

Chapter 25
Jesus Stands Alone

I.

What have I learned? Having spent over a decade in writing this study (it began as a six-section Lenten Bible series in the church of which I was then pastor and had grown over the years as I worked on it), and having put in more than thirty-five years in study of the Scripture during my ministry, what has it meant to me personally? This last chapter will be different from the others, more personal, as I sum up my own discoveries through the years.

Certain scholarly articles and books have contributed to my understanding of Scripture, and these listed below I treasure most highly.

- George Mendenhall's work on "*Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition*" (Biblical Archaeologist Reader, Volume three, edited by Edward F. Campbell and David Noel Freedman, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970, pp 25-53). He identified Moses' use of the Hittite suzerainty treaty and the way it provided a context for the theology of the people of God; this treaty-form has played a tremendous part in my understanding of both the Old and New Testaments. I am also indebted to his studies on the reign of King David and the use to which the king put the Jubusite bureaucracy when he conquered the city of Jerusalem.
- Moshe Greenberg's monograph on the meaning of the word "Hebrew": *The Hab/piru*, American Oriental Series XXXIX, 1955. He pointed out that it was originally a sociological term rather than an ethnic or religious one, and this opens the way for understanding early Israel as made up of a group of tribes not necessarily related to a common ancestor or bound by a common race or religion. "Israelite" was the name for those people who joined themselves first into a federation of tribes under Joshua and his successors and then the name of the Kingdom of David and Solomon, and hence it is a designation of national allegiance. "Jew" is the name of those Judahites who were taken into Babylon and became a self-conscious religious community, and hence the word has a religious meaning. But "Hebrew" was the name given to people the world over who were outcasts, outside the established structures of life, and hence it is a sociological term. And because the People of God were Hebrew before they were Israelite or Jews, early Israel was a pluralistic nation, a heritage that Christianity was later to pick up and affirm: "In Jesus Christ there is neither Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; we are all one in Jesus Christ."

- Jacquetta Hawkes' magnificent book on *The First Great Civilizations*, (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1973). She introduced me to both Egypt and Sumeria and got me thinking about the impact these had made on Israel. To Egypt Israel was indebted for Moses and, while they remembered the enslavement in that country as a bitter experience; later Egypt, ironically enough, was to become a cradle for the Christian message. To Sumeria Israel was indebted for the form of its civilization, for its great concern with justice and with law) and in that order of priority, incidentally), for its means and manner of education, and for its concern with story-telling and writing. I have since read many other studies on these two ancient civilizations but my almost accidental discovery of Ms. Hawkes' book turned my own thinking into new directions.
- Closely related to this was C. Leonard Woolley's account of his archeological studies in ancient Ur, *Ur of the Chaldes* (New York: Norton Co., 1965). This offered an unparalleled insight into life in the area from which the patriarchs had emigrated and assisted me in understanding the lifestyle that Abraham had known.
- Another study important to me was R. N. Whybray *The Succession Narrative*, (London: SCM Press, Studies in Biblical Theology, Second Series 9, 1968). I am indebted to it for its historiography of the time of David and Solomon and especially for its relating this to the world-wide Wisdom movement existing at the time of Solomon's court. This book also introduced me to the problems of governance being faced both then and now.
- Theodore Mueller (*Journal of Biblical Literature*, June 1983, Vol. 102:2, pp 207-218, based on original work by M. Weinfeld, "The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East," JAOS 90 (1970) pp 184-203) brought a very important concept to the formula that the court of Solomon used to replace the Mosaic idea of covenant. Called "The Royal Grant," it was an unconditional promise of the king to the vassal as a reward for faithful service to the suzerain; its bestowal was a sign of the king's favor, and it was not to be withdrawn. Of course, this changed Israel's, and Judah's, relationship to God: under the older concept the kingdom was unconditionally to God and under the new one, God was unconditionally bound to care for the king and the kingdom. Scholars before Weinfeld had recognized that the covenant form of 2 Samuel 7, in which the covenant of God with David is stated, was fundamentally different from that of the Exodus story; but Mueller's, and Weinfeld's, work unearthed an historical formula used in the exact time of David and Solomon's kingdom that cast light on the change which was made.
- E.W. Nicholson's book of *Deuteronomy and Tradition*, (Philadelphia, PA.: Fortress Press, 1967) while not a major work in the area of Deuteronomic studies, served to introduce this fascinating period to me and to quicken my interest so that I read more deeply about the movement that I came to call "The Israelite Underground."

