy to remember.

I'm speechless!



So were the evangelists for they were left with a regular headache since detached parable stories made up a large part of the sayings of Jesus which they had in their possession.

Naturally they felt they had to try and find some way of making use of them, but how?



Why is there no inkling of all of this in the texts?

There is! As isolated stories with no subject matters to illustrate, Jesus' parables naturally appear intriguing though inscrutable.



Mark made use of this by suggesting Jesus **intended** to be enigmatic.

However, you only have to consider his suggestion for one moment to realise how bogus it is...

When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven."

Mk 4, 10-12

That, however, has not prevented lots of people from trying to come up with more logical scenarios along Mark's lines. But their efforts were doomed from the start.

The parables were coded messages comprehensible to his followers but confusing to his enemies.

The parables were riddles designed to tease peoples' minds into active thought.

The parables were works of art which broke fresh ground in human understanding, requiring people to see things in a new and unaccustomed way.



So, what do you have to say about all of that?

At best it's a denial of what should have been perfectly obvious: that people had simply forgotten the precise circumstances which caused Jesus to tell his parables.

At worst it's devastating for it pictures Jesus as **a proactive wisdom teacher** which was the opposite of the truth!

If you're right, why couldn't the evangelists have invented suitable subject matters for the parables to illustrate?

Easier said than done. Manifestly, they found it simpler to use Jesus' parabolic sayings to illuminate events about which they had independent knowledge.



We find Mark doing this in the case of the first parable story he uses in his gospel.



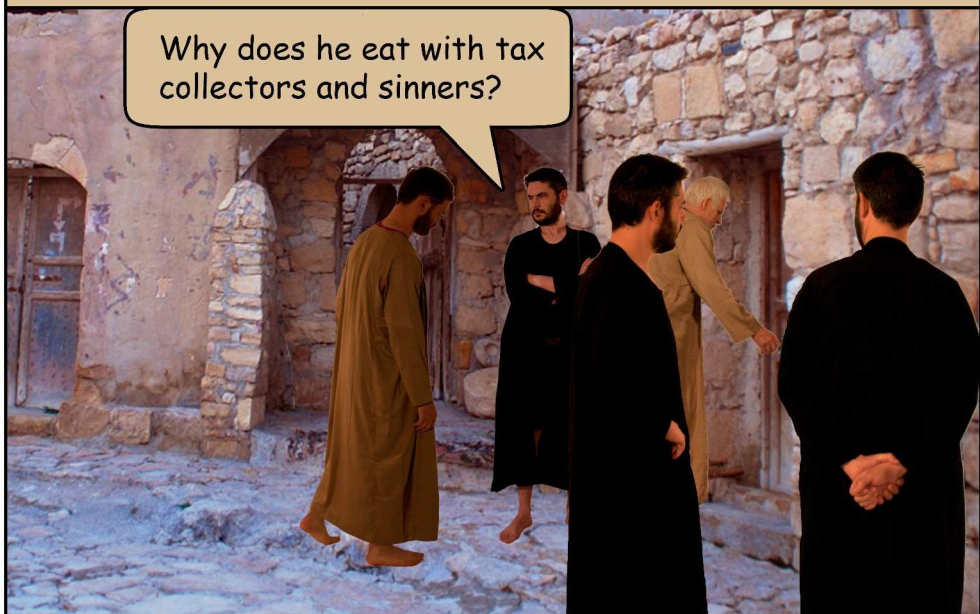
As he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples; for there were many who followed him.

Mk 2.15-17



When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples:

Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?

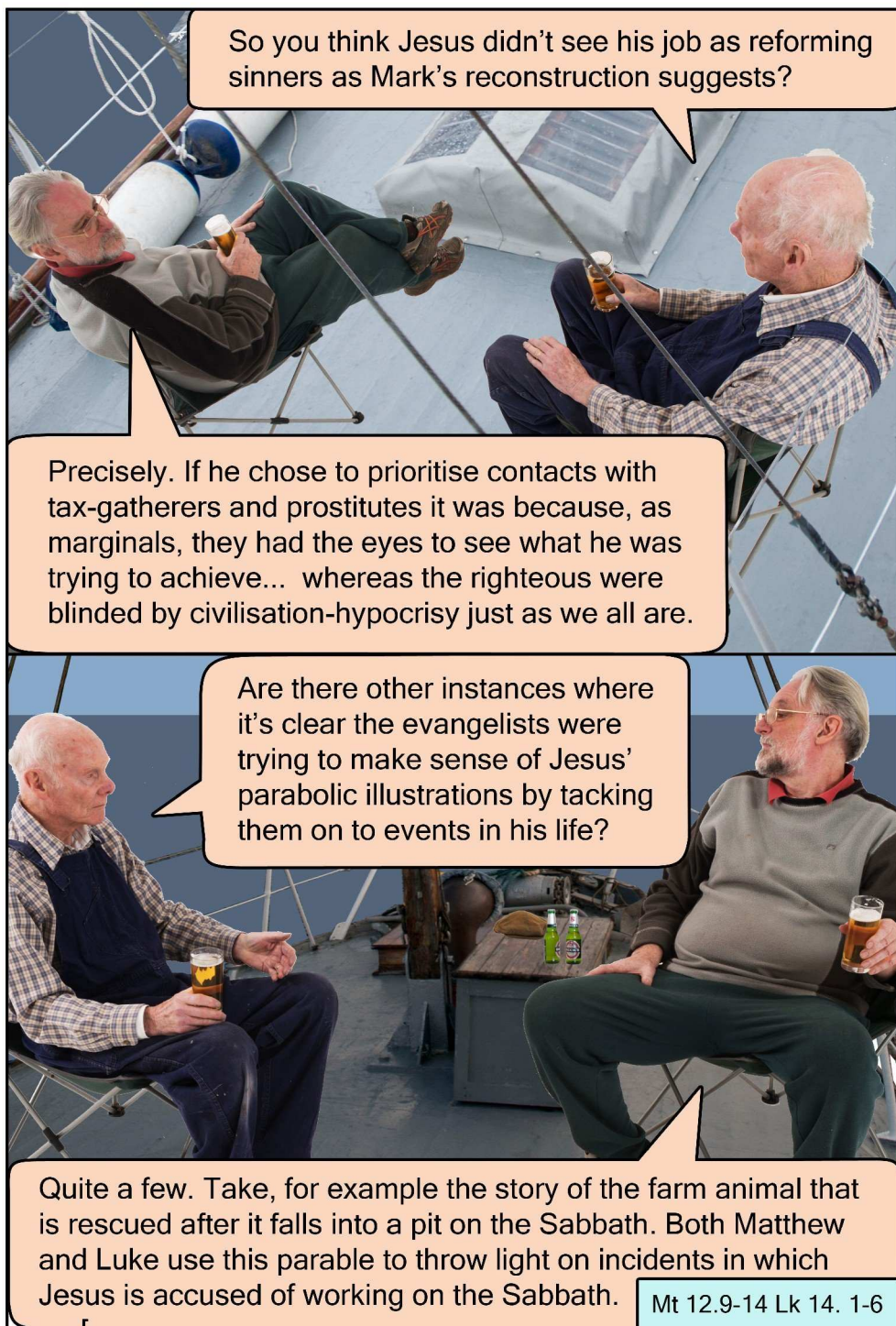


When Jesus heard this, he said to them,

Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.

So this is a complete parable of Jesus!

Not really. It's Mark's reconstruction produced by tacking on the 'Doctor' saying to the independent story of the tax collector, Levi. And unfortunately it undermines the way in which we know Jesus thought about marginals.



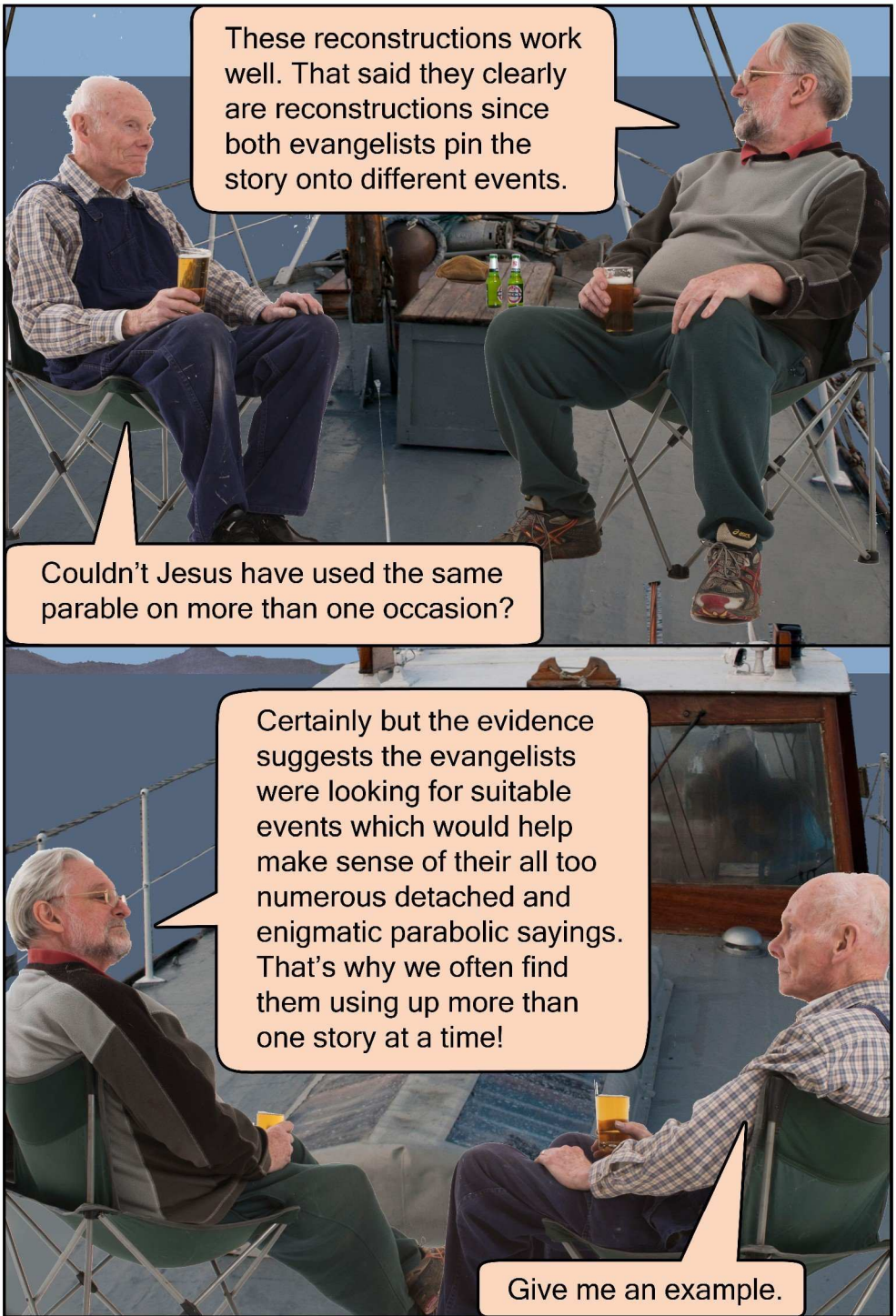
So you think Jesus didn't see his job as reforming sinners as Mark's reconstruction suggests?

Precisely. If he chose to prioritise contacts with tax-gatherers and prostitutes it was because, as marginals, they had the eyes to see what he was trying to achieve... whereas the righteous were blinded by civilisation-hypocrisy just as we all are.

Are there other instances where it's clear the evangelists were trying to make sense of Jesus' parabolic illustrations by tacking them on to events in his life?

Quite a few. Take, for example the story of the farm animal that is rescued after it falls into a pit on the Sabbath. Both Matthew and Luke use this parable to throw light on incidents in which Jesus is accused of working on the Sabbath.

Mt 12.9-14 Lk 14. 1-6



These reconstructions work well. That said they clearly are reconstructions since both evangelists pin the story onto different events.

Couldn't Jesus have used the same parable on more than one occasion?

Certainly but the evidence suggests the evangelists were looking for suitable events which would help make sense of their all too numerous detached and enigmatic parabolic sayings. That's why we often find them using up more than one story at a time!

Give me an example.

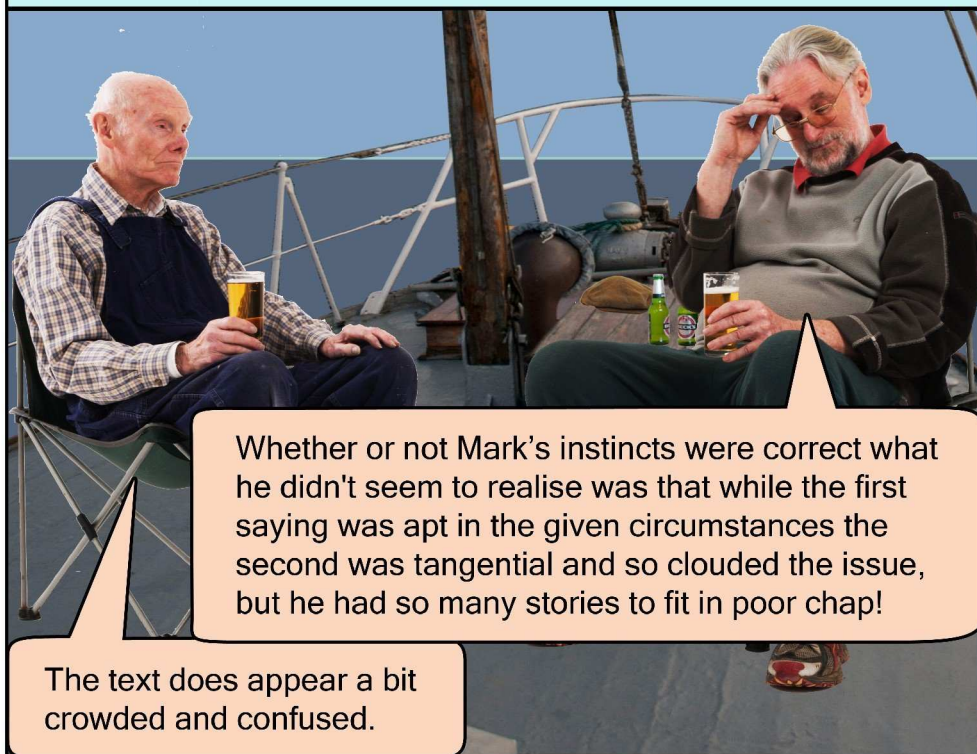
Describing the incident in which Jesus was accused of using demonic powers in his exorcisms, Mark inserted two parables presumably because he thought both dealt in some way with the business of exorcism...

