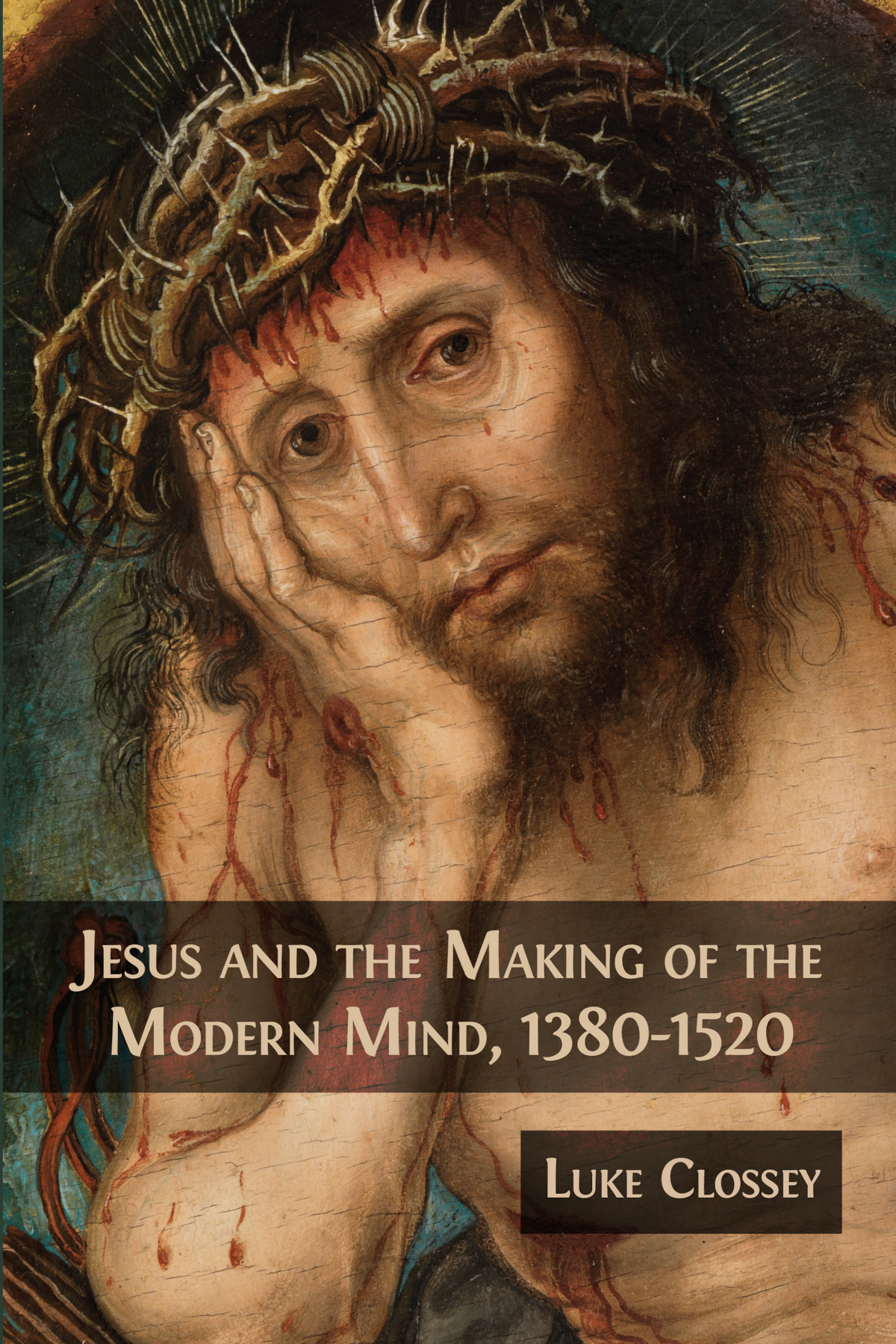

Jesus and the Making of the Modern Mind, 1380-1520

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22. Afterword: History between the Kens