- George Ernest Wright's definitions of the three great theological movements of the times during and after the exile in Babylon – The Deuteronomic, the Priestly, and the Chronicler (*The Book of the Acts of God*, Garden City, N.Y. Doubleday, 1960) – have also become fundamental to my approach to the Old Testament. Though in my present re-thinking of that theological situation I am entertaining the possibility that the lines of division were not so clear-cut and precise as Wright suggests (the underground included in its membership both prophets and priests, and the struggle reflected in the side-by-side presentation of the two theologies may have taken place within that group), it is good to distinguish between these different ways of understanding God's dealing with God's people.
- C.H. Dodd's magnificent study *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge University Press, 1963) has been fundamental to my understanding of New Testament times. Dr. Dodd, later chairman of the committee in Great Britain which produced the translation of the *New English Bible* and a distinguished teacher and writer in many fields of New Testament study, stated that the Gospel of John had as much to tell about Jesus' ministry in Judea as the Gospel of Mark had to say hypothesis of the two centers of Jesus' ministry – one in Jerusalem and the other in Galilee – from which much of my own thinking about the New Testament has come.
- Erick Dinkler, one of my teachers at Yale Divinity School, had begun some studies that he later published in *Signum Crucis* (Tubingen: Mohr, Siebeck, 1967), concerning the conference of Christian leaders in Jerusalem referred to in Galatians 2:7-8. He suggested that this agreement divided the mission field of the early church between Peter and Paul, the Twelve and the Apostles, one to the circumcised, that is, the Jews and proselytes in the Diaspora, and the other to the uncircumcised, the Gentiles. From this I began to realize that there were identifiable parties in early Christianity with different functions and that it was important for us to learn as much about them as possible. Around this insight my four-party hypothesis on the organization of the church between the years 30-70 AD began to coalesce.
- Walter Schmitbals wrote a book (*The Office of Apostle in the Early Church*, Nashville, Tenn: Abingdon, 1969) about the Apostles as a movement distinct from the Twelve of Galilee rather than an extension of it. He identified the Apostles as Gnostics. I agree with him that the Apostles constituted a separate movement in the early church, but I believe that the focus of their work was with the Gentile "Godfearers" rather than with a Gnostic re-interpretation of Christianity and I worked on my organizational theory in the light of this.

- J.B. Tyson wrote a small but excellent article on the Law in the New Testament, which forces a reconsideration of the use of the term in the letters of Paul. Under the (“‘Works of Law’ in Galatians,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 92, No. 3, September 1973 pp 423-431) influence of Martin Luther we had believed that Law in New Testament times was as comprehensive as was the canon law of the Catholic church. But Tyson pointed out that “Law” at the time of Jesus and Paul referred to two matters, circumcision and the food laws, and that if those two were kept, a person was considered to be “keeping the law.” If this is so, the issues before the early church are much clearer: Jews had convinced proselytes to accept these in fulfillment of the law, but Godfearers while attracted to Judaism were not willing to accept these practices. When Paul and the Apostles brought Godfearers into the church as full members directly through baptism without undergoing either the lengthy probationary procedures of becoming a proselyte or pledging to be circumcised and to keep the food laws, the issue was bound to arise: could the Gentile Christians be admitted to full table fellowship with those who held to the Jewish prescription? The answer was fascinating: in the conference in Jerusalem described in Acts 15, Gentiles, and the Gentile Godfearers, were excused from being circumcised but were required to keep the food laws. It was a perfect compromise: half to one side and half to the other, and Paul tried to enforce it among his churches. The compromise held, until Paul ran into the contentious congregation at Corinth who insisted that their freedom as Christians liberated them from both circumcision and food laws. Tyson’s article does not take this issue that far, but it did provide the catalyst for my own thinking and also offered some of the scholarly background that brought me to this understanding.
- Jacob Neusner’s studies on Pharisees, which I discovered in *From Politics to Piety* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973), tended to confirm the above insights from a Jewish point of view. This prolific scholar, who appears to publish more books and papers than anyone else writing in the religious field, agrees that the Pharisees in Jesus’ time and shortly thereafter were most interested in circumcision and food laws. He also pointed out that the struggle over the interpretation of the Law was fought out in the Diaspora synagogues in the Hellenistic world and that in cities where Rabbinic Judaism prevailed the Christians were shut out and where Christianity prevailed the rabbis were excluded.
- Lastly, I have been much instructed by trips I have made to Egypt and by Christian friends there. As I traveled through the land and worked through the Scripture with members, both ministers and laypersons, of the Coptic Evangelical Church, I came to a new appreciation of the Egyptian beginnings of the People of God and especially for the impact that Christian mission made in Egypt. I also developed some feeling for the way Mideasterners read and study the Scripture, how different this is from the approach of a western-trained theoretician, and how real the living Word of God is in their lives. Their

