

# The Gospels as Political Good News

## Part 2. The Historical Jesus



by Andrew Parker





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Copies of all my cartoon books can be downloaded free from my website: <http://bibleincartoons.com>

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), **Volume 2** *God of the Marginals* (Parts 1 & 2), **Volume 3** *Politics Before and After the Exile* (Parts 1 & 2) and **Volume 4** *The Gospels as Political Good News* (Part 1) can also be found on this website.



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## INTRODUCTION

This book is from my 'Bible in Cartoons' series.\* It constitutes Part 2 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.

Volume 3 'Politics Before and After the Exile' then examined some pre-exilic texts (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings and Jeremiah) and some post-exilic texts (Ezekiel, Isaiah, Ruth, Jonah, Job and Daniel). It found them to be basically revolutionary Hebrew texts with the great exception of Ezekiel the archetypal conservative revisionist.

In Part 1 of Volume 4 'The Gospels as Political Good News' we examined some of the common misunderstandings that have arisen in trying to understand Jesus in the Synoptic tradition.

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

## The Opening Ministry



If we accept that the nativity stories were not intended to be read as histories\* where does one start to look for the historical Jesus?

\*See Part 1 Chapter 1



It was common knowledge Jesus and his brothers were Galilean Jews from the back of beyond in Nazareth, that their mother was called Mary and that their father was a landless peasant who made a living from housebuilding.



Fair enough but it's Jesus' ministry we're interested in.

As for that, all we can be sure of is that Jesus started by becoming a disciple of John the Baptist. I say that since, as you rightly pointed out,\* it was a great embarrassment for his followers who thought Jesus superior to John.

\*See Part 1  
page 32-33

So what can we tell from this?

Quite a lot. John was seen as a prophet: the latest advocate of the Mosaic covenant and its marginal ideology and so the deadly opponent of the priestly hierarchs in Jerusalem.

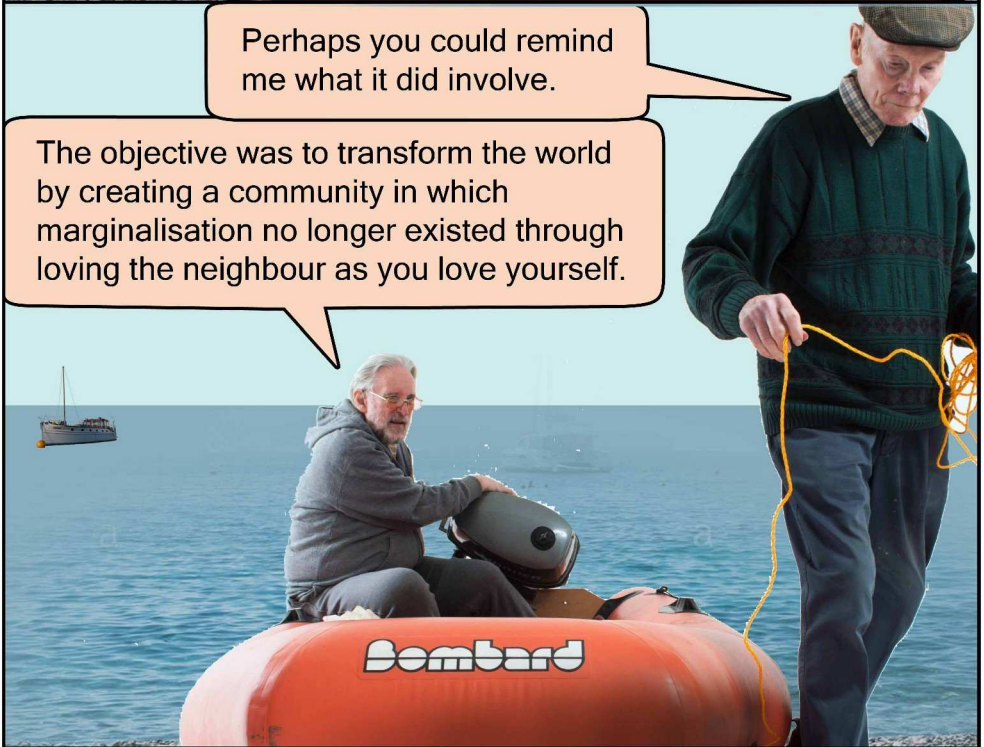
I guess that would put him at loggerheads with other conservative, authoritarian rulers in the region including the Romans.



True but John would have operated for the most part beneath the Romans' radar, since the covenant in no way involved armed revolt.

Perhaps you could remind me what it did involve.

The objective was to transform the world by creating a community in which marginalisation no longer existed through loving the neighbour as you love yourself.





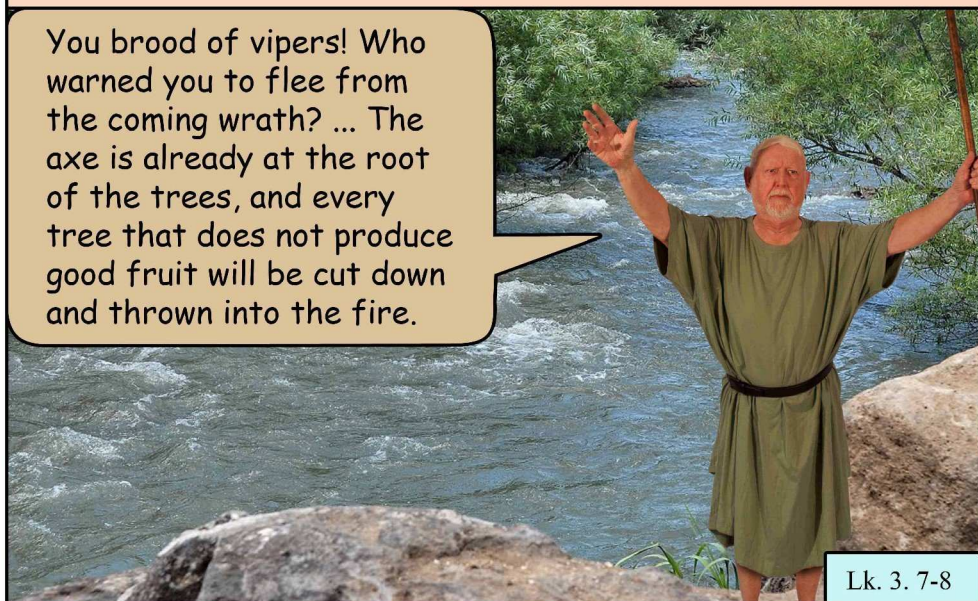


This, it was hoped, would eventually shame the surrounding societies into changing their oppressive authoritarian ways.

So how did John try to set up such a community?

He sought to reignite support for the covenant by establishing a centre in the wilderness to which he could attract his fellow countrymen.

You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ... The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.



Lk. 3. 7-8





There they would recommit themselves by being baptised before returning to their communities to put the covenant into effect.

But why do this in the wilderness? Why not operate at the centre of things in Jerusalem?



In the struggle for influence within the post-exilic community, the prophetic movement had lost out to the priestly followers of Ezekiel, leaving these hierarchs effectively in sole charge.

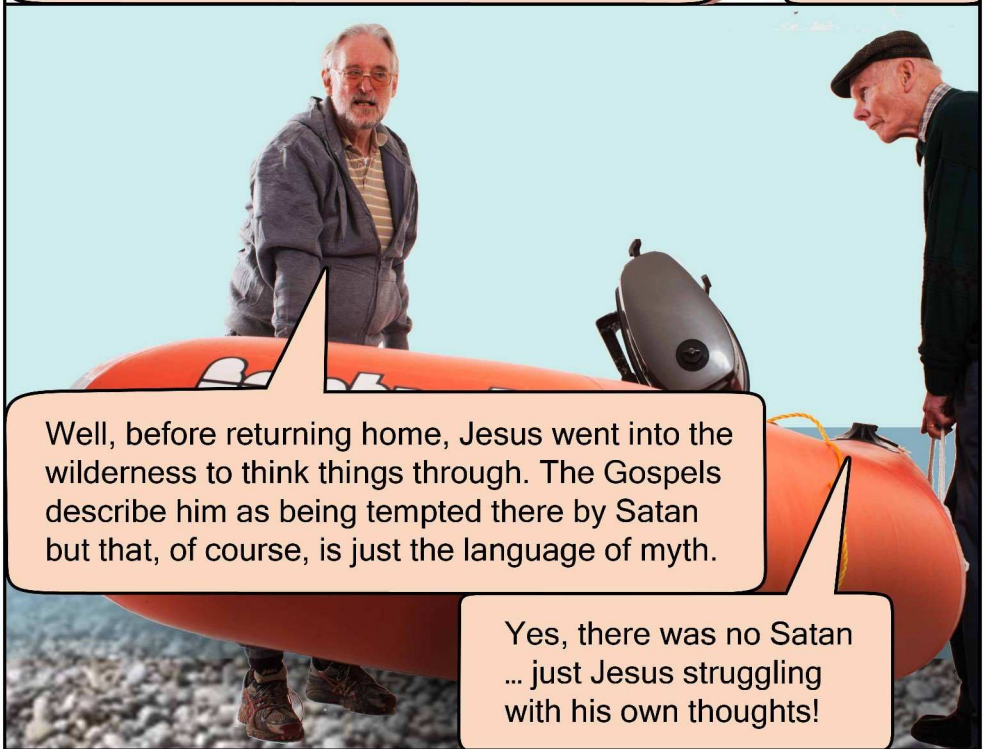
This meant it would have been suicidal for John to preach his message in Jerusalem and explains why he remained on the east bank of the river Jordan in Pereia.

As it turned out it proved unsafe for him to operate even there!


Yes, he eventually fell foul of Herod, the governor of Galilee and Paeria, and was imprisoned and finally executed by him.

So you're saying Jesus returned to Nazareth as a disciple with John's message about the covenant ringing in his ears?






Right, so if we read what happened correctly - politically rather than religiously - it's clear Jesus was tempted to use his considerable talents to become a powerful leader just as John and the other prophets, including Moses, had done.

A photograph of two men on a pebbly beach. The man on the left is wearing a grey hoodie and glasses, leaning over a red inflatable boat. The man on the right is wearing a dark jacket and a flat cap, also leaning over the boat. The boat has the word 'Benetton' written on its side. In the background, there is a blue sea and a small boat on the horizon.

Politics is full of people wanting to become great leaders!

Yes but Jesus came to realise it was a classic mistake since you can't impose a liberating ideology without deforming it. He therefore determined to do things differently by getting alongside people and helping them see things for themselves.

A photograph of the same two men from the previous panel, now working on a red inflatable boat on a pebbly beach. The man on the left is using a tool to work on the boat's interior. The man on the right is leaning over the boat, looking at something. An outboard motor is visible on the boat. The background shows the sea and a small boat on the horizon.

That's what you call his reactive strategy.



Precisely! Instead of telling people what to do, which is what all of us would have done, he did everything he could to help people react by opening their own eyes.

Fair enough but I've a problem with your narrow political description. Why do you say nothing about emotions - about love?

Well, we haven't yet looked at the historical Jesus but let me just remind you that, following Leviticus, Jesus defined the covenant as 'loving Yahweh and loving the neighbour as the self'.\*

So?

\* Lev 19.18; Mk 12.31



How do you interpret 'loving Yahweh'. Do you understand it religiously as emotionally attaching yourself to an unseen spirit... or do you see it politically as embracing the one who represents the wellbeing and aspirations of the marginals?



Can't it be both?

Since it makes little sense to talk about being attracted to yourself 'loving your neighbour as you love yourself' can hardly imply emotional involvement!



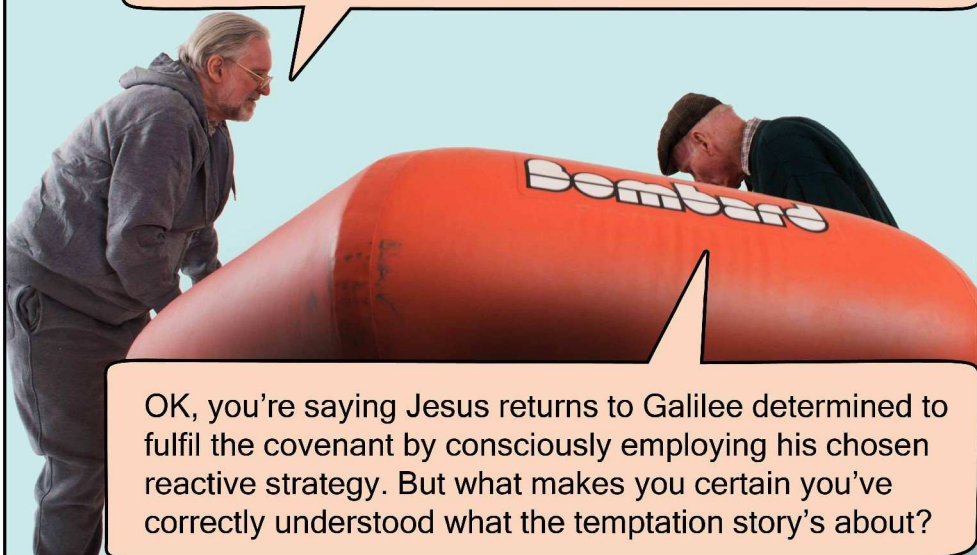
What does it imply?

It means treating others as you would want them to treat you, emotions being beside the point!



Are you saying that love is always political not emotional in the gospels?

By and large, though it is used on a couple of occasions to describe an emotion as for example when John is spoken of as 'the disciple Jesus loved'. However, I can't think you would want to make anything of that!



OK, you're saying Jesus returns to Galilee determined to fulfil the covenant by consciously employing his chosen reactive strategy. But what makes you certain you've correctly understood what the temptation story's about?



Several things! When Jesus returns home, he doesn't set up an HQ from which to operate, as John and all of us would have done. Rather he goes out to mingle with people where they naturally congregate.



*As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen.*



Mk 1.16

Again, though clearly recognising John as a great figure standing in the line of the prophets, Jesus sees everyone involved in his new movement as streets ahead of him.



Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Mt11.11, Lk7.28



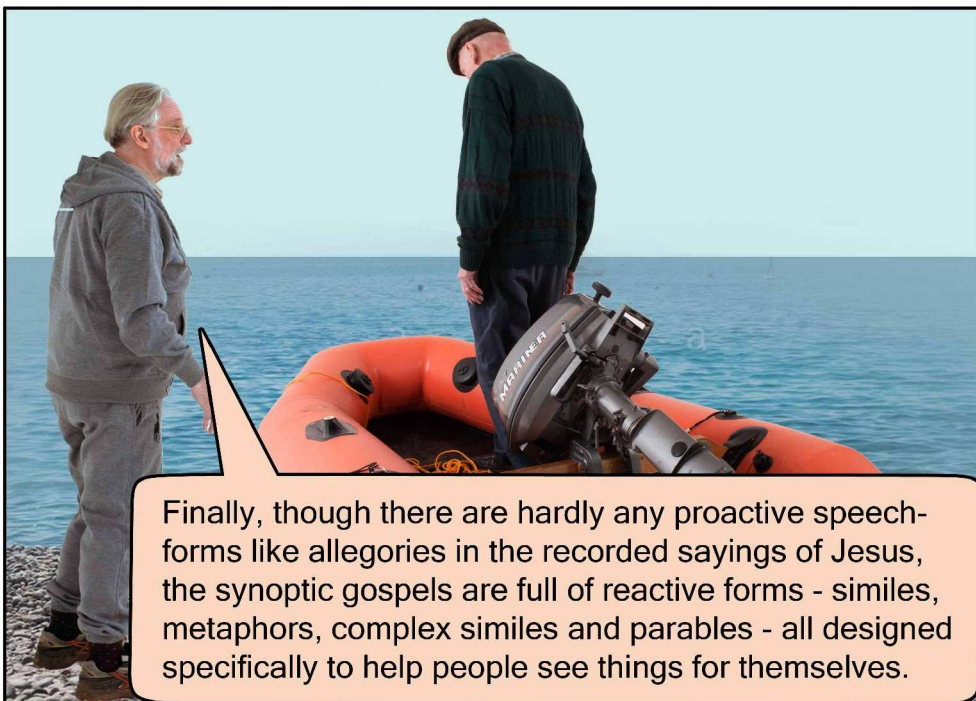
Again, though all the evangelists use miracle stories to present Jesus operating proactively - majestically alone - the stories themselves portray a Jesus operating reactively alongside others.



Mk 5.34 See  
Part 1 page 114

Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.





Finally, though there are hardly any proactive speech-forms like allegories in the recorded sayings of Jesus, the synoptic gospels are full of reactive forms - similes, metaphors, complex similes and parables - all designed specifically to help people see things for themselves.



Yes but, as I said, quite a few Jewish Rabbis are remembered as using parables as well.

Yes but as I said only one or two parables have been recorded for each Rabbi.



Do you recall how many parables Jesus is remembered as using in the Synoptic tradition alone... setting aside other documents like the Gospel of Thomas?

No how many ?

**67**... and that's just parables. If you include similes, metaphors and complex similes as well, the count must be well over 100!

Makes you wonder why no one else has noticed it!

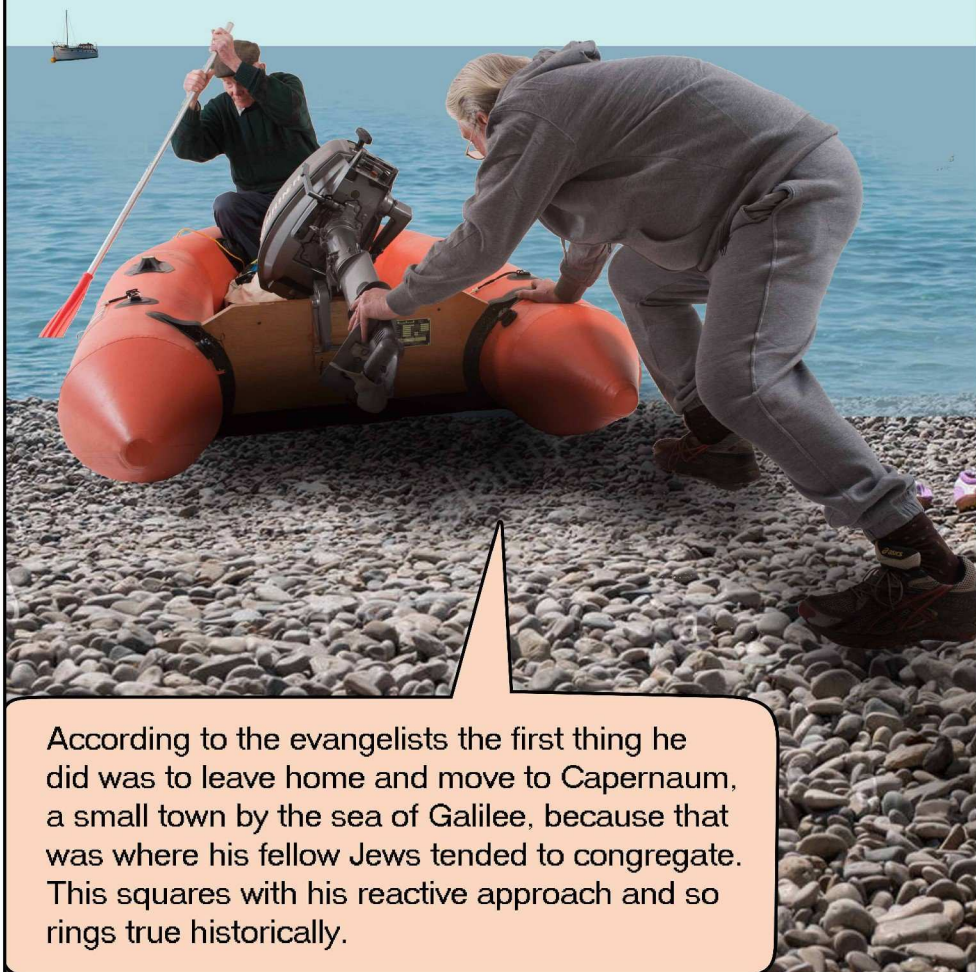
2

# Avoiding Herod





So when Jesus eventually got back to Galilee how did it all pan out?



According to the evangelists the first thing he did was to leave home and move to Capernaum, a small town by the sea of Galilee, because that was where his fellow Jews tended to congregate. This squares with his reactive approach and so rings true historically.



Capernaum was where he started calling disciples.\*

\* Mk 1.16

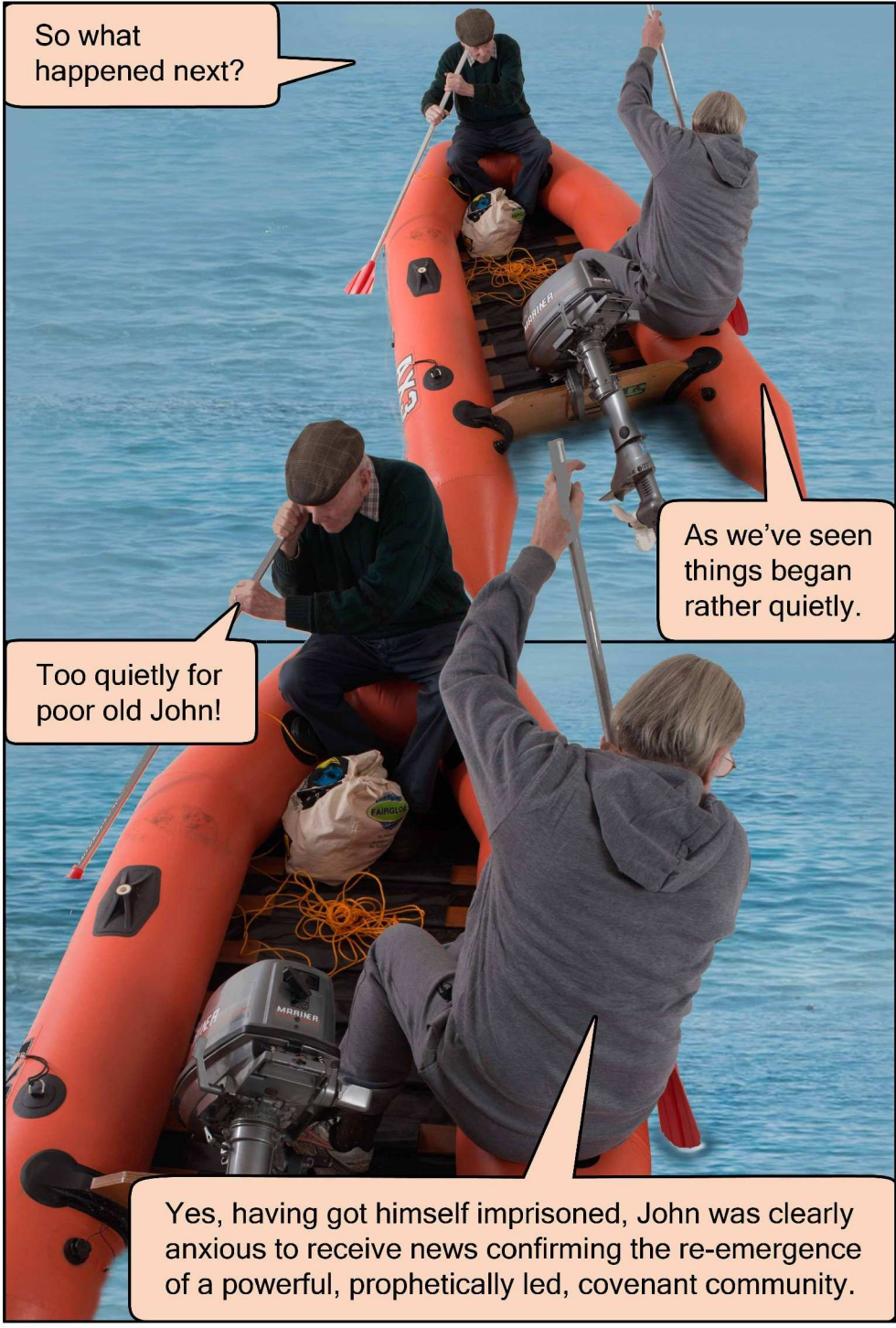


Yes, twelve of them representing the twelve tribes, a highly symbolic number showing that all of Israel was involved.

Wasn't that a proactive move ... establishing a hierarchy?



No, the twelve wasn't a hierarchy. In keeping with Jesus' strategy, their role was entirely symbolic. Their calling simply affirmed the common objective: the long hoped-for establishment of the covenant community, which was to shame the world into changing its ways.




So what happened next?

As we've seen things began rather quietly.

Too quietly for poor old John!

Yes, having got himself imprisoned, John was clearly anxious to receive news confirming the re-emergence of a powerful, prophetically led, covenant community.




A photograph of two men in a red inflatable motorboat on a body of water. The man in the foreground, wearing a grey hoodie, is looking back towards the other man. The man in the background, wearing a dark green sweater and a flat cap, is looking down at the outboard motor. A speech bubble from the man in the cap says, "You can see his point!".

You can see his point!

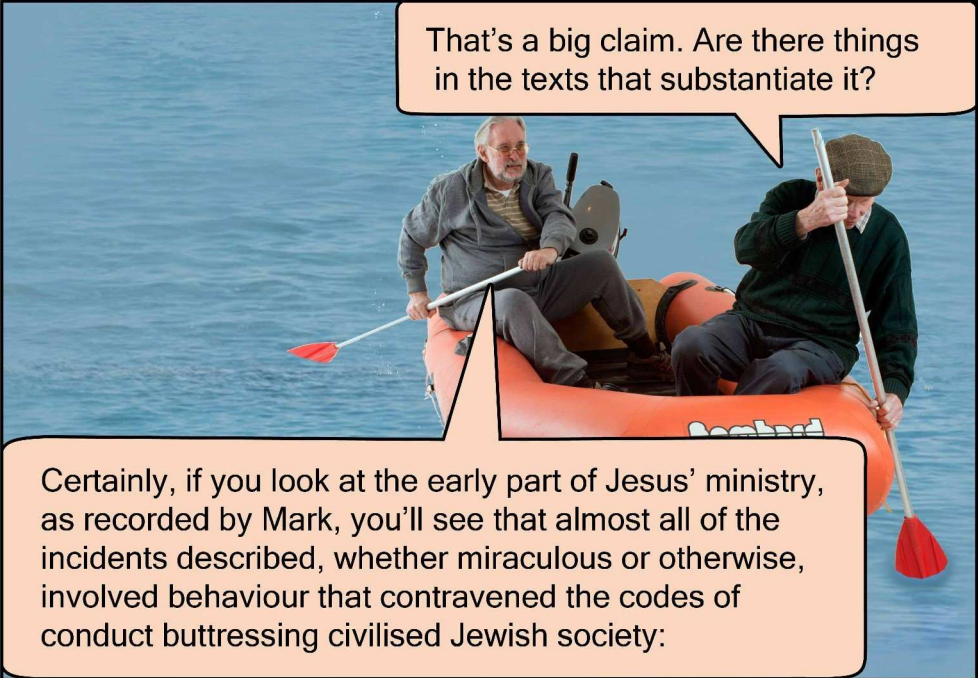
Fair enough, but John was barking up the wrong tree.\* Jesus tried to get him to understand his new reactive approach by allowing John's disciples to personally witness the 'miraculous' transformations taking place in Galilee.

\* According to Q

Yes but if, as you think, these transformations weren't medical cures, what did they amount to?


A photograph of the same two men in the red inflatable motorboat on the water. The man in the foreground, wearing a grey hoodie, is looking back towards the other man. The man in the background, wearing a dark green sweater and a flat cap, is looking down at the outboard motor. A speech bubble from the man in the cap says, "You can see his point!".

They were signs that, with Jesus' encouragement, people were beginning to see through the hypocrisy of first century Jewish civilisation: opening their eyes to what was going on beneath the surface and having the courage to start doing something about it together.



That's a big claim. Are there things in the texts that substantiate it?

Certainly, if you look at the early part of Jesus' ministry, as recorded by Mark, you'll see that almost all of the incidents described, whether miraculous or otherwise, involved behaviour that contravened the codes of conduct buttressing civilised Jewish society:



Physically touching a leper to show he was no longer ostracised.

If you will, you can make me clean.

I will; be clean

Mk 1.40-41



Presumptuously telling people their sins are forgiven.

My son your sins are forgiven.

That's blasphemy!

Mk 2.3-7

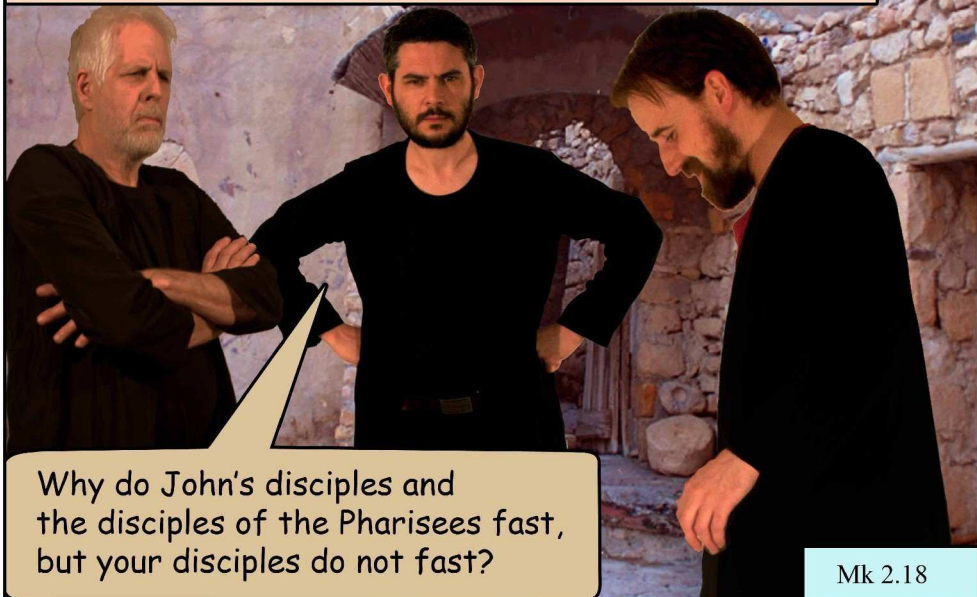
Consorting with marginals.