On Easter Sunday, 1517, in northwest Switzerland, a preacher interrupted his sermon to recline in a pile of manure, hiss like a goose, and then act out giving birth to a calf. Another Easter sermon climaxed in the preacher eating pancakes while imitating a cuckoo bird. Another discussed a hypothetical reality in which the Jews did not persecute Jesus, and so Mary had to crucify him herself. Reports of these unexpected sermons eventually reached Basel and its in-house preacher Johannes Oecolampadius (d. 1531), a sober man who had helped Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536) publish his Greek New Testament the year before. He was flummoxed. At a loss, he tried to apply a deep-ken understanding: there were subtle connections between pancakes, manure, and some profound allegorical truth. His friends, laughing over dinner one night, blocked his attempt and turned towards a plain ken: these were just people, delighting in Jesus's Resurrection, having fun. Oecolampadius could not let it go; he could not hear this calving preacher with a plain ken: if his friends' laughter denied him a deep ken focused on meaning, he would hear with a deep ken focused on decorum, and be outraged at the dissonance between such "shameless stupidities" and the dignity of Easter. The next year, he published *De risu paschali* [On Easter Laughter], urging his readers to imitate Jesus and find meaning in the silences of canon: "No one knows that Jesus laughed, but every one knows that he wept."[1]

This book has showcased dozens of fifteenth-century humans thinking with either or both kens. As a professional historian, my native ken is plain. I read

1 *De Risu Paschali* (Basel: Johann Froben, 1518). See Maria Caterina Jacobelli, *Ostergelächter: Sexualität und Lust im Raum des Heiligen* (Regensburg: Pustet, 1992); Anton Linsenmayer, *Geschichte der Predigt in Deutschland* (Munich: Stahl, 1886), 180–82; Jolanta Rzegocka, "Being Serious about Laughter: The Case of Early Modern Biblical Plays," in *Humour and Religion: Challenges and Ambiguities*, ed. Hans Geybels and Walter Van Herck (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 156–68; Benny Grey Schuster, *Das Osterlachen*, trans. Eberhard Harbsmeier (Hamburg: Igel, 2019).

the sources with the plain ken as best I could, but when that failed, I artificially read with a deep ken, as best I could. I imagine the typical reader will also have brought an instinctive plain ken, and the ideal readers will, in certain passages, try to use the deep ken as sympathetically as they can.

How we use kens determines who we are, which in turn conditions how we use kens. To me, Alex Colville's 1978 painting *Dog and Priest* (see Fig. 22.1), in which a dog blocks the face of a reclining priest, has the awkward staging of plain-ken art: the dog is "in the way," obscuring the human's face. Instead, a canine observer might find deep-ken appropriateness in highlighting the priest's pet-giving hands.

Fig. 22.1 Alex Colville, *Dog and Priest* (1978), acrylic on hardboard, © A.C.Fine Art. All rights reserved, http://alexcolville.ca/gallery/alex_colville_1978_dog_and_priest/

One modern proverb neatly encapsulates the plain-ken attitude: if something sounds too good to be true... it probably is. A variation, sometimes attributed to comedian Emo Philips, neatly encapsulates the process of switching kens, even in a mid-sentence twist: if something sounds too good to be true... it's probably magic. Magic and miracles create opportunities for opening the mind and finding the logic in phenomena dismissed by the plain ken.

The Komi sorcerer Pam of Perm (see Chapter 7) tied success in hunting bears to the superiority of Indigenous religion over Christianity. This makes sense: Indigenous non-human powers helped the hunters. To test Pam's claim, a "scientist" (at least one who could overcome any conditioned prejudice to dismiss the issue out of hand) might set up a "scientific" experiment comparing the bear-hunting abilities of one hundred Komi against those of one hundred Christians. However, that all presumes that spiritual beings enjoy participation in experiments, and would behave normally, or at least be not so annoyed that

they change their habits. This experiment would be unlikely to yield results that give the scientist much confidence.

Consider an under-verified legend about the sanctuary of Maria dell'Isola at Tropea in southern Italy. In the eighth century, during a period of iconoclasm, a previously unknown statue of Mary was discovered. The bishop, considering the statue too large for the natural cave he wanted to display it in, decided to have its legs sawn off—and instantly died. My father pointed out that if the next bishop were scientific, he would have tried again. Of course, the next bishop was neither brave nor impious enough to proceed with the investigation along such scientific lines.