excited reading of Scripture will stay with me as long as I myself am able to read and reflect upon the meaning of the Bible.

II.

In preparing this study I was struck by the fact that many of the issues we confront in the twentieth century were also being faced by the writers of Scripture. These were not only the religious and spiritual questions we would expect to find in Scripture but also questions of public policy and cultural philosophy.

One was the question of governance -- how are the people of God to govern themselves and what societal structures might they erect so that governance can be carried out effectively? The answers were diverse.

Israel seemed originally to accept the kind of tribal structure that was common to the Mideast: councils of elders drawn from various tribes would govern the affairs of the people and adjudicate their disputes. This was to be done within the broad framework of a treaty with God that made each clan and tribe accountable to him. At a later time, kingship was introduced somewhat reluctantly, but when this kingship tried to introduce another form of relationship with God, namely the royal grant rather than the suzerain-vassal treaty, the prophets rose up in protest. A new answer, not fully satisfactory, was worked out when allegiance to a God-given law code was substituted for both, so that king and people, court and commoners were rendered accountable to the law. But then Jesus came claiming that God's kingship was at hand, and his followers were forced to work out the meaning of that in tension with the might and power of Rome. That every institution of governance and every structure of government had to work out its own accountability to the living God of justice and mercy was the common agreement of Scripture. How this is to be done is the question bequeathed to each generation.

Education -- its aims and methods -- is also a prime concern of Scripture. Again, accepting the heritage of Sumeria and Egypt, Israel worked out its ways of educating elders, kings, scribes, priests and people. Elders learned the tribal law code and the tribal traditions; kings were instructed in the qualities important to ideal rule; priests learned how to perform the rituals but, more importantly, what kind of God God was; scribes learned that intricate arts of writing and of statecraft; the people learned the sacred stories of their faith and adequate standards for appropriate behavior. These modes changed over the centuries, and in New Testament times the Christian communities organized themselves to carry out their tasks of instruction of those who were already members of the community and of outreach to bring others into it. That the Old Testament people of God continued for a thousand years and the people of the New Testament have continued for two

thousand more indicates something of the vitality and creativity which has been applied to the questions of education.

How to face rapid social change was another of the issues met then that we confront today. We tend to think of this as primarily a problem for people of the twentieth century, or by extension the nineteenth; but think how frequently it became a problem to people of Scripture. The Abraham who had grown up around Haran had to learn how to live in settled and cultured Egypt and then in the desolate deserts of Hebron. Jacob had to shift from the life of a relatively wealthy shepherd in Canaan to that of an impoverished immigrant into Egypt, and then his people had to accommodate themselves to growing servitude to the Pharaoh. Under Moses the people had to face the shift from slavery to freedom, and to do so in the wildest desert on the planet, the desert of Sinai. They had then to force their way into Canaan, to build kingdoms, to fight wars, to endure exile, to rebuild a desolate nation. Their solution was to realize that if God is God nothing else is, and so they refused to deify any of their forms of life but accepted each as God's opportunity for them to be faithful to him -- but such situations of rapid social change they faced!

How to form one people of God out of a plurality of cultures and traditions was also a problem they hold in common with us. They confronted it as early as the time of Moses: those who accompanied him in the exodus were all Hebrews but not necessarily all Israelites, and only through the covenant-treaty were they banded together in common loyalty. They faced it again at the time of Joshua and came up with a similar situation: the fact that different configurations of tribes were at one time or another part of Israel argues that not all were originally from a common ancestor. They became involved with the issue again during the time of David: how could a king and kingdom weld the diverse peoples he had conquered into his one national entity? And in the time of the Christian church the question was raised and answered all over again as persons from widely diverse societal segments were incorporated into the church. Pluralism, the full acceptance of persons with widely divergent lifestyles into the corporate life of the People of God, proved to be a continuing concern for the community.