If a kingdom is divided against itself,
that kingdom cannot stand.

Mk 3.24

No one can enter a strong man's house
and plunder his property without first
tying up the strong man; then indeed
the house can be plundered.

Mk 3.27



Whether or not Mark's instincts were correct what he didn't seem to realise was that while the first saying was apt in the given circumstances the second was tangential and so clouded the issue, but he had so many stories to fit in poor chap!

The text does appear a bit crowded and confused.

Another way of using up the stories people had remembered Jesus as telling, was to put them together as twins.



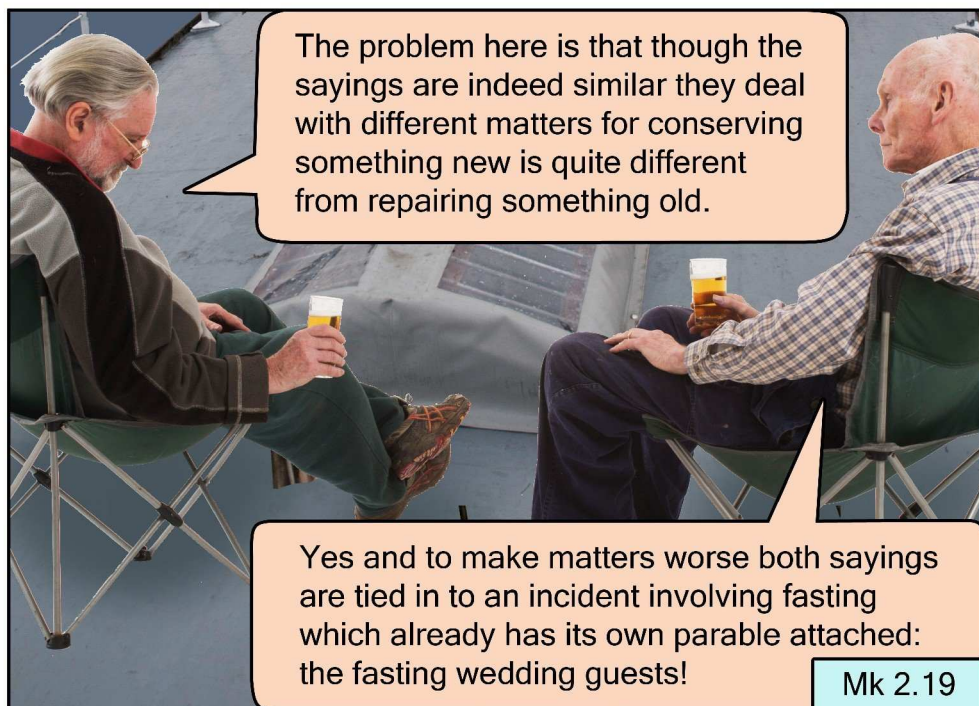
For example, Mark tacks on the saying about conserving new wine to the other saying about repairing an old garment:

No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made.

Mk 2.21

No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost.

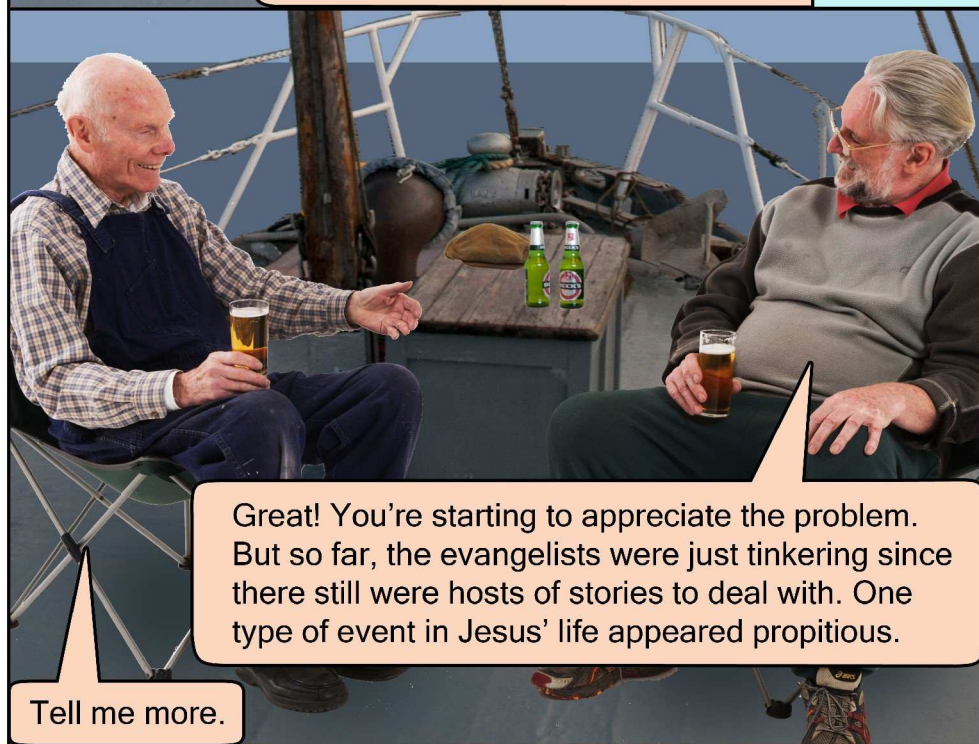
Mk 2.22



The problem here is that though the sayings are indeed similar they deal with different matters for conserving something new is quite different from repairing something old.

Yes and to make matters worse both sayings are tied in to an incident involving fasting which already has its own parable attached: the fasting wedding guests!

Mk 2.19



Great! You're starting to appreciate the problem. But so far, the evangelists were just tinkering since there still were hosts of stories to deal with. One type of event in Jesus' life appeared propitious.

Tell me more.

It was well-known Jesus withdrew to secluded spots from time to time to teach his disciples. However, no record would have been kept of what had been said on these occasions.

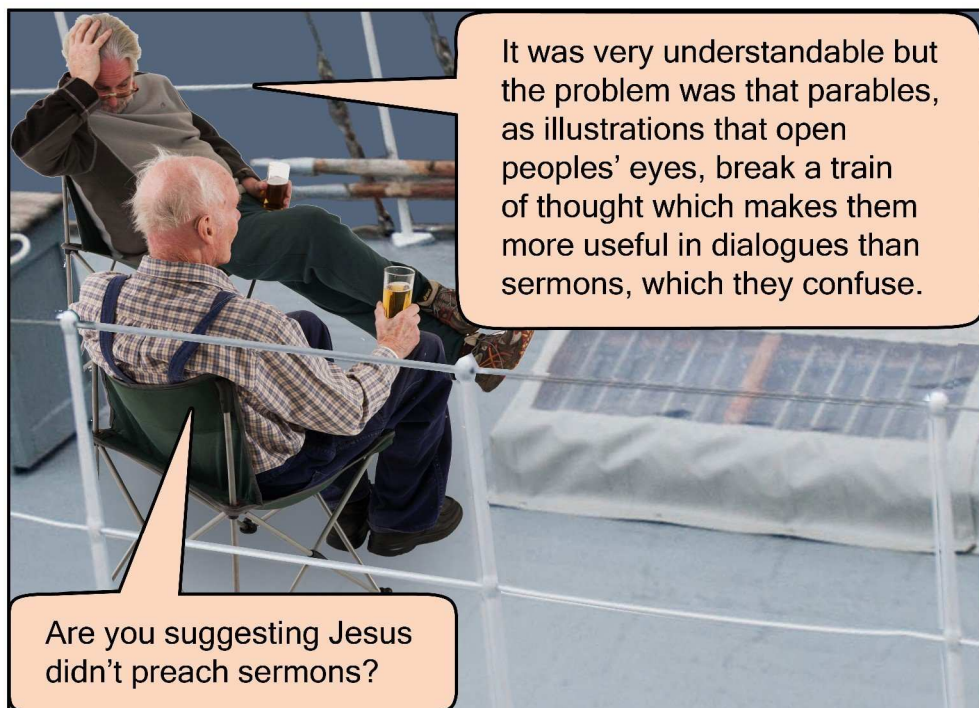


So?

You'll hardly be surprised when I tell you that in his account of the Sermon on the Mount Matthew found a home for eleven parabolic stories.

That was fair enough surely?

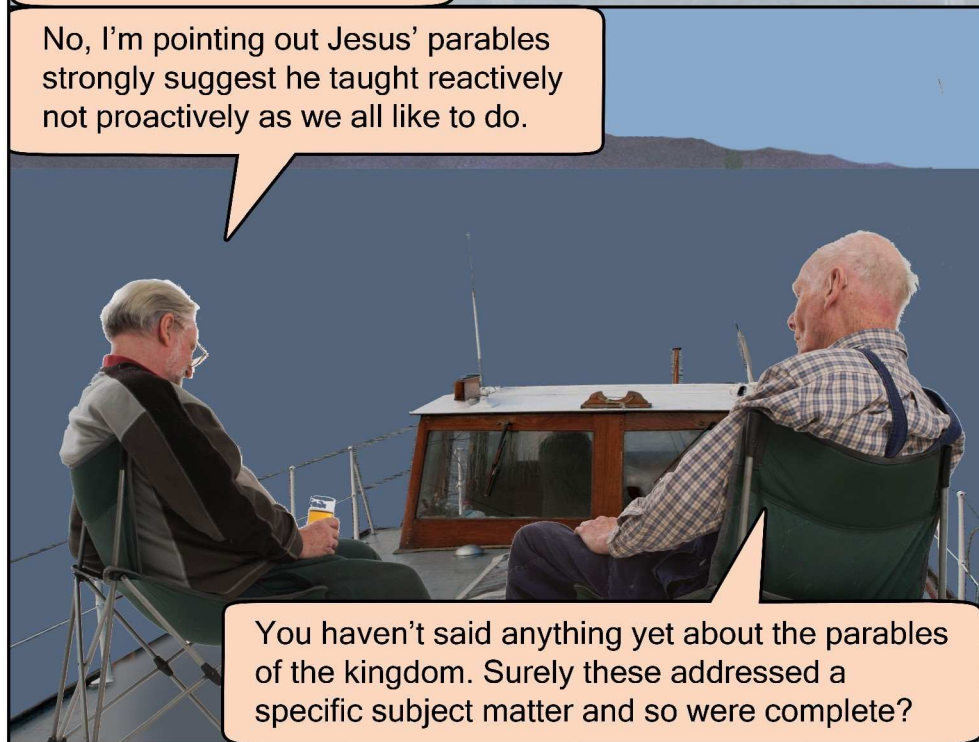




It was very understandable but the problem was that parables, as illustrations that open peoples' eyes, break a train of thought which makes them more useful in dialogues than sermons, which they confuse.

Are you suggesting Jesus didn't preach sermons?

No, I'm pointing out Jesus' parables strongly suggest he taught reactively not proactively as we all like to do.



You haven't said anything yet about the parables of the kingdom. Surely these addressed a specific subject matter and so were complete?

Parables of the Kingdom

Mk 4.26. The growing seed
Mk 4.30; Mt 13.24; Lk 13.18 The mustard seed
Mt 13.33; Lk 13.21 Leaven
Mt 13.44 The treasure hidden in a field
Mt 13.45 The pearl
Mt 13.47 The drag-net
Mt 18.23 The unforgiving servant
Mt 20.1 The labourers in the vineyard
Mt 22.2 ; Lk 14.16 The king's banquet
Mt 25. 1 The torch bearers
Mt 25.14; Lk 19.11 The master's capital.

You know that's nonsense. Jesus used the idea of the kingdom to represent the transformed world he and his followers were bringing about. So you could say **all** his parables were kingdom sayings. However, it's obvious every parable he delivered addressed some very specific matter... now unfortunately lost.

So Jesus never said, 'The kingdom of God is like....'?

Why do you say that? He may have often said it but people would always have known what was being talked about... whereas we don't.



So is that it...
your final word?

No there's one last important way in which the evangelists tried to make sense of Jesus' detached illustrative sayings. They turned them into allegories. The best known example is the story of The Sower in Mark's Gospel.



Yes, it's interesting the disciples clearly had no idea what this story was all about.