Why does your master eat with tax collectors and sinners?

Mk 2.15-16



Turning a blind eye to important customs like fasting...



...and refraining from doing any work on the Sabbath.



Or, again, treating people's needs on the Sabbath.

Is he going to  
heal him on the  
Sabbath?

Is it lawful on the Sabbath  
to do good or to do harm,  
to save life or to kill?

Mk 3.1-5

Is there anything else?

There are also clear indications how aware  
Jesus was that the success of his campaign  
to unmask hypocrisy was bound to ignite the  
wrath of the Jewish authorities.

This explains why he told the people whose lives he had radically changed to keep quiet about it.

See that you say nothing to anyone.

Mk 1.44

Mark certainly says the authorities were out to get Jesus forcing him to stay out of the towns and operate instead on the shores of the lake around Capernaum.

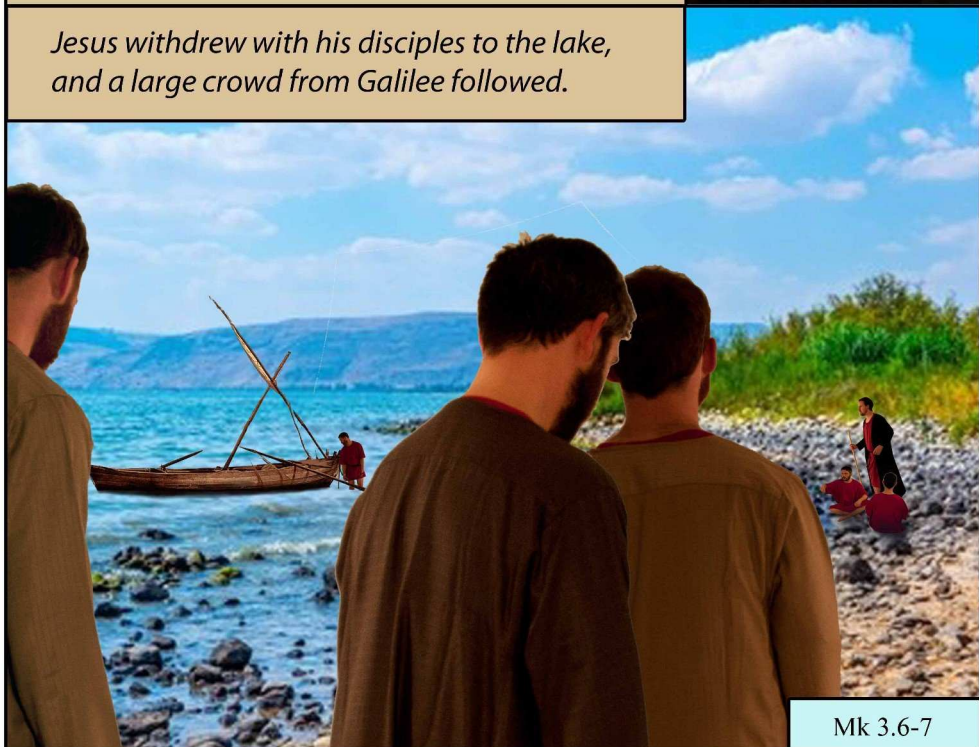






*Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.*

*Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the lake, and a large crowd from Galilee followed.*



Mk 3.6-7

There's also evidence that at one point, when things became too hot, he used his disciples' boat to withdraw completely to Gentile areas to the south east of the lake.

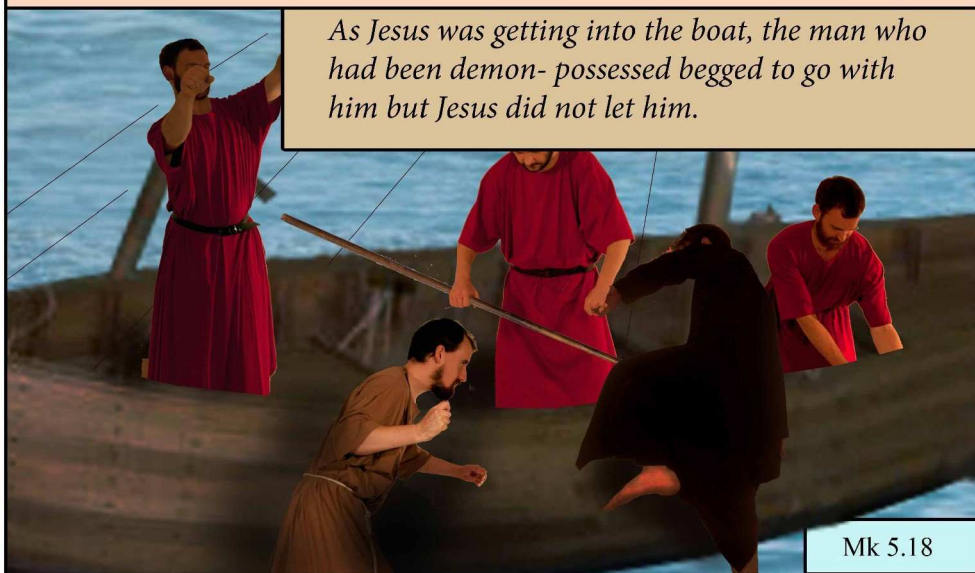


\* Mk 5.1-20

You're referring to the story of the Gadarene swine.\*

Yes, there are two really interesting things about this story. First, Jesus refuses point blank to let the man he helps become a follower... one has to presume because he's a foreigner.


*As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon- possessed begged to go with him but Jesus did not let him.*



Mk 5.18




Second, instead of ordering the man to refrain from telling people what had happened... as was his habit when treating fellow Jews ...



A man with glasses and a grey jacket is sitting in a red inflatable boat, holding a red paddle. A woman with short grey hair and a dark green sweater is sitting next to him, also holding a paddle. They are on a calm lake with mountains in the background. A speech bubble points to the man.

Jesus tells him to go ahead and broadcast the news.

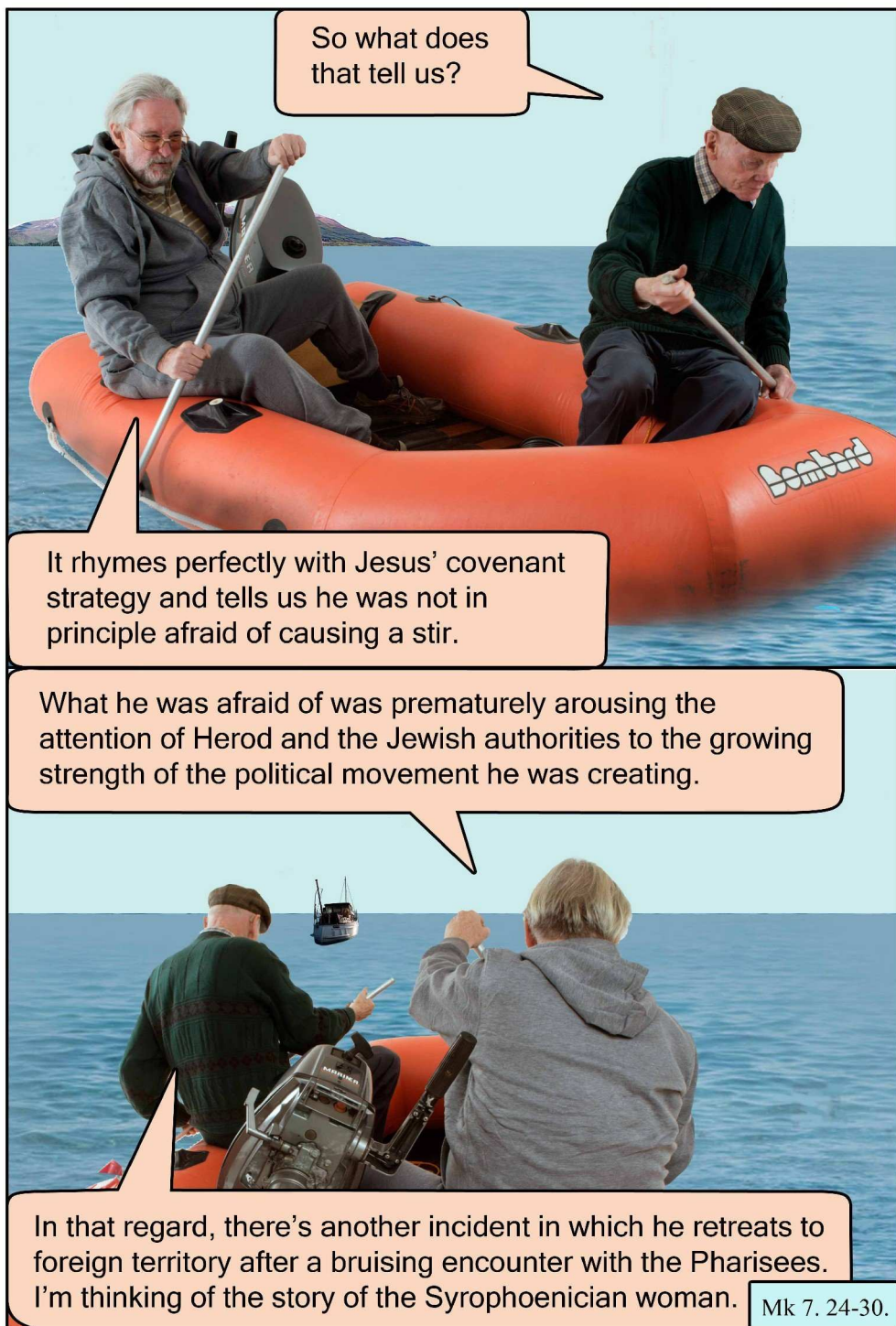


A group of men in red robes are on a boat. One man is standing and holding a rope, while others are sitting or kneeling. A man in a brown robe is in the foreground, looking towards the boat. A speech bubble points to the group.

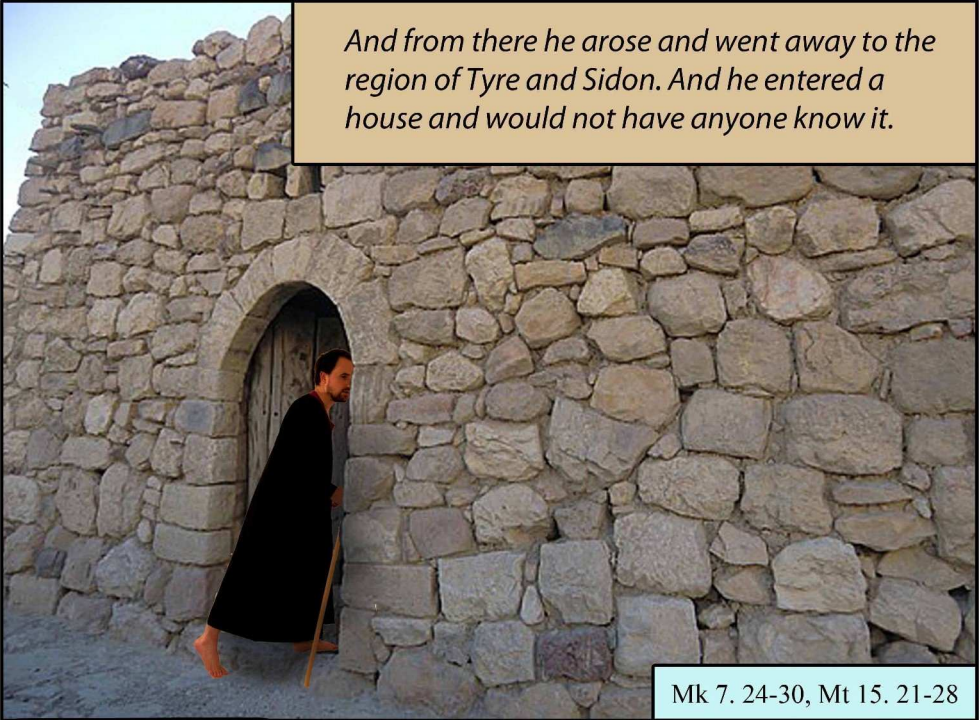
Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.

Mk 5.19





*And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and would not have anyone know it.*



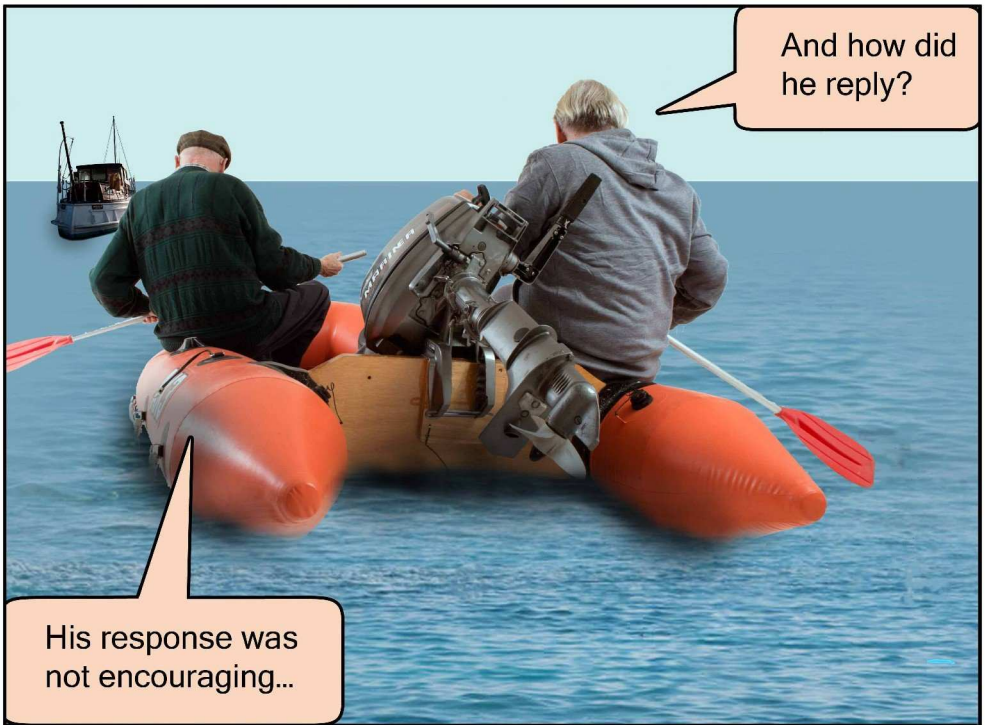
Mk 7. 24-30, Mt 15. 21-28

Yes, it's a great story. Tell us what happened.

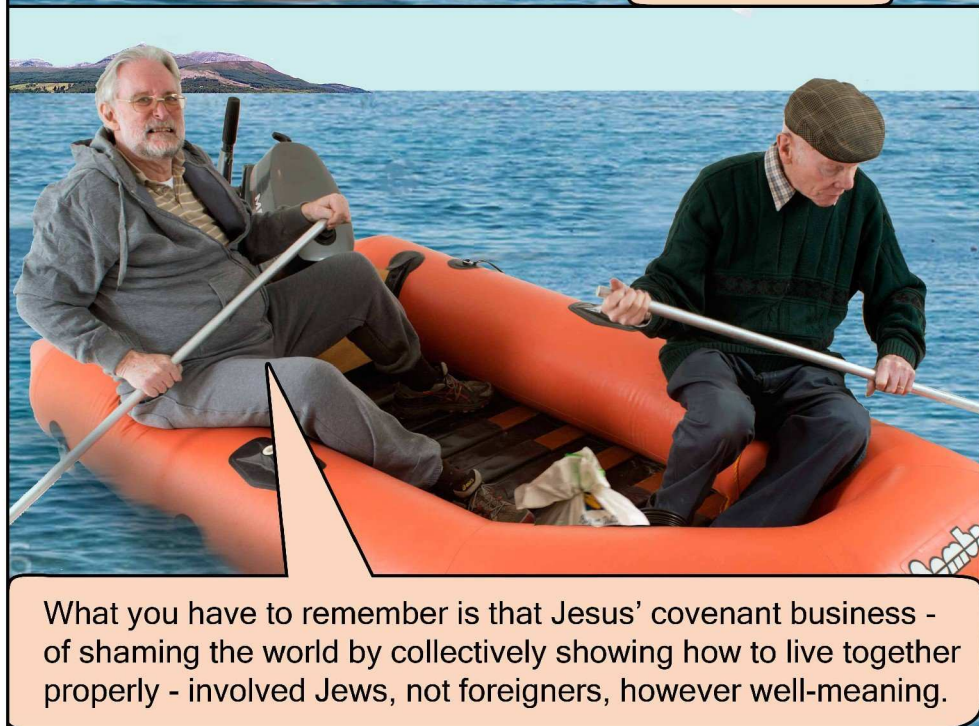
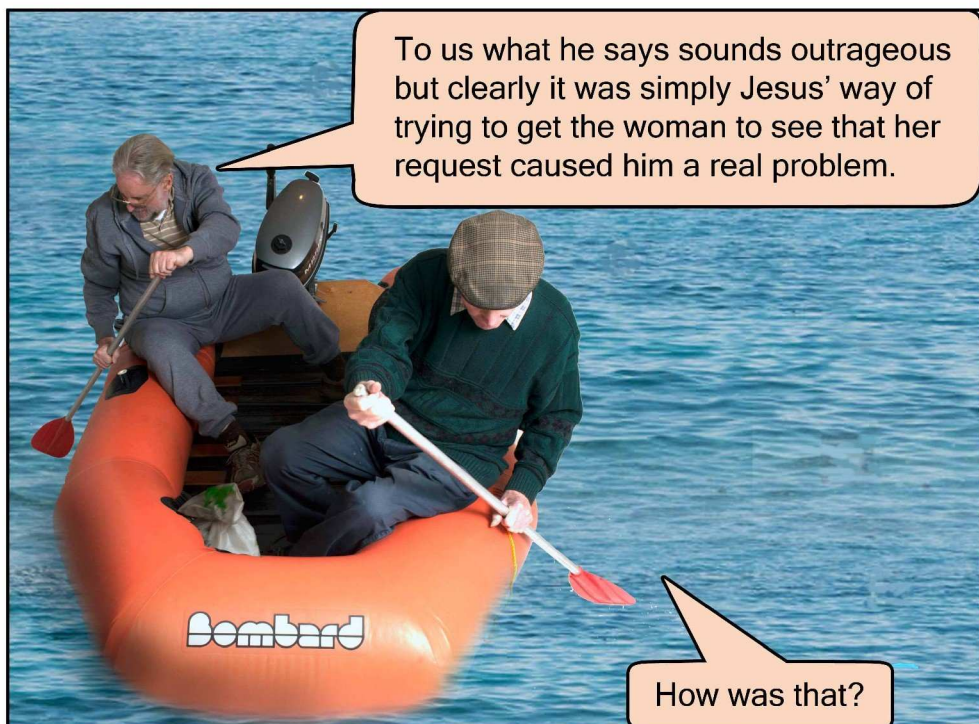


This foreign woman somehow heard of Jesus' arrival and came to beg him to cure her little daughter who was possessed by an unclean spirit.

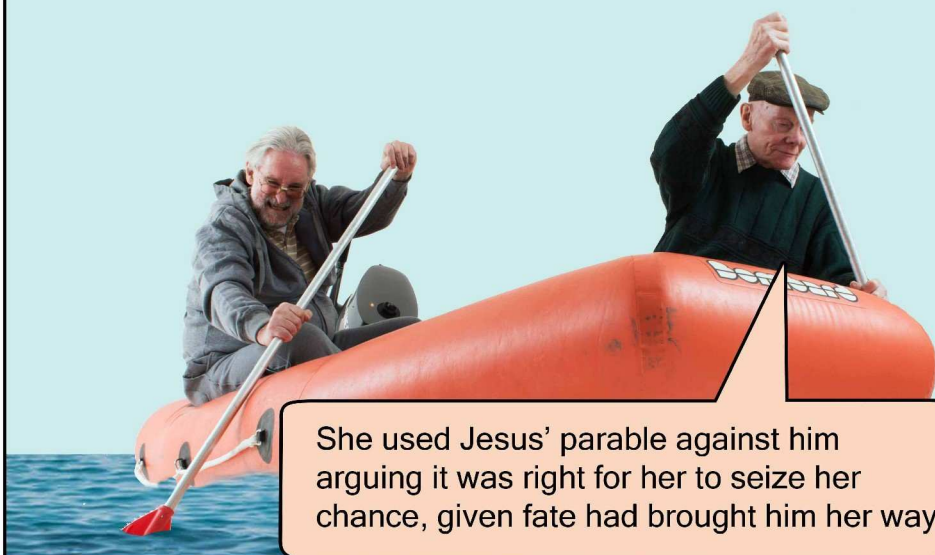




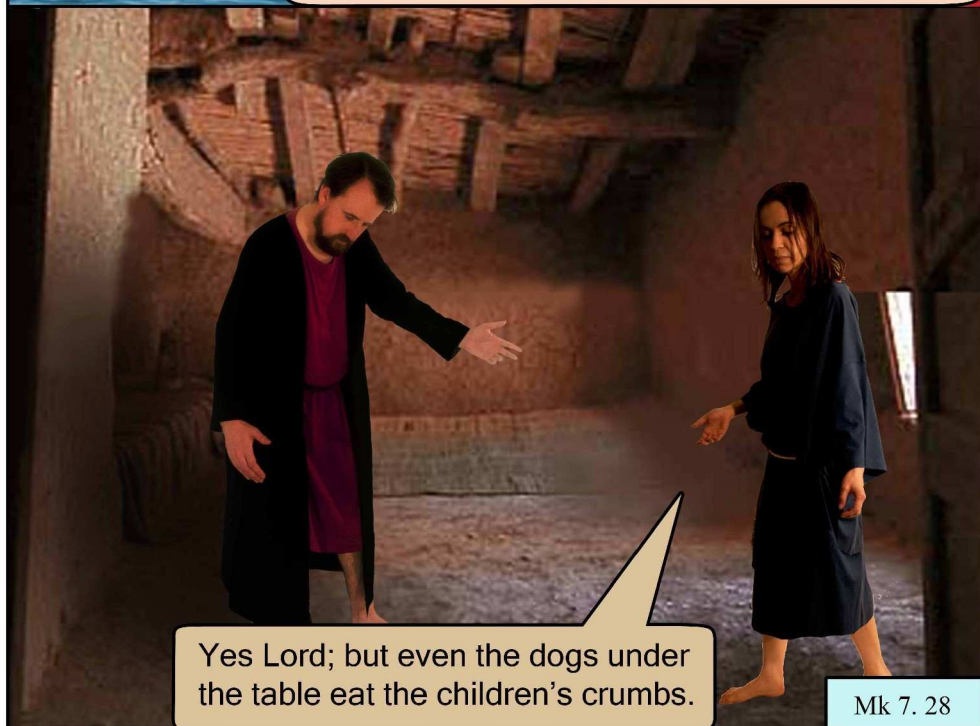




So how did she reply to Jesus?



She used Jesus' parable against him arguing it was right for her to seize her chance, given fate had brought him her way.



Yes Lord; but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.

Mk 7. 28





Good question. It's a powerful story which perfectly reflects Jesus' historical strategy though the miracle itself must be understood as the language of myth.

Why haven't you mentioned the story of the feeding of the 5,000\*. It's also clearly to do with gathering Jews to fulfil the covenant.





Taken along with its twin - the feeding of the 4,000\*  
- its clear both stories are more to do with the situation  
facing the early Church than with Jesus' ministry.



\* Mk 8. 1-10, Mt 15. 29-38.

How's that?

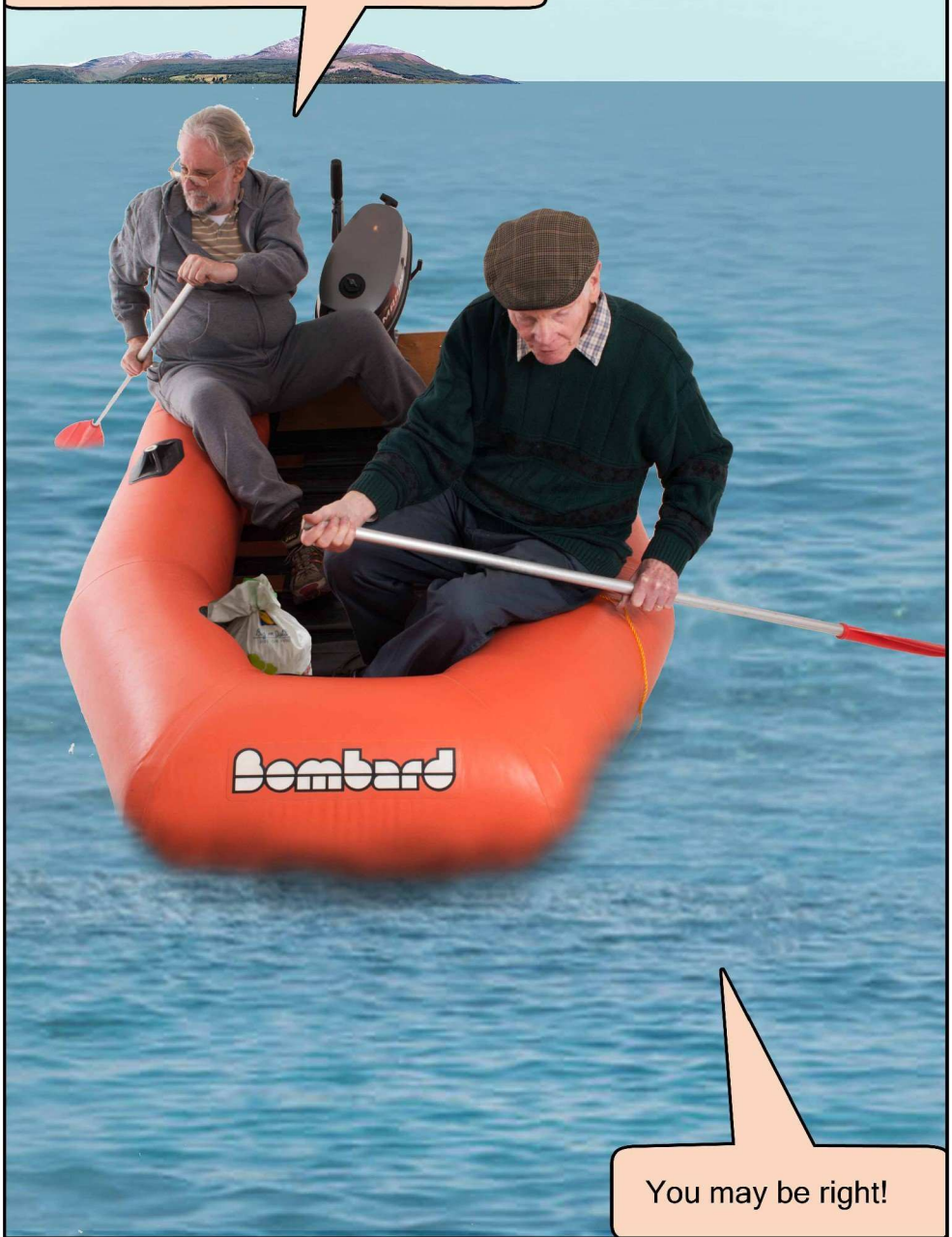
Because the numbers indicate the story of the  
5,000 is about gathering Israel whereas the story  
of the 4,000 is about gathering the Gentiles.



I'm aware scholars have  
established that but so what?



The early Church which was first  
a gathering of Jews and then  
a gathering of Gentiles.



You may be right!






# 3

## Establishing the Covenant Community







Shall we move on to the next stage of Jesus' ministry?

Hang on a moment. First, I want to hear what you have to say about the Gospels' portrayal of Jesus as a man of prayer.

How do you define  
'A man of prayer'?



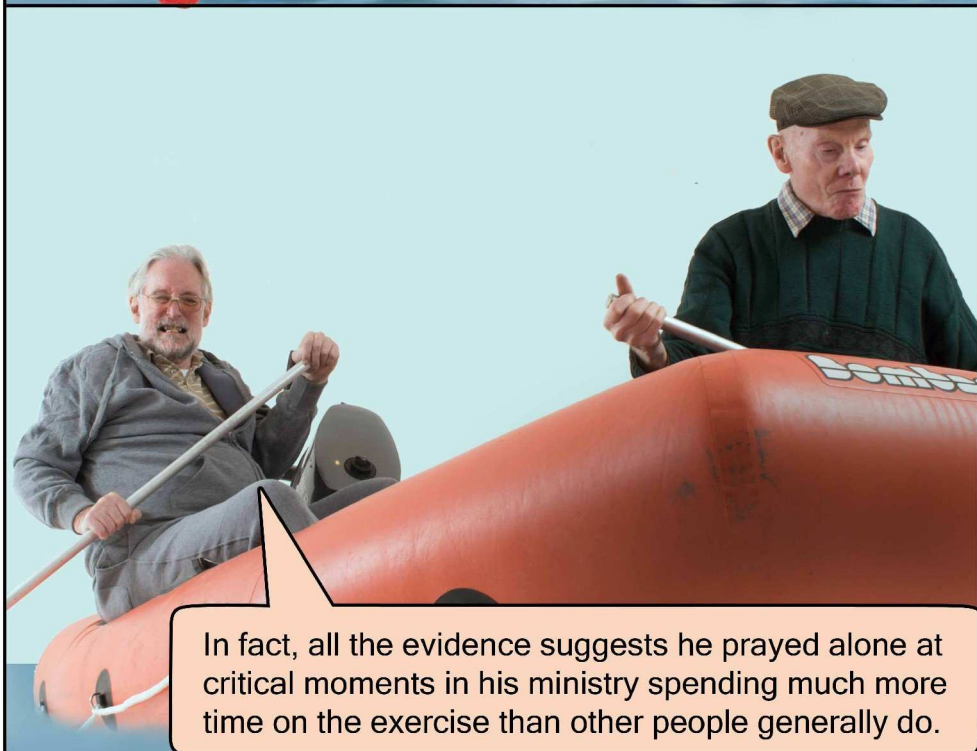
Someone who prays by themselves habitually  
morning, noon, and night and along with others  
either at home or in a regular place of worship.