Peace and how to attain it was one persistent question. Moses had to protect his people from the pursuit of Egyptian forces, and he settled them in the desert where not even the armies of Egypt would follow. Joshua had to learn to organize, provide for, and lead his armed bands as they forced their way into Canaan. During the time of the judges the tribes alternated between peace and war; wanting to live at peace with their neighbors, they still had to provide for the common defense. David's armies were extraordinarily effective military machines, as were those of some of his successors. As the Assyrian threat developed, the prophets were to suggest some radical solutions to the problem -- depend on God rather than God's horsemen, for one -- and left as a legacy, monumental statements of hope for peace: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruninghooks, and they shall not study war anymore." Jesus, confronted with

possible Roman reaction to rising zealot terrorism, stated bluntly: "If anyone strikes you on the cheek, turn the other to him also; the one who lives by the sword shall die by the sword." Clearly, working out structures to undergird the peaceable kingdom of God was as necessary then as it is now.

Meeting these issues and others like them sets the context in which the Scriptures were written. My conviction is that it is not true to think of the People of God (I use this term with its capital letters to incorporate into one continuing historical entity the people of Israel and the people of the church) as especially religious people and the ages in which they lived as peculiarly religious times. On the contrary, like ourselves they married and were given in marriage; lived by farming or by trade, by the work of hands and minds providing livelihood for self, family, and community; had pride in their children or were caused by them to despair; engaged in all the entanglements of community living; God, worshipped at the shrines of their gods or some doing so from deep piety, others with little conviction; died in bed or died in battle; built magnificent homes, buildings, temples, cities, and civilizations, and lived in poverty, squalor and pain; lived lives full of hope or lives of quiet desperation; faced questions for which they had no firm answers and yet strove to fashion answers that may or may not work. In short, they lived in a society that was at once affluent and poverty-stricken; secular and religious; parochial and international; rural and urban; just and cruel. It was a society and a world very similar to our own, a world in which many forces were at work and in which the work of God was by no means clear. Yet try to understand it, they did; and because of the understanding they worked out we turn time and again to study who these People were, why they did what they did, who was the God to whom they responded in unfaith and in faith.

III.

These people had some great creative moments as they struggled with their life-situation.

One such came through Moses. His application of the suzerainty treaty to the life of the People was a supreme achievement. Imagine briefly the pieces of the puzzle that Moses was trying to put together. In his understanding, God was sovereign, that is, God would do what God intended to do and nothing could prevent God from carrying out God's will, nor did God need any human help in doing it. On the other hand, men and women needed to be free to work out the terms of their own life in response to what God was doing in human affairs. Additionally, this possibility of responsible freedom needed to be open to all peoples. In considering these factors, Moses was drawn to the one device in his own time that was comprehensive enough to incorporate all these concerns into it and he employed it to mold an altogether new People of God; no one before his time had understood the theological implications of the political instrument the Hittites had fashioned to make possible the expansion of their empire. Moses' achievement was to that date the most significant contribution made in the history of religion. It provided a

new understanding of God's relationship to his people, offered a new self-identity to the people, and opened up vistas of responsible freedom whose implications are hardly sighted yet today.

The contribution of the era of the judges was equally creative. They too had a difficult life-situation to face. Rightly regarding themselves the successors to Moses' People of God, they had to construct social institutions in the hostile land of Canaan that would express their conviction about themselves, namely, that they were Israel, the people who would let God rule. To do this they fashioned a legal system, an economic system, a system of self-defense, and a religious system that reflected their self-understanding, and they embarked upon the task of nation-building by collecting and accepting each other's traditions and identity. Not many groups in human history have been so successful in working out ways to express their primary conviction about themselves as was the federation called Israel in the time of the judges.