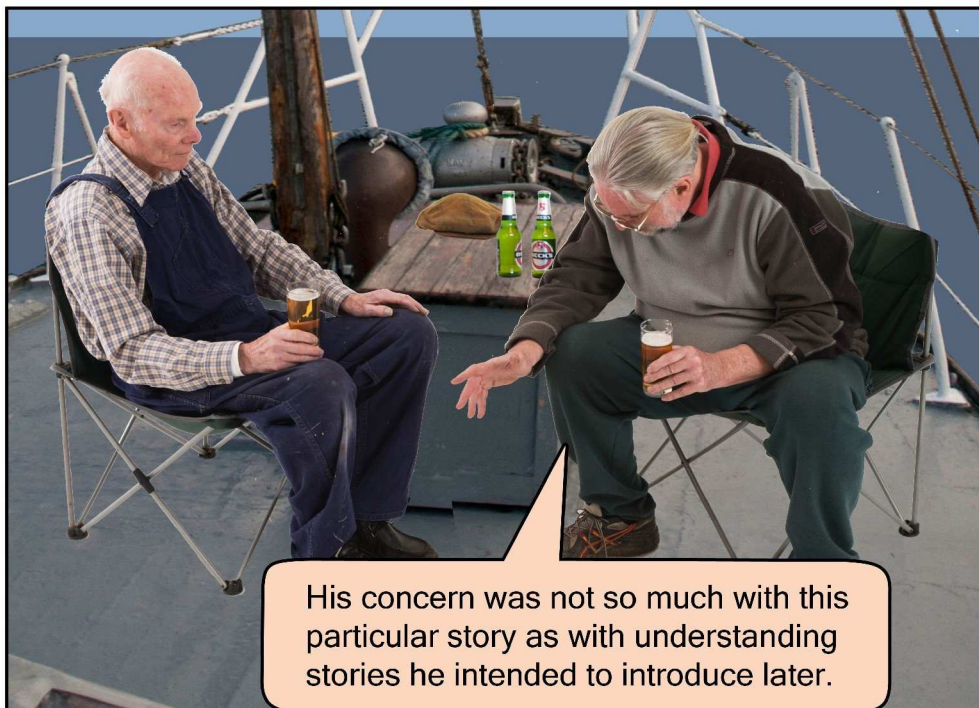
Mark attempts to explain this curious situation by suggesting it was an allegory containing multiple symbols, none of which were self-evident.



It's an absurd idea when you think about it: A supposedly illuminating story that itself requires copious clarification!

So why did he stick his neck out like that?





His concern was not so much with this particular story as with understanding stories he intended to introduce later.

He needed to get people to look for symbols in the stories so as to be able to read them allegorically without him having to provide explanations.



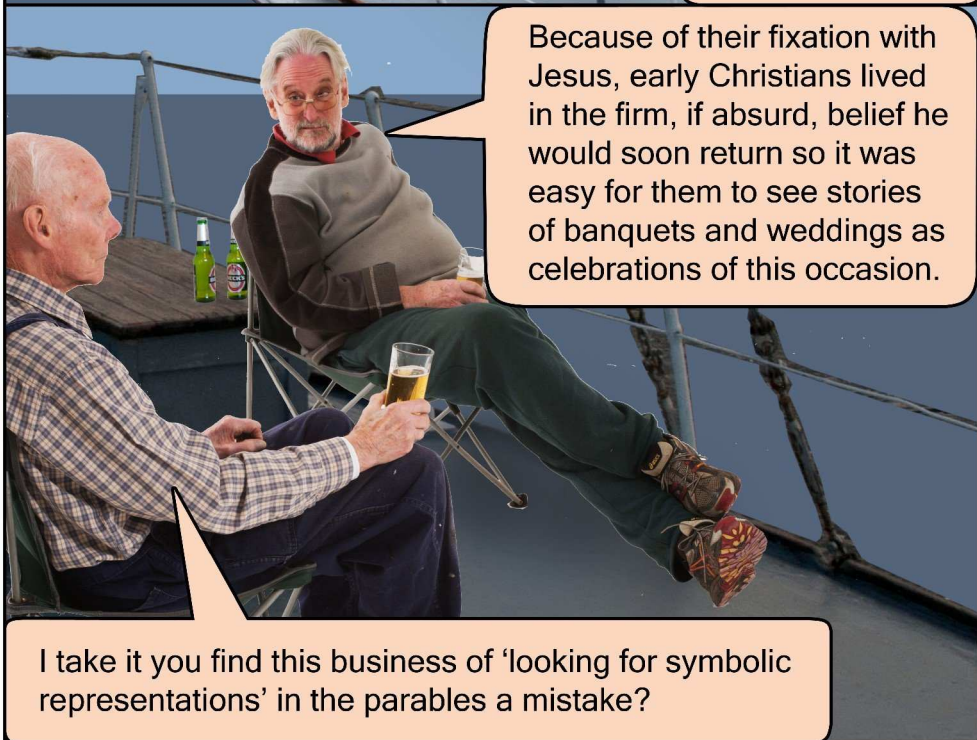
So what symbols did he expect his readers to see for themselves?

Simple ones like kings and masters standing for God and a king's son for Jesus; enemies symbolising the Devil; growing plants representing the coming kingdom. Things like that.



And what about the Parousia, the second coming?

Because of their fixation with Jesus, early Christians lived in the firm, if absurd, belief he would soon return so it was easy for them to see stories of banquets and weddings as celebrations of this occasion.



I take it you find this business of 'looking for symbolic representations' in the parables a mistake?

It's worse than a mistake for it destroys the parables as reactive illustrations that invite people to see things for themselves and turns them into authoritative assertions.

You seem to be saying all the parabolic material in the Gospels is fundamentally flawed. I find that hard to take.

It's true we can't be certain about the meaning of any particular parable of Jesus, but we can be absolutely sure Jesus used parables and other reactive speech forms far more extensively than anyone else had previously done.

The early Rabbis also used parables.

True, but at best we only have **1** or **2** examples from each Rabbi. We know of **71** parabolic sayings associated with Jesus and countless other similes, metaphors and complex similes.



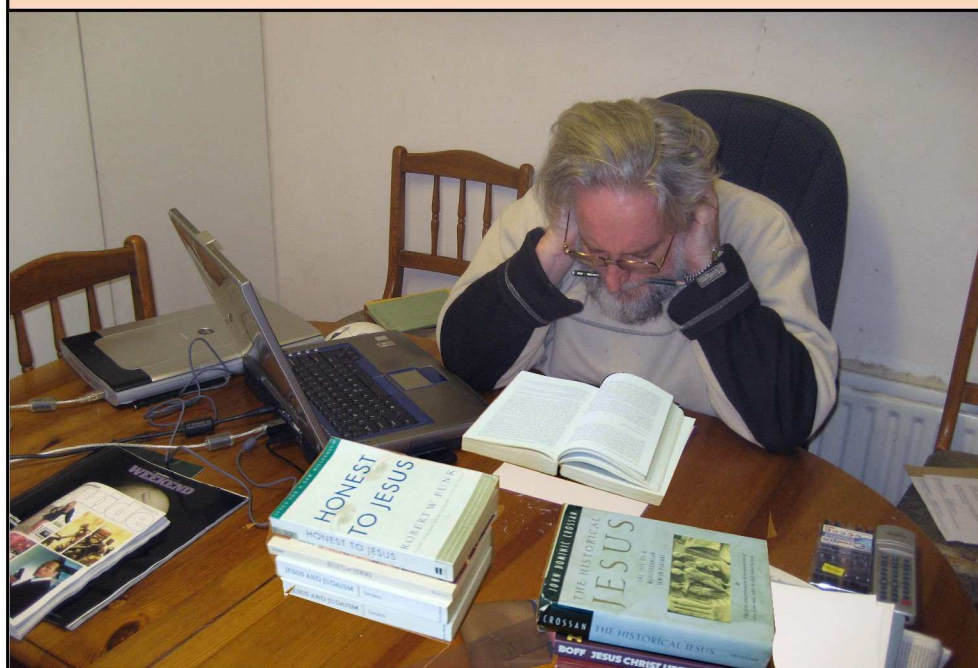
What about representations?

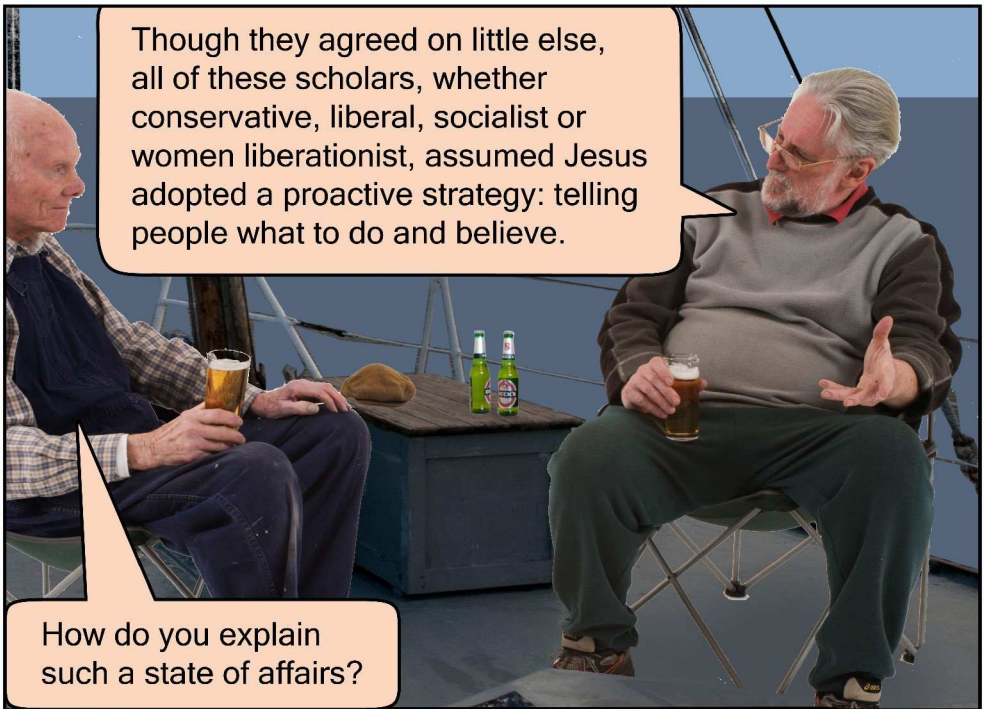
I have only been able to identify one representation used by Jesus: the curious little story of the unclean spirit [Mt 12.43; Lk 11.24]. Says it all wouldn't you say?

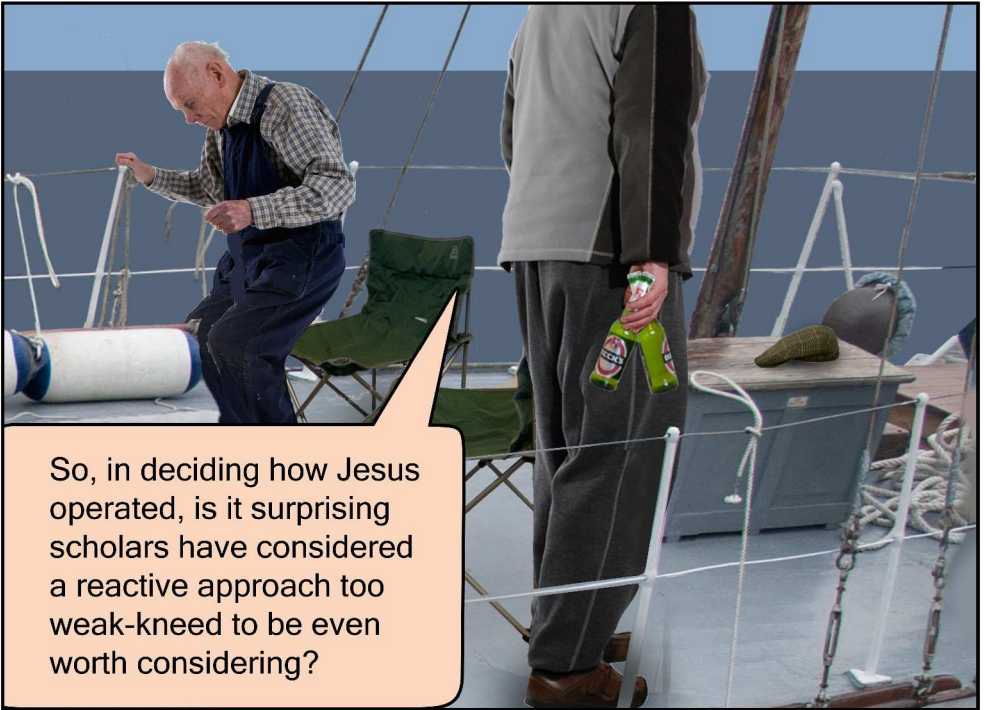




I was so struck, I wanted to find out if anyone else had noticed it. I read the works of 30 scholars involved in the 'historical Jesus' debate: 50 volumes in all... and could find no inkling of it.







So, in deciding how Jesus operated, is it surprising scholars have considered a reactive approach too weak-kneed to be even worth considering?

God you're a bugger... I'll need to think about what you're saying!