In early drafts, I, fighting all my training, my instincts, and centuries of western intellectual tradition, experimented with writing this history with and for a deep ken. Over the years, advance readers convinced me to remove almost all such passages; their native plain ken was too strong, and my artificial deep ken was too weak.

One paragraph written with a deep-ken voice survived the first readers' feedback. It justified calling the long fifteenth century the "Nicodemian Age," after the statistically improbable—to the plain ken—number of the "priests, scholars, potentates, and mystics named Nick who played roles, starring or supportive, in the Jesus cult's history in this period: Nicholas of Autrecourt, Nicole Oresme, Nicholas Love, Nicholas of Dresden, Pope Nicholas V, Nicholas of Hereford, Nicholas of Lyra, Nicholas Eymerich, Nikephoros of Calabria, [Ni-]Colette of Corbie, the non-swearing Nicholas of Prague, Nicholas Martello of Bologna, Niccolò Malermi, Nicolas Jenson, Nicolaus de Random, Nicholas of Pisek, Nicodemus of Tismana, Niccolò de' Conti, Gonfaloniere Niccolò Capponi, and Niccolò Machiavelli."

Eventually, even this paragraph disappeared in the face of my, and early readers', discomfort with the deep ken. Deep-ken writing is incompatible with historical satisfaction and with scholarly monographs. Instead, I want to crunch census data to create statistically significant datasets of names, and, even then, with those results I would not argue for any cosmic significance. As a good historian, I cut the paragraph (and then smuggled it back in here anyway, safely contained in quotation marks).

Such plain-ken assumptions permeate the historical profession, and are perhaps most visible in ancient history, where the relative paucity of written sources encourages historians to make judgment calls based, sometimes, on a single passage. A handbook of Indian epigraphy raises "suspicions as to the historicity" of a list of sixty-four different writing systems because the number

sixty-four is "conventional."[2] One scholar of the Old Testament commented that King Solomon's narrative was similar to royal narratives from other parts of southwest Asia, and was therefore unlikely to have been historical. The implication is that a story from Persia, or elsewhere, had made its way to the editors of the Old Testament, who applied it to Solomon.[3] A source clocking the population of Nanchang in 1412 at 1,126,119 is ugly enough to be believable, until compared with a record of Nanchang's population eighty years later, also at 1,126,119; the coincidence makes at least one of the two figures dubious.[4] Similarly, one study, after presenting traditions that the Buddha died either 100 years or 218 years before the rule of Ashoka, notes that the number 100 was "suspiciously round."[5] I suspect most historians, even in total ignorance of Buddhist history, would have more confidence in 218, as our plain ken would guide us. I can artificially engineer a deep-ken perspective: the Buddha, perfectly enlightened, teacher of gods and humans, would not link his death to an ugly number (see Appendix C, Example 5).

Jesus did not invent plain-ken history writing, but his cult created problems and solutions that contributed to its rise. The plain ken came late to the Far West, but took over and settled in for the duration; indeed, professional historians are still living by its house rules. Most modern historians now believe the world is flat. That is, their plain ken sees a meaningless world that lacks the depth that a deep ken would detect. Most professional historians today ignore or reject the deep ken in their work. For most, the idea of a deep ken would probably give rise to aversion. It looks, to us, stupid or silly; it finds significance in what is obviously coincidence.[6] The plain ken, with its meaningless events in homogeneous spacetime, is fundamental to our logic as historians. Coincidence, which flowers with the beauty of consonance in deep-ken eyes, is meaningless or suspicious to us.

One modern biographer of Jesus wrote that what historians are most confident about is their knowledge that Jesus was wrong. In the gospel account,

2 Richard Salomon, *Indian Epigraphy* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), 9.

3 J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press 2006), 193–94.

4 Timothy Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 95.

5 Paul Williams, *Buddhist Thought* (London: Routledge, 2000), 23.

6 Olivier Hekster notes that historians' work often "excludes 'coincidence' as a mode of interpretation. Most historians view coincidences as closely related events that lack causal relationship. That type of coincidence does not fit into a historical narrative, because historians tend to focus on causality, action, and consequence." Olivier Hekster, "The Size of History: Coincidence, Counterfactuality and Questions of Scale in History," in *The Challenge of Chance*, ed. Klaas Landsman and Ellen van Wolde (Cham: Springer, 2016), 215–32 (215).

