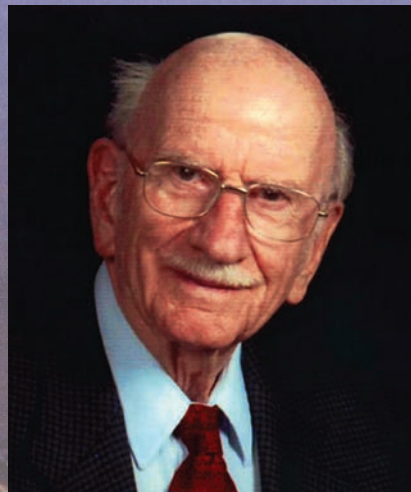


The Gift opens with a parable: On Christmas morning one gift remains, beautiful and complex, given to all the family, but with no manual to tell how to put it together. Jesus, the Gift, comes with no divinely dictated instruction to say what his brief life and his message mean; so that, from the beginning, his followers have been offering their interpretations, sometimes sharply disagreeing. This author, with a lifetime perspective, examines and sifts together what the three synoptists, Mark, Matthew and Luke, record as remembered sayings of Jesus, listening for those moments when the Gift's own voice seems to come through.

Donald R. Fletcher grew up in pre WWII Korea and earned degrees in English and theology at Princeton. He has lived and worked in Chile, Mexico and the Caribbean; and in the USA since 1960, in Texas, Alabama and New Jersey. He has taught English and Biblical Studies at high school and college levels, and has served extensively in Presbyterian and ecumenical churches over 68 years. A creative thinker and writer, he is the author of *I, Lukas*, *Wrote the Book*; *Doors of Bronze*; *View from the Playroom Floor*; and *Turnings: Lyric Poems Along A Road*; as well as numerous other poems, plays and prose pieces.



The Gift: Looking to Jesus As He Was

Donald R. Fletcher

The Gift

Looking to Jesus As He Was

DONALD R. FLETCHER

The Gift

**Looking to Jesus
As He Was**

DONALD R. FLETCHER

To you,
Man of Galilee,
ever mysterious companion
on desert roads and sparkling shores,
giver of bread and wine,
whose hand is on the curtain
to make a beginning of my ending.

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Cover Photo: Sea of Galilee, from below the Church of the Primacy of Peter
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Foreword

This book comes out of a lifetime of experience with the New Testament gospels, and reflection on Jesus and his message. In it I am speaking with anyone who reads and prizes those gospels, and who, like me, has wanted to come closer to the man Jesus himself.

All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise indicated.

For dates, I have preferred B.C.E. (Before Common Era) and C.E. (Common Era), as now generally used, rather than the specifically Christian B.C. (Before Christ) and A.D. (Anno Domini).

I could hope that the reading of the book should be as meaningful to you, along your way, as its composition has been on mine.

Donald R. Fletcher
Lions Gate, Voorhees, N.J

Introduction

A Parable

1

The card said that the gift was given to the whole family—not like all those other gifts that family members were giving to each other. Theirs had been opened, admired, arranged, and the torn wrappings all cleared away. This was—sometimes—an orderly, considerate family. But the Gift, distinctive, beautiful, still rested on the coffee table in the center of the room.

What seemed to be the main part of it looked simple, until you examined it closely and saw the intricate design and obviously delicate workmanship. And the other parts beside it—if they were parts—must be meant to be assembled, making one complex, ingeniously fashioned artifact. But how? No one could decide. There were many trials, and some strongly held opinions. The problem was that no manual had come with the Gift—no set of instructions, written in one or several languages—no guidance. There was just this gift for the whole family to admire, to puzzle over, to find different ways to enjoy, if they could.

2

How silently, how silently
the wondrous gift is given!

That is Phillips Brooks, in his hymn “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” The gift is given quietly, in an obscure corner of the world. And it is given without elaboration. That is the truth we start with. The Jesus message comes, not as doctrine or revealed communication, but as person. He enters through the ever-mysterious, ever-new process of gestation and childbirth that we all share. He grows up, lives out his brief years, startles, captivates, and offends various people, and is put to a cruel and patently unjust death.

Jesus’ essential story is simply told. Where he lived was something of a backwater of the world of that time. He evidently created a stir, but a lot of other currents were churning the same waters. After he was put to death, the indications are that he was officially forgotten. Only those who had been his friends and immediate followers continued to talk about him, beginning to make their claims as to who they believed that he was.

3

The Gift is still here in our 21st century—on the coffee table at the center of our life. The influence of this extraordinary person has been powerful enough for history world-wide to be divided according to the presumed year of his birth. His shadow falls across the councils and commerce of Eastern as well as Western nations. But is the shadow cast by Jesus himself?

From the time of his first followers, people have struggled to express who they think that he is and what his coming has meant to them. As there came to be organized churches and an organized faith—a new religion—various and conflicting ideas were sorted out. Some emerged on top; others were pushed aside. An agreed-on orthodoxy of Christian teaching was eventually estab-

lished. Those who varied from it came to be branded as heretics, excluded, even persecuted.