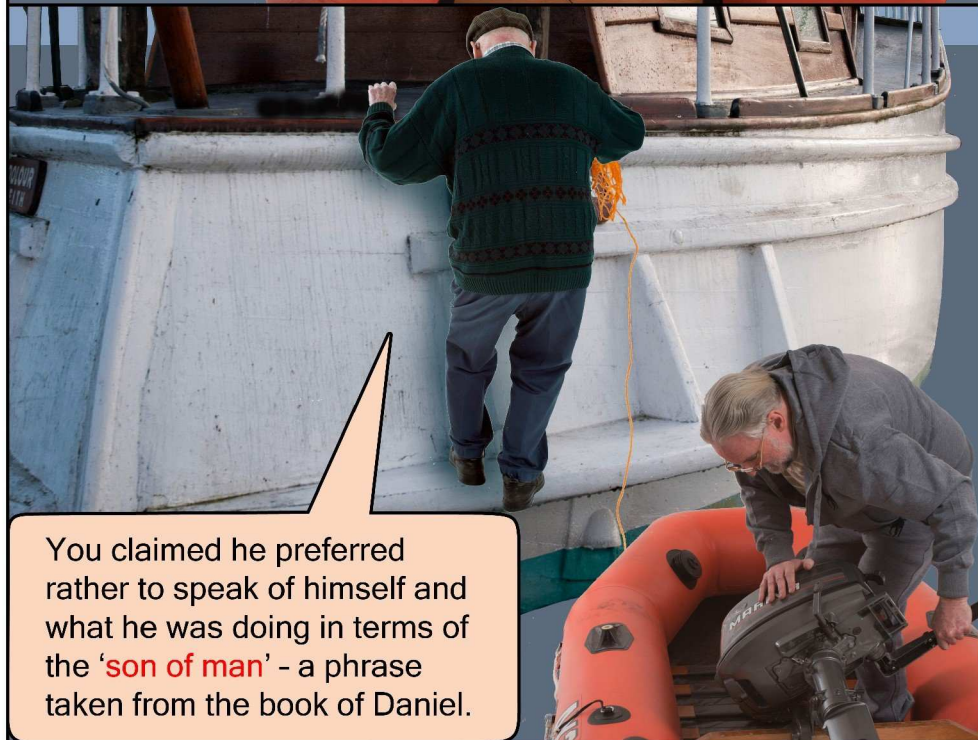
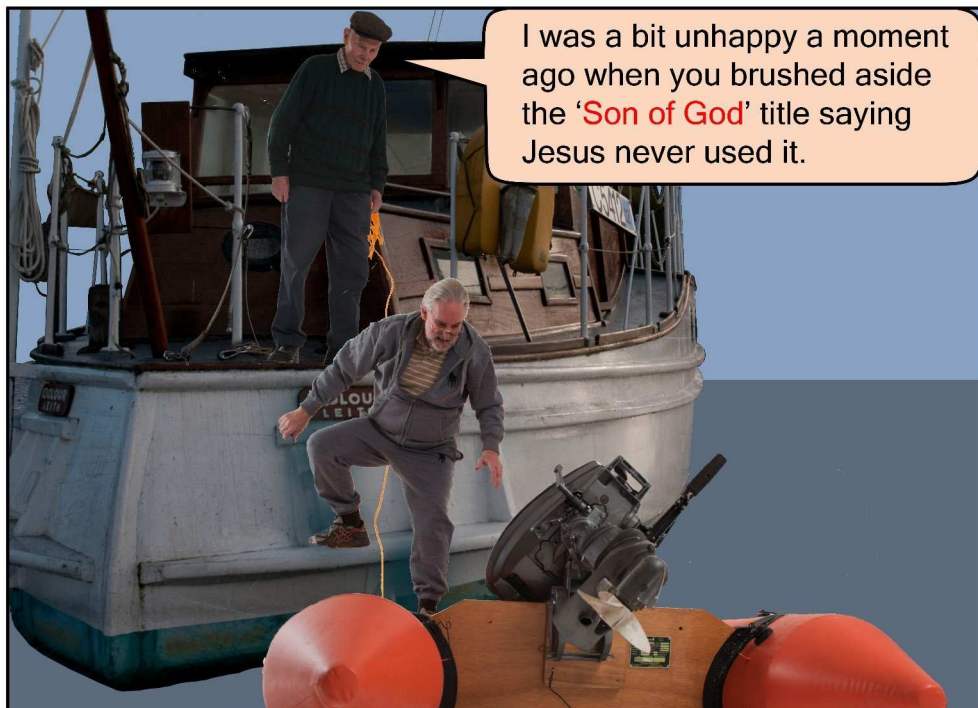


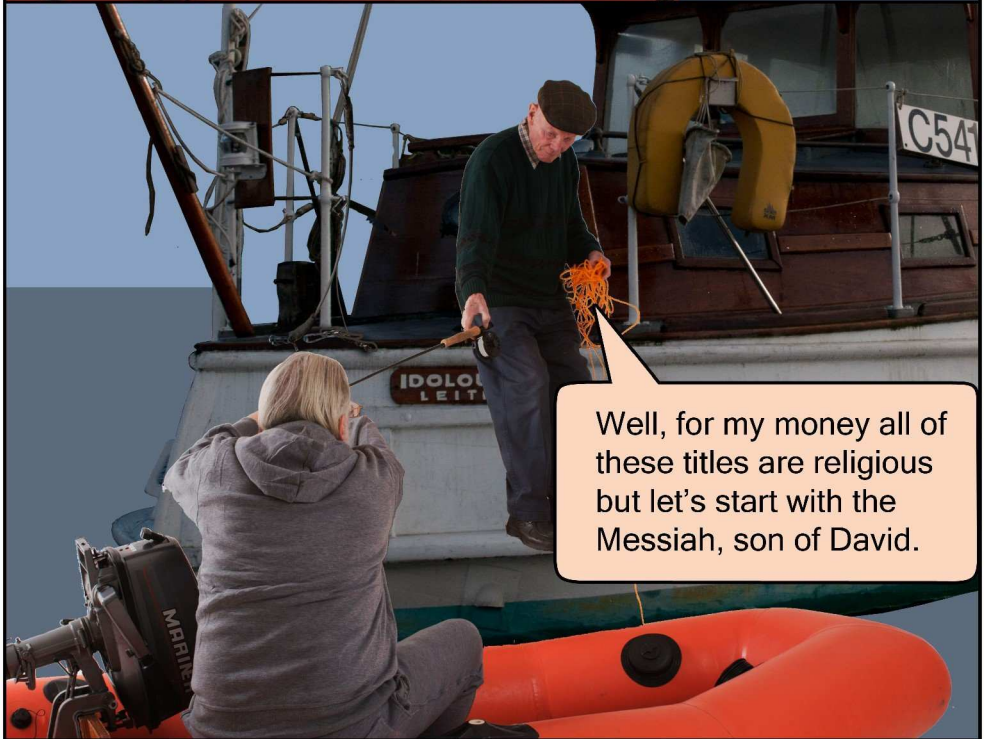
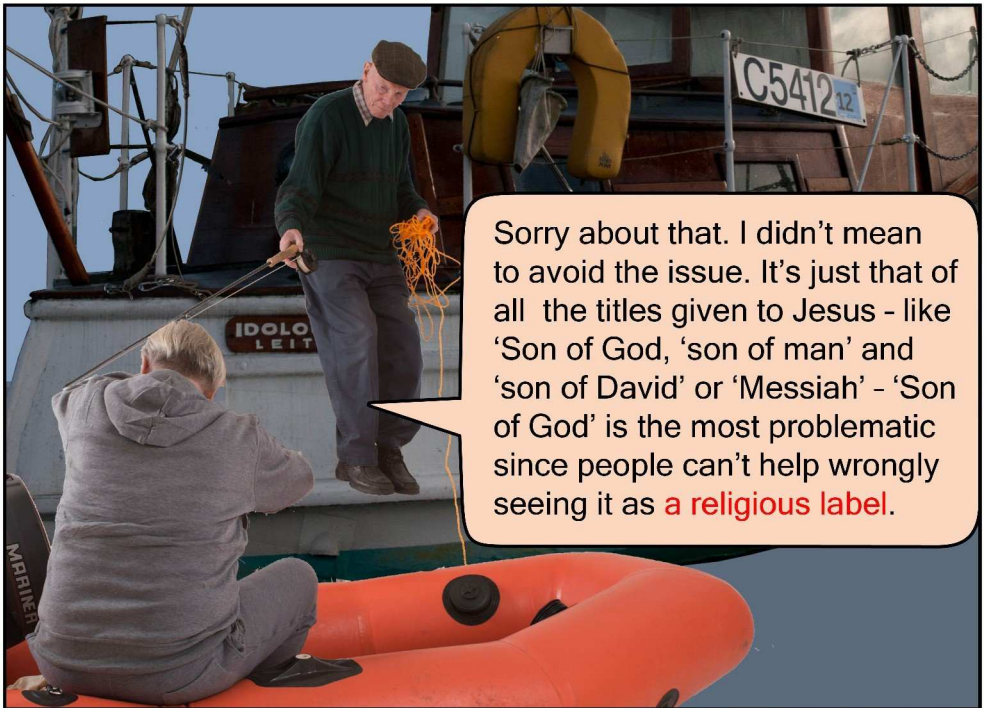
6

Understanding the Titles given to Jesus



So are there any more problems you wish to raise before we start on the historical Jesus?





The synoptic writers follow Mark in describing Peter as using this title to announce who Jesus was...

Mk 8. 27-30



... and they all make it clear Jesus accepted this recognition while wanting them to keep the matter quiet for the moment.

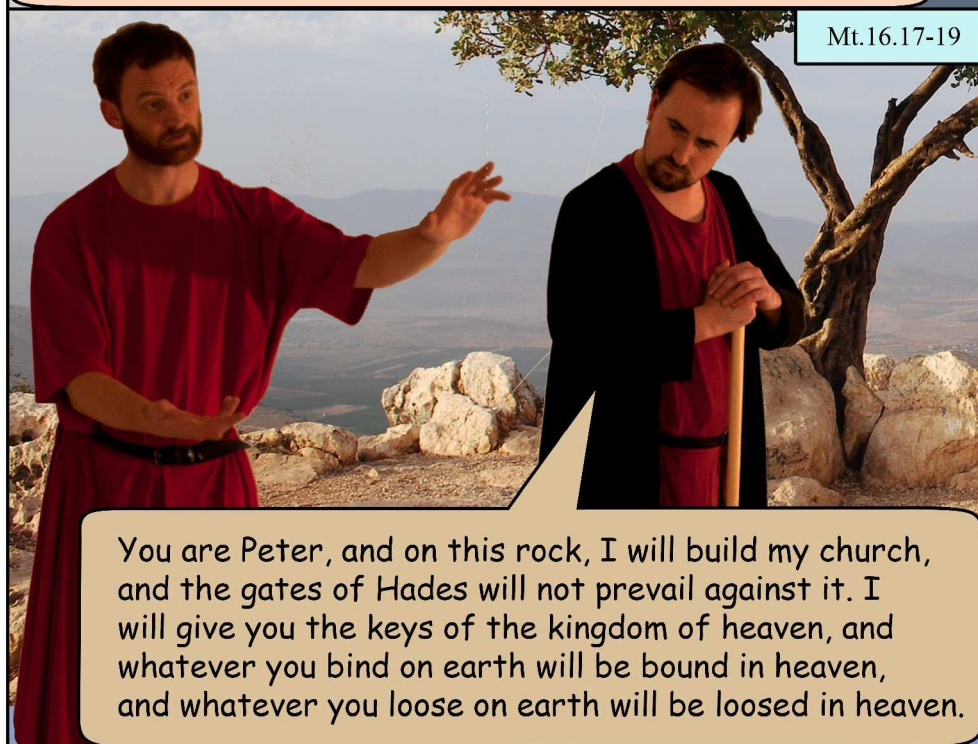
Can't see anything religious there!

Hang on a moment! Matthew describes Jesus as clearly approving Peter's declaration.



Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah!
For flesh and blood has not revealed
this to you, but my Father in heaven has.

Mt 16.17



What makes you say this can't be an original statement made by Jesus?

Because, like all Hebrew militants, Jesus was entirely focused on accomplishing his mission, not on what might or might not happen after his death - though that, of course, was Matthew's concern.

So why did Jesus want to stop his disciples from telling people he was the Messiah?

To answer that perhaps we should look at what he had to say about the Messiah.



Yes and according to Matthew, all the Pharisees present went away with their tails between their legs, while everyone else was highly delighted!



Well, I can understand people being impressed by Jesus' ability to win arguments but for the life of me I can't see what he was driving at here.

Seems clear enough to me.

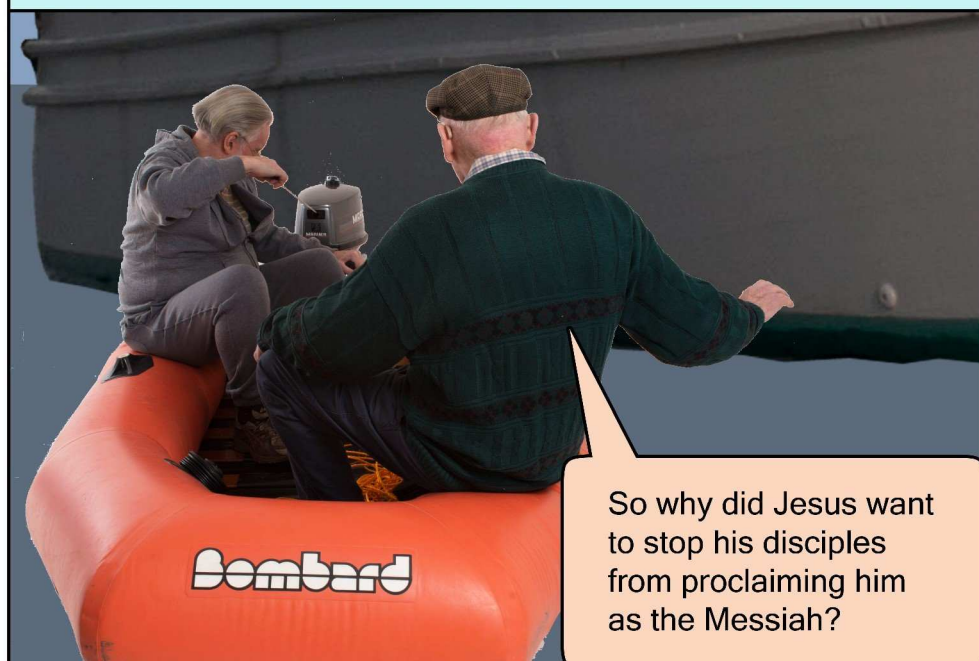


Wasn't he making the valid point that you recognise someone as a Messiah not because you're impressed by his religious pedigree but rather because of his political performance.