That doesn't correspond with the picture  
we get of Jesus in the Gospels!



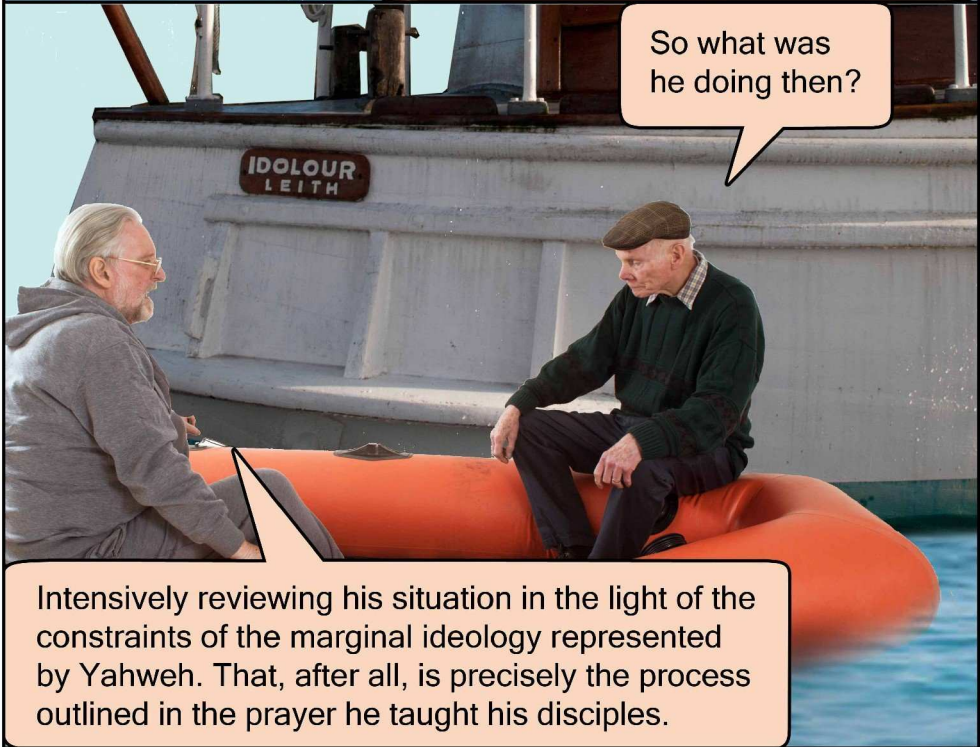
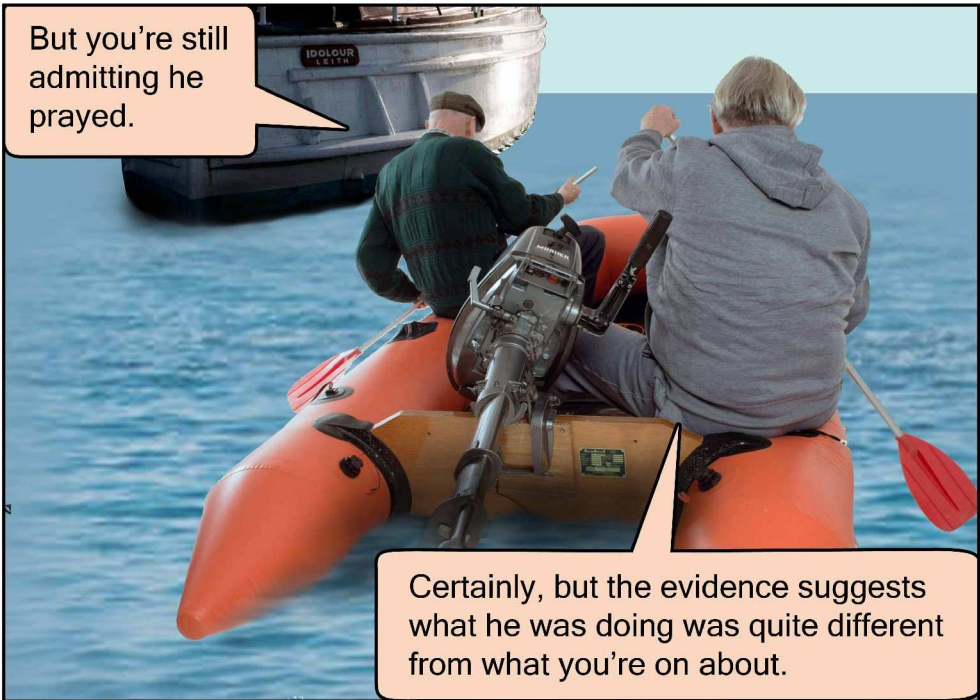
Why not?

There's no evidence Jesus prayed by himself at fixed times of the day or that he prayed anywhere along with others.



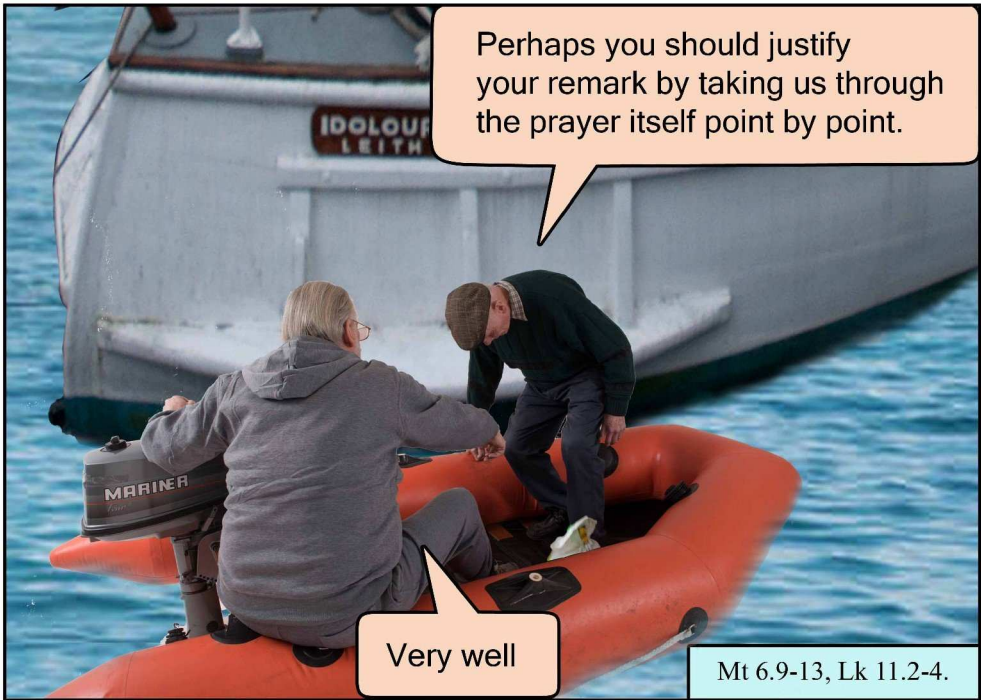
In fact, all the evidence suggests he prayed alone at critical moments in his ministry spending much more time on the exercise than other people generally do.







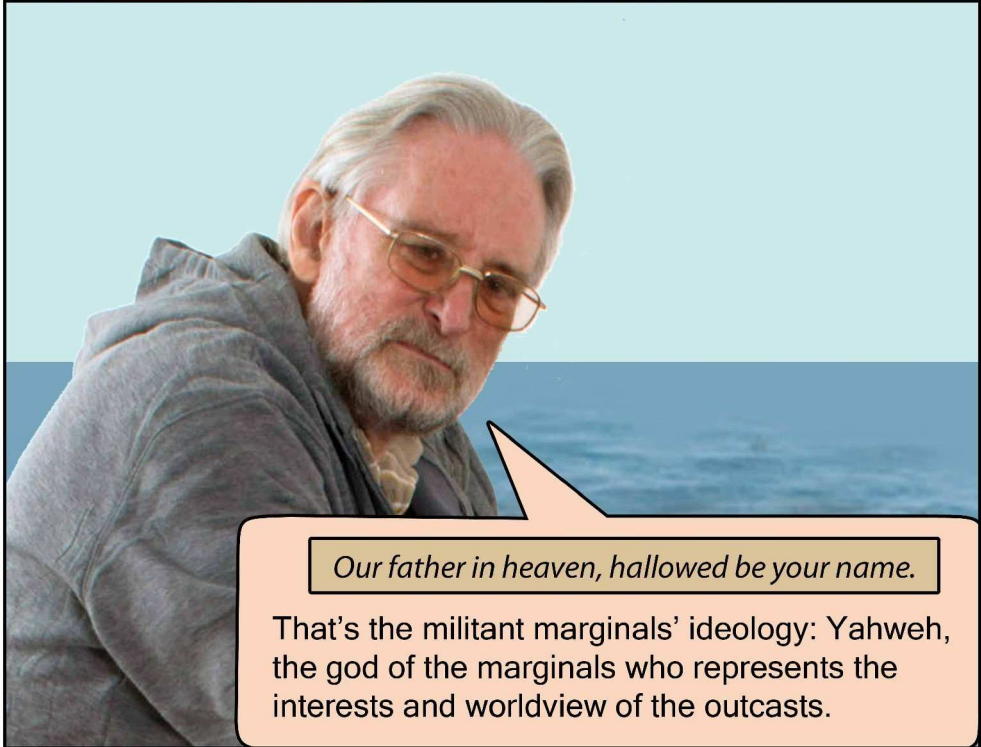




Perhaps you should justify your remark by taking us through the prayer itself point by point.

Very well

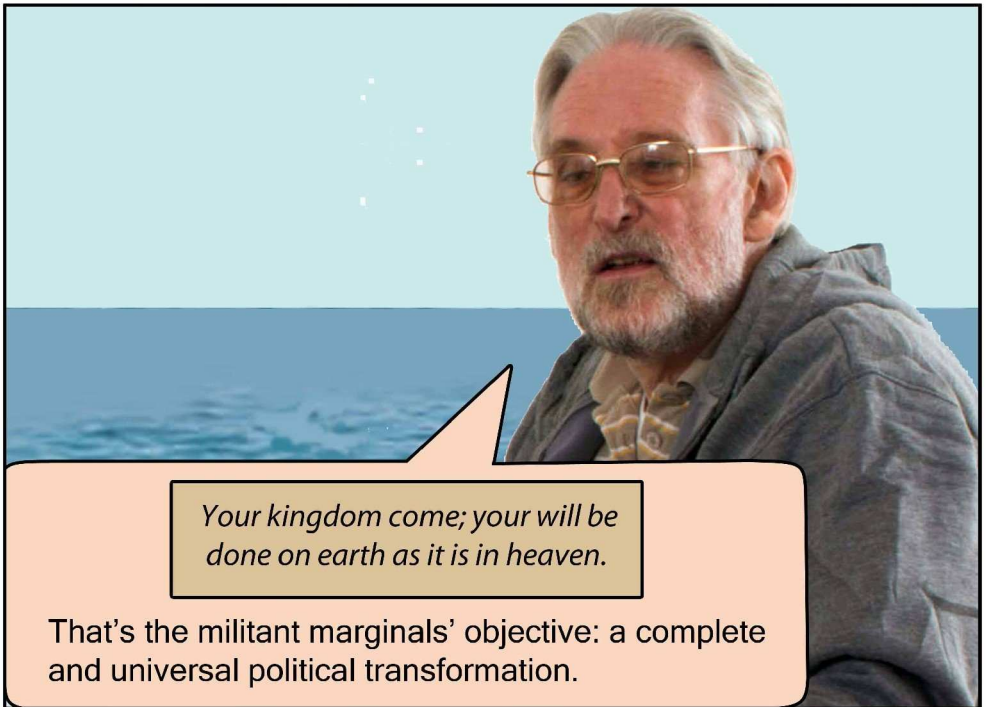
Mt 6.9-13, Lk 11.2-4.



*Our father in heaven, hallowed be your name.*

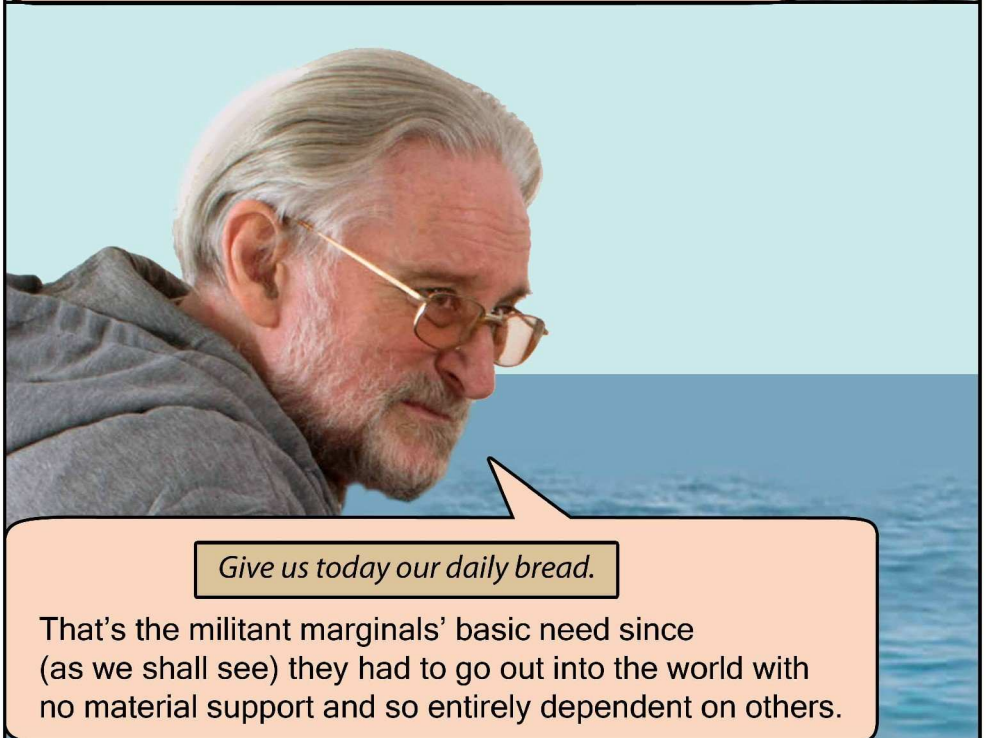
That's the militant marginals' ideology: Yahweh, the god of the marginals who represents the interests and worldview of the outcasts.





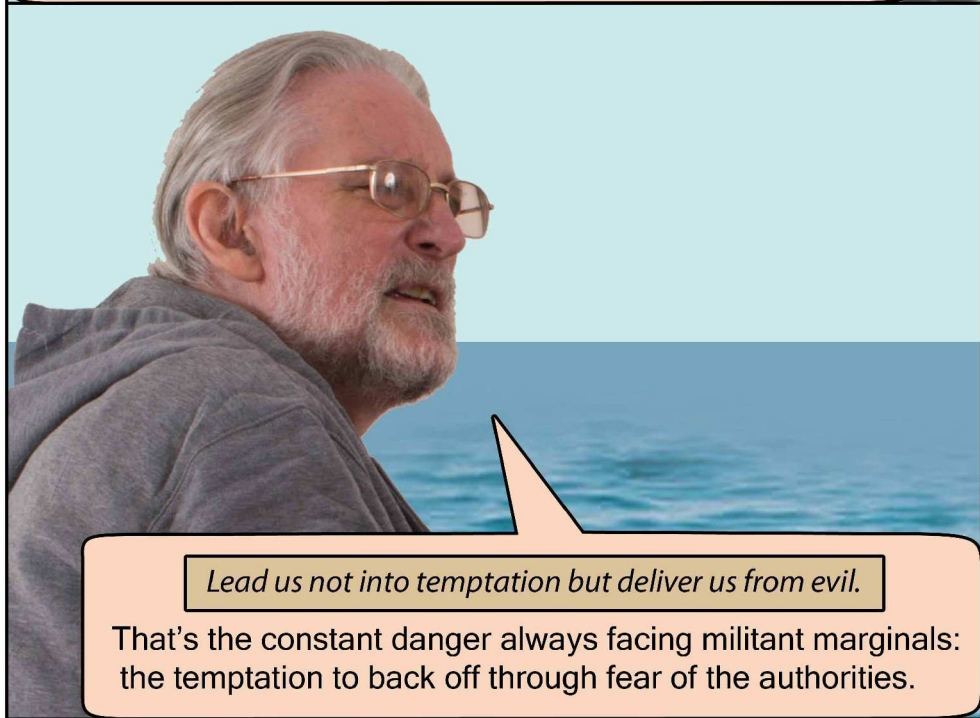
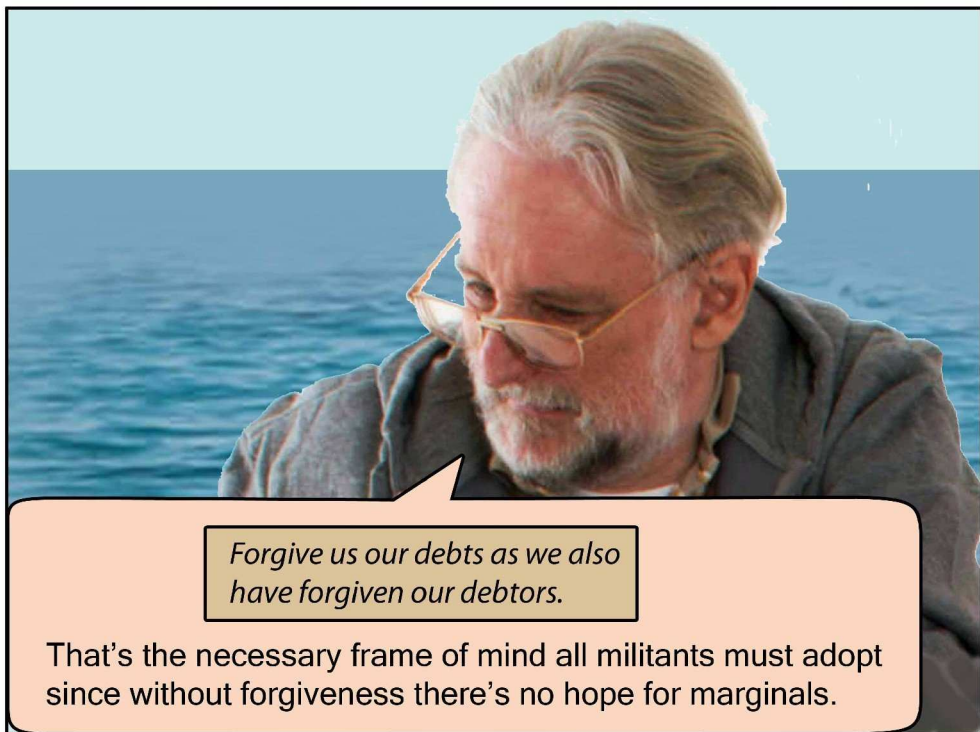
*Your kingdom come; your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*

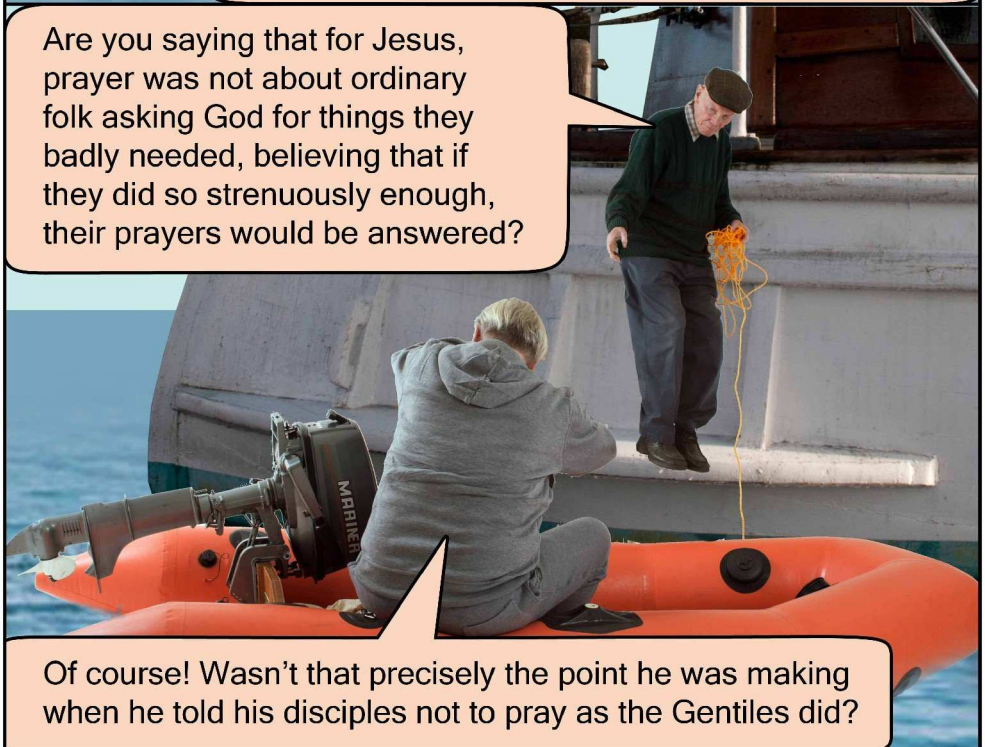
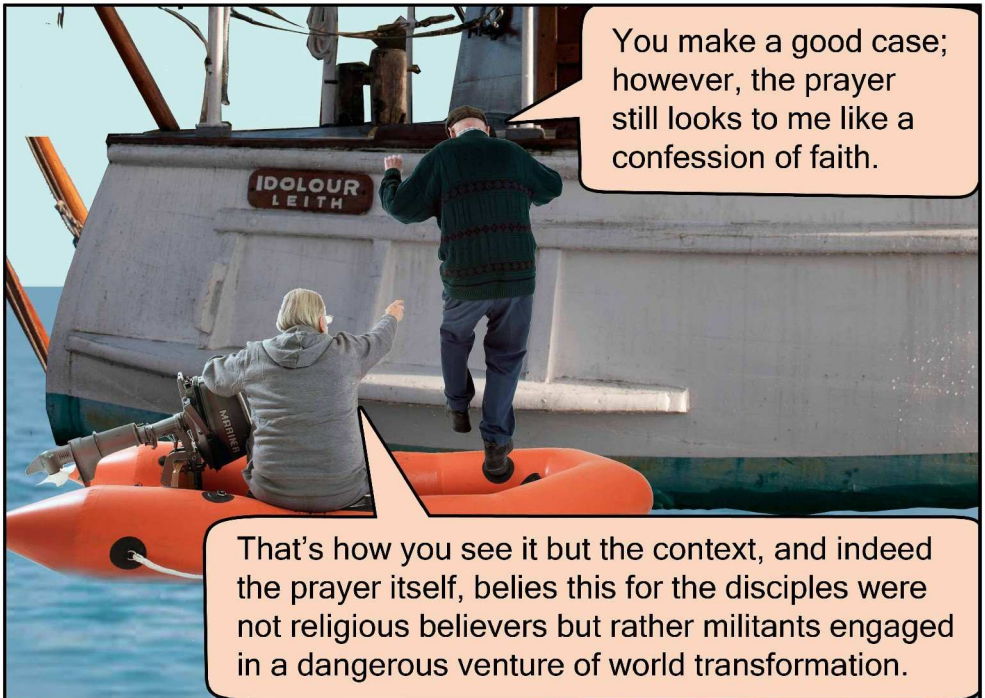
That's the militant marginals' objective: a complete and universal political transformation.



*Give us today our daily bread.*

That's the militant marginals' basic need since (as we shall see) they had to go out into the world with no material support and so entirely dependent on others.







When praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Your Father knows what you need before you ask him.



Mt 6.5-8

If God knows about peoples' needs then surely, he must do something about them?



He does. As the representation of the marginals' worldview, he aims to banish need by getting people to love their neighbour as they love themselves.

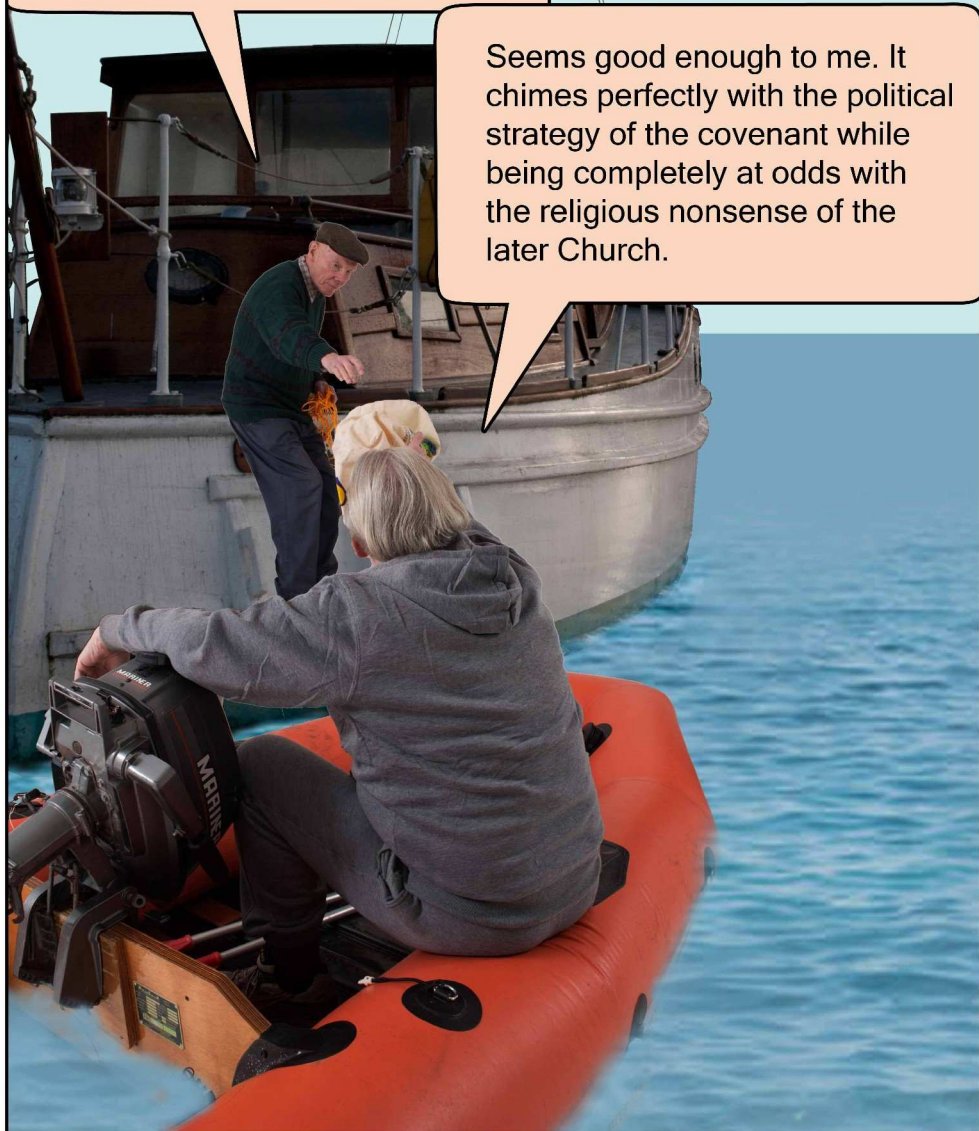
As Paul  
later wrote:

*Bear one another's burdens, And in  
this way, you will fulfil the law of Christ.*

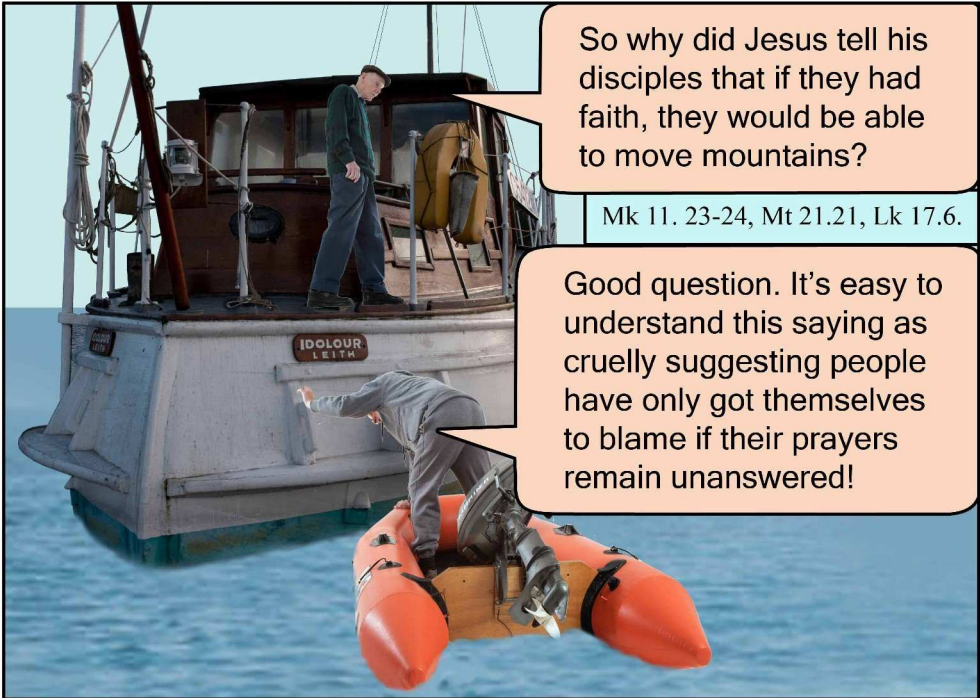
Gal 6.2

So is the Lord's Prayer historical?