The movement called prophesy also exhibits the marks of Israelite creativity. Having its origins both in the ecstatic groups gathered around the shrines of Israel and in the Jebusite tradition of appointing a court prophet to act as the conscience of the king, both strands came together under Elijah and were incorporated into the Moses-tradition as Elijah faced down King Ahab in the name of the God of Moses. Prophecy continued to build upon itself. Amos, the poor man of Tekoa, spoke out for justice for the poor in the name of the God who on Sinai had shown concern for the peoples oppressed by Egyptian policy. Hosea, he of the wayward wife, came to understand and proclaim God's forgiving love, a love like that shown to Israel when they rebelled in the wilderness. Isaiah, the courtier of Jerusalem and admirer of the leper king Uzziah, recognized Judah's need for cleansing and proclaimed the holiness of God. Micah, who had seen his little village overrun time after time by the marauding Assyrian armies and who himself may have died in one of the invasions, brought all these messages of earlier prophecy into a single proclamation when he said, "And what does the Lord require of you but to do justly (Amos), love mercy (Hosea) and walk humbly with thy God (Isaiah)?" When the Deuteronomists edited these messages and began to apply them in a rigid manner, Jeremiah broke away by returning to the earlier message, "A new covenant I will make with Israel, written not on stone but on the heart." And Isaiah of Babylon brought all these traditions of prophecy together in proclaiming that the creating and redeeming God worked through a servant who suffered, a message that the prophet Jesus of Nazareth incorporated into his own being. The creative interworking of prophet with prophet and the interweaving of their messages, accomplished over a millennium, is a magnificent era of creative activity.

The exile of Judah provided another creative moment. Faced with extinction as a self-conscious entity, the same dread fate that had engulfed their brothers and sisters from the north, these Judean exiles set out to devise means that would hold them together as a people and make it possible for them to continue their religious and national identity.

Picking up the institutions of Sabbath, circumcision, sacrifice and Passover, and reconstructing their personal history in the light of new reflection upon what had happened to them, they survived in Babylon -- more than survived, they re-lit the flickering light of the People of God and made it possible for Jesus the Christ to come.

The followers of Jesus also offered an era of new creativity. Developing from the two nuclei that Jesus had established in Judea and Galilee, and discovering their mission fields in the social organization of the synagogue, they founded through James a mission to the Jews of Judea, through Peter a mission to the Diaspora synagogues, through Paul a mission to the gentiles that began with the God-fearers of the synagogue and extended to their companions and friends, and through the broken remnants of Stephen's group an eminently successful mission to Alexandria and Egypt. Facing the problems certain to confront a new movement of this sort, they developed new liturgies for worship, set up organizational structures not only to carry on mission but to resolve differences and disputes, fashioned methods of teaching the faith to new converts, worked out creeds and confessions that expressed their faith in God in Christ, and learned the new behavior required of them as Christians in family and business, in personal and public affairs -- an achievement of vast creativity whose efforts and effects still influence the church today.

This movement was creative because of the creative person at its center, Jesus of Nazareth, savior, lord, and Christ.

IV.

What can we say of him? Anything we say is not enough. He was, is, and remains the single most impressive person of all times, and what I have to say about him can hardly penetrate the surfaces of the depths of this magnificent man.

I am impressed, for instance, with the manner in which he summed up in his own person all the important movements of Scripture.

As stated in Chapter Four, he took the contributions that Moses made and changed them to suit his own purposes: he gave God a new name, Father; he exerted God's liberating force to free men and women from the bondages that controlled their lives; he offered a new covenant in his supper, the bread and the cup, the flesh-and-blood body he chose in order to continue to be present with his people; and more profoundly than did Moses he suffered for and redeemed the sins of people. More than David had done, he set up a kingdom in which love and justice meet and which is not bounded by time and place; and he established in his own body a new center of worship in which God and humans are drawn into everlasting communion with each other. Like Elijah, he challenged the values humankind lives by and called us to new stewardship of God's resources. The work of each pioneering person comes to its climax in him.

The social movement of Scripture also found their fulfillment in him. The Shield of Abraham, the Mighty One of Isaac, and the Kinsman of Jacob were seen to be poor and imperfect replications of the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. The creative attempt of the federation of Israelite tribes to learn how to shape their institutions to express their convictions about the rule of God have been replaced by the call to accountability that Jesus Christ gives to each person and each nation. He was the quintessential prophet who distilled into his own message the best work of Samuel and Nathan; Elijah; Amos, Hosea, and Micah; both Isaiahs and Jeremiah; and his predecessor John the Baptizer. His own followers took their inspiration from him and his spirit as they tried to organize their community to carry out the task to which he had set them, that of continuing his ministry upon earth.