Thus, says Yahweh to Cyrus his Messiah...

Is 45.1





Because he didn't want to be arrested by the authorities before he was ready - as, unfortunately, had happened to John.



Consequently he did his best to remain in control of events by maintaining silence on this score right up until the final showdown.

Fair enough, I'll give you that but what about the 'son of man'.

I'm aware it's taken from the book of Daniel and was Jesus' preferred title but wasn't it religious as such?

Hardly! It was a common appellation meaning 'human being'. Ezekiel used it 90 times and always in the same way, as Yahweh's manner of addressing him.

So what is its
significance
in Daniel?



Strangely, it only occurs a couple of times and on the first occasion it's again simply used as the name by which Yahweh addresses the prophet.

As he came near the place where I was standing, I was terrified and fell prostrate. "Son of man," he said to me, "understand that the vision concerns the time of the end."

Dan 8.17

However, the other time it appears it's not as an appellation. Rather it's symbolic and represents the realisation of Israel's covenantal dream: the creation of a humane society.

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence... and given authority, glory and sovereign power

Dan 7.13

That said, though the 'son of man' expression itself does not actually occur again in the text, the 'humane' symbolism does.

While I, Daniel, was watching the vision and trying to understand it, there before me stood one who looked like a man.

Dan 8.15

I looked up and there before me was a man dressed in linen, with a belt of fine gold from Uphaz around his waist. His body was like topaz, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and his voice like the sound of a multitude.

Dan 10.5

Then one who looked like a man touched my lips, and I opened my mouth and began to speak.

Dan 10.16

Again, the one who looked like a man touched me and gave me strength.

Dan 10.18

You'll have to spell that out for me I'm afraid.
I see nothing about the covenant there!

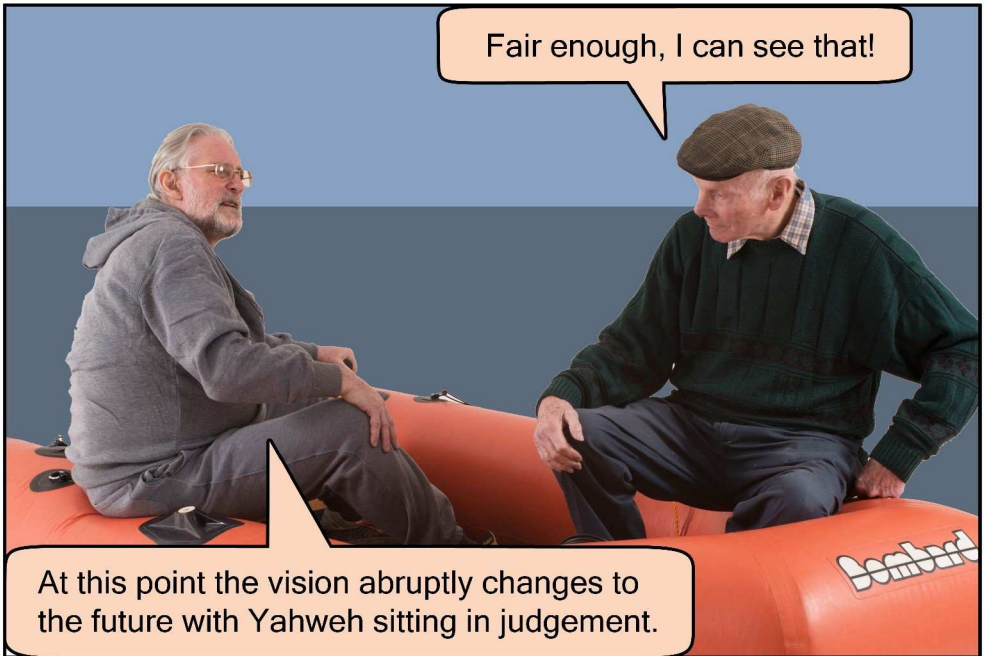


Let's take it slowly.

The first part of Chapter 7 in the book of Daniel is a vision about recent history. In it, the successive waves of oppressive misrule that have affected the region are symbolically represented as the dominions of a series of terrifying beasts.

A lion with eagle's wings
A bear with three ribs between its teeth
A leopard with four heads and four wings
A great beast with iron teeth and ten horns


Dan 7. 1-8



First, the final beast is slain whereupon dominion of the world is bestowed... not on a new beast but rather on **'one like a son of man'**.

Dan 7.9-14





OK but what
are we to make
of the weird
visionary stuff
if it's not
religious?

Well, there are
several things
to note...

First, given we agree the visions of the
beasts **represent** the political misrule
of past despotic empires, so too the
vision of one-like-the-son-of-man must
represent the future appearance of
a new humane kind of politics.



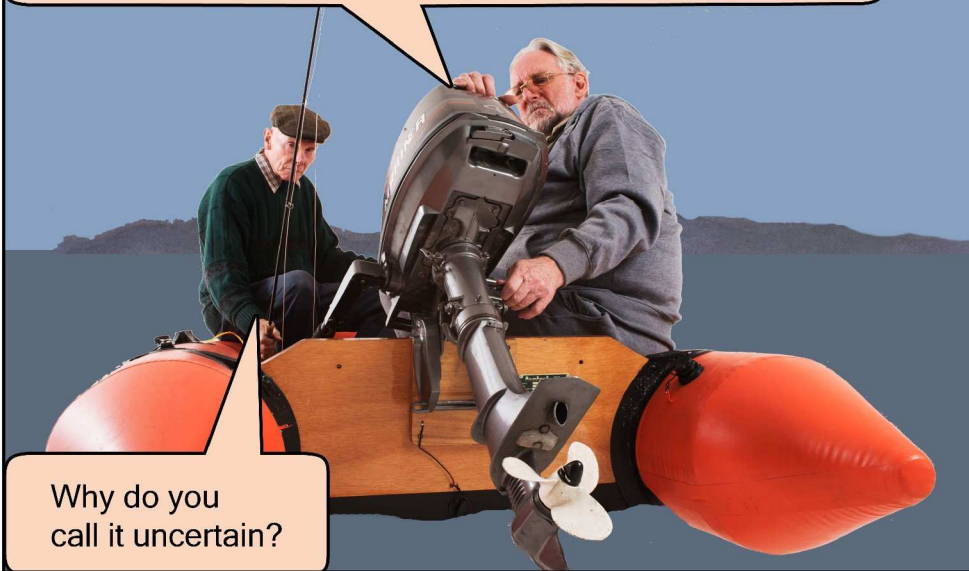
So you see the son of man in Daniel as a
representation not an **appellation**... Interesting!

Second, the deliberate vagueness of the expression 'one like the son of man' suggests it's not an **individual** that's being talked about but rather a new kind of humane **society**.

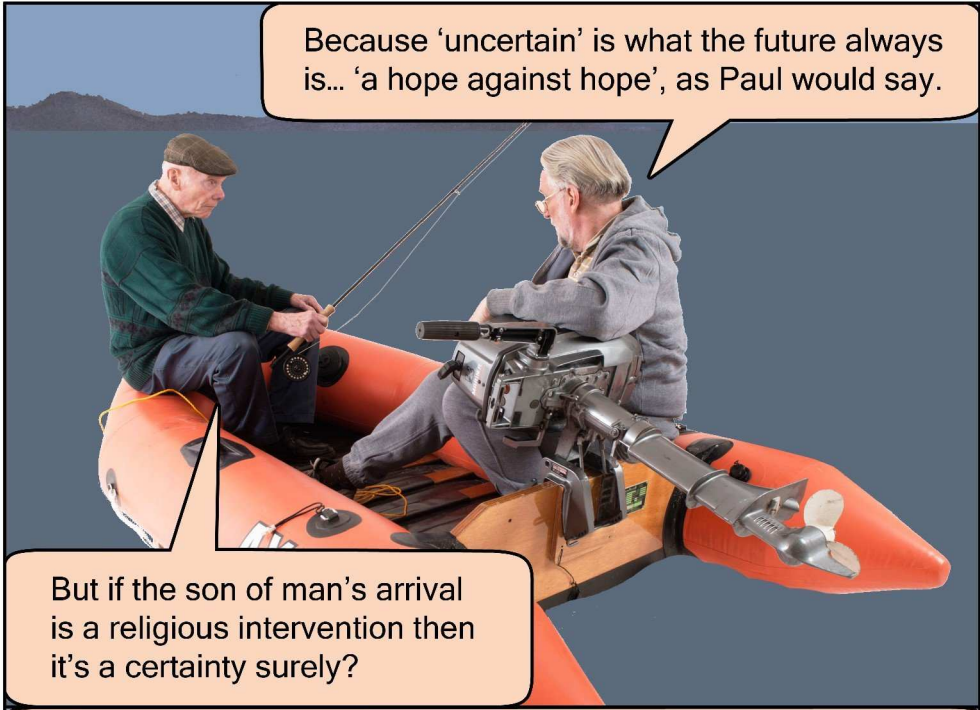


Go on I'm listening!

Third, it seems to me that whereas the beasts represent the **known past and present**, the 'one like the son of man' must represent an **imagined and uncertain political future**.



Why do you call it uncertain?



Because 'uncertain' is what the future always is... 'a hope against hope', as Paul would say.

But if the son of man's arrival is a religious intervention then it's a certainty surely?

Indeed, a religious intervention would constitute a magical coup vitiating all human endeavour including Moses and the prophets.



So?



...as for example Daniel's bizarre notion that a humane society, when it arrives, will function with 'authority and sovereign power'!

OK but surely all visions, whoever receives them, are religious in one way or another?

No. That's not true.

In the Old Testament, a vision is usually just an allegory cast in the form of a dream.

In such allegorical visions the salient characters function as representations just as they do, for example, in Ezekiel's story of the vine and the eagles.



In the first section of this allegory Ezekiel simply recounts the history of the Exile using eagles to represent the Babylonians and a twig and a low-spreading vine to represent the Judeans.



Ezekiel 17 1-8

Up until this point we're obliged to conclude Ezekiel's simply using his allegory **to talk about history** wouldn't you say?



Fair enough.

However, everything changes for Ezekiel introduces words from Yahweh that pretend to foretell what's about to happen:

Thus says the Lord God:

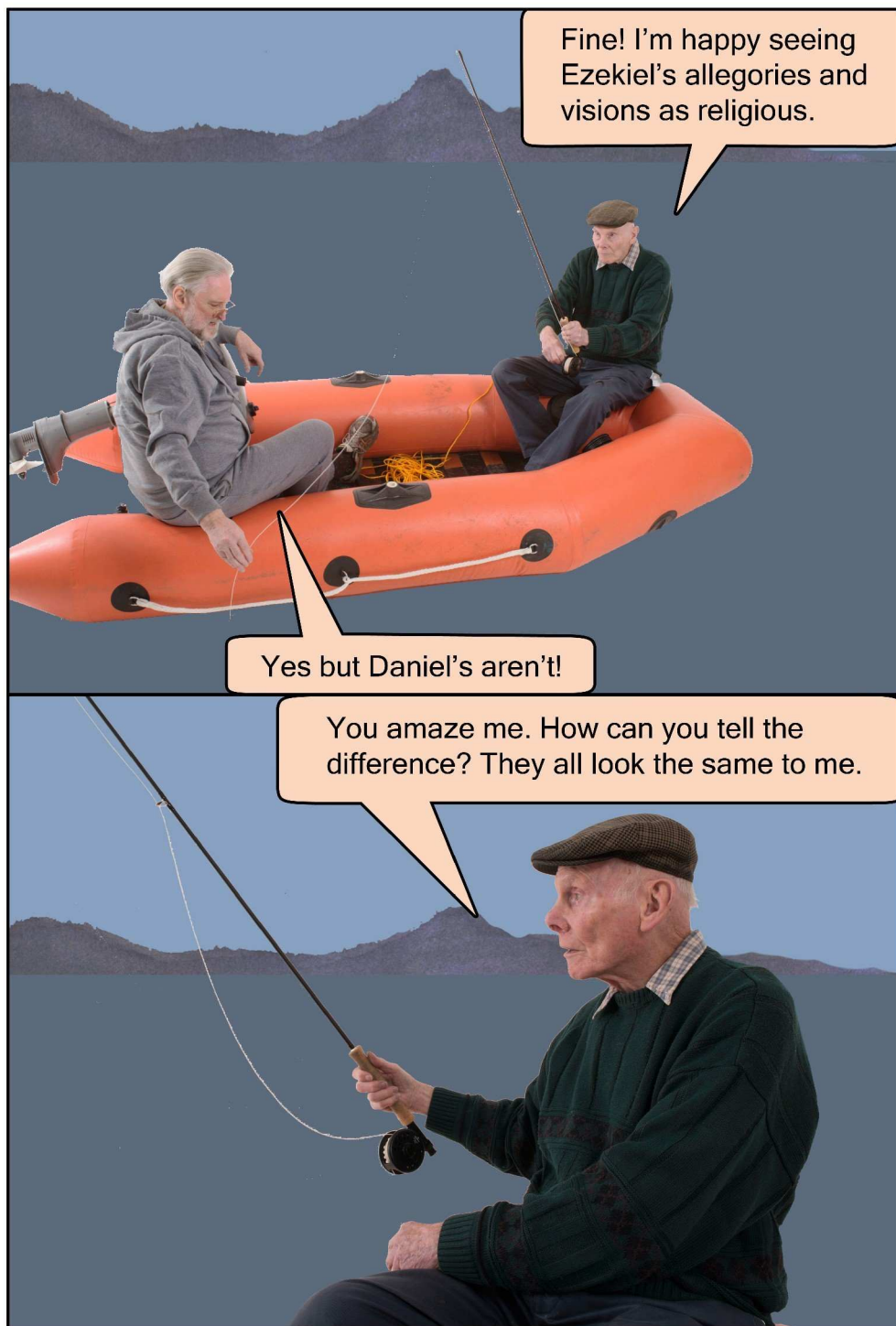
*Will the vine prosper? Will he not pull up its roots,
cause its fruit to rot and wither,
its fresh sprouting leaves to fade? ...*

When the vine is transplanted, will it thrive?