Seems good enough to me. It  
chimes perfectly with the political  
strategy of the covenant while  
being completely at odds with  
the religious nonsense of the  
later Church.







So why did Jesus tell his disciples that if they had faith, they would be able to move mountains?

Mk 11. 23-24, Mt 21.21, Lk 17.6.

Good question. It's easy to understand this saying as cruelly suggesting people have only got themselves to blame if their prayers remain unanswered!

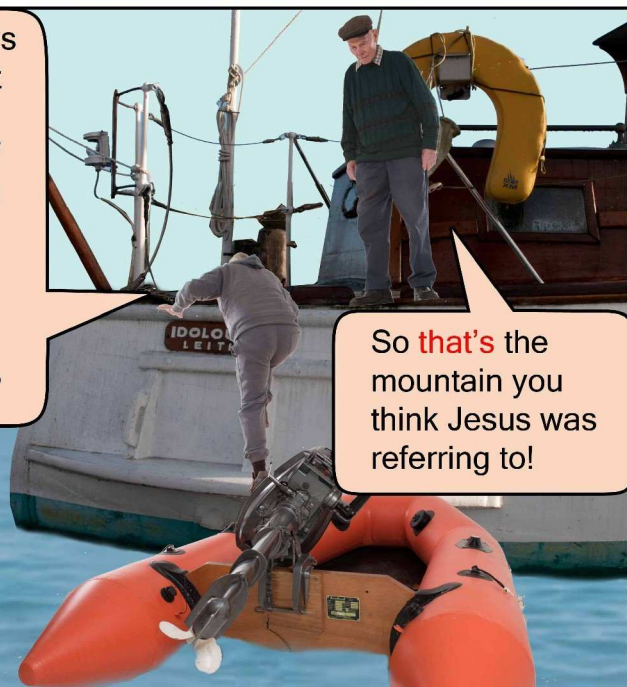


He can't have meant that!  
So, what did he mean?

Once again we must see Jesus' words as aimed not at ordinary folk living ordinary lives but rather at militants set on changing the world.



Wouldn't you agree it's monumentally difficult to believe that rulers can be shamed out of their oppressive ways simply by showing a better way of living... even though that is precisely what the covenant is all about?



So **that's** the mountain you think Jesus was referring to!

Of course. He was trying to get his disciples to see that if they had faith, they would together be able to make short work of this apparently insurmountable obstacle!



I'm amazed. I've always found those words puzzling.

Let's get back to Jesus' ministry. What happened after he had finished training the disciples?



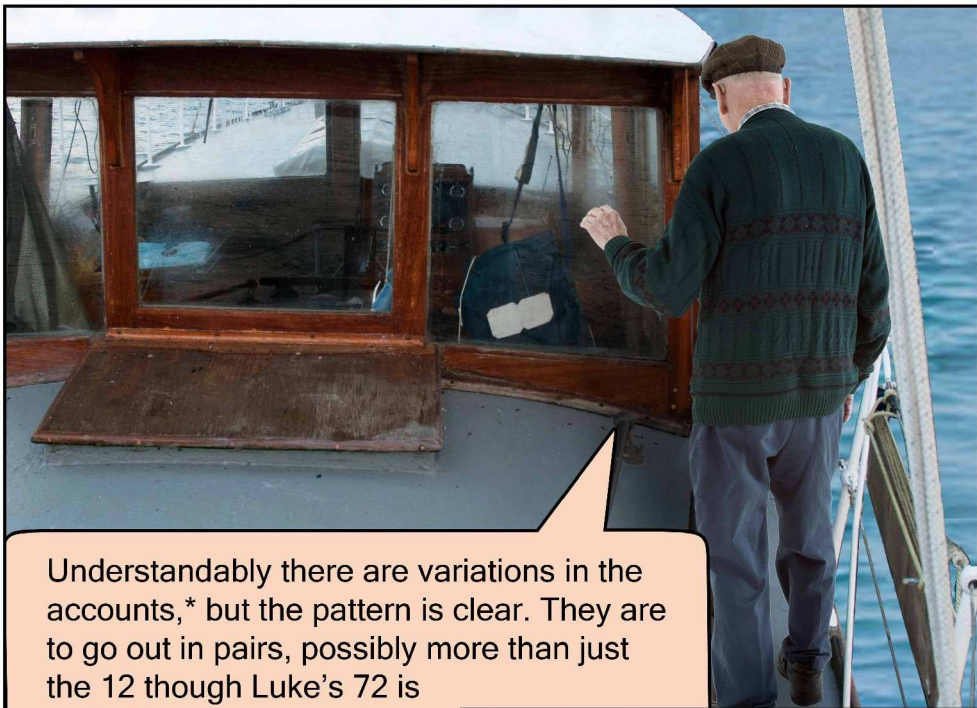
He sent them out to all parts of the region.

Proclaim the good news that the kingdom is arriving.



Mt 10.7





Understandably there are variations in the accounts,\* but the pattern is clear. They are to go out in pairs, possibly more than just the 12 though Luke's 72 is probably an exaggeration.

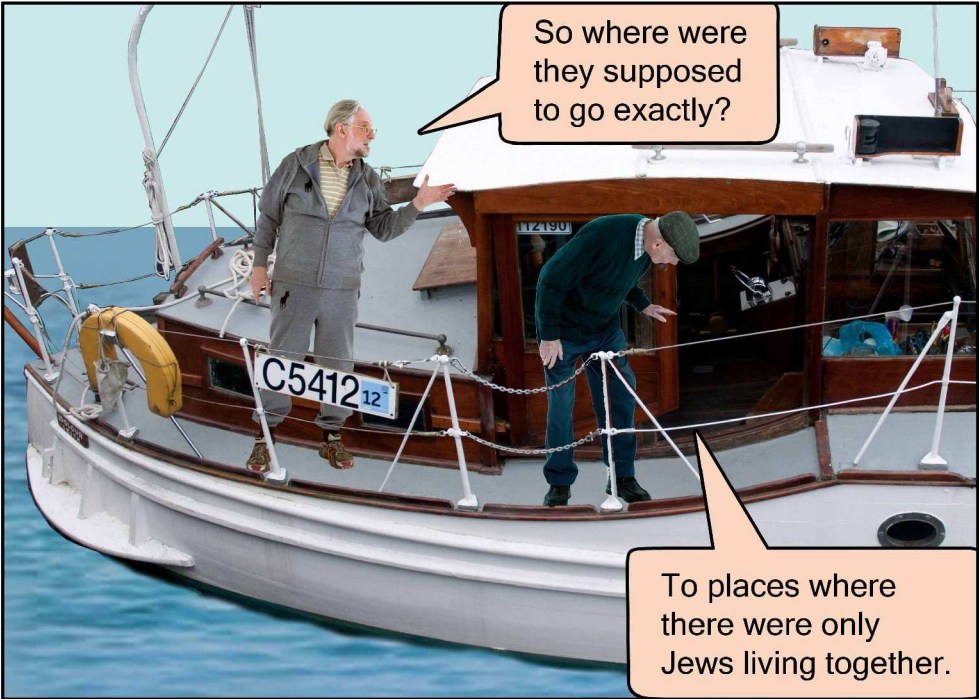
\* MK 6.7-30, Mt 10.5-23, Lk 9.1-10, 10.1-23



The harvest is plentiful,  
but the labourers are few.

Lk 10.2





That's the covenant strategy isn't it? Only Israelites living together are concerned.

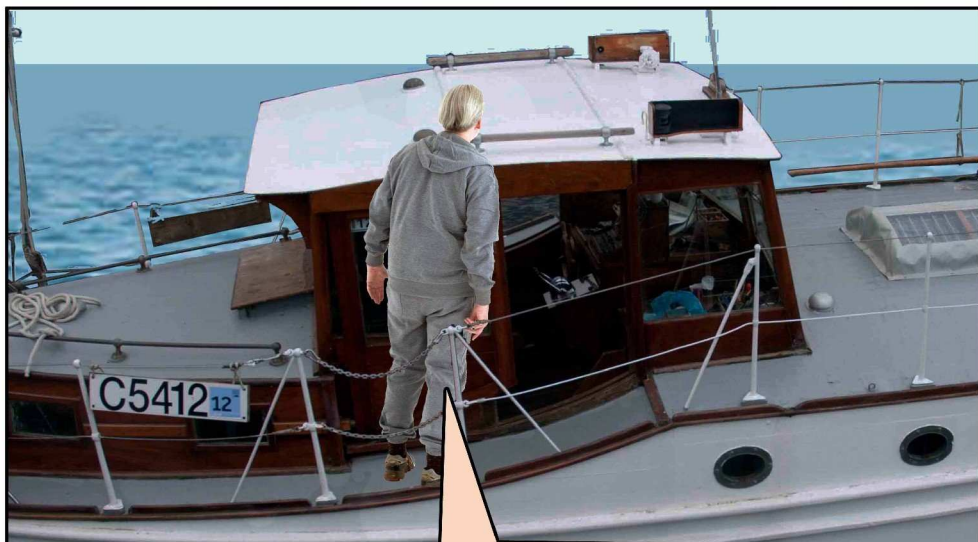


Point taken!. They were told to carry nothing with them but to rely entirely on the people they stayed with.



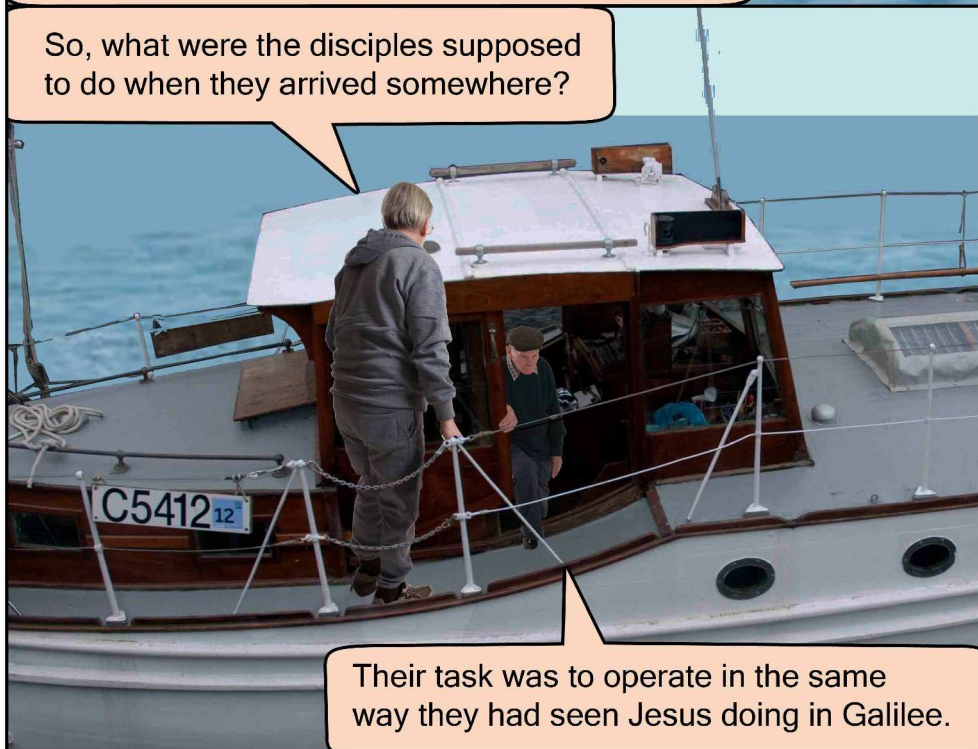
Take nothing for your journey except a staff. Take no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Wear sandals and don't put on an extra tunic.





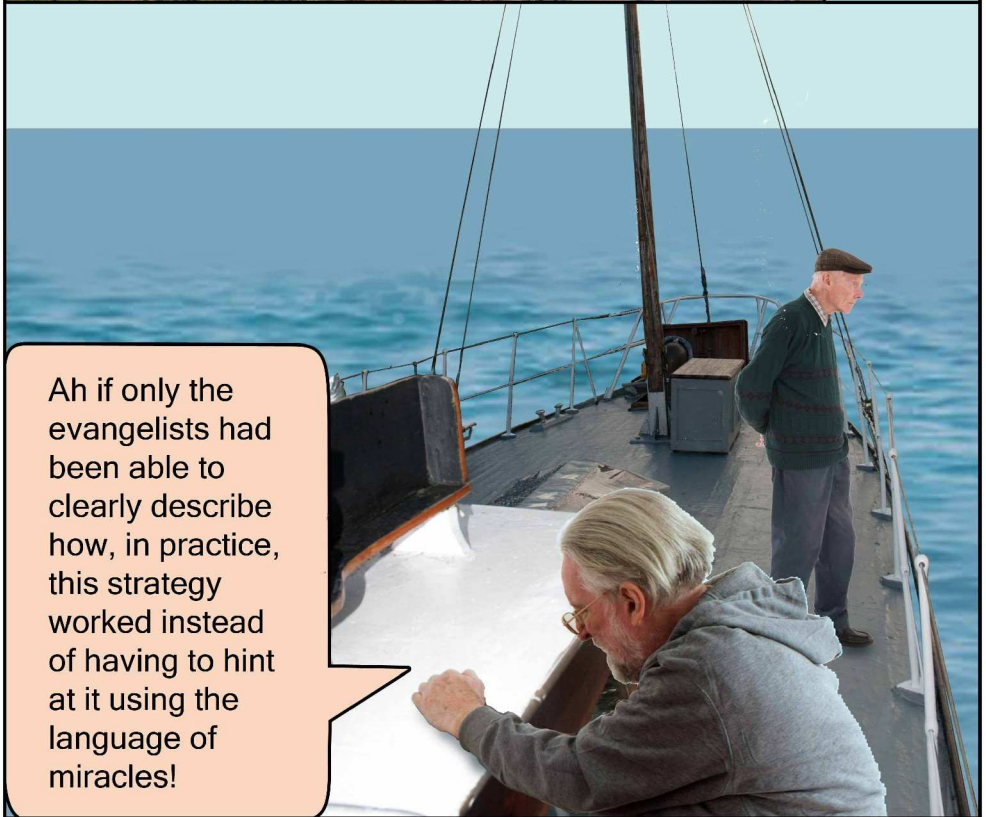
That's Jesus' idiosyncratic reactive strategy, his correction of John's proactive approach. We've already come across it in the Lord's Prayer.

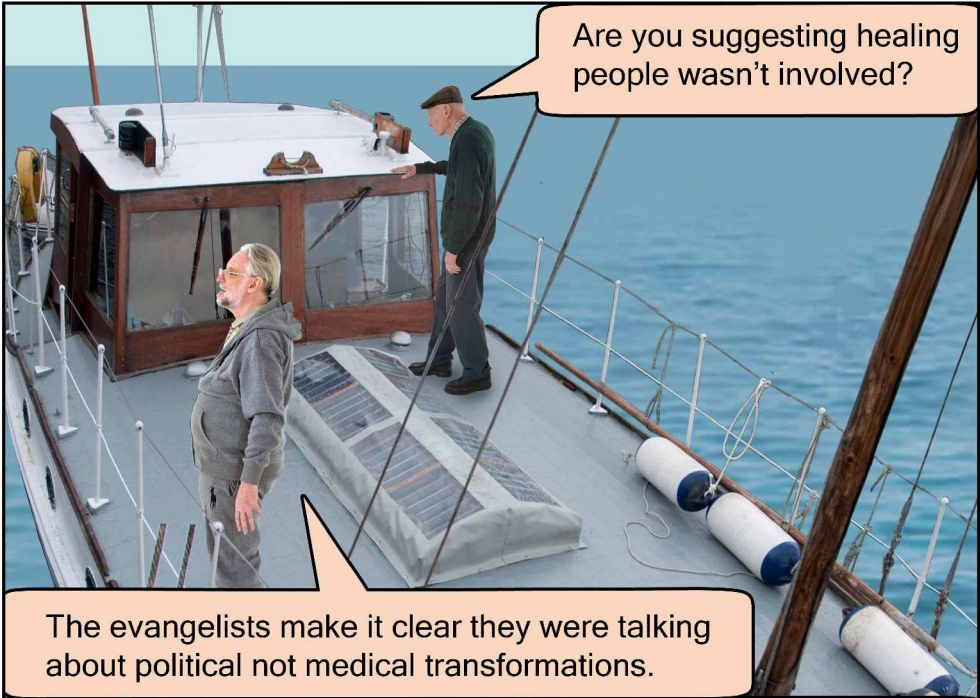
So, what were the disciples supposed to do when they arrived somewhere?



Their task was to operate in the same way they had seen Jesus doing in Galilee.







Are you suggesting healing people wasn't involved?

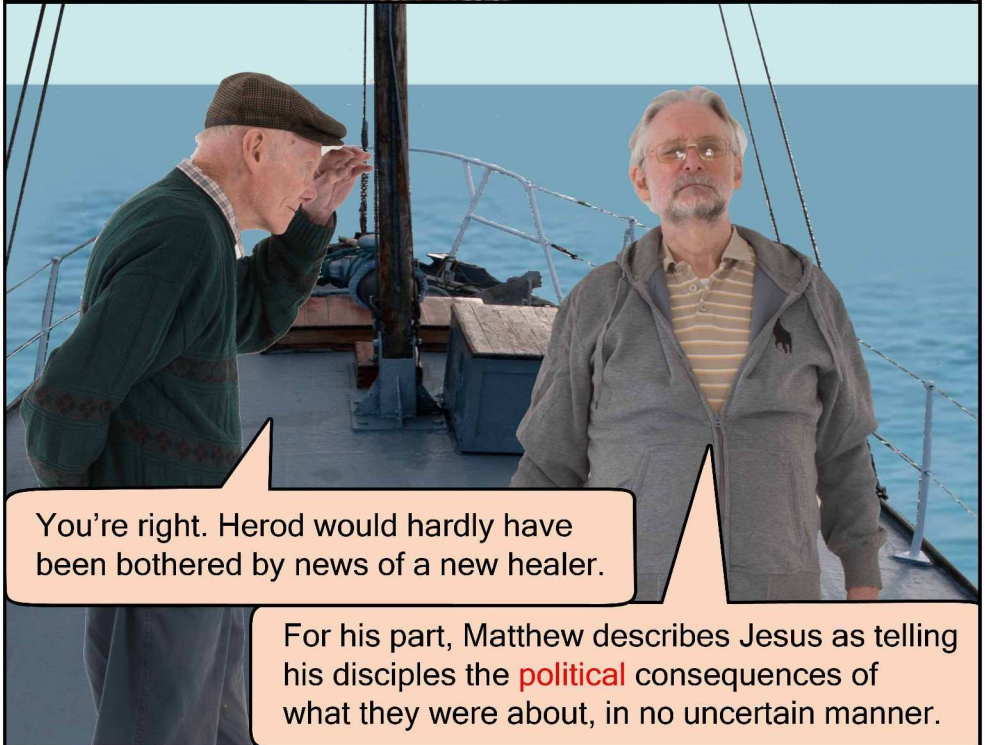
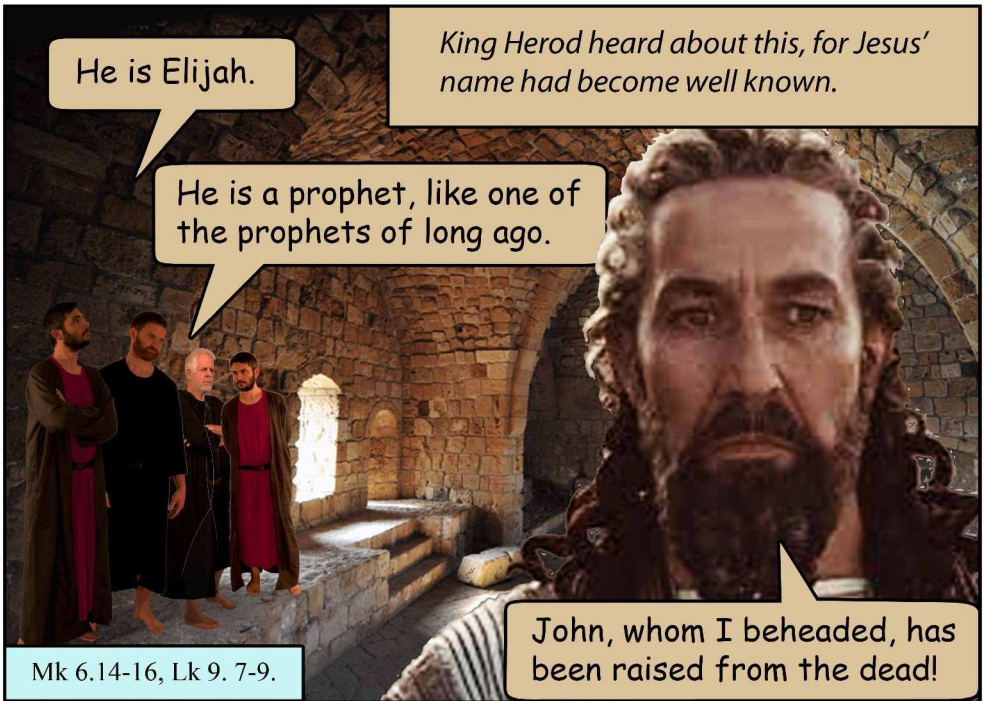
The evangelists make it clear they were talking about political not medical transformations.



What makes you say that?

Because they immediately go on to describe how upset Herod became when he heard what was going on.







I am sending you out like sheep surrounded by wolves ... Beware of people, because they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues. And you will be brought before governors and kings because of me...



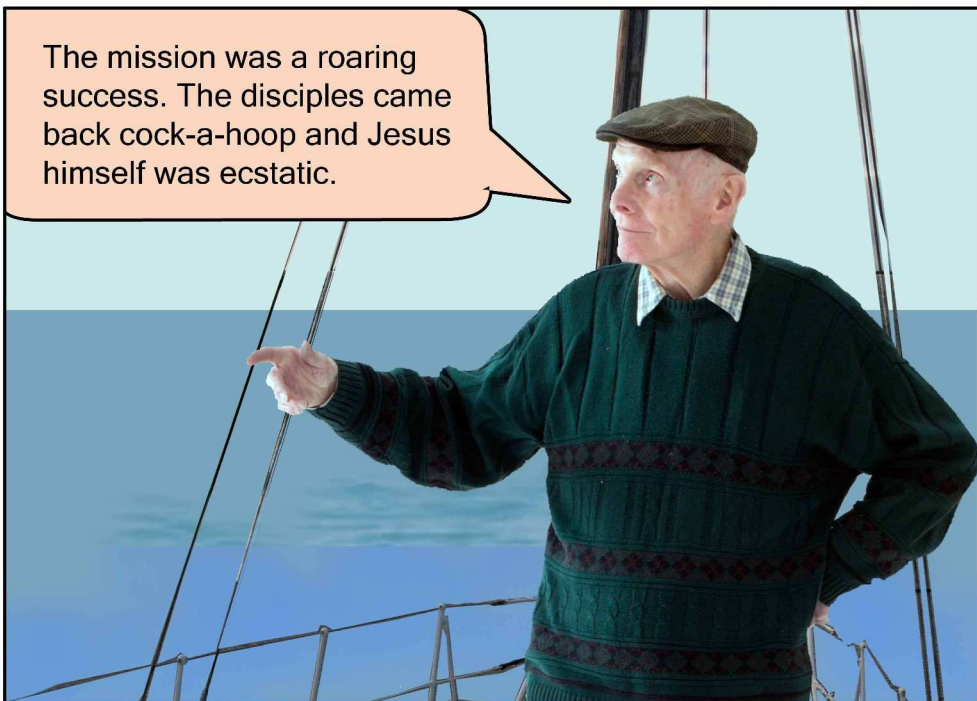
Mt 10. 16-18

Fair enough!



So how did things work out?

The mission was a roaring success. The disciples came back cock-a-hoop and Jesus himself was ecstatic.



Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!



I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning.

Lk 10.17-18



Sounds almost as if the kingdom  
had already come. On with the story!









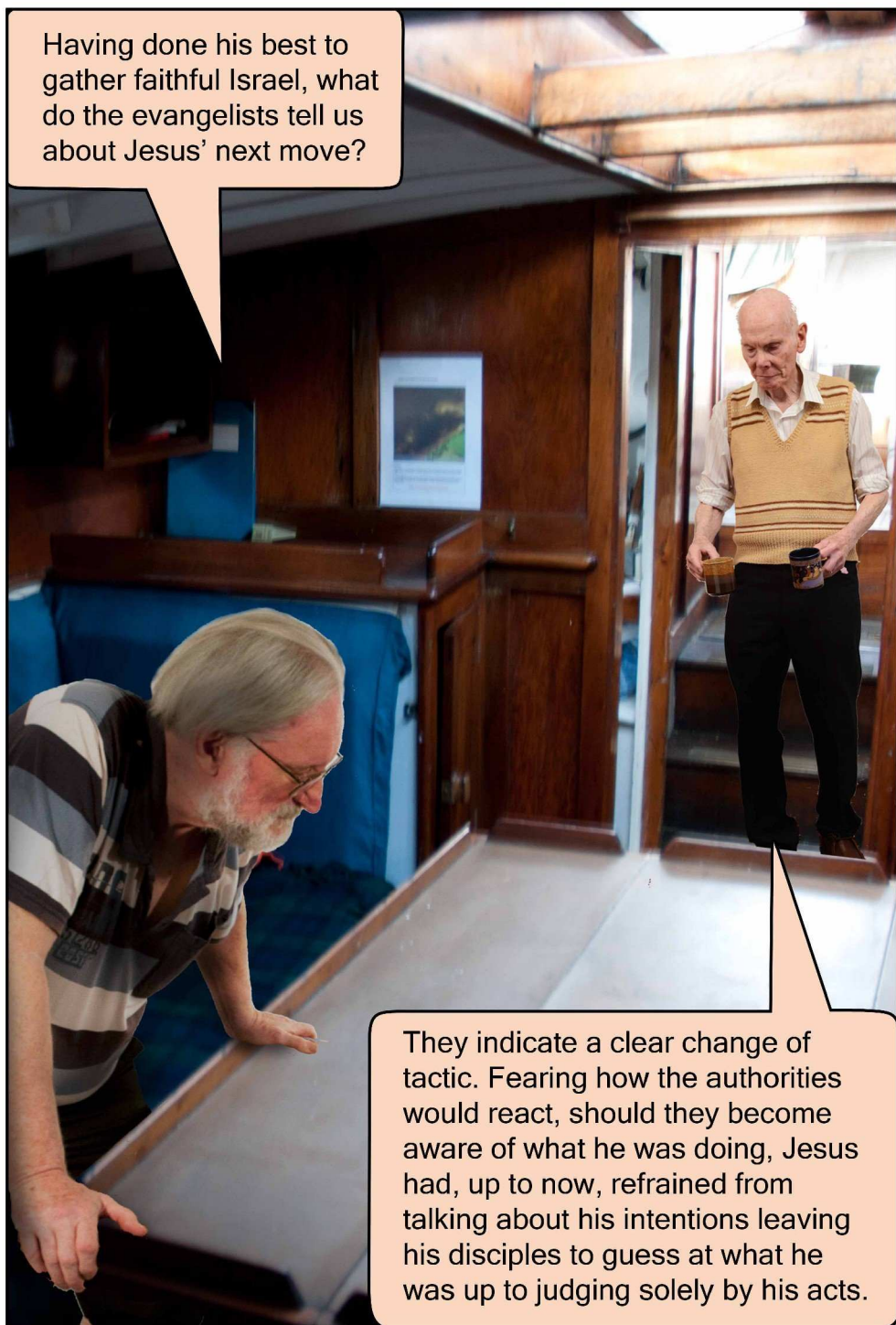
# 4

## Open Confrontation





Having done his best to gather faithful Israel, what do the evangelists tell us about Jesus' next move?



They indicate a clear change of tactic. Fearing how the authorities would react, should they become aware of what he was doing, Jesus had, up to now, refrained from talking about his intentions leaving his disciples to guess at what he was up to judging solely by his acts.

Now, however, he leaves them in no doubt.

*Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite plainly.*



Mk 8.31

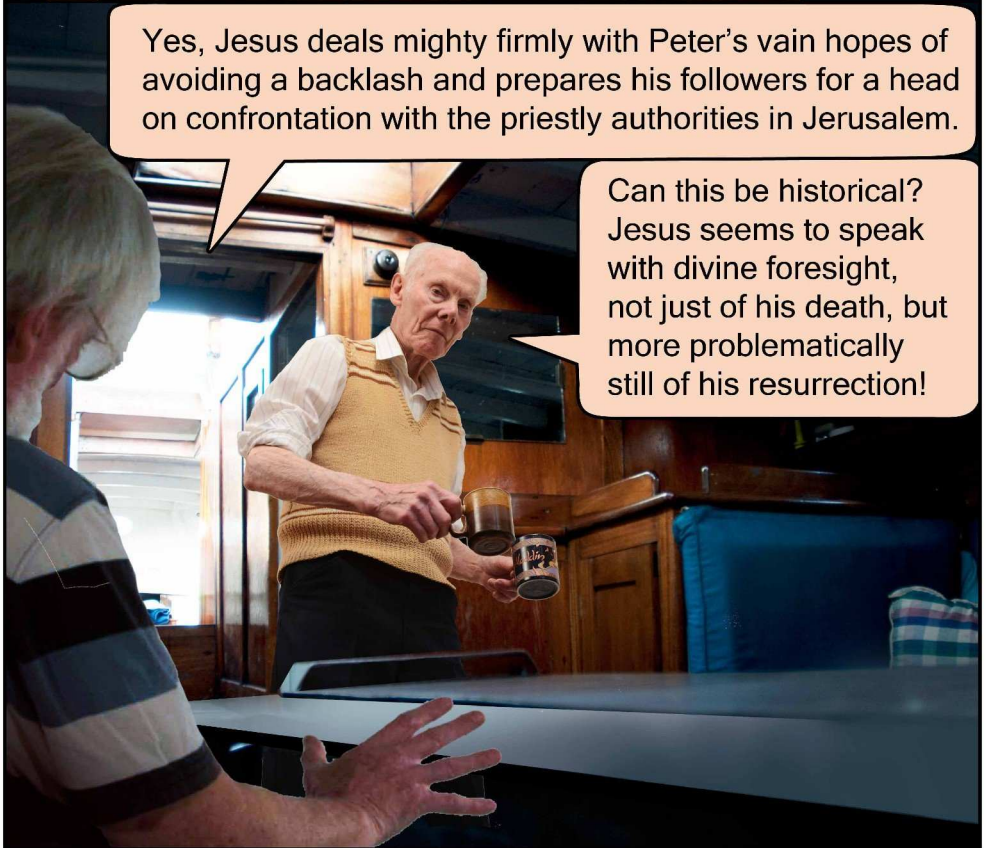
Peter was shocked and took him aside to rebuke him.

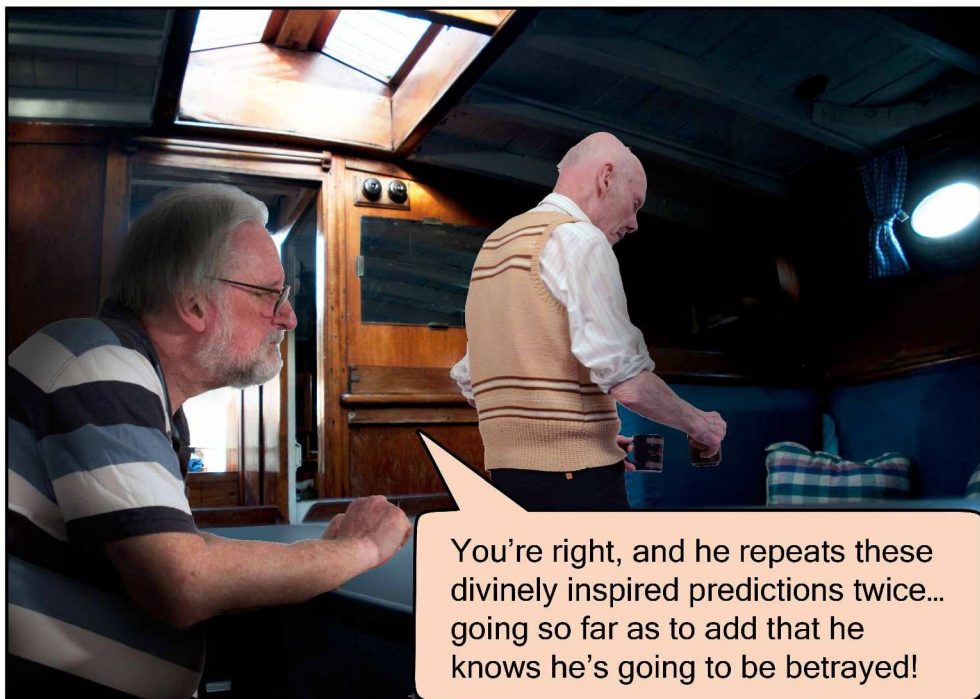


*Get behind me, Satan! For you do not have in mind the concerns of God but merely of man.*

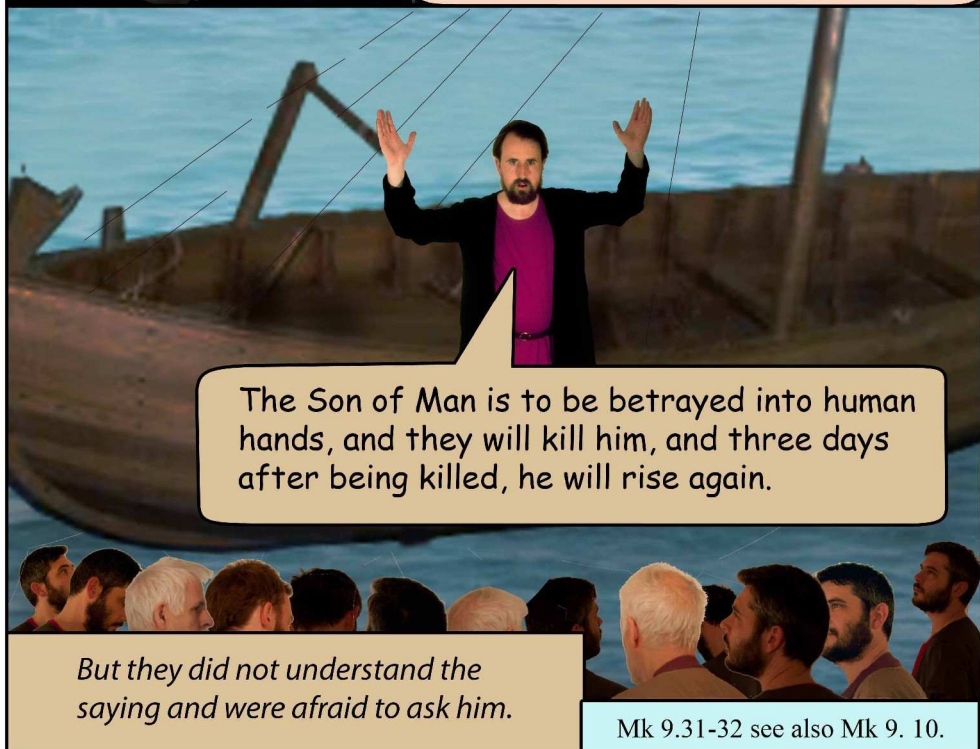
Mk 8.32-33







You're right, and he repeats these divinely inspired predictions twice... going so far as to add that he knows he's going to be betrayed!



The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.

*But they did not understand the saying and were afraid to ask him.*

Mk 9.31-32 see also Mk 9. 10.





It's a real problem!

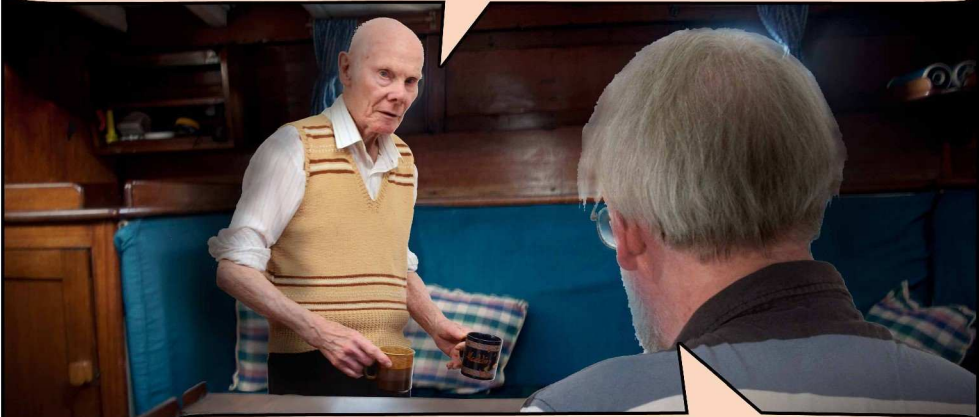
Even for someone, like you, who believes in God?

Yes, its difficult to stomach for though in the days leading to the crucifixion Jesus fears the worst, he doesn't speak as someone resigned to die knowing he will rise again!

Doesn't this suggest the evangelists are inserting stuff that happened later into Jesus' mouth. For example, when they say he told his followers to take up their crosses!



You're right, before the crucifixion it would have made no sense to talk of taking up your cross. Perhaps the evangelists were resorting to myth-talk because of their lack of vocabulary?



That can't be so. Myth-talk is used to communicate and Mark insists the disciples had no idea what Jesus was trying to tell them by speaking of his resurrection.

So you're saying the evangelists were at it again... deliberately painting Jesus in a divine light?



I'm afraid so.

We come now to the entry into Jerusalem.  
Perhaps you could tell us the story.



Approaching the city from the Jordan valley, Jesus and his followers arrived at the village of Bethany lying about a mile and a half from the city on the slope of the Mount of Olives.



Go into the village, and at the entrance you will find a colt that has never been ridden tied up there; untie it and bring it. If anyone asks you why you are doing this just tell them the Lord needs it and will send it back immediately.

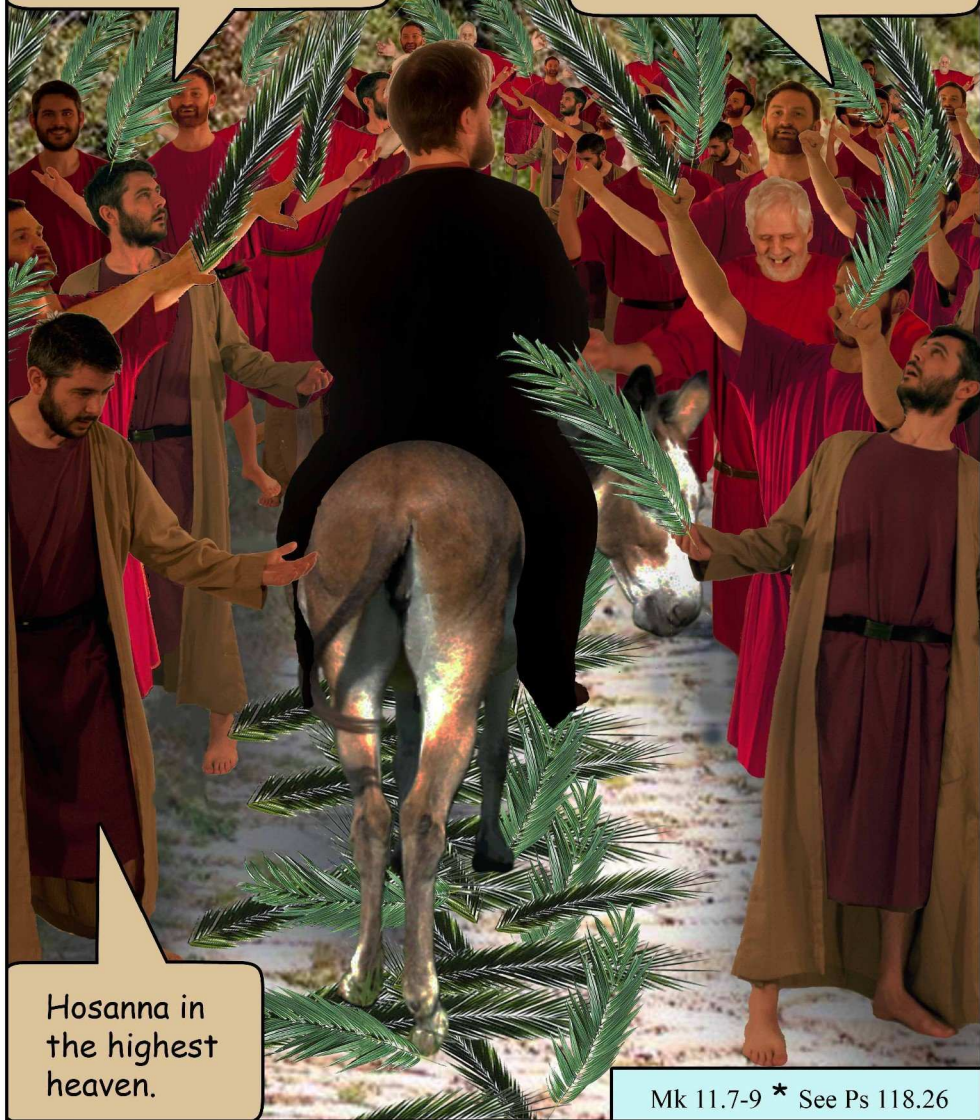
Mk11.2-3



*They brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields.*

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! \*



Hosanna in the highest heaven.

Mk 11.7-9 \* See Ps 118.26



What we have here is a carefully planned symbolic act.



Indeed and it was clearly designed with Zechariah's famous oracle in mind:

*Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud,  
O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you;  
triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding  
on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*

Zech 9.9



What I want to know is whether it's historical?

It has all the hallmarks for Zachariah was one of the last prophetic advocates of the covenant movement before it was forced underground by the priestly followers of Ezekiel.

So Jesus was cocking a snook at the priestly rulers by publicly declaring his solidarity with the covenant ideology?

He was doing more than that. He was putting himself forward as the Messiah who was to fulfil the covenant. But let's not be too hasty for, as we know, Jesus was far from being uncritical of the prophetic movement...



I don't remember him criticising the prophets.

As we have already seen\* in his disagreement with John the Baptist, he openly challenged the prophets' religious belief in Yahweh as an angry God prepared to bring in the kingdom using violence.

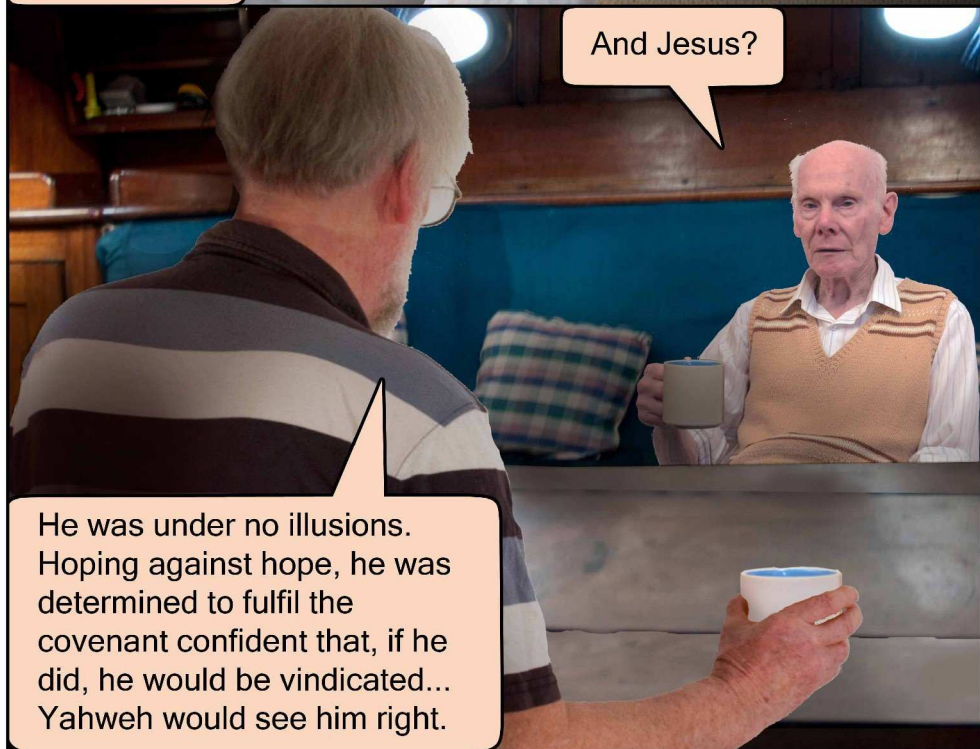
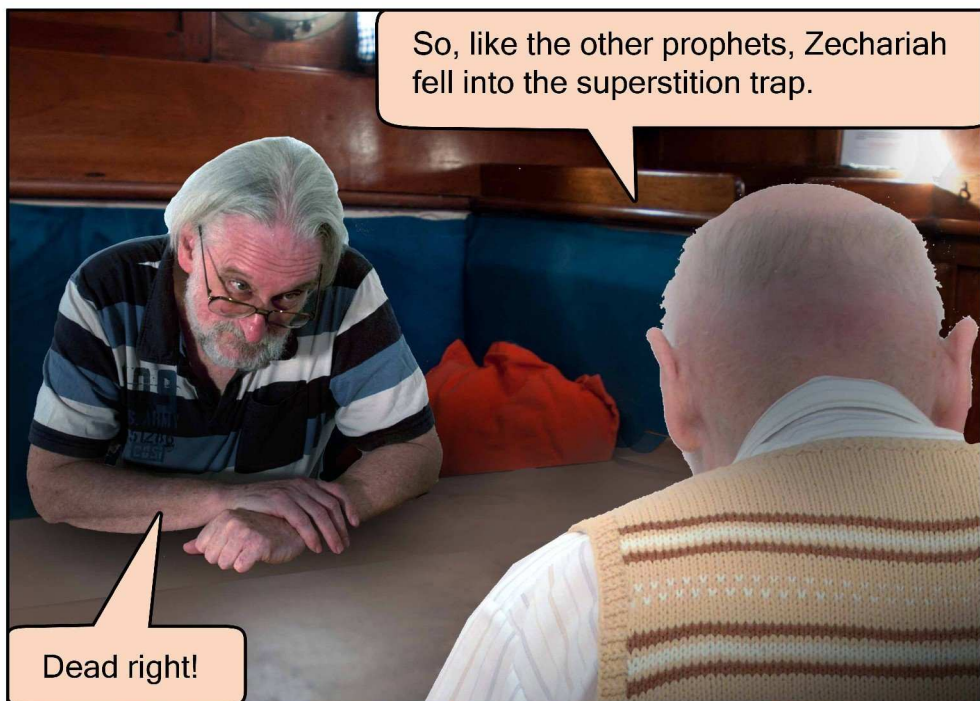
\* See Vol 1 page 44

Mt 11.11-12

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. From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has been coming violently and men of violence have been taking it by force.





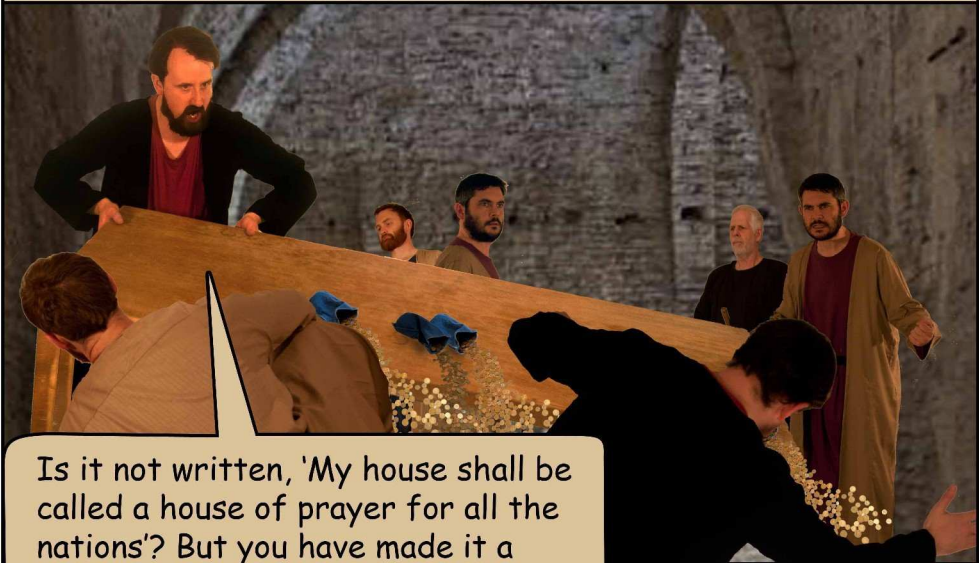




OK back to the story. After his triumphal entry, Jesus and his disciples returned to the city the next day from Bethany, where they were staying.



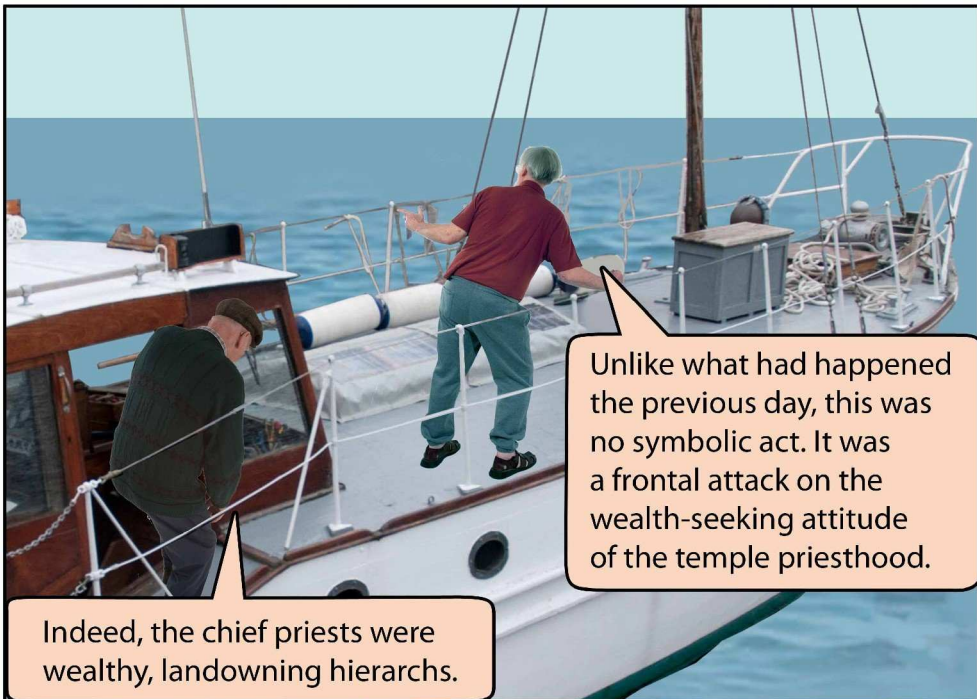
*And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple.*

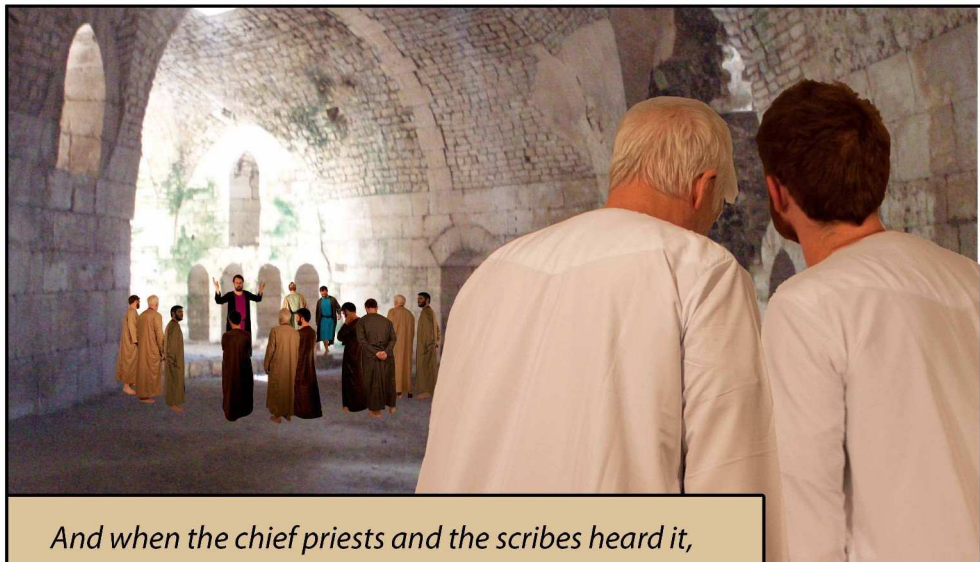


Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers.

Mk11.15-17 See Jer 7.11







*And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him.*

Mk11.18

However, they were temporarily caught off balance by the reaction of the crowd and forced to bide their time, as Luke comments:



*Every day he was teaching in the temple. ...; but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were spellbound by what they heard.*

Lk 19.47-48



Mark tells us about an interesting conversation that took place between Jesus and his disciples one day when they were leaving the temple.



Mk13.1-2

Look, teacher, what huge stones and massive buildings these are!



You see these great buildings? Soon not one stone will be left resting on another; all of them will be thrown down.



That looks like a prediction of the destruction of the temple which happened forty years later.

Yes and the rest of the chapter appears to be about how Jesus' followers were to deal with the turmoil that engulfed the region as a result of the Jewish wars.

What I want to know is whether you think any of it is historical.

It's not inconceivable Jesus thought that, if his attempt to shame the authorities failed, there was likely to be a disastrous nationalist conflict with Rome which could never be won.

However, the evangelists' attempts to make out he was divinely aware of everything that was going to happen doesn't inspire confidence in the historicity of sayings like these.

One of you will betray me.

Mk14.18

Mk14.25

I will never drink wine again.

You will all become deserters.

Mk14.27

Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.

Mk14.30



In any case, one must suppose Jesus was entirely focused on his immediate objective, having little or no regard to what might happen afterwards.

Very well. We now come to Jesus' betrayal.

*Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. When they heard it, they were greatly pleased, and promised to give him money. So, he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.*

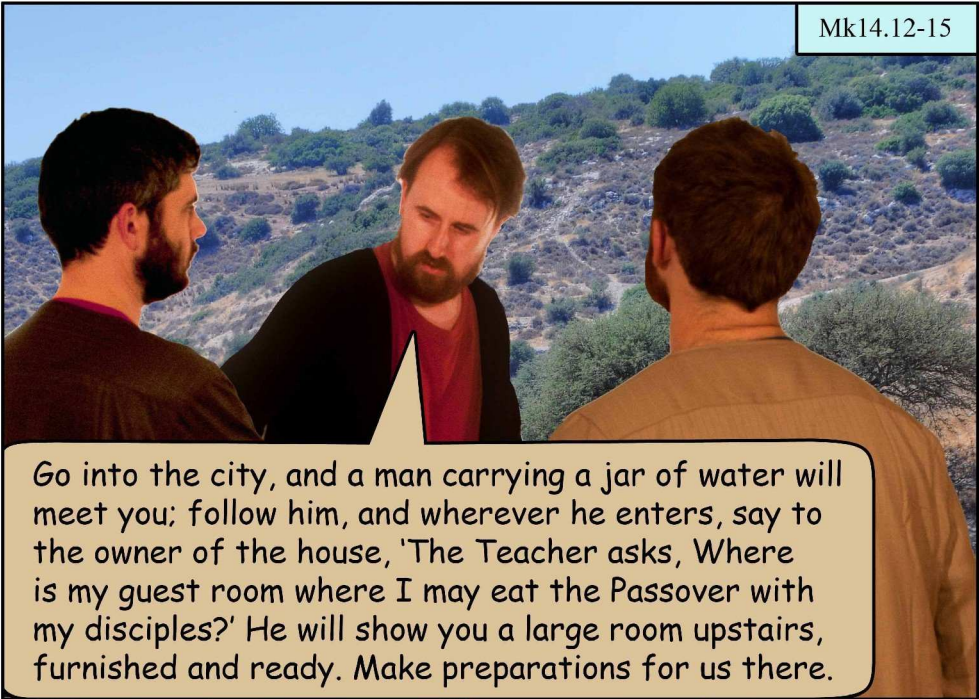
Mk14.10-11



Was his betrayal historical?

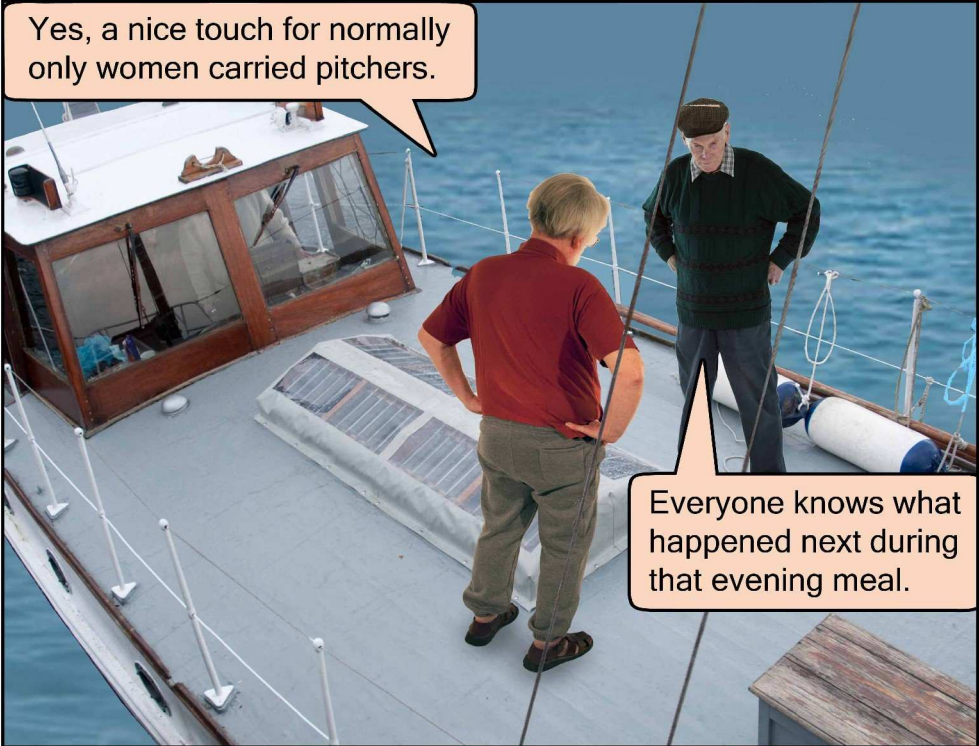
Certainly but that's not to say Jesus knew it was going to happen for, if he had, he would have done something about it... even if only for Judas' own sake!