This process was already beginning in the later first and early second centuries C.E. as the New Testament writings were being composed, and it is reflected in them. It continued through the third and fourth centuries in extensive writings of the Church Fathers and in councils of church leaders. It received a huge push forward under the Emperor Constantine, when Christianity emerged from its unrecognized status to become, in a few short years, the preferred religion of the Roman Empire. The Nicene Creed is one heritage of that emergence. A carefully explicit statement of the orthodoxy at which the organized Church was arriving, it is still widely used in Christian worship today.

So where are we now? Has the Gift been understood, as explained and expounded in the Constantinian era and since then, in the creeds and doctrines of the churches? Is its meaning clear?

The spate of books, articles—films, even—about Jesus that has been pouring out over the last century and a half would seem to say that exploring and explaining is still needed. In the West, successive awakenings have opened the Bible and Christian theology to critical examination. And now global interchange and global politics are bringing Christian claims into daily confrontation with the claims of other religions; while Christianity itself is trying to cope with its fragmentation. There is not just one perceived and accepted Jesus doctrine. Jesus—the Gift—is the subject of many rival and sometimes contradictory interpretations, many claimed revelations.

The people who claim them appeal to the Scriptures, particularly the New Testament scriptures, for authentication. But, generally, it’s a question of which passages are selected as authority and of how those passages are interpreted. The Bible, whether Old or New Testament, doesn’t speak with one voice. The more closely it is read, the more clearly its different accents are distinguished—and the more we become aware of its complex authorship and markedly differing traditions.

What this book will endeavor to do is to distinguish those traditions and set them aside, going back to the single, original Gift—to

Jesus only. Many recent books about Jesus try to do this in various ways. Can it be done? Can one recover the Jesus of history, the man himself, a real, actual person living in a real, actual time and place, two thousand years ago? For many of us it is valuable—and profoundly meaningful—that we should try.

Elaboration

4

Jesus' immediate followers had no ready explanation about him. As far as we can tell, Jesus of Nazareth had come among them quite simply as a sort of self-appointed prophet and rabbi, or teacher. He attracted disciples—evidently he actively enlisted some of them. A central core appear to have become his dedicated followers, leaving their occupations and families. They moved with him from place to place in an itinerant ministry that blended private and public teaching with healings and occasional denunciations.

On the model of the prophets of Ancient Israel and of his contemporary, the fiery John the Baptizer, Jesus challenged the practices of some religious leaders of his people. Like various of those prophets, including John, Jesus was demanding an inner godliness, not a reliance on religious law and ritual. And he was making the demand without having any formal sanction—but simply in the name of God, whom he spoke of as “your Father in heaven.” This much seems clear from the gospel memories that were later set down.

Jesus' teaching, what we can know of it, was in the style of prophets of Ancient Israel—Amos, Isaiah, Hosea and others. It was generally figurative, symbolic, and categorical. Jesus made copious use of parables—sometimes a single picture deftly suggested, sometimes the outline of a complete story. These parables were symbolic. And whether the comparison being made was explicit or implicit, generally it was not elaborated. There is little indication that Jesus offered interpretations of the meaning of his parables. He seems to have left that to his hearers to ponder—which also was in the tradition of Israel's prophets.

And in that tradition, Jesus taught in categorical terms. We try to listen to him—listening for his voice, filtered through the New Testament voices of the early churches. When we do, we hear

how drastically he speaks. He does not moderate the demands he makes, the requirements of God's kingdom. He seldom says that his hearers should try to do this or that—that they should be thus, as far as they are able. He simply says, Do this; be that. “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48); or, as Luke has it, “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (6:36; where also “merciful” might be better rendered as “compassionate”).

Jesus' remembered actions, similarly, appear to have been symbolic at times—also in the tradition of Israel's prophets. The action had a symbolic significance, but the symbol was not explained. We think of that particularly memorable action, as variously recalled in Paul's tradition and in those of the Synoptic writers, when Jesus takes a loaf of bread and a cup of wine at his last supper. His statements—even though the memories leave us with various wordings—are simple and symbolic. His followers are to remember and to repeat the actions, and in that way to remember him. How? With what powerful meaning and association? That is left to them to know.

5

Jesus' death, the timing and the manner of it, came to be seen as central to his message. Did he himself anticipate his death as a culmination of that message, or as a necessary part of it? This, supremely, is an unexplained aspect of the Gift. The *titulus*, “Jesus Nazarene King of Jews,” nailed on the cross in Pontius Pilate's sardonic gesture, is little help. It only adds another layer of symbolism to this act, which faith comes to see as the supreme act of God's revealing in Jesus. After two thousand years we are still pondering, and still differing widely and sometimes heatedly, on how to interpret its meaning.

And then there's Jesus' resurrection. That piece of the Gift moves out of history, out of space/time altogether, along a dimension that is outside the here-and-now. Those who claimed to have experienced it seem to have handed along some confused memo-

ries—quite understandably so. They are strong in their insistence that it was the real Jesus who encountered them after his death on the cross—but this would be a reality of a different order.