*When the east wind strikes it,
will it not utterly wither,
wither on the bed where it grew?*

Ezekiel 17.9-10

Now it's quite clear Ezekiel's in fact using the allegory **to justify his conservative politics by buttressing it with religion.**



As a priestly authoritarian, Ezekiel pretends it's Yahweh who sends the visions. As such they constitute religious messages, spelled out in code, which simply have to be blindly obeyed.



Point taken though I don't like the word 'pretend'. So, what about Daniel?

Daniel isn't a conservative priest. He's one of the saints, a faithful Hebrew marginal struggling to fulfil the covenant by putting on the necessary shaming performance.



Go on!

Daniel's visions, far from being religious messages supposedly sent by Yahweh, simply constitute his own political analysis of the past and the present and his fearful, though hopeful, contemplation of the future... given his covenant commitment.



Yes but in Daniel, Yahweh makes no pronouncements on what's going to happen. He simply represents the marginal ideology as he did in the more ancient Hebrew covenantal texts.

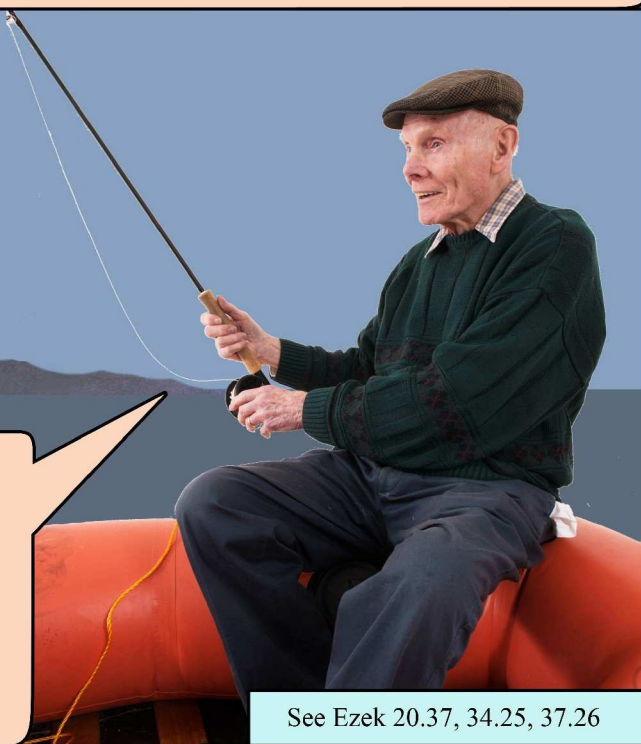


True but, whereas for Daniel the struggle of the saints to fulfil the old Mosaic covenant is the basis of everything...



... for Ezekiel the Mosaic covenant is simply an obsolete standard from the past which old Israel failed to honour and which he himself has no intention of upholding.

You're forgetting that in Ezekiel Yahweh also hints at **a new everlasting covenant** which he intends to establish in the near future.



See Ezek 20.37, 34.25, 37.26

Yes but unlike the old covenant, which had to be fulfilled **politically** by a successful demonstration of how people could live together without marginalising each other...

... In Ezekiel, Yahweh's new everlasting covenant **is religiously imposed** with people simply having to blindly obey.

Are you saying that when Jesus used the 'son of man' expression he too was talking politically rather than religiously?

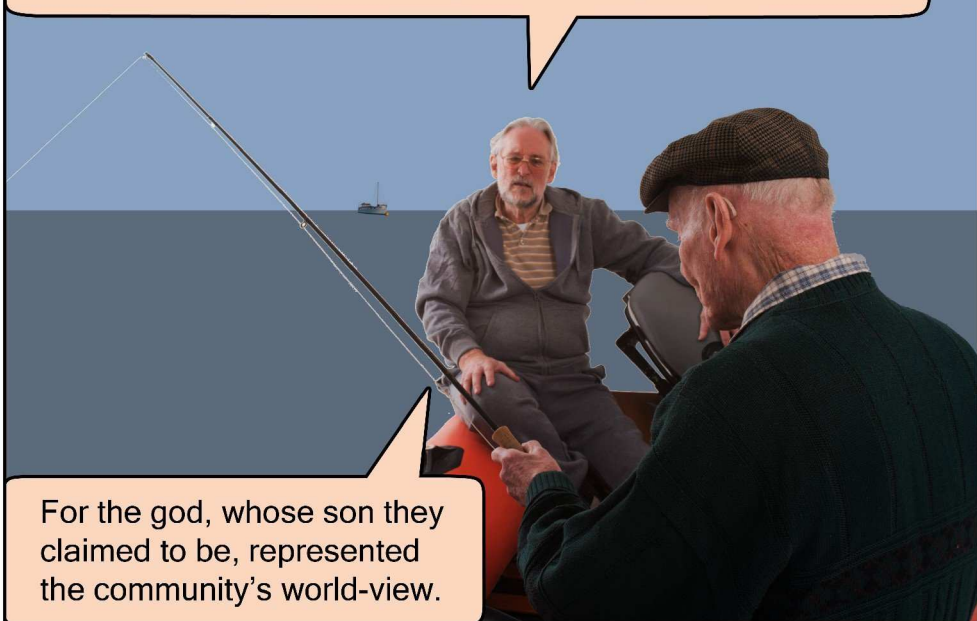
Yes, everything suggests Jesus employed it, just as Daniel had done, to represent the work he and his followers were engaged in in fulfilling the covenant.

That said, I can't guarantee the evangelists haven't added religious touches of their own since none of them was averse to seeing Jesus as tinged with the divine.




Fine, so what have you to say now about the 'Son of God' expression?

Historically, it was the title assumed by rulers in the ancient world as a way of establishing their ideological credentials.



For the god, whose son they claimed to be, represented the community's world-view.



So, once again, you're saying the title was basically political?

Exactly! In the plural as '**sons of God**' or '**children of God**' the title could also be used to designate the ideologically faithful as here in the New Testament:

Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become **children of God**.

John 1.12

For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the **children of God**.

Rom 8.14

For the creation waits in eager expectation for the **children of God** to be revealed.

Rom 8.19

So in Christ Jesus you are all **children of God** through faith,


Gal 3.26

Because you are **his sons**, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father."

Gal 4.6

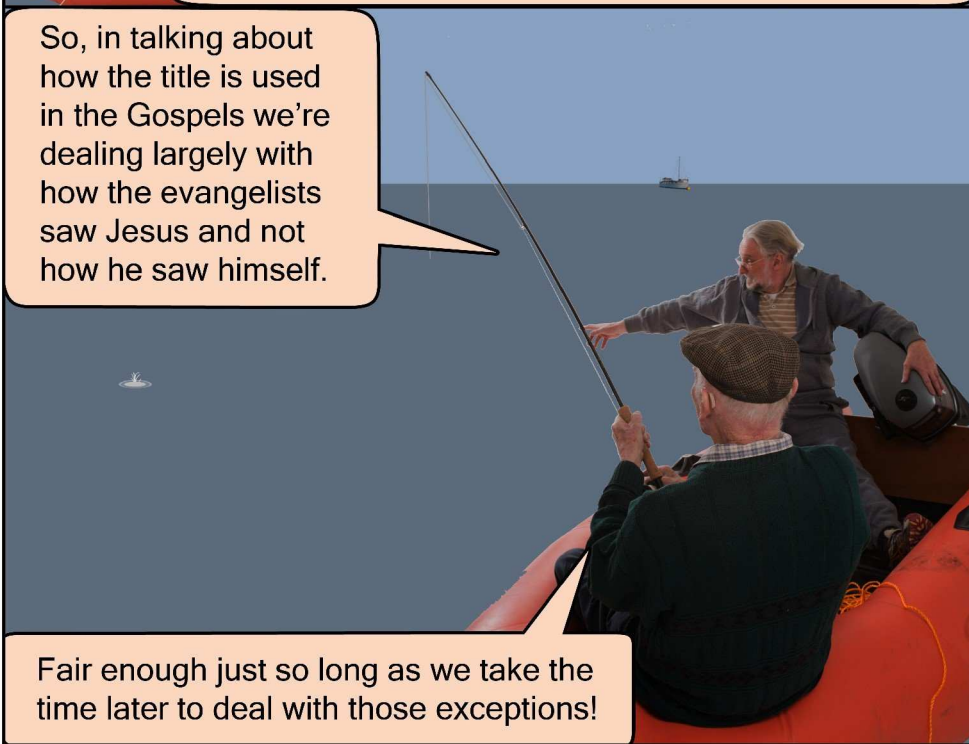


Point taken but you're surely not denying the 'Son of God' title is employed religiously in the Gospels... even if it does have a definite political colour, which I don't deny.

A photograph of two elderly men sitting in a red inflatable boat on a calm body of water. The man on the left is wearing a grey hoodie and glasses, looking down at his fishing rod. The man on the right is wearing a dark sweater and a flat cap, looking towards the other man. A fishing line extends from the man on the right across the water. In the background, there are low mountains under a clear blue sky.

We'll see, but for the moment let's remind ourselves that, with two possible exceptions, Jesus is never remembered as using the expression.

So, in talking about how the title is used in the Gospels we're dealing largely with how the evangelists saw Jesus and not how he saw himself.

A photograph of the same two men in the red inflatable boat. The man on the left is now leaning forward, gesturing with his hand towards the water while holding his fishing rod. The man on the right is seen from the back, looking out at the water. A small boat is visible in the distance on the water.

Fair enough just so long as we take the time later to deal with those exceptions!

Agreed! Now if you look at the texts in the Synoptic gospels in which the 'Son of God' idea appears you'll see that the evangelists habitually use it to encapsulate the Jesus event:

*The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, **the Son of God**.*

Mk 1.1

*This was to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, 'Out of Egypt have **I called my son**'.*

Mt 2.15 quoting Hosea 11.1

*He will be great and will be called **the Son of the Most High**... The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called **Son of God**.*


Lk 1.32-35 The annunciation

*Thou are **my beloved Son** in whom I am well pleased.*

Mk 1.11, Mt 3.17, Lk 3.22 The baptism

*Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of **the Son**, and of the Holy Ghost.*

Mt 28,19 Instruction of risen Lord



Taking it as read the deity spoken of here is Yahweh, god of the marginals, these texts constitute political summaries emphasising Jesus' ideological credentials...

...there being no whiff of religious beliefs that have to be blindly taken on board in any of them,

You seem to be ignoring that in the baptism text the voice comes **from heaven** and that the risen Lord's final instruction comes from **an apparition**!

Are you telling me you read these texts literally as fundamentalists do?



There's one text that well illustrates the evangelists' use of mythological language when summarising the 'Jesus event'. I'm thinking of the Transfiguration. Perhaps you could tell us about it.

Very well. Jesus takes some chosen disciples up a mountain,...

Shades of Moses and Elijah!

...On reaching the summit, two things happen. First, Jesus is transfigured. Second, they meet two strangers who turn out to be Moses and Elijah.

Surprise! Surprise!
I wonder how they recognised them!

Jesus is at ease with the strangers and has a long chat with them but his disciples appear out of their depth.

Master it is well that we are here; let us make three booths, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.



Eventually a voice is heard coming out of a cloud

This is
my beloved Son.
Listen to him.



Whereupon Moses and Elijah disappear and the disciples find themselves, once again, alone with Jesus.