Jesus concluded a description of an apocalyptic event with a promise that "Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened."[7] This biographer noted that this verse proved that Jesus had erred; the world did not end within the lifetimes of Jesus's audience. A verse making Jesus look good might have easily been inserted by a sympathetic editor, but not a verse that makes Jesus look bad. Therefore, according to the biographer's plain-ken logic, this verse was likely to be original and authentic.[8]

Because our intellectual values are still set by the plain ken, it can be difficult for us to see value in the deep ken. We historians are skeptical of coincidences, of beauty, of round numbers, of what we suspect are literary tropes. In our eyes, these things are suspicious, while in deep-ken eyes, they would be auspicious. Instead, we love the idea of humans doing things haphazardly. This is the fundamental tool in the historian's toolbox. It allows us to prove our cleverness and value by partaking in the unexpected genius of *lectio difficilior potior*, the "More Difficult Reading," by which a text difficult to read is preferred over a clearer variation, which was presumably fixed by some editor.

One of this book's goals is to make a case for the deep ken being intelligent and plausible. Other parts of the world discovered the plain ken earlier, but, for them, its magic quickly wore off. As we have seen, in the West the plain ken became reality, but in the Asian Cores and the Middle East, the plain ken was a tool to be used alongside, or subordinate to, the deep ken. Even as some Muslim scholars brought the plain ken to bear on the Qur'an (ca. eight to tenth century), others were arguing against it: did the truth of the Qur'an bow to mere historical studies? Even an occasional European could discount the new perspective: Lorenzo Guidetti (1439–1519) held historical minutiae, "barely known by anyone even in those time," to be less interesting or important than the beauty of elegant rhetorical forms.[9] In deep-ken eyes, the plain ken could only uncover the trivial, pedantic, unimportant, irrelevant, and irreverent. A

7 Mt 24:34; Mk 13:30.

8 I read this biography in the 1990s, before I knew I would be writing my own Jesus book, and lost the reference, but the idea made an impression and motivated this project. Bertrand Russell's "certainly" makes a similar point when he notes that Jesus "certainly thought that His second coming would occur [...] before the death of all the people who were living at that time," an idea that does not "seem to be very wise." Bertrand Russell, "Why I Am Not a Christian," in *Why I Am Not a Christian: And Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 3–23 (16).

9 Guidetti to Massari, 14 October [1465], in *La critica del Landino*, ed. Roberto Cardini (Florence: Sansoni, 1973), 267–69. See Anthony Grafton, *Defenders of the Text: The Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science, 1450–1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1991), 23–26. Grafton's description has a clear articulation of one aspect of the deep ken: in Guidetti's view a theoretical "pupil would be able to extract

deep-ken parody of the plain ken might hold that Karl Marx did not write the *Communist Manifesto*; rather, his right hand did.

My (plain ken!) life circumstances, professional and personal, have conspired (coincidentally!) to habituate me to the plain ken. I can appreciate the beauty and usefulness of the deep ken as well as the plain ken, but—despite my attempt with the Nicodemian Age—I cannot see, think, or write with the deep ken. I am too thoroughly trained to be able to abandon the plain ken that defines my perspective. I can appreciate the truth of both kens, but I write about both of them only from the plain ken.

How that habit and prejudice came to be is a major focus of the book; the division between the plain ken and the deep ken is itself a product of history. If you think one way is obviously right, you will find it difficult to understand the logic of those who approach things from the other. Being aware of both approaches powerfully expands our intellectual horizons, and deepens our capacity for empathy. If we habitually discount unexpected beauties and conjunctions in history as coincidence or trickery, we are left with an artificially ugly and boring history.