OK to continue, on the first day of Unleavened Bread Jesus sends two disciples to prepare the Passover meal, employing a stratagem to make sure his whereabouts are not discovered.



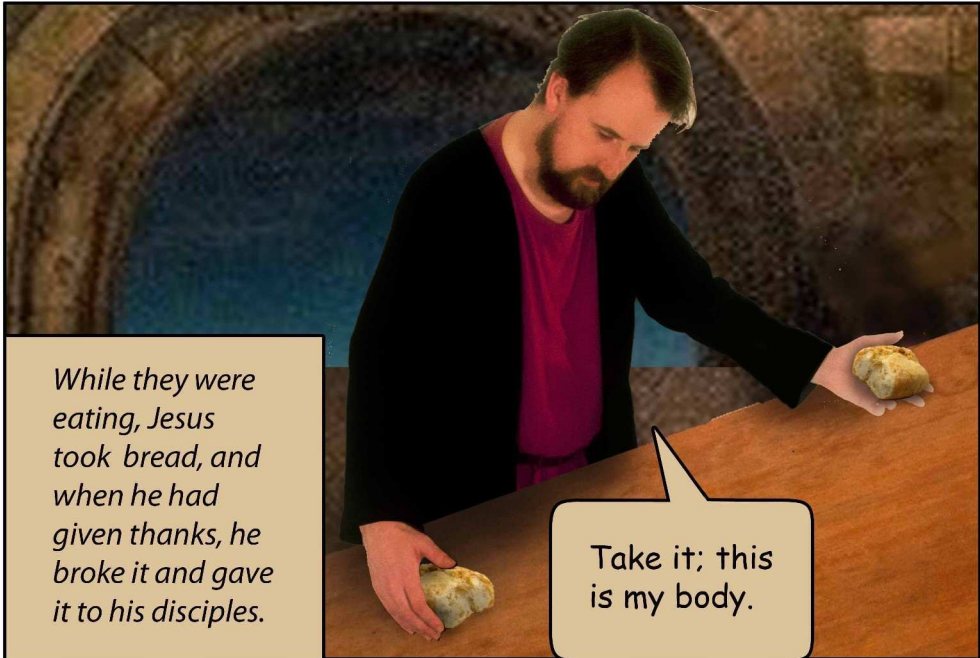
Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, 'The Teacher asks, Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there.

Yes, a nice touch for normally only women carried pitchers.



Everyone knows what happened next during that evening meal.



A man with a beard, wearing a black robe over a purple shirt, is seated at a wooden table. He is looking down at a piece of bread in his right hand, which is about to break it. His left hand is resting on the table.

*While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples.*

Take it; this is my body.

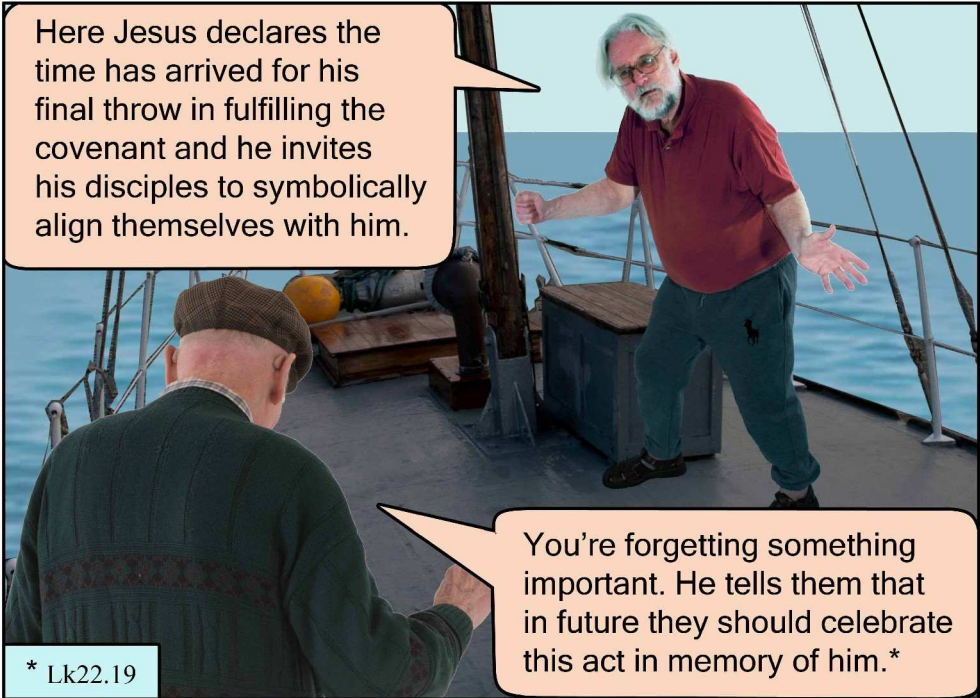
*Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it.*

The same man is shown from the side, holding a golden chalice filled with a dark liquid. He is looking down at the cup with a solemn expression.

*This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.*

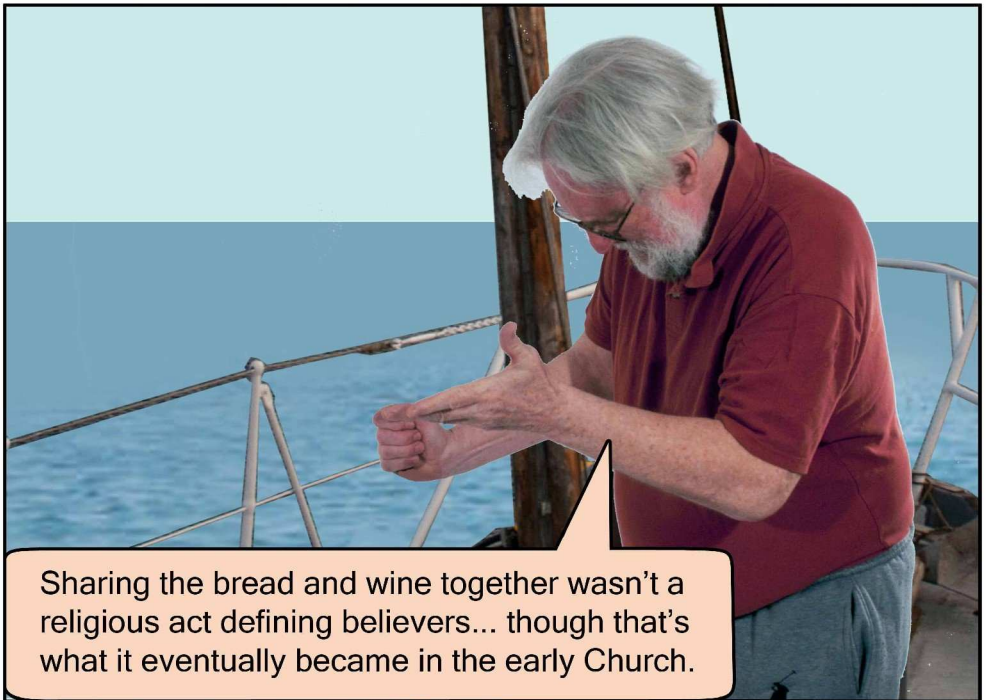
Mk14.22-24



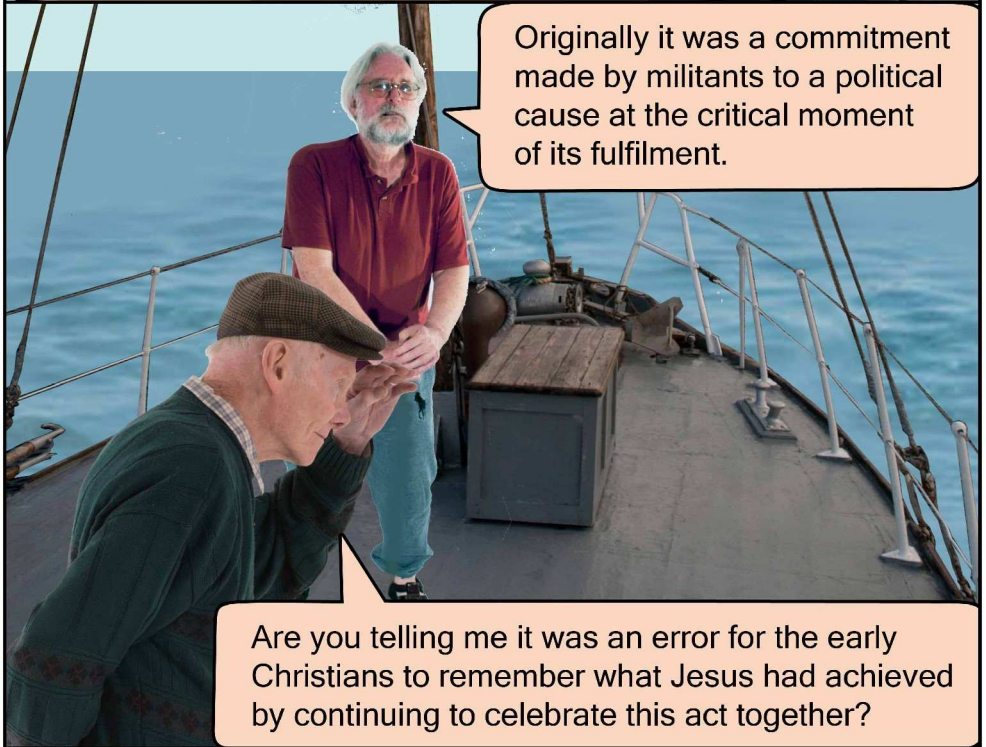


\* Lk22.19





Sharing the bread and wine together wasn't a religious act defining believers... though that's what it eventually became in the early Church.



Originally it was a commitment made by militants to a political cause at the critical moment of its fulfilment.

Are you telling me it was an error for the early Christians to remember what Jesus had achieved by continuing to celebrate this act together?



No. I'm saying it was a mistake for Luke to pretend Jesus wanted people to continue celebrating the act for that was not historical.

Fair enough. After supper they all went out of the city to a garden called Gethsemane at the foot of the Mount of Olives.

Understandably agitated and distressed, Jesus told his disciples to remain vigilant while he went off to pray by himself.

Yes, if ever there was a time to review his situation in the light of the covenantal marginal ideology, this was it.

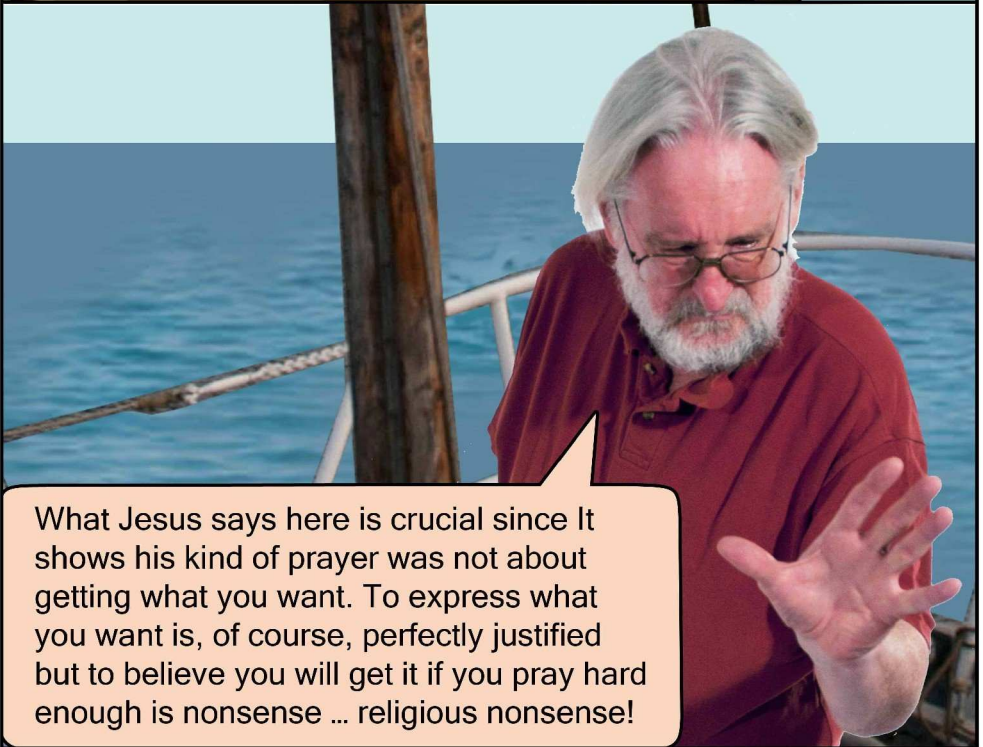


According to the evangelists, the substance of his prayer was that he might somehow avoid the terrible suffering he clearly faced.



Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup of suffering away from me. But let what you want be done, not what I want.

Mk.14.36



What Jesus says here is crucial since It shows his kind of prayer was not about getting what you want. To express what you want is, of course, perfectly justified but to believe you will get it if you pray hard enough is nonsense ... religious nonsense!



When Jesus had finished praying,  
he returned to find his disciples asleep.



Yes, the rest of the story is straightforward. Judas arrives with the chief priests' thugs showing them who to arrest by greeting Jesus with a kiss. After a brief struggle, during which Jesus tells his disciples not to resist, his followers abandon him to his fate.







# 5

## Trial and Execution



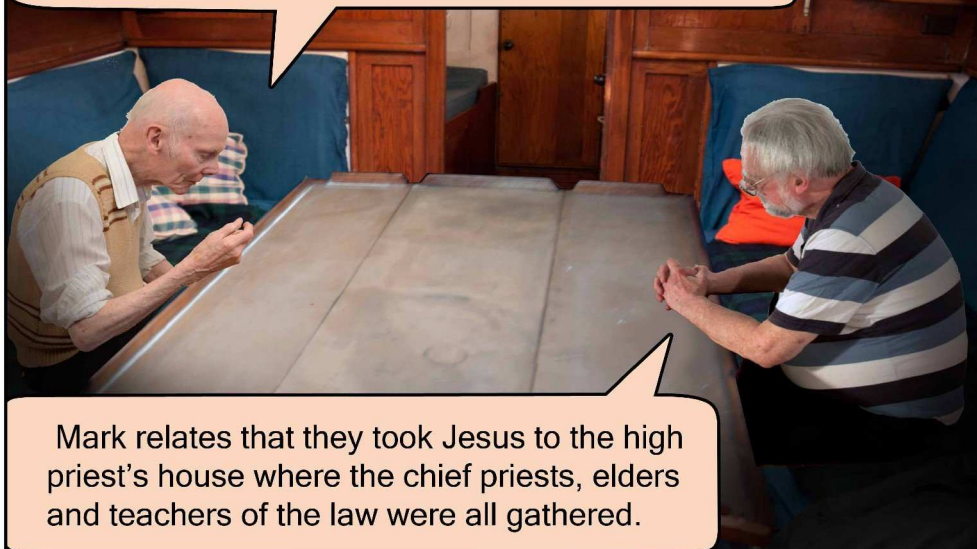


We come now to Jesus' trials...  
first the one before the high priest.



Given our aim is to determine what was truly historical,  
we must keep an eye on all the synoptic accounts. For  
example, only Matthew names the high priest as Caiaphas.

Since Matthew and Luke were clearly following Mark that must be something Matthew has added but let's concentrate on Mark's account first.



Mark relates that they took Jesus to the high priest's house where the chief priests, elders and teachers of the law were all gathered.

That figures since Judas had promised to deliver Jesus to them.



Mark tells us Peter had discreetly followed the party of thugs escorting Jesus but, on arrival at the high priest's house, he remained below in the courtyard along with the guards who had lit a fire to keep themselves warm.

Given Peter's presence, we can take it that up to this point Mark's story is based on his eye-witness account. Now, however, things change.

Yes, one must suppose Mark was guessing about what happened next upstairs in the house.

He claims many witnesses, who had heard Jesus speak, lied about what he had said but couldn't agree amongst themselves. Consequently, the high priest asked Jesus what he had to say for himself, but he remained silent.





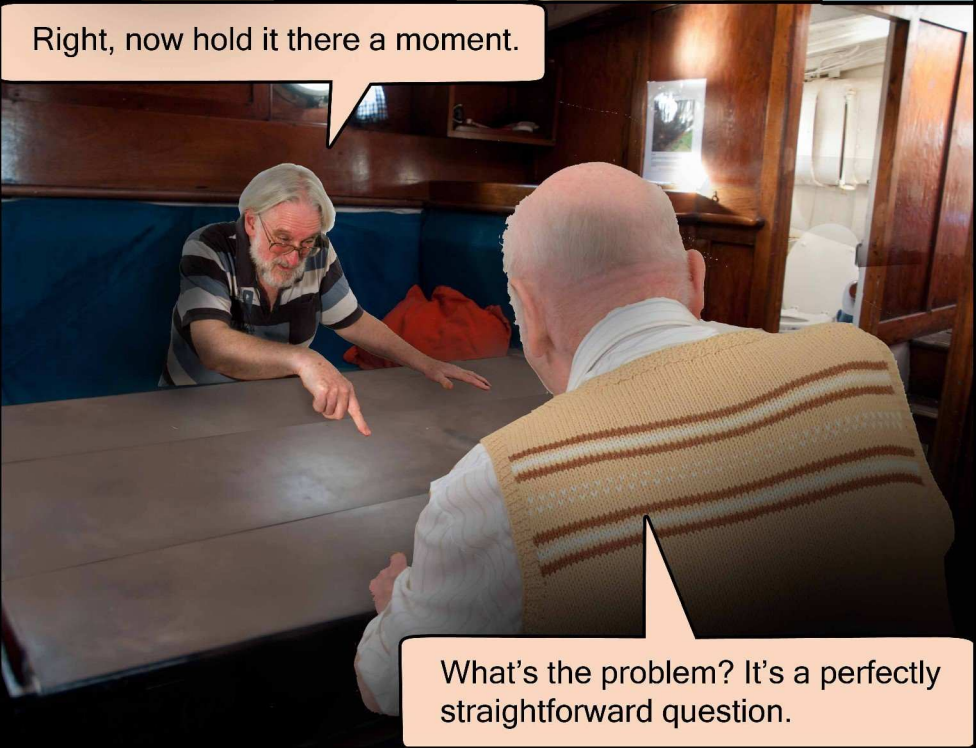
Exasperated, the high priest demanded outright to know what he was up to.



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

Mk14.61

Right, now hold it there a moment.



What's the problem? It's a perfectly  
straightforward question.

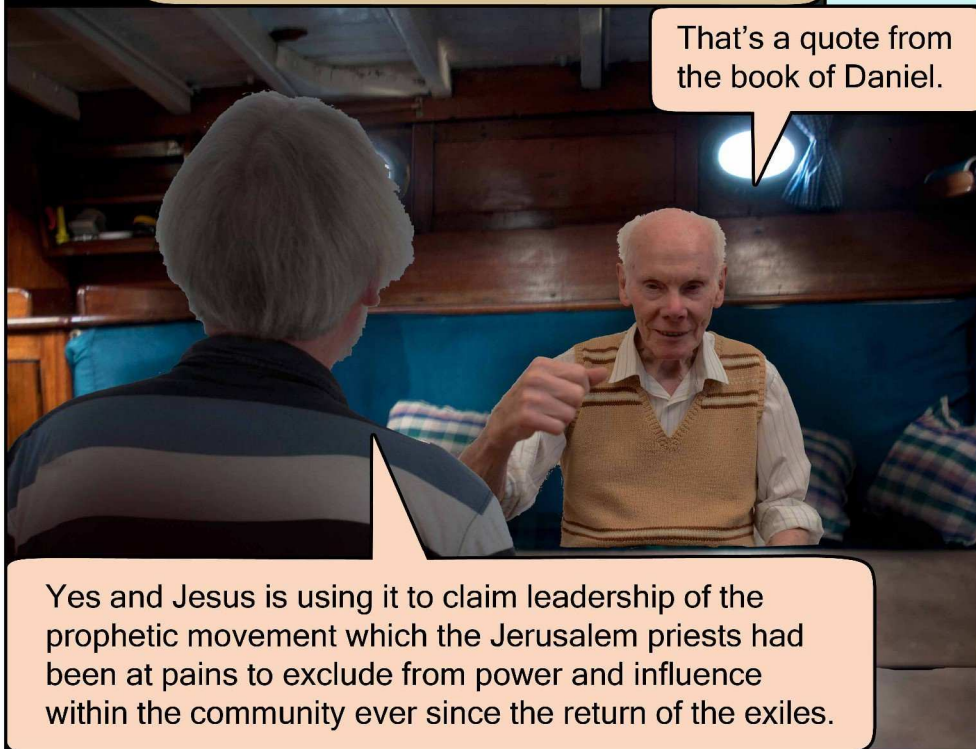
Maybe, but it's important to understand the high priest wasn't asking Jesus whether he claimed to be divine, as most Christians seem to think was the case.

Is that so! What was he asking him then?

He wanted to know whether Jesus claimed to be fulfilling the covenant which was the Messiah's job.

Why is that important?

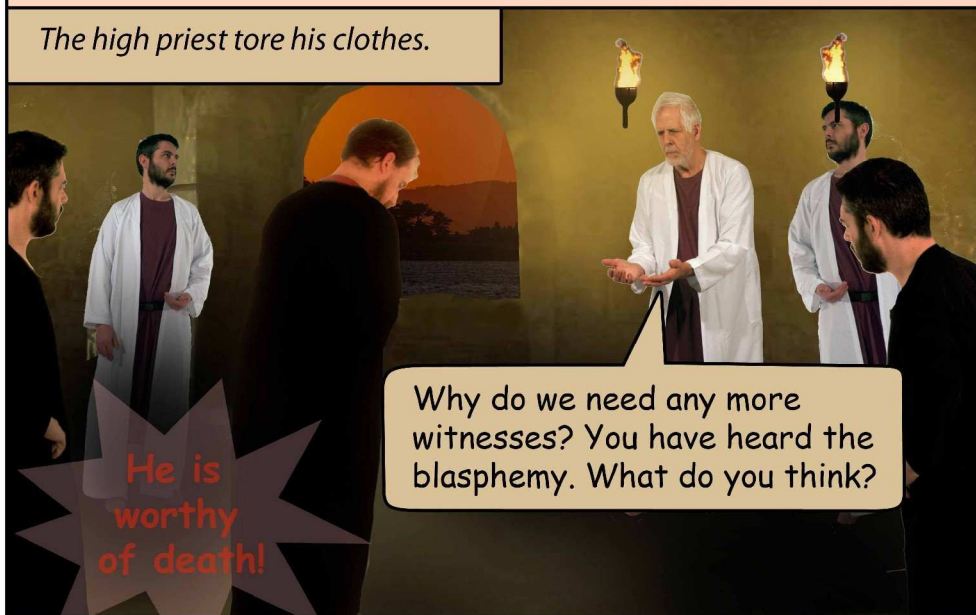
Because it's the only way of making sense of Jesus' reply.



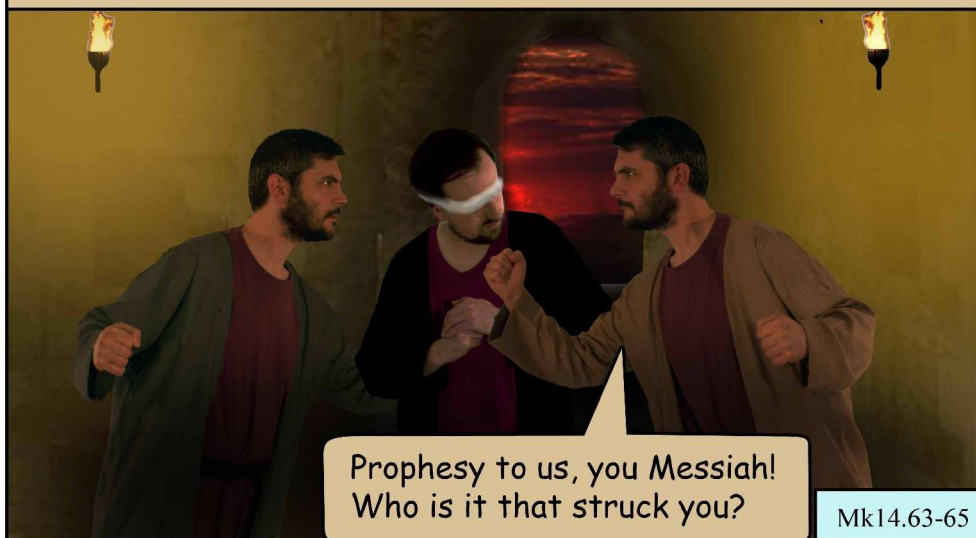


In short, he's revealing his hand, openly avowing to the assembled authorities that he's their number one political enemy. This explains their reactions:

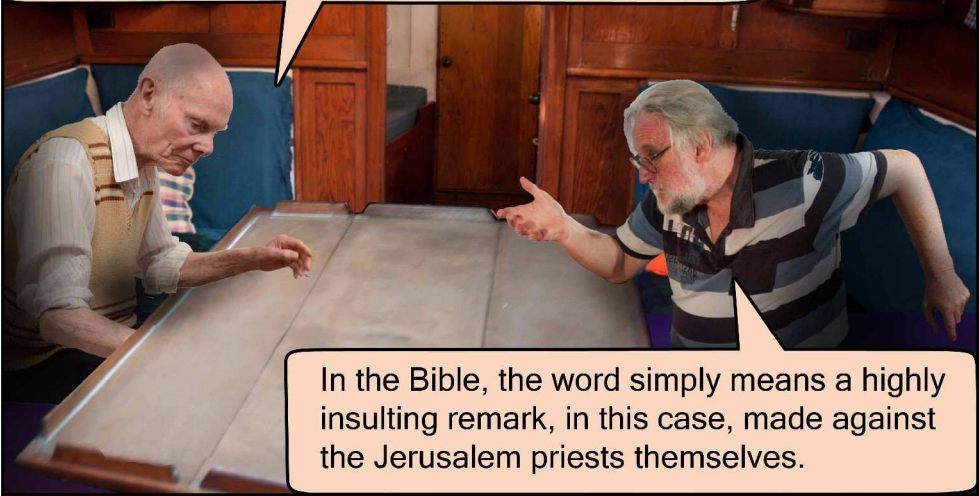
*The high priest tore his clothes.*



*Then some began to spit at him; they blindfolded him and struck him with their fists...*



You may be right. They would hardly have felt threatened by a deranged individual pretending to be divine. But why accuse Jesus of blasphemy?



In the Bible, the word simply means a highly insulting remark, in this case, made against the Jerusalem priests themselves.

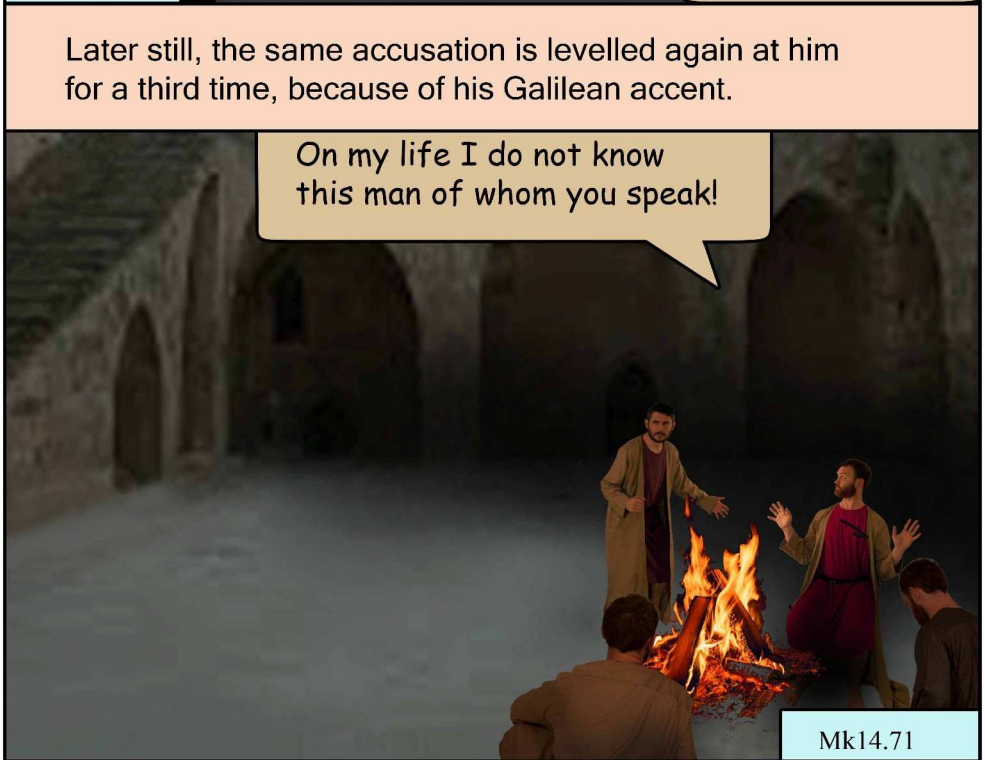
Very well. The story now returns to the courtyard where a servant girl spots Peter and accuses him of being one of Jesus' followers.