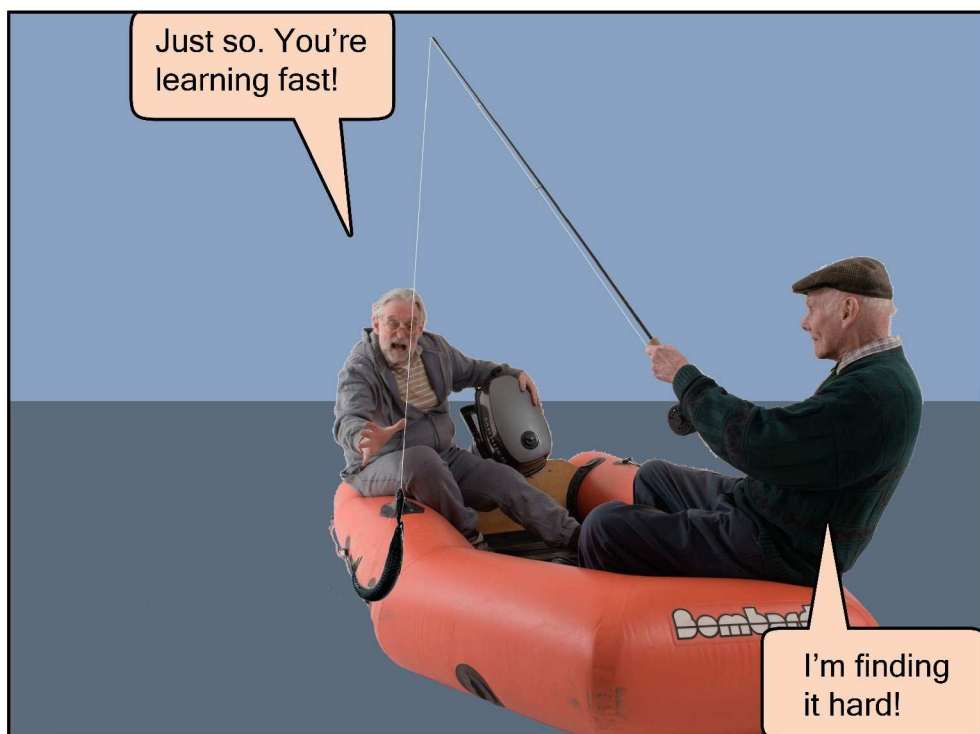


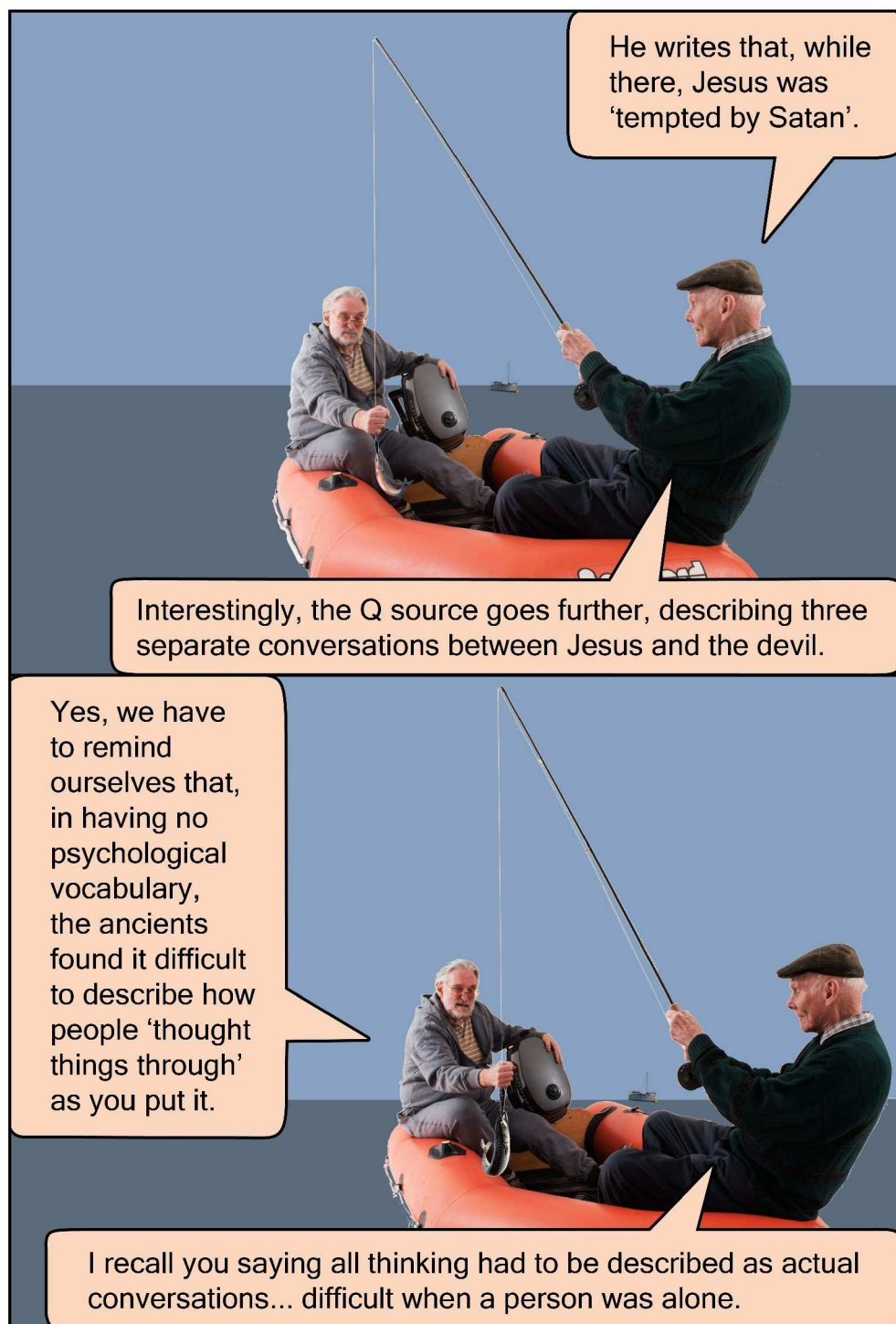
Up to now, in all of these 'Son of God' texts we've simply had to assume we're talking about the god who represents the marginals' view of the world.

What's special about this story is that it makes this point explicit by including Moses and Elijah.

You're saying including Moses and Elijah makes clear we're not dealing with Ezekiel's religious God of the new covenant...

... but rather with Daniel's political god of the old Hebrew alliance.





He writes that, while there, Jesus was 'tempted by Satan'.

Interestingly, the Q source goes further, describing three separate conversations between Jesus and the devil.

Yes, we have to remind ourselves that, in having no psychological vocabulary, the ancients found it difficult to describe how people 'thought things through' as you put it.

I recall you saying all thinking had to be described as actual conversations... difficult when a person was alone.

You suggested this accounts for all of those stories in the Bible in which people have conversations with angels.

Just so... only here it's the Devil!

This means we can take it the story's about how Jesus coped with his own natural desire to try and find a way of doing his job while avoiding the likely consequences.

In short the story's Q's account of how Jesus came to work out his tactics...

...tactics which the early Church later came to speak about as his 'grace'... and, of course, there's nothing religious about that.

Yes, that's convincing.

Let's now turn to the trial and crucifixion stories in which the 'Son of God' title is also found. Could you give us a résumé?

The story is basically the same in all three Gospels: After his arrest Jesus is taken before the high priest where people, who had heard him speak, witness against him.

Mk 14.57

We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple made with human hands and in three days will build another, not made with hands.'

Since Jesus doesn't answer his accusers, the high priest asks him outright if he claims to be the Messiah:

Mk 14.61-62

Are you the Messiah,
the Son of the Blessed One?

I am, and you will see the son of man
sitting at the right hand of the Mighty
One and coming on the clouds of heaven.

In this first appearance of the 'Son
of God' title, here on the lips of the
high priest, it's noticeable Jesus
accepts it... but only when it's
understood politically in the light
of Daniel's 'son of man'.

Fair enough

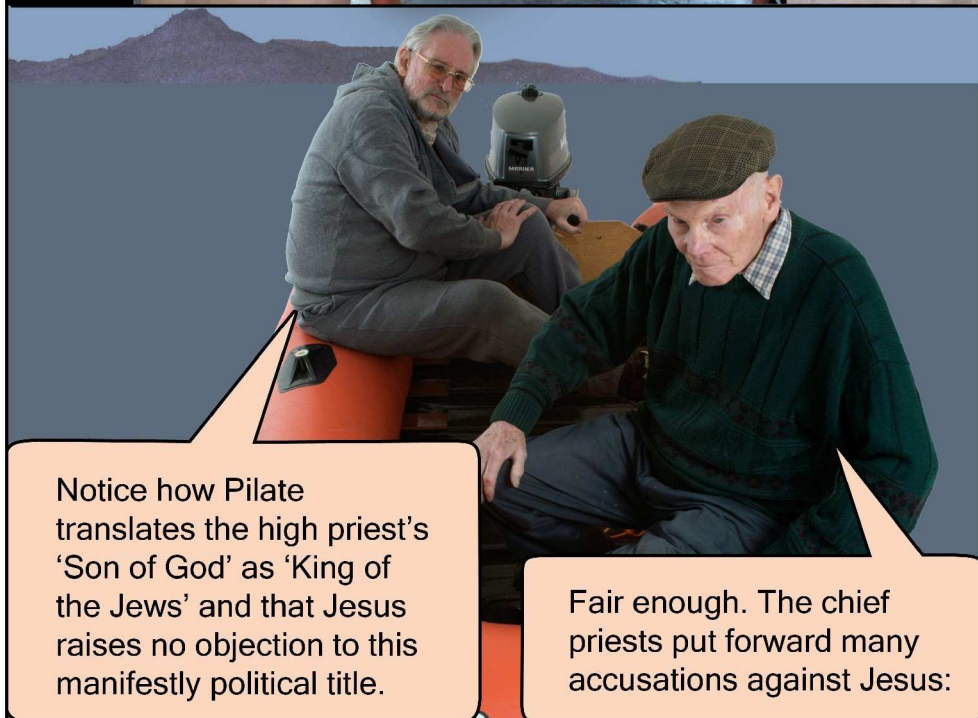
With this admission from Jesus, the high priest is satisfied he now has all he needs to have Jesus convicted and put to death by the Romans as a revolutionary zealot:

Mk 14.63-64



Humm... Shall I go on? Early next morning the chief priest and elders have Jesus bound and delivered to Pilate.

Mk 15.2



He claims to be the Messiah! He says he will destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days!

Aren't you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of.

But Jesus is silent which amazes Pilate.

What shall I do, then, with the one you call the King of the Jews?

Crucify him!

Clearly, Pilate recognises that, even as a Messianic pretender, Jesus presents no threat to Roman rule.



Fair enough. However, to satisfy the crowd, he has Jesus flogged and handed over to be crucified.

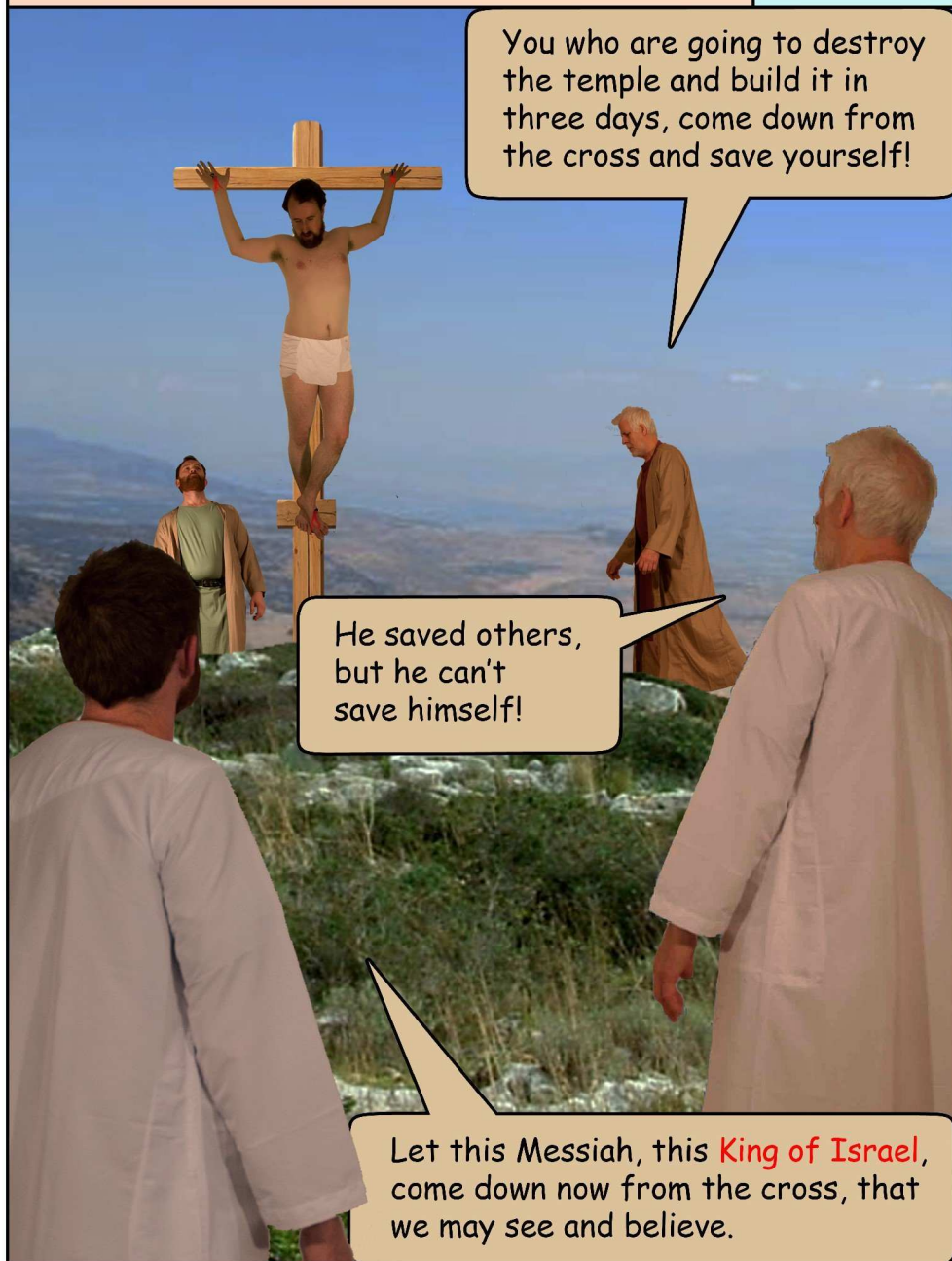
The Roman soldiers dress Jesus in a purple robe and make a crown of thorns which they put on his head.



Hail, **King**
of the Jews!