The deep ken is attracted to beauty, and the plain ken suspicious of it, preferring the ugliness of haphazard history. However, at certain times the deep ken can find and appreciate beauty within the ugly. Jesus once made a similar point himself. A 1501 manuscript of the Persian poet Nizami Ganjavi's (d. 1209) epic *Khamsa* [Quintet] cycle contains its own dog art, an intriguing rendering of an intriguing incident (see Fig. 22.2). Once, the "feet of Christ, walking on the earth, passed across a small market place" at a crossroads, where Jesus saw the corpse of a dog. Disgusted spectators, "like carrion-eating vultures," gathered to poetically express their distaste: one remarked that their fear of the canine corpse had brought "darkness to the mind, as breath blows out the lamp." Relocated in a wilderness setting, Nizami's dog is doing a headstand, ignoring any plain-ken inducement towards illusionism in order to maximize its wretchedness. Jesus, however, expressed a positive reaction, finding a beauty perfecting the ugly: "the picture remaining of its body shows that pearls are not so white as its teeth." The onlookers, corrected, used burnt oyster shell to whiten their own teeth. Perhaps influenced by Buddhist ideas, the poet shifts into a moralizing mode, encouraging modesty before concluding with the plain-ken sentiment that "the whole world, from its beginning to its end, is not worth a grain of barley, because it is transient."[10]

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from his text—an ideal thing outside of any particular time, space, or individual experience—a central core of moral and literary instruction" (25).

10 Nezāmi of Ganjeh, *Makhzanol Asrār: The Treasury Of Mysteries*, trans. Gholām Hosein Dārāb (London: Probsthain, 1945), 198–99 (tenth discourse, lines

Fig. 22.2 *Jesus and the Dead Dog* (1501), Khamsah-'i Niẓāmī, BodL MS Elliott 192, fol. 22b, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/ed3dac54-cfc0-43b5-9eb7-6214abe98094/surfaces/97361cff-fc62-4a67-9fee-9748dad55490

This same appreciation recurs in several historical moments. A thread of it runs through much of the Islamic tradition. The scholar Abu 'Ubayda (728–825), for example, fully accepted philology and the plain ken it implied, but placed it all within the deep ken. He argued that God's decision to express the eternal Qur'an in Arabic, a language subject to change, brought divine favour upon the language in all its varieties, and he felt free to make use of even pre-Islamic

1542–59). This is the first of the five treasures that make up the *Khamsa.* The core of the tradition, with just a single insult and Jesus's praise of the canine's teeth, dates back to Abu Bakr ibn Abi al-Dunya (d. 894). Tarif Khalidi, ed., *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2001), 122–23 (no. 127). Miguel Asín y Palacios, "Logia et agrapha domini Jesu apud moslemicos scriptores, asceticos praesertim, usitata," in *Patrologia Orientalis*, 50 vols. (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1919–26), XIII, 335–431 and XIX, 531–624 (607) reports Goldhizer identifying this tradition as having Buddhist origins. For early Buddhist influences on Islam, see Ignaz Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, trans. Andras and Ruth Hamori (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1981), 141–44.

poetry. For Abu 'Ubayda and like-minded thinkers, the messy problems in the Qur'anic text's language were themselves praiseworthy, and part of the overall miracle.[11] Echoing a similar insight, the poet 'Abd al-Karim al-Jili (ca. 1366–1408) wrote:

> If you bring it back to its beauty, everything ugly
> Will immediately open beautiful meanings to you.
> The imperfection of the ugly is made perfect by its beauty:
> There, there is no imperfection, nor is there ugliness.[12]

11 Claude Gilliot, *Exégèse, Langue et Théologie en Islam: L'exégèse coranique de Tabari (m. 311/923)* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1990), 73–78; Alexander Knysh, "Multiple Areas of Influence," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2006), 211–33 (213–14); E. Almagor, "The Early Meaning of *Majāz* and the Nature of Abū 'Ubayda's Exegesis," in *Studia orientalia: Memoriae D. H. Baneth dedicata*, ed. Joshua Blau, Shlomo Pines, Meir Jacob Kister, and Shaul Shaked (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1979), 325.

12 Quoted by Aḥmad Ibn 'Ajība [1747–1809], *Two Treatises on the Oneness of Existence by the Moroccan Sufi Aḥmad Ibn 'Ajība*, trans. Jean-Louis Michon (Cambridge, UK: Archetype, 2010), 53–57.