You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus.

I don't know what you're talking about.

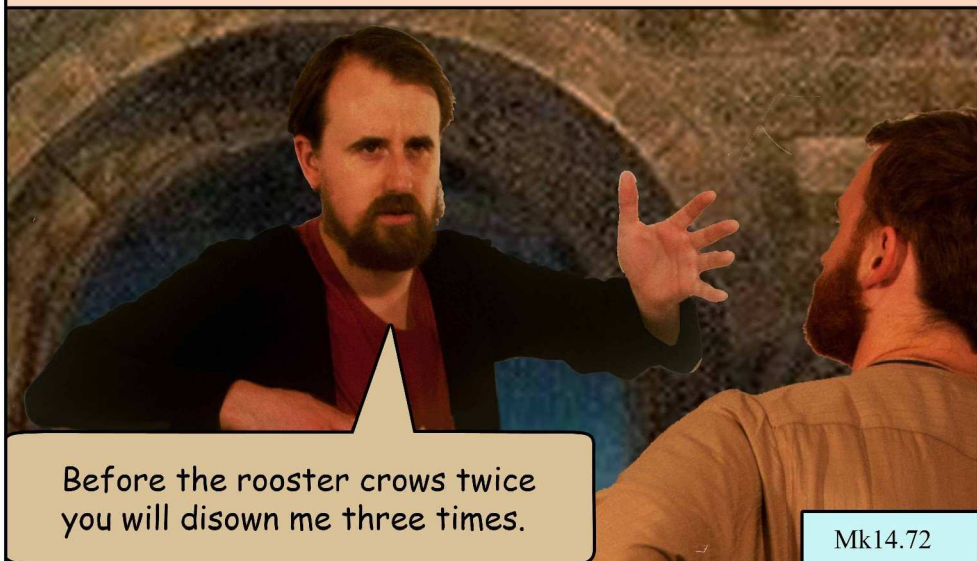


Mk14.66-67





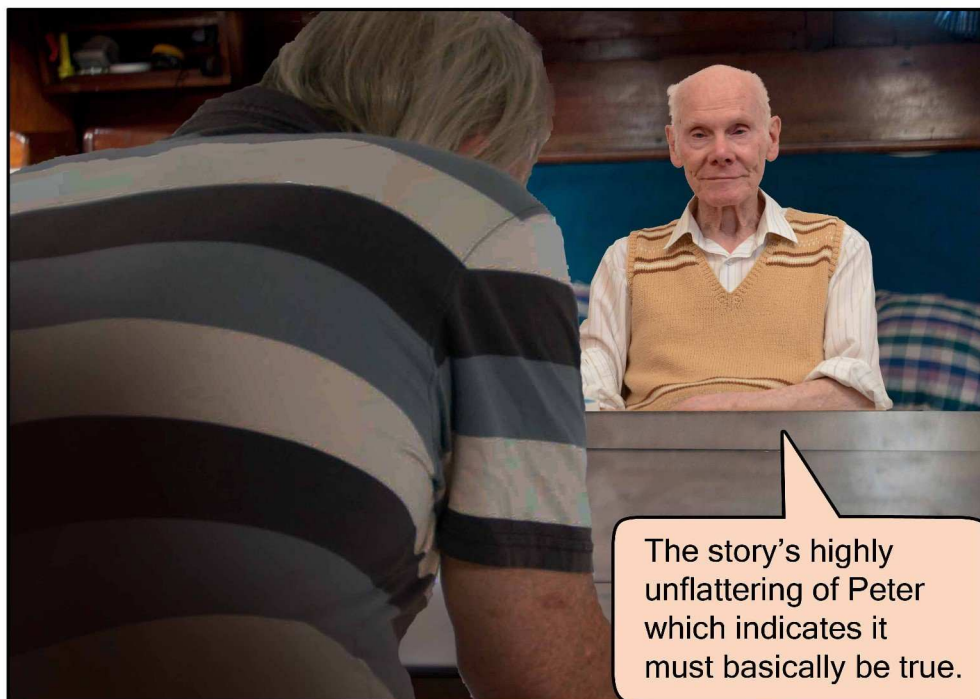
As soon as he says this, the cock crows bringing Jesus' previous words to Peter's mind:



At this point Peter breaks down and it's the last we hear of him. So, one must presume he returned to Bethany where they had all been staying.

Can we say that any of this is historical?



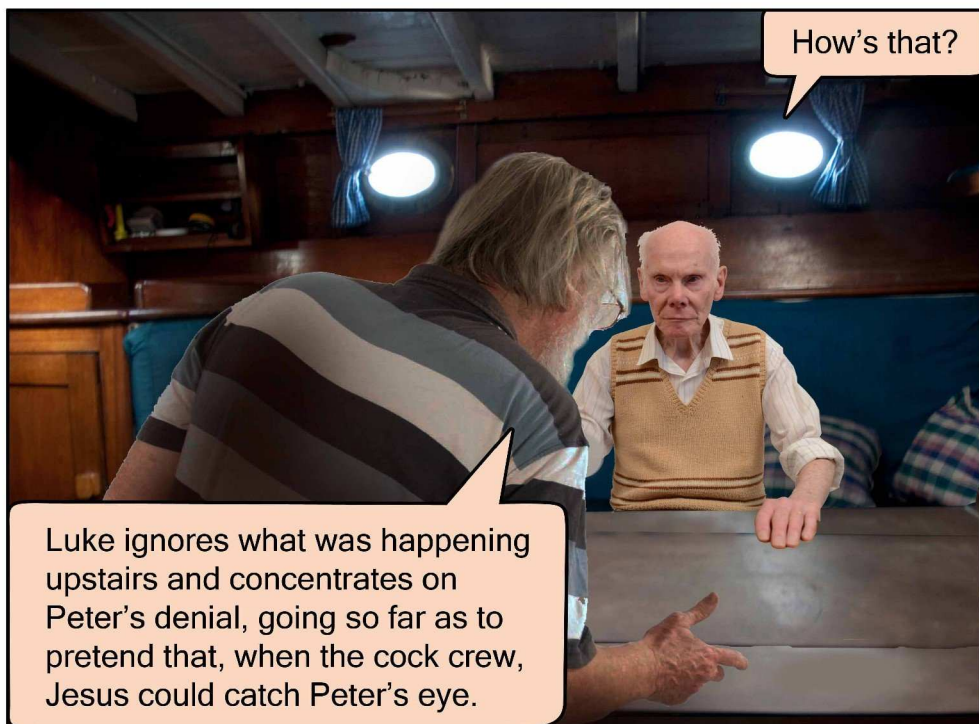


The story's highly unflattering of Peter which indicates it must basically be true.

However, we've already noted the cock crowing business is designed to highlight Jesus' divine foreknowledge which makes this aspect suspect.



It's even more dubious in Luke's account.




*The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord... And he went out and wept bitterly.*










So we agree Peter's denial is historical and that it's highly probable Jesus admitted he was the Messiah, the arch enemy of the Jerusalem priests, causing them to unanimously decide to have him put to death.

The image shows two men in a boat cabin. On the left, a man with a shaved head wearing a white shirt and a tan vest is leaning over a long wooden table. On the right, a man with white hair and a beard, wearing a striped polo shirt, is also leaning over the table. The cabin has blue cushions and wooden paneling.

Yes, it's the only thing that explains why they sent him to Pilate for only the Romans could administer the death sentence.

Right, let's now look at the trial before Pilate. Mark's account is brief. He doesn't even say where it took place.



True, only John tells us that... but we're not dealing with his gospel!

The image shows the same two men from a different angle. The man in the striped shirt is now leaning back with his hands behind his head, looking towards the other man. The man in the tan vest is seen from the back, still leaning over the table. The cabin interior is visible in the background.



Mark says Pilate began by asking Jesus about his Messianic claim using his own words, of course.



Are you the King  
of the Jews?



You have  
said so.

Mk15.2



*Then the chief priests accused him of many things.*

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



Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you.

*Jesus makes no further reply which astonishes Pilate.*



So far all of this seems perfectly plausible even though it's very unlikely Mark had any knowledge of what had happened.



Mark goes on to say Pilate realised the chief priest had only handed Jesus over to him because they were jealous of his fame.

Consequently, he sought to release Jesus making use of a custom that one Jewish prisoner was freed by the Roman authorities during the festivities.



No! Release Barabbas.

Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?

*But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him instead release Barabbas, who was a Jewish rebel.*

Mk15.9-11

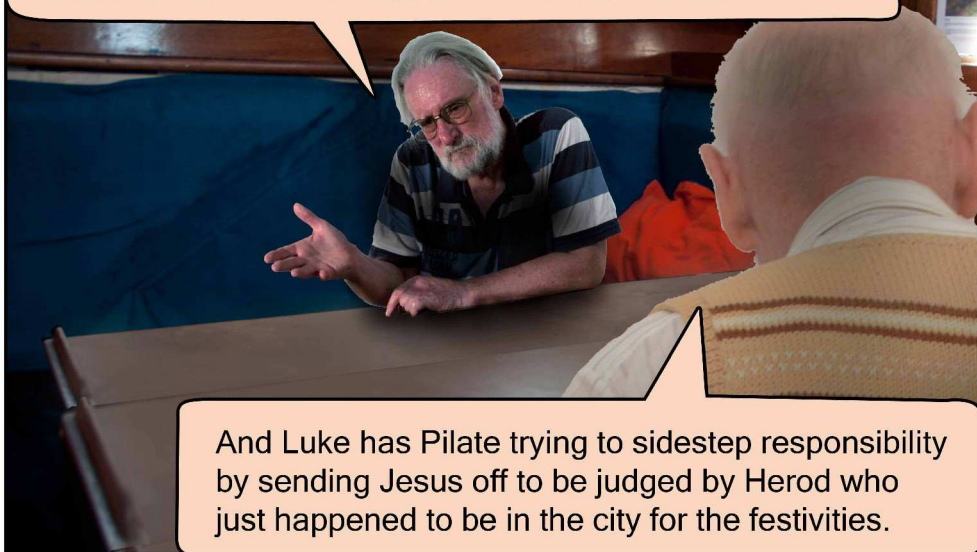


This whole business of Barabbas and the custom of freeing a Jewish prisoner to mark the festivities, constitutes a most unlikely interruption of the trial's proceedings.



Yes, everything suggests Mark invented the incident to make it clear the chief priests, not the Romans, were the ones responsible for Jesus' death.

Interestingly, the other evangelists too add things that underline the very same point. Matthew includes the story of Pilate's wife who sent a message to her husband that she had dreamed that Jesus was innocent...



And Luke has Pilate trying to sidestep responsibility by sending Jesus off to be judged by Herod who just happened to be in the city for the festivities.



So we're agreed. None of these stories have any historical credibility but the point they are all making is certainly historical!



Yes, Matthew summarises it well... though once again one has to say the incident was probably invented.

*So, when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd...*



We now come to the crucifixion.

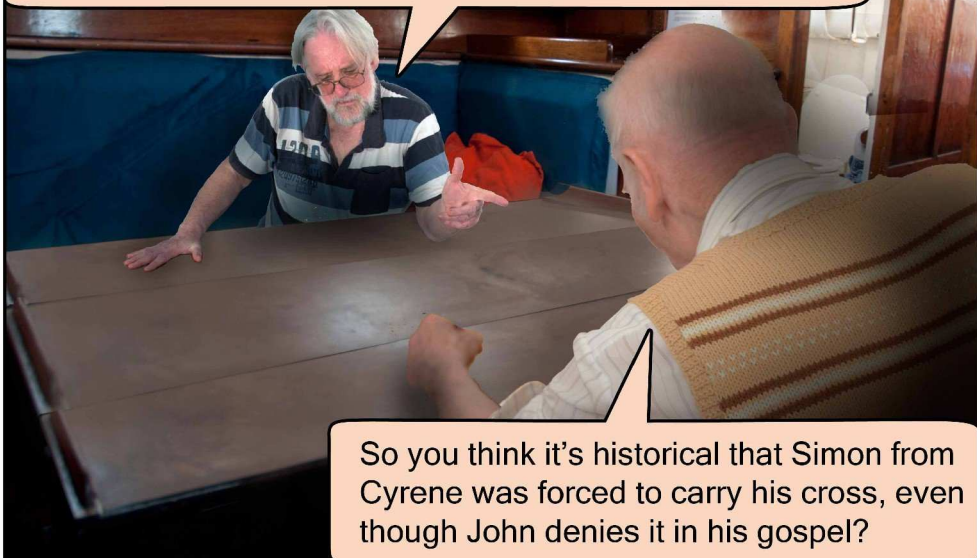
It can't be claimed what happened next is historical given there were no witnesses:

*And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. And they began saluting him,*

**Hail, King of the Jews!**



Just so. It's far more likely the Romans flogged Jesus near to death for the next thing we know for sure is that he was unable to carry his cross to the place of execution.



So you think it's historical that Simon from Cyrene was forced to carry his cross, even though John denies it in his gospel?

Certainly. There's no earthly reason why Mark should have invented it and we're told Jesus was the first to die, which can only mean he had been treated very harshly.



Why then do you think John wanted to deny it?



Clearly, he wished to portray Jesus as assuming the full weight of the crucifixion... but we're not dealing with John.

What do you reckon we can say was historical in Mark's account?

We have eyewitnesses in the women followers of Jesus, said to be present though they kept their distance. So we can safely say Jesus was crucified along with two other Jewish bandits.

Anything else?



It's pretty sure members of the Temple priesthood would also have been present to gloat over the fate of their deadly enemy, though what they actually said is another matter.

What about Jesus being offered wine mixed with myrrh?

That's an interesting feature. The whole object of crucifixion was to inflict the maximum pain and humiliation so it's hard to believe the soldiers carried pain-killers to offer their victims!

Maybe that's why John infers it was Jesus' followers who gave it to him to drink... but why include the incident at all if it's so dubious?

In the Synoptic accounts of the last supper Jesus tells his disciples he will drink no more wine while he's alive, so it seems what we have here is a deliberate echo.



What about all the things Jesus is described as saying?

Well you can forget Luke's account of his discussion with the women following him to Golgotha since, clearly, he was in no state to hold such a conversation!



Fair enough but what about his words on the cross?



There's little likelihood they would have been heard by the witnesses so we can also forget the conversation with the two bandits in Luke.

And the centurion's words after Jesus had died?

The same thing applies. However, it's just possible Jesus' final cry of dereliction could have been heard:



Moreover, it's hard to overstate how surprising the words are in this excruciating context. Difficult to see Jesus' followers daring to make them up... unlike Jesus' final words in Luke, which are almost banal by contrast:



Exactly. In comparison with Luke's proposal, one can't help noting how painfully yet exquisitely Mark's words summarise Jesus' whole endeavour in fulfilling the marginals' cause.

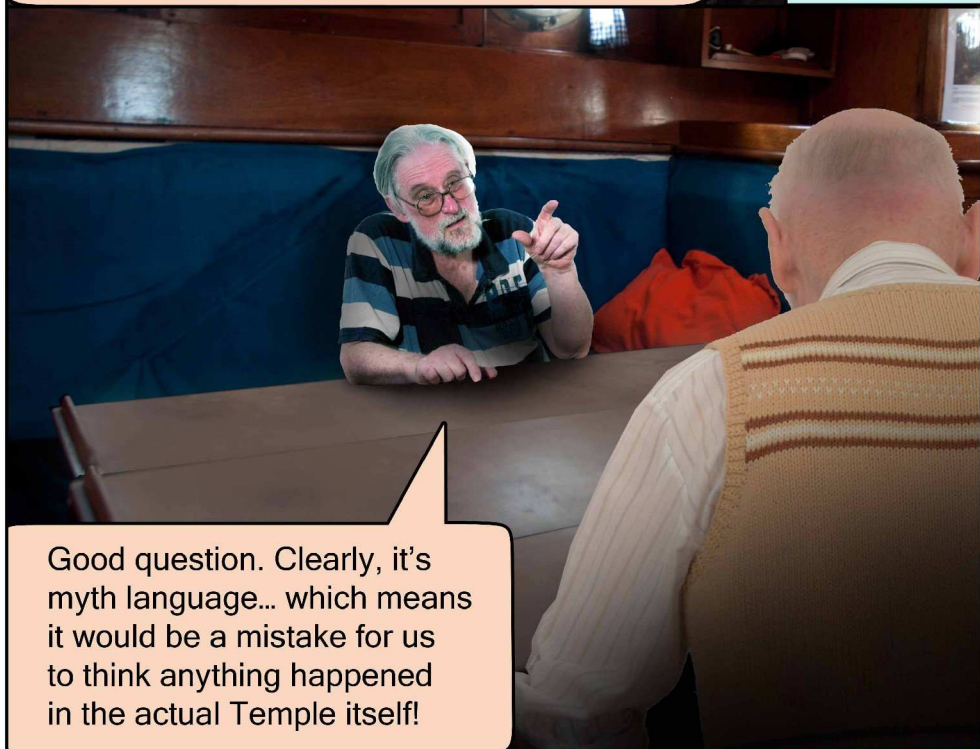




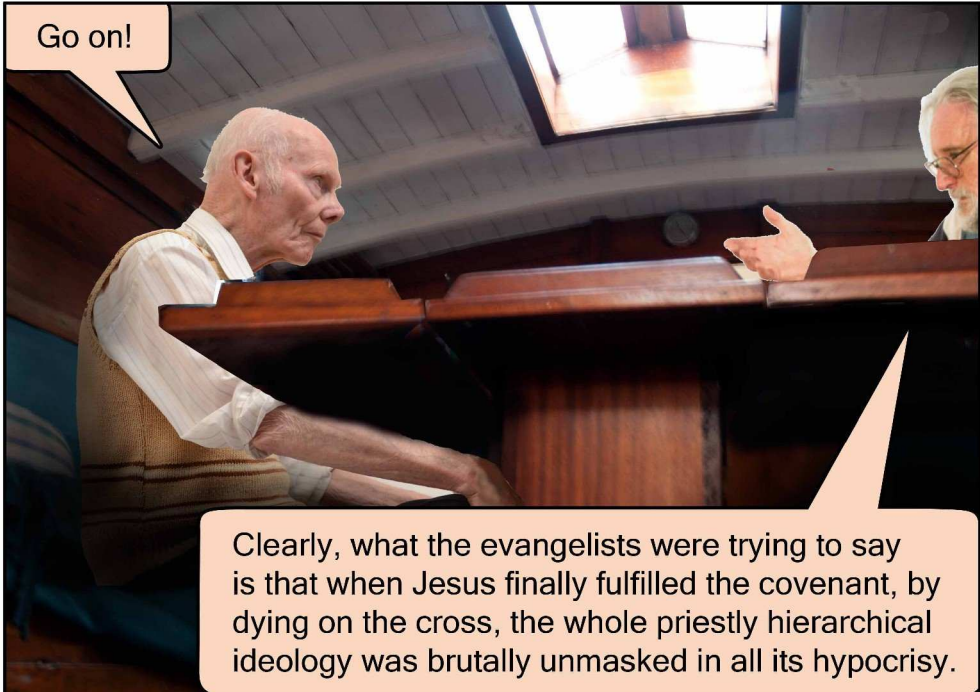


What about the statement recorded in all three Gospels that the curtain closing off the Holy of Holies in the Temple was demolished when Jesus, with a cry, breathed his last?

Mk 15.37.38




Good question. Clearly, it's myth language... which means it would be a mistake for us to think anything happened in the actual Temple itself!



Go on!

Clearly, what the evangelists were trying to say is that when Jesus finally fulfilled the covenant, by dying on the cross, the whole priestly hierarchical ideology was brutally unmasked in all its hypocrisy.



To find out how historically true this was we must look at the resurrection stories.





# 6

## Resurrection



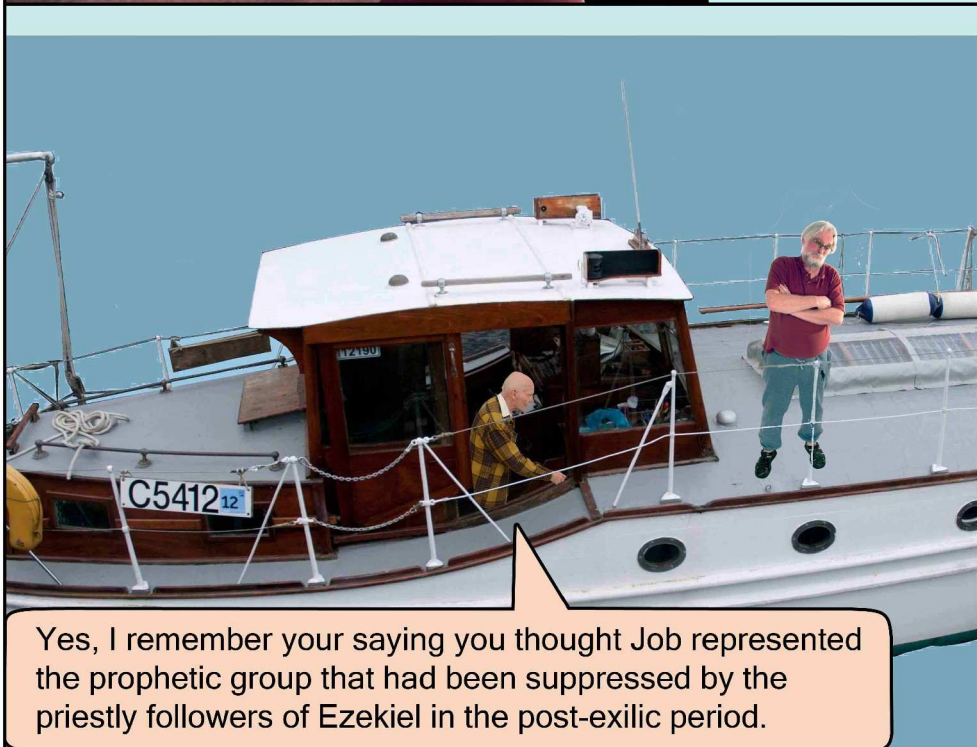
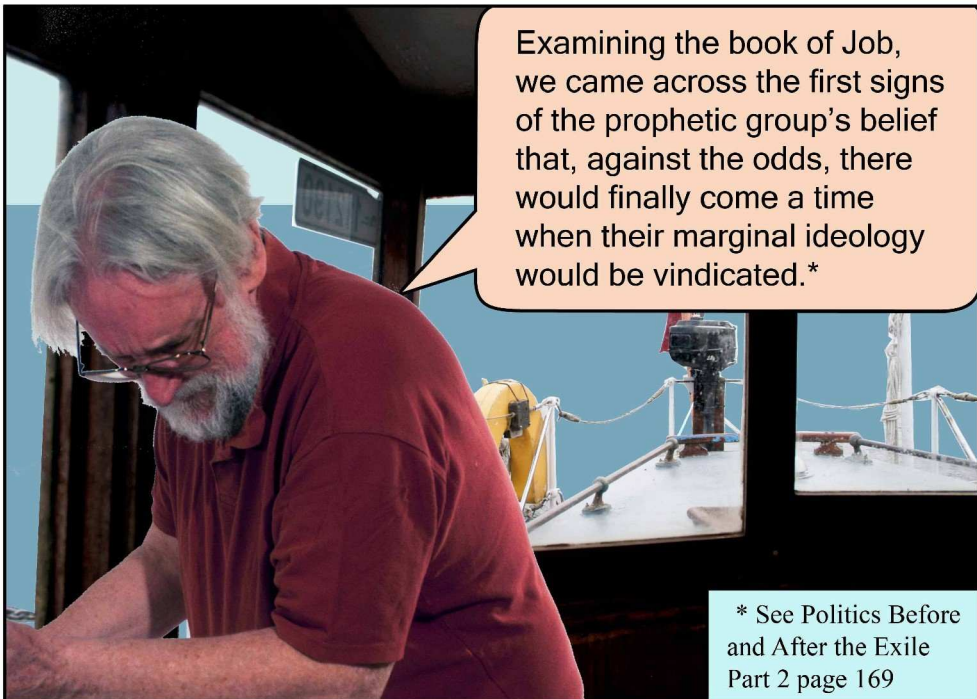


Now let's go up on deck where we can discuss the resurrection.

I'm surprised you want to talk about such stories.





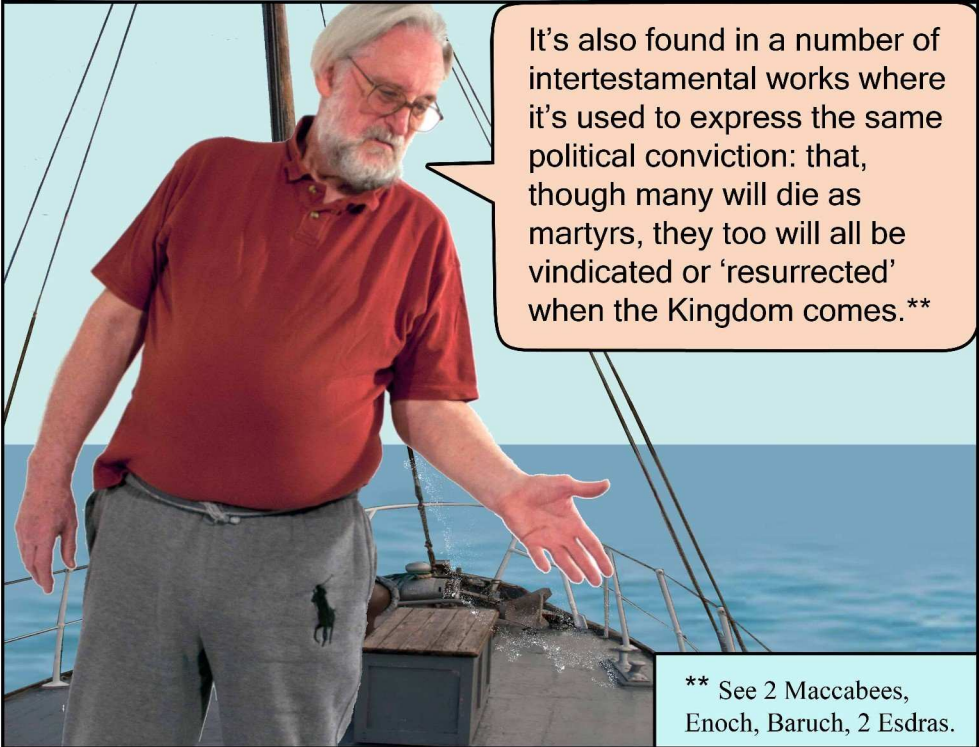


Later, of course, we saw this concept of resurrection taken up again in the book of Daniel. \*



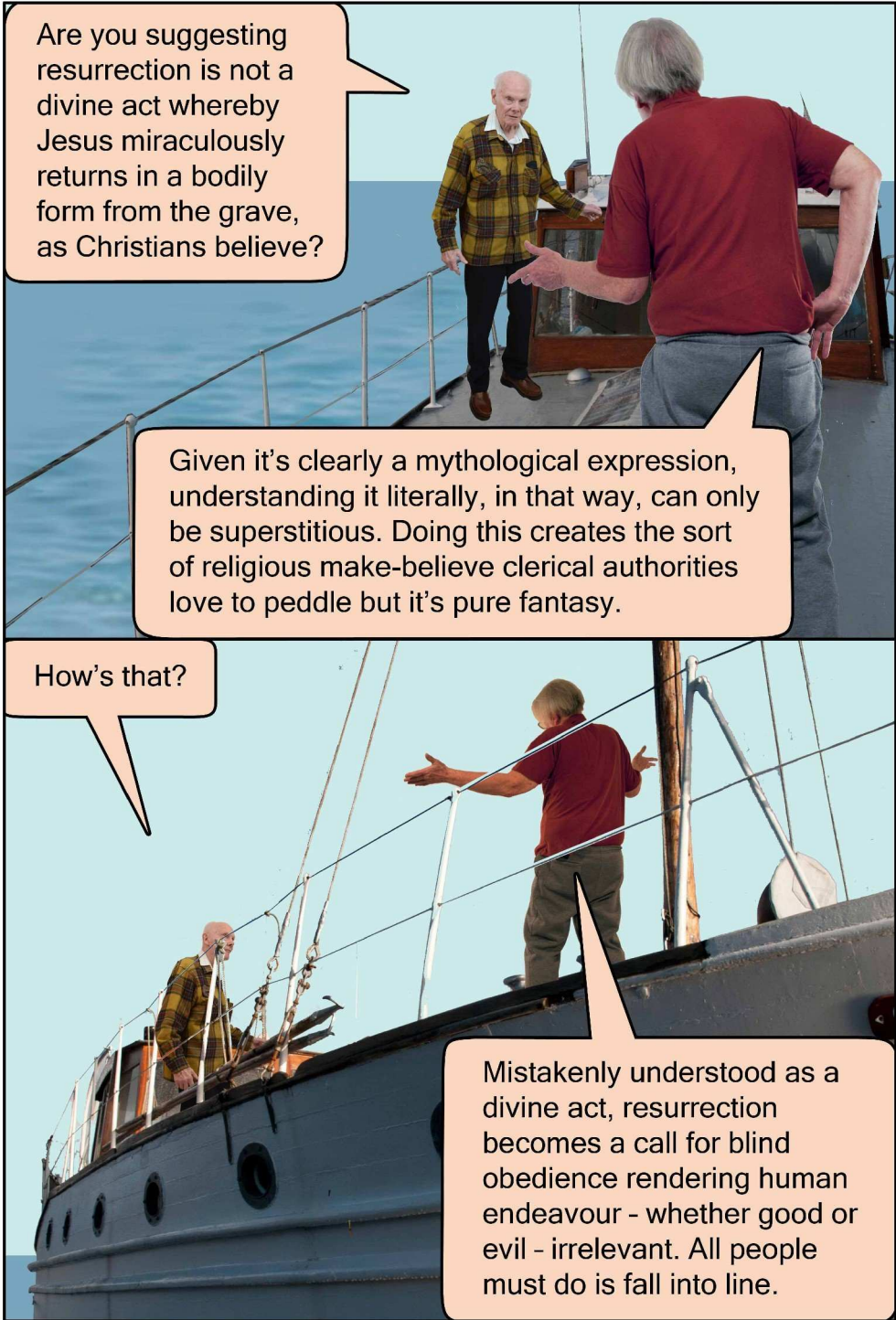
\* See Politics Before and After the Exile Part 2 page 191-192

It's also found in a number of intertestamental works where it's used to express the same political conviction: that, though many will die as martyrs, they too will all be vindicated or 'resurrected' when the Kingdom comes.\*\*



\*\* See 2 Maccabees, Enoch, Baruch, 2 Esdras.