On the cross Jesus is reviled by passers-by as well as by the chief priests.

Mk 15.29-32



After Jesus dies, a Roman centurion standing guard makes a stunning declaration.

Mk 15.39

Surely this
man was the
Son of God!





What do you make of that?

It's as if the high priest recognises Jesus is heading a political movement that threatens his own authority and the Roman centurion sees the same thing only, for his part, with grudging respect.

I can't help feeling that in consistently ignoring the religious angle you're reducing the power of the story.

I'm not ignoring anything!

What you call 'the religious angle' is just something Christians try to breathe into the story even though it's manifestly not there...



...except, of course, in the high priest's words.

Very well, let's now turn to those two exceptions you mentioned in which Jesus is remembered as using the 'Son of God' expression himself.



The first is a saying from Q:

I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and prudent, and have revealed them to babes; yes Father, for such was your gracious will. All things are delivered unto me of my Father, and no man knows the Father save the Son, and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

Mt 11.27, Lk 10.21-22

Surely what we have here is talk of a religious God who reveals things to chosen people?



Not really. There's no reason to suppose these 'babes' are special because they have faith and believe blindly.

If we take it the expression as used by Jesus to designate the marginals, he's simply saying they find it easy to see **because they are marginals** ... not because they have faith!

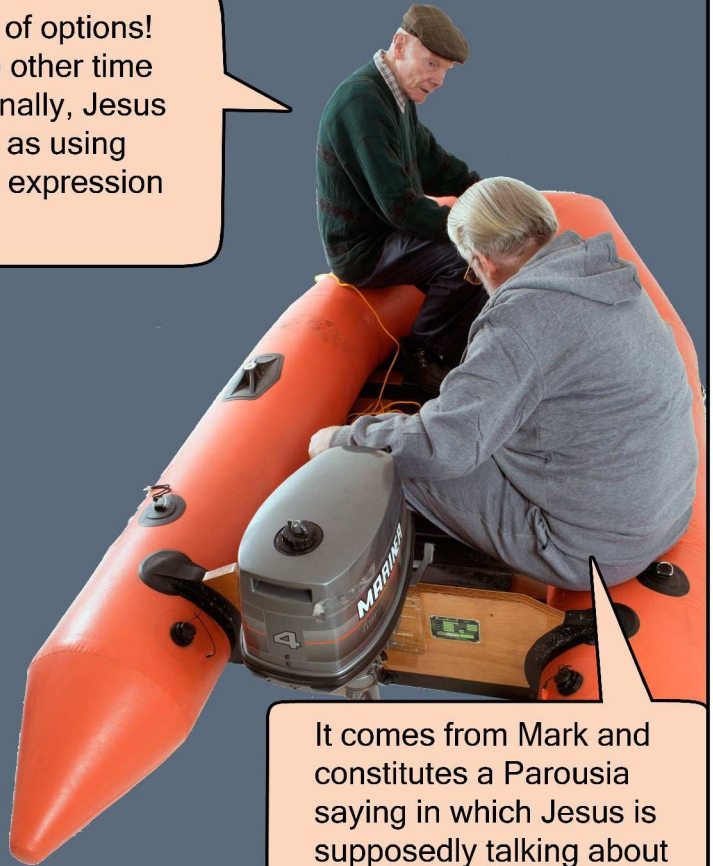


What about the phrase 'No man knows the Father save the Son'?



It's Jesus way of saying that if a Hebrew marginal correctly puts his ideology into practice then he becomes as one with the marginal ideology itself.

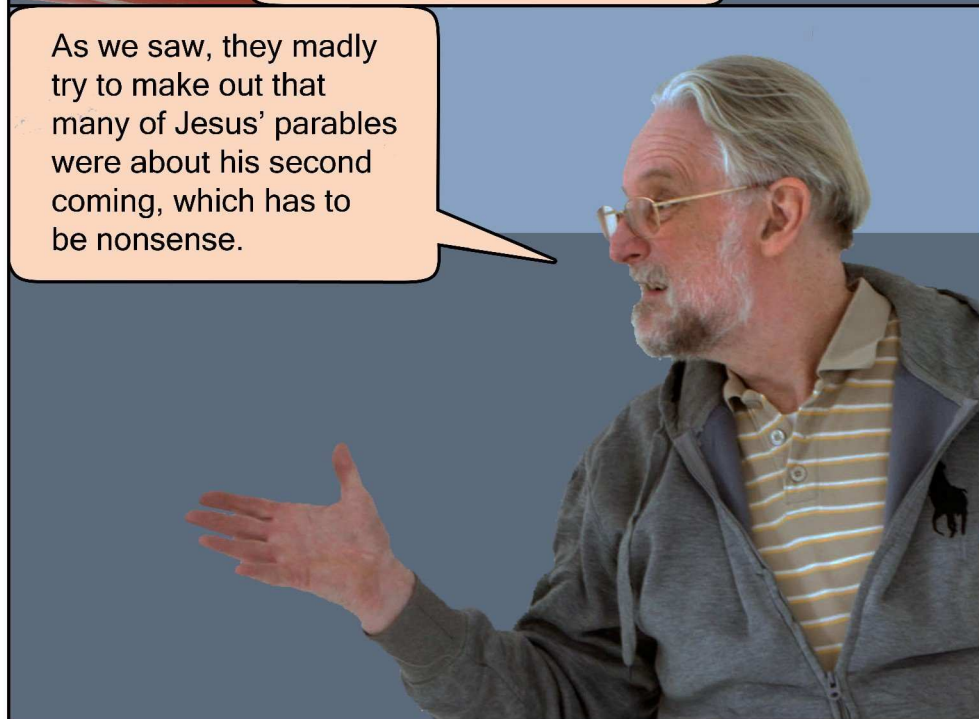
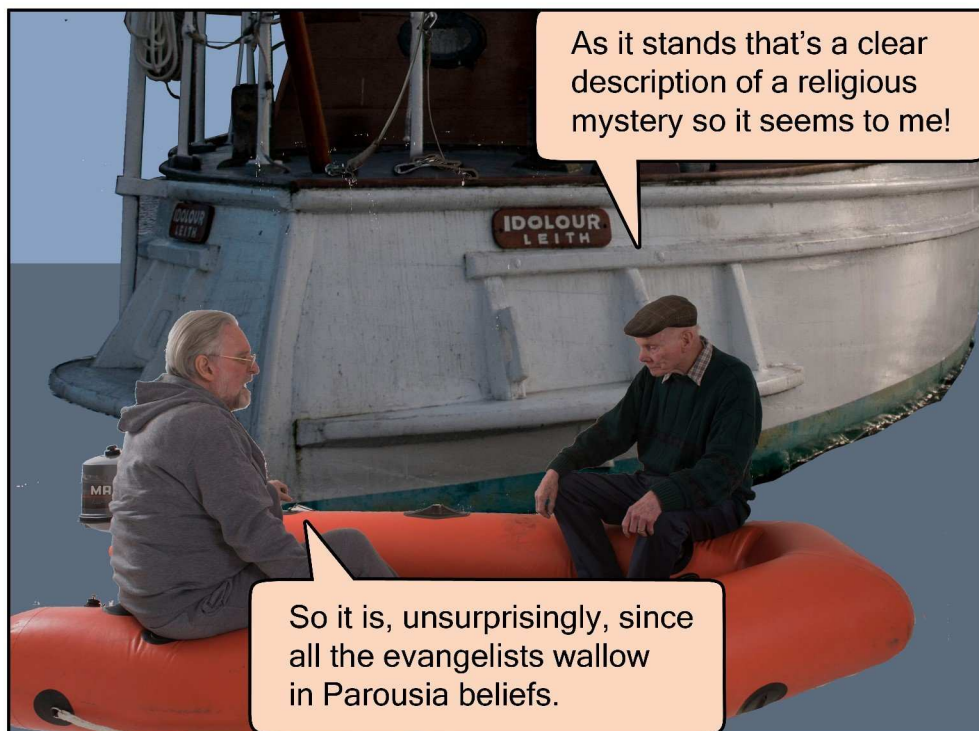
I'm running out of options!
What about the other time
when, exceptionally, Jesus
is remembered as using
the Son of God expression
of himself?



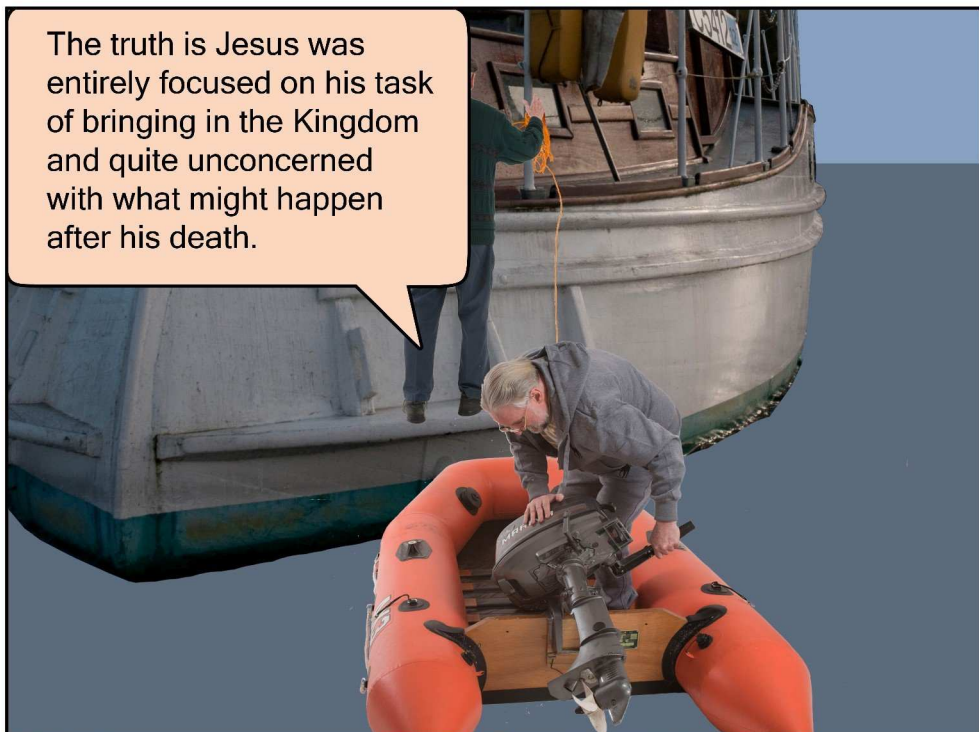
It comes from Mark and
constitutes a Parousia
saying in which Jesus is
supposedly talking about
his second coming.

But of that day and that hour
knoweth no man — no, not the
angels who are in Heaven, neither
the Son, but only the Father.

Mk 13. 32



The truth is Jesus was entirely focused on his task of bringing in the Kingdom and quite unconcerned with what might happen after his death.

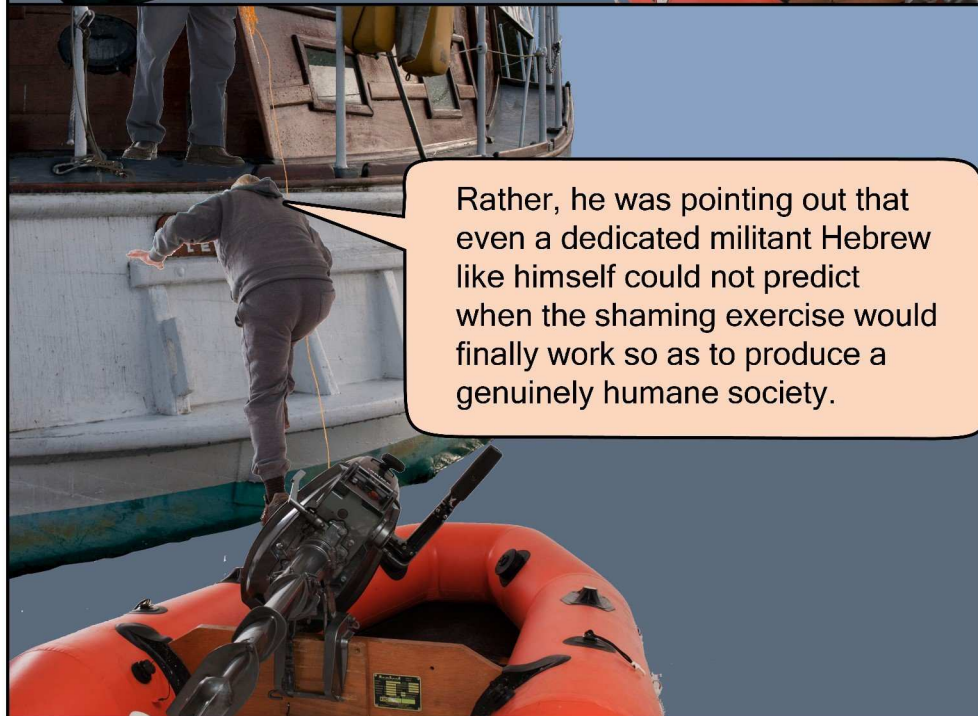


Are you suggesting Mark made up this saying and that it's not original to Jesus?





Not at all. I'm simply saying that, if Jesus did say these words, he was not referring to his second coming.



Rather, he was pointing out that even a dedicated militant Hebrew like himself could not predict when the shaming exercise would finally work so as to produce a genuinely humane society.

That is the end of Part 1.

In Part 2 John and I will be discussing the historical Jesus.

I say this in spite of the sad fact that John recently passed away. Before he died, however, he made it clear he wanted me to continue and finish our joint project using pictures that had previously been taken of him.

Andrew

To all who have helped in
the production of this book:

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