Even the risen Jesus, according to the memories of those early encounters, doesn't give his followers an interpretation—a key to the meaning of his life, his ministry, his death and resurrection. There is still no manual provided by God to go with the Gift.

In Luke's beautiful resurrection idyll (24:13-35), the Stranger who joins those two disciples on the Emmaus road on that first day of the week expounds to them the whole meaning of the scriptures. He rebukes them for not believing what the prophets had declared, “that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory.” He begins “with Moses and all the prophets,” interpreting to them “the things about himself in all the scriptures.” But Luke does not provide for us the text of such an interpretation, as spoken by the risen Jesus. What he suggests, rather, is the sort of argument from scripture that Jewish Christian believers of his time were beginning to develop—to buttress their faith in Jesus as God's Messiah, and to try to convince their fellow Jews.

6

The “wondrous gift” is given—silently. This appears to be God's way. We yearn and struggle to interpret, to understand, to discover God's message, God's intention in the Gift.

What needs to come first is to meet and to sit at the feet of the person himself, Jesus, Yeshua, man of Nazareth in Galilee, in what we now call the first century C.E.

PART ONE:
Many Interpreters

I. The Way

1

There are few clues, historically, to how the first disciples of Jesus interpreted what he meant to them, when he was no longer there. There was, clearly, a sturdy and growing body of Jesus followers centering in Jerusalem, in the four decades that elapsed between Jesus' death and the destruction of the city in 70 C.E. Those followers would all have been Jewish believers, at first. Jesus himself, a devout Jew, had apparently directed his message to his own people. Perhaps he'd even limited it to them.

Luke, in the early chapters of his Acts of the Apostles, offers an account of some critical events in the establishment of the Jerusalem fellowship. It is a retrospective account, set down about half a century later. And Luke is a fine literary craftsman, perhaps the best among the New Testament writers. Using whatever sources may have been available to him—memories and traditions told and retold in the growing and changing communities of believers—Luke provides, for his dedicatory patron Theophilus, a vivid picture of the churches' beginnings.

Luke includes stirring and extended speeches by Peter, Stephen and, later, by Paul. Such speeches would have been constructed by the author according to what he thought that those people might have, or should have, said. In the Greco-Roman world of the time, that was an accepted way of writing history. And the inclusion of remarkable happenings—happenings we would call miraculous—was also accepted as part of history.

2

In its first phase the believing fellowship was essentially a reform movement within Judaism—a rather close-knit body of devout Jews with a special belief and witness that God’s long-awaited Messiah had appeared among them in the prophet Yeshua of Nazareth. The leaders of their people had conspired to have him put to death—as, in the past, Israel’s prophets had often been reviled and rejected. But God had raised him up. God had made plain to all that this Jesus was more than a prophet; he was and is Israel’s Messiah.

Therefore also—as they declared that Jesus himself had taught—God’s messianic age was imminent. God’s judgment was about to break through. The old order would be swept away. They and all Israel must repent, must call on God in the name of Jesus, God’s Messiah. Little time was left; no one knew how little.

Luke’s picture of the Jerusalem congregation in these early, apostolic days seems plausible. The believers, many of them, sell their possessions. They share a communal life, holding strongly together, preparing themselves for the imminent revealing of their Messiah and Lord, the risen and exalted Jesus. Their mission is to prepare for God, in Jesus, a redeemed and purified Israel.

It seems plausible, also, as Luke describes it, that at first this Jewish reform congregation finds wide acceptance among fellow Jews (Acts 2:43-47). Their message is known simply as the “Way” (Acts 9:2; 19:9, *et al*).

3

Such, apparently, was the meaning of the Gift for Jesus’ apostles and other Jewish believers, in that first, Jerusalem phase. It was a Jewish reform movement, one that affirmed Jesus to be Israel’s Messiah. Had it remained as such—with the onset of the Jewish-Roman War, the scattering of the Jesus congregation, and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE.—we could think that the movement might have disappeared.

Israel’s faith was salvaged from that disaster. Judaism emerged as a recognizable creed, owing much to the Pharisees. But the small groups of Jews claiming allegiance to Jesus of Nazareth as God’s Messiah—finding themselves scattered from their Jerusalem center by the war and finding that their risen and exalted Jesus did not return in glorious judgment as they had been taught to hope—might have dissolved. They might simply have blended in with the Jewish diaspora and the emerging rabbinical tradition. The Jesus movement might have faded away, leaving little trace.

This did not occur because of two factors: the attraction of gentile believers to the new faith, and the emergence of Paul of Tarsus as the movement’s dynamic leader. Luke gives, in Acts, an idealized picture of the early expansion of Christianity. He has it breaking out of the Jerusalem chrysalis, adding gentile believers, and metamorphosing harmoniously into a wide, mutually supportive body of churches planted across much of the Roman world. He glosses over the critical conflict painfully evident in various of Paul’s letters. There were Jewish Christians who insisted that gentile converts, to be part of the new Israel of Jesus, must embrace the whole law of Moses; and others, championed by Paul, who declared that God was now welcoming all who put their faith in Jesus as Messiah, Christ. It was a conflict that came close to tearing the nascent Christian Church apart.