Are you suggesting resurrection is not a divine act whereby Jesus miraculously returns in a bodily form from the grave, as Christians believe?

Given it's clearly a mythological expression, understanding it literally, in that way, can only be superstitious. Doing this creates the sort of religious make-believe clerical authorities love to peddle but it's pure fantasy.

How's that?

Mistakenly understood as a divine act, resurrection becomes a call for blind obedience rendering human endeavour - whether good or evil - irrelevant. All people must do is fall into line.





For fuller descriptions we must turn to the Gospels. The oldest manuscripts of Mark describe three of Jesus' female followers discovering the empty tomb.



*As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.*

They were told by an angel to report the fact that Jesus had risen to his disciples.



*Don't be alarmed, You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. Go, tell his disciples and Peter, that he is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.*

Mk 16.1-8



Later versions include an account of the risen Jesus appearing first to two followers journeying together in the countryside.



Then to the assembled disciples in Jerusalem\*

\*Mk 16.9-14



And we see these stories developed further still in Matthew and Luke.\*\*

\*\*Mt 28.2-10, 16-17; Lk 24.1-9, 13-35, 36-49

So what does all of this tell us?




It indicates that the stories were not told to outline ordinary describable events but rather to try and convey something these writers, with their lack of abstract vocabulary, found indescribable. Hence their resort to mythological language.

Explain that to me, please.




To say the disciples had been hard hit by the crucifixion is an understatement. It represented the catastrophic failure of Jesus' enterprise on which all their hopes had centred, and it highlighted their disarray in the face of their enemies' triumph.





Go on I'm following.

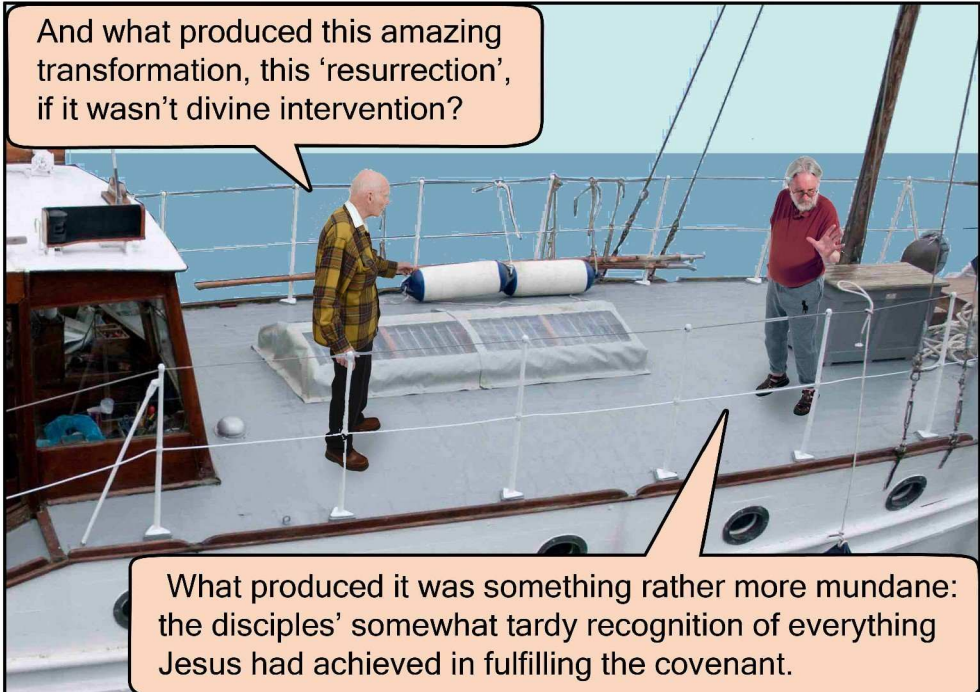
What happened next was, to say the least, unexpected: the amazing growth within them all of a radical change in motivation. At first, they could scarcely credit it but gradually it spread amongst them transforming them from frightened riffraff into an almost unstoppable movement.



And the resurrection?

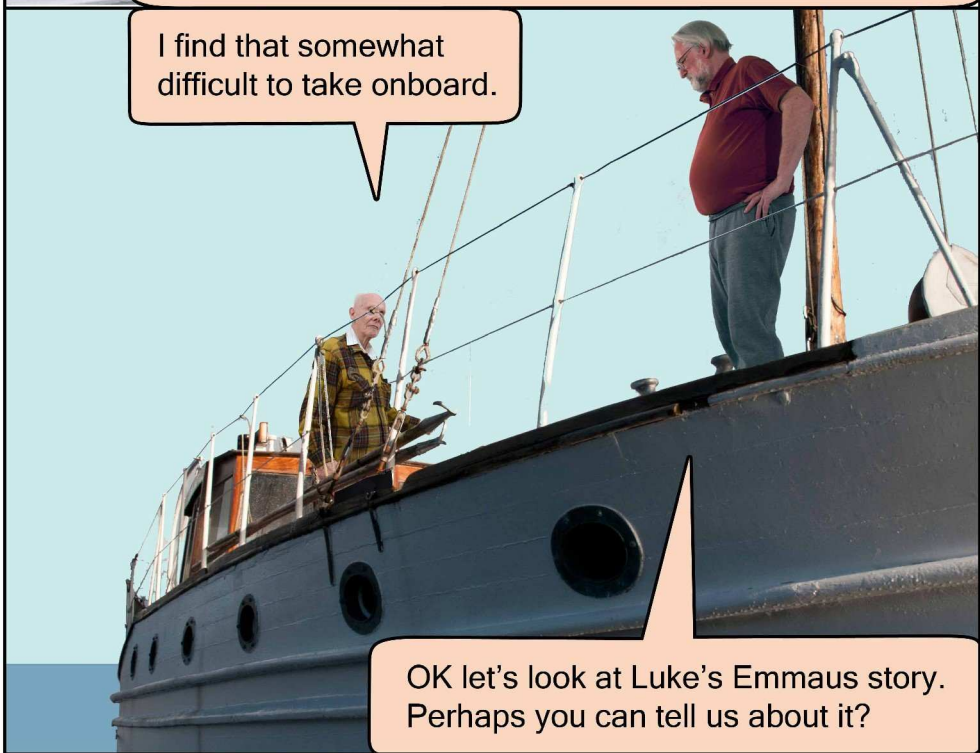
The whole process I've just described was for them, of course, an undeniable fact. What's more, I think you'll agree, they would all have seen it as vindicating Jesus so naturally they spoke of it as his resurrection. It's obvious.





And what produced this amazing transformation, this 'resurrection', if it wasn't divine intervention?

What produced it was something rather more mundane: the disciples' somewhat tardy recognition of everything Jesus had achieved in fulfilling the covenant.



I find that somewhat difficult to take onboard.

OK let's look at Luke's Emmaus story. Perhaps you can tell us about it?

Three days after the crucifixion, two disciples set out from Jerusalem to walk the seven miles to the village of Emmaus. As they journey, they are joined on the road by the risen Jesus who they don't recognise but take to be a stranger.



Jesus asks them about what they have been discussing so seriously and they recount to him the whole business of the crucifixion which they claim has destroyed their lives and hopes.





To finish, they tell him about the empty tomb which they clearly find most perplexing.



Lk 24.17-24

At this point Jesus starts to scold them for being so blind. Taking them through the scriptures, he explains how the prophets foretold that the Messiah had to suffer if the covenant was to be fulfilled.



Lk24.25-27

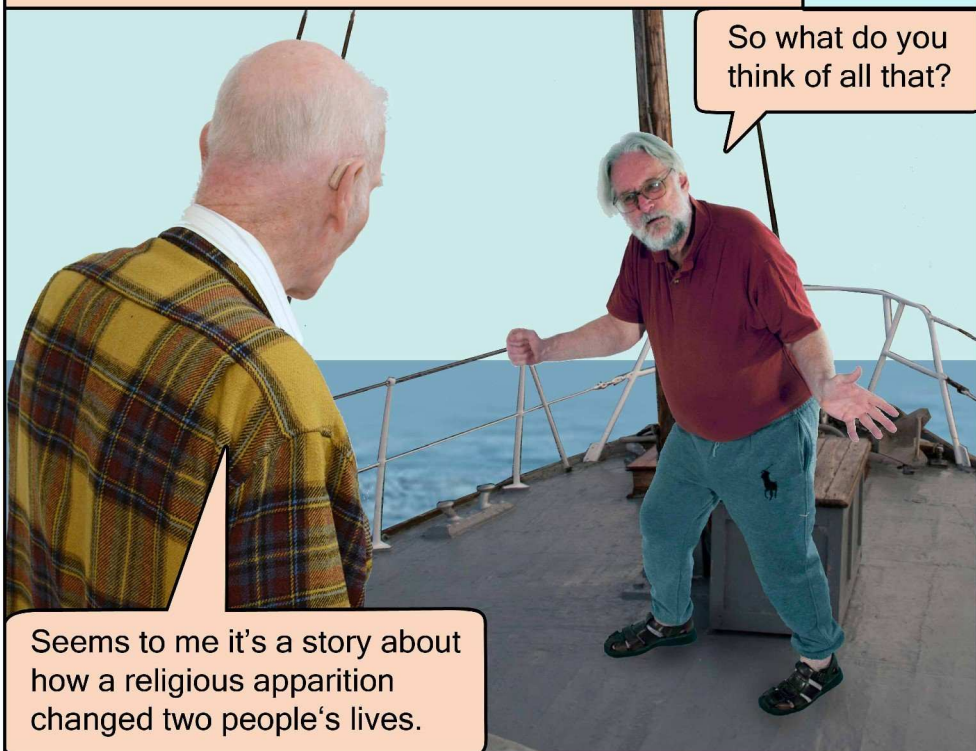


Arriving at their destination, Jesus makes as if to continue his journey but they persuade him to stay and have a meal...

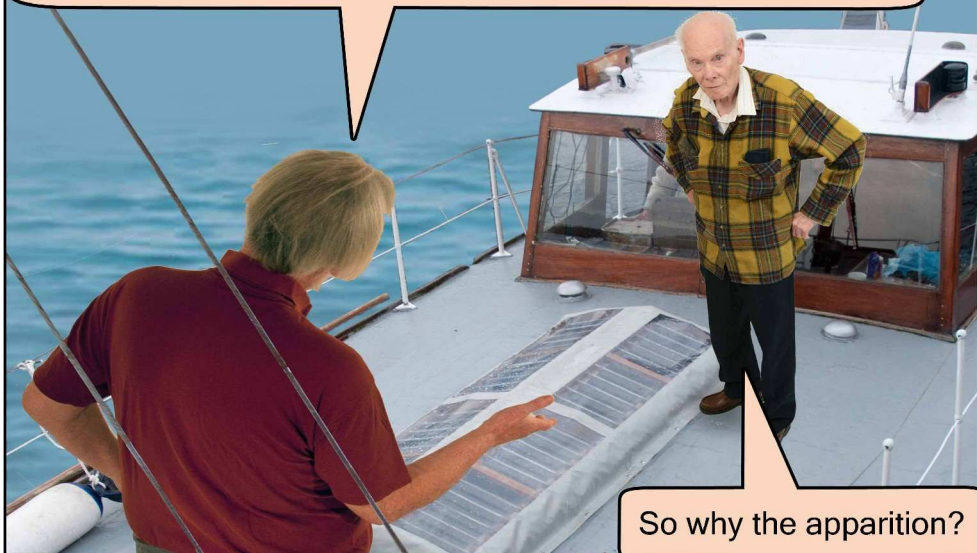


...in the course of which they suddenly realise who he is when he takes bread, breaks it, and gives it to them.

Lk24.28-30

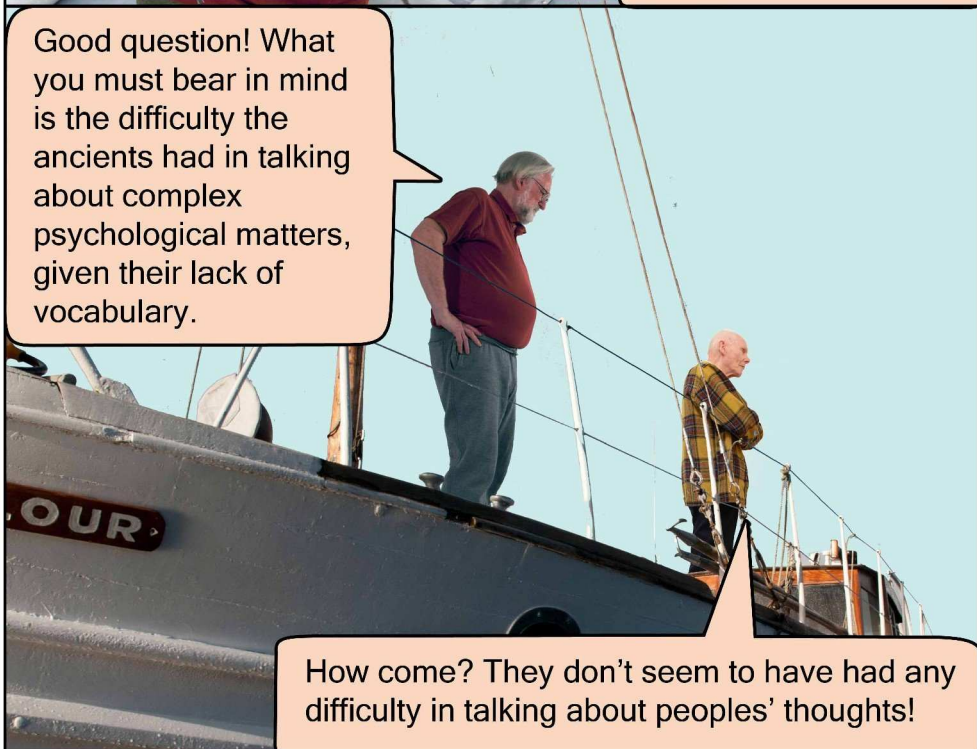


No, it isn't! According to the story, it wasn't the apparition that changed their lives. It was, rather, a true understanding of scripture and everything Jesus had politically been doing.

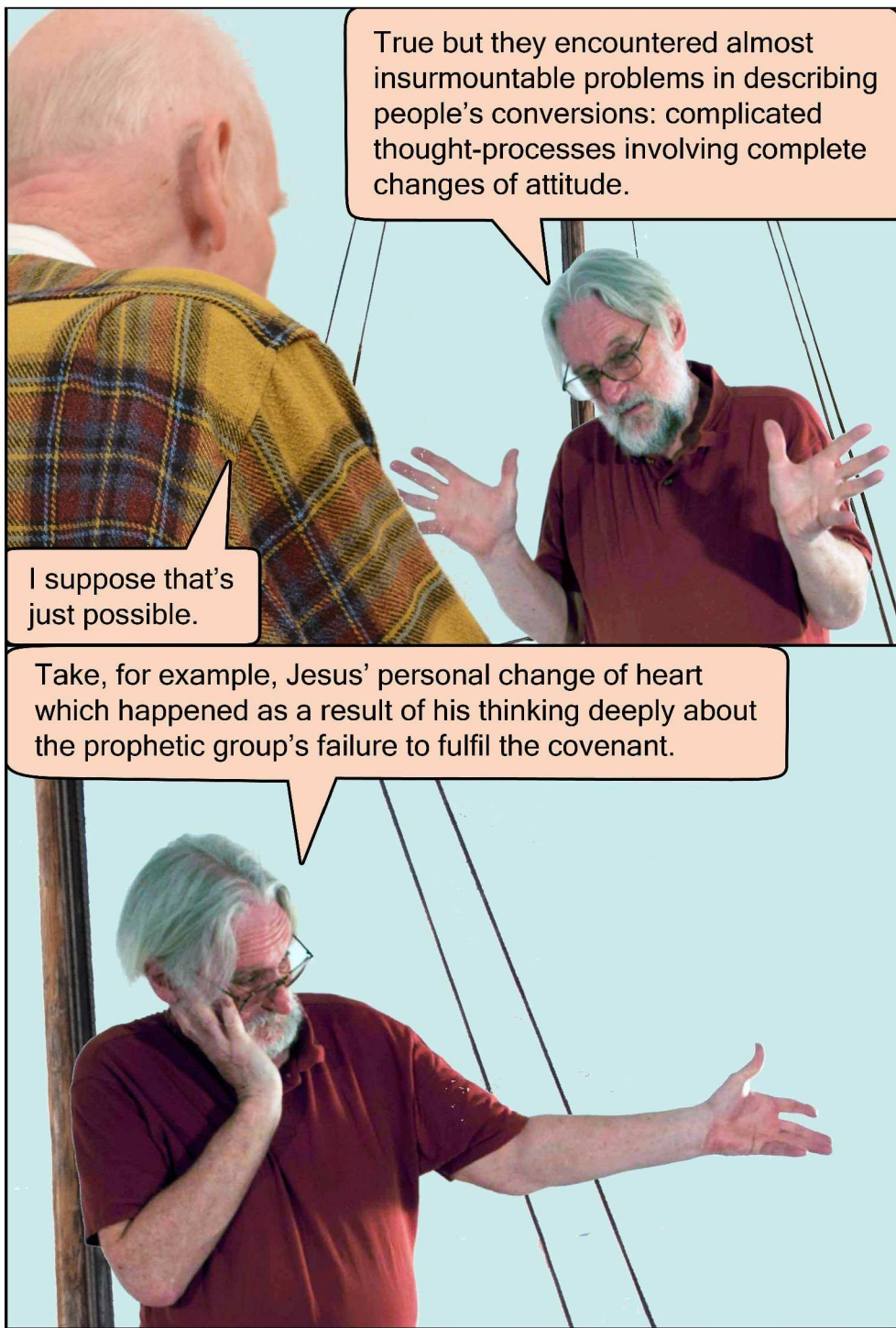


So why the apparition?

Good question! What you must bear in mind is the difficulty the ancients had in talking about complex psychological matters, given their lack of vocabulary.



How come? They don't seem to have had any difficulty in talking about peoples' thoughts!



True but they encountered almost insurmountable problems in describing people's conversions: complicated thought-processes involving complete changes of attitude.

I suppose that's just possible.

Take, for example, Jesus' personal change of heart which happened as a result of his thinking deeply about the prophetic group's failure to fulfil the covenant.



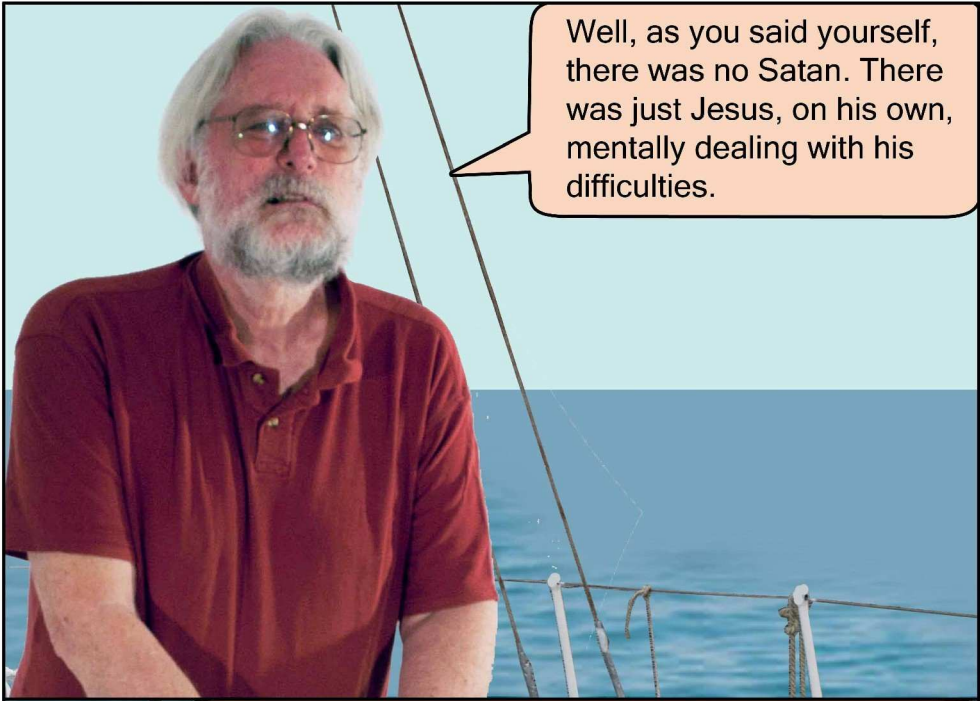
This brought him to see the need to get rid of civilization's coercive politics and to replace it with his new marginal strategy of grace.

That's all very well but I don't remember such a conversion experience being described anywhere.

Have you already forgotten our discussion of Jesus' temptation by Satan? \*

\* See page 2

What about it?



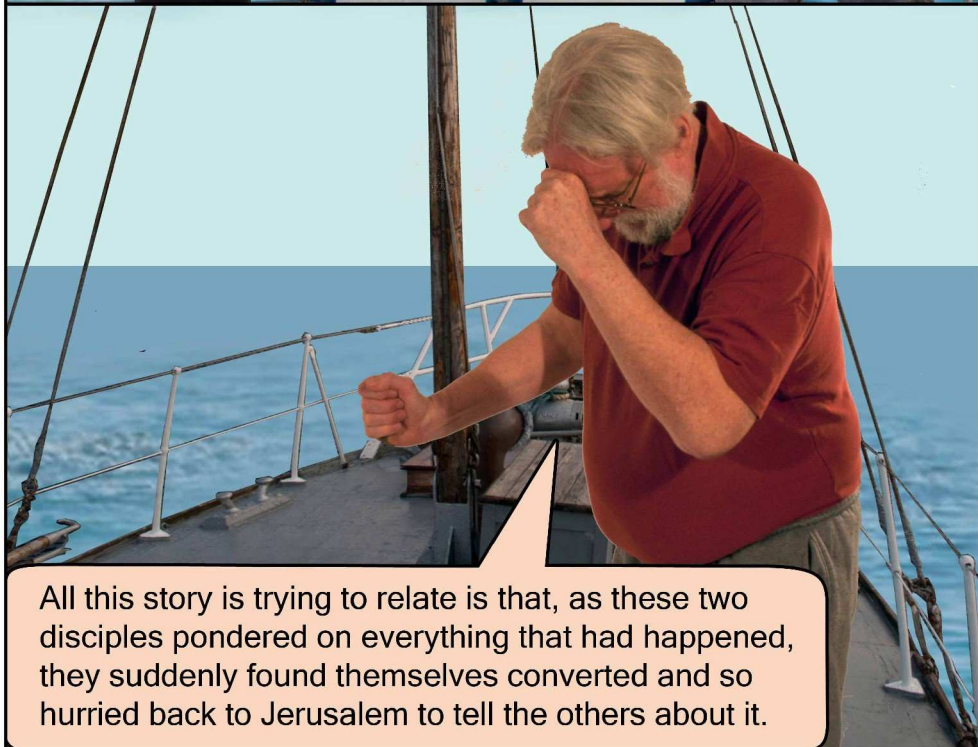
Well, as you said yourself, there was no Satan. There was just Jesus, on his own, mentally dealing with his difficulties.



Satan was simply a representation of civilization's authoritarian political approach against which Jesus, as a follower of the covenant, found himself pitted.

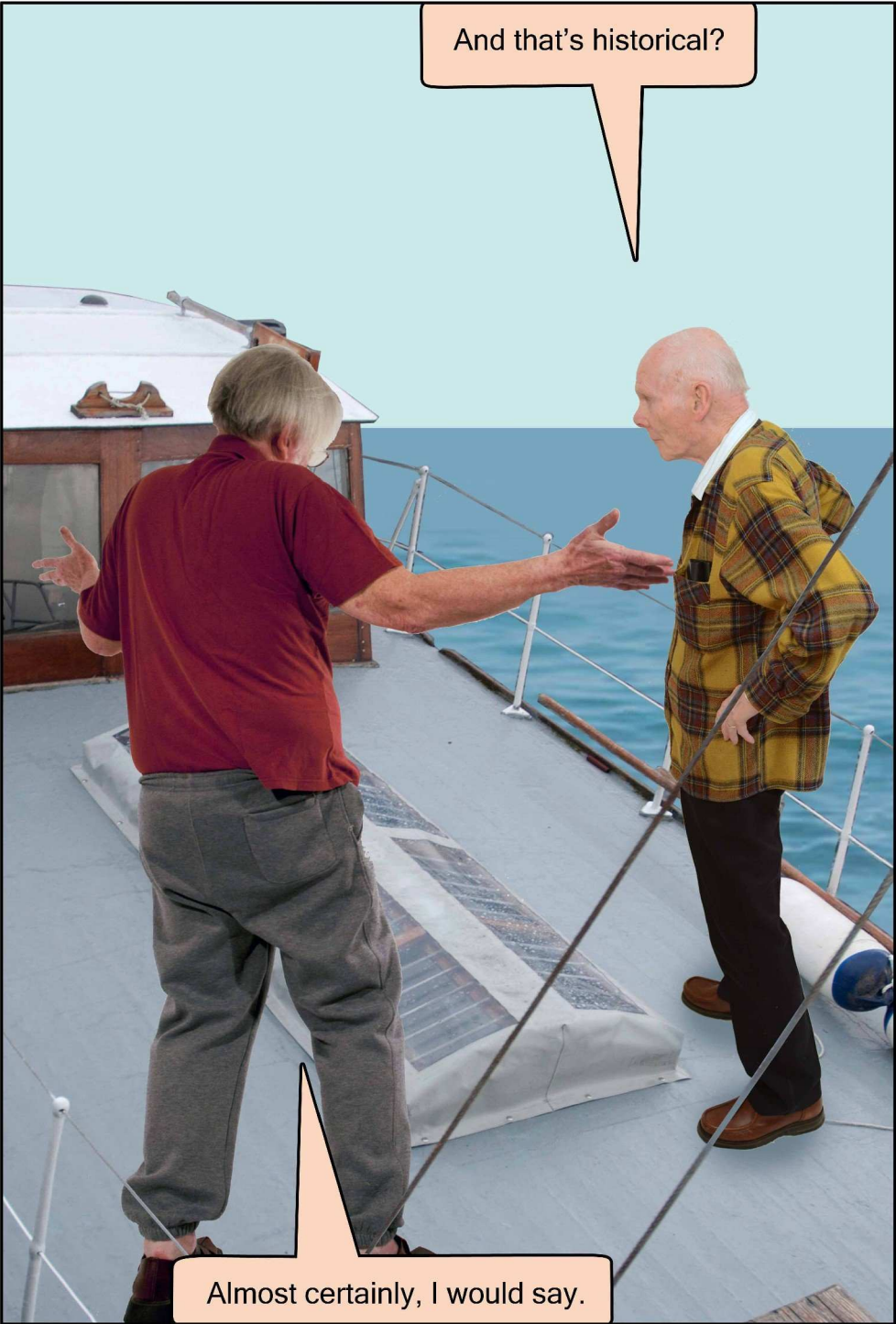
So how is all this relevant to our story?

Well, just as it would be a mistake to see Satan as a diabolical apparition in the temptation story, so it has to be an error to see Jesus as a divine apparition here in this Emmaus story.



All this story is trying to relate is that, as these two disciples pondered on everything that had happened, they suddenly found themselves converted and so hurried back to Jerusalem to tell the others about it.



A photograph of two men on the deck of a boat. The man on the left, wearing a red polo shirt and grey trousers, is gesturing with both hands towards the other man. The man on the right, wearing a yellow and brown plaid jacket and dark trousers, is looking at him. The background shows the blue sea and a clear sky. A white cabin structure is visible on the left. Two speech bubbles are overlaid on the image: one at the top right and one at the bottom left.

And that's historical?

Almost certainly, I would say.

That's the end of the last book  
in my cartoon series on the Bible.  
I'm glad it's finished... though  
sad my old friend John Rowe  
died before I could complete it.

Andrew





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

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Thanks to all of you.







Parker claims the Bible's mythological language is not religious, as is generally supposed, but rather it is political. He argues this was the normal language used by the ancients to talk about the powers they experienced in the world, given their lack of abstract vocabulary and that it should not, therefore, be understood as indicating a belief in unseen, supernatural forces.

Not surprisingly this idea is not widely welcomed. Parker's work is, however, not to be discarded for two reasons. First the range and depth of scholarship here is truly remarkable and there can be no accusation of ignoring the work of biblical scholars. Again and again, traditional exegesis is considered, with alternative and often highly original understanding being offered. Secondly, Parker's presentation of his argument in cartoon form relates very well to modern life and is ideally suited for education and the medium of the internet.

This is a massive, intriguing work, both responsible and challenging.

Prof. D W D Shaw