He also fulfilled the writings of earlier times. The JE document portrayed God as the creating one, the calling, chastening, covenanting God; Jesus plays each of those roles in the life of his people. He compressed the ten Commandments of antiquity into the two commandments of his movement: love the Lord your God with heart, soul, strength, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself. The Psalms pointed to him; his inner life both reflected and dominated their themes of faith and doubt, praise and lament, sorrow over sin and joy over forgiveness.

He became the focus of the theological movements of the Old Testament. He was greater than Moses to whom the Deuteronomists looked as their standard of behavior; the high priest greater than Eli and Zadok; the one who cared for outcasts such as the Levites. There was nothing in the Old Testament that he did not take into himself and transmute into something finer than it was before.

In the most literal sense, he is the Word of God; everything found in the Scriptures of its Old Testament is contained in his person. Was this accidental or intentional? Did he understand he was doing this or was this only understood later by those who saw him in such a context? My answer is that it was intentional: "I have not come to abolish the law and the prophets," he said, "but to fulfill them." He was himself the Word of God.

In addition, God was in Him; he completely identified his life with that of God.

This, of course, has been the sticking point of biblical studies and of Christian theology. Some make it the test of orthodoxy: do you believe that Christ is God? Others fall away from the faith at this point: how can this one man or any man, they ask skeptically, fully comprehend in his own person the total life of God? From my studies I have become convinced anew that Jesus meant us to understand that the full life of God was in him, and I submit three lines of evidence in behalf of that.

The first is that his followers had come to understand him as such. In reading such sections of the New Testament as the fourth through ninth chapters of the Gospel of Mark, it is clear that those who followed him were seeing him in a way that transcended all the categories by which one human being describes another. He was with them in a boat on the Sea of Galilee when a storm came up, and he said to the storm, "Peace, be still," and there was a great calm. Note the reaction of the disciples: "They were filled with awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this,' that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (Mark 4:41) He cleansed the demoniac, raised from the dead the daughter of Jairus, and taught in the synogogue in such a manner that the crowd exclaimed, "Where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom given to him? What mighty works are wrought by his hand?" (Mark 6:2) He ate with them in the wilderness; it was a meal like no other, it was a veritable foretaste of the messianic meal in the kingdom of God. When, following the meal, the disciples were again in a storm at sea and were greatly distressed, they saw him walking on the water, as if to pass by them; in terror they cried out and he replied, "Take heart, ... have no fear." Between these two commands is a phrase usually mistranslated into "It is I." In the Greek testament it is more meaningful than that: "I am," he says, the same words God spoke to Moses on the mountain to identify himself, the same words Isaiah of Babylon used to describe the inner life of God. Soon after, the disciples were with Jesus on the way to Ceasarea Philippi; after having asked them who people say he is and having received identification with the greatest persons of all -- John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets -- he asked who they say he is, and Peter responded, in words one man or woman had never before spoken to another, "You are the Christ." From that event a few of them went to the mountaintop with him, and they saw Jesus in yet another new way: his garments glistening white, Moses and Elijah speaking with him, his person completely changed as they watched him, while a cloud, like the cloud of the exodus, overshadowed him, and a voice came from the cloud, God's voice, announcing, "This is my son, the beloved; hear him," -- as Israel had heard God so the Christian is to hear Christ -- an event that defies description and yet before his death showed Jesus in his resurrected glory. No mere man is this. Mark is telling us that we are dealing with one whom no human categories can contain: "I am; hear him; beloved son; destroyer of death; lord of creation; Christ."

The "I am" sayings in the Gospel of John are a second line of evidence. As already suggested, this is the chief of divine names, used especially in Exodus and in Isaiah to designate God. Jesus in John's Gospel claims this title for himself and gives it new content. "I am... the bread of life... the light of the world...the door of the sheep...the good shepherd...the resurrection and the life...the way, the truth, and the life...the true vine." Surely Jesus recognized the Old Testament implications of the phrase; he would not have used it in connection with himself had he not meant it to be understood in the obvious way, namely, that he was fully identifying himself with God.

A third line of evidence is theological more than biblical: he had an ability that no one except God had, the ability to say what he was going to do and then do it.

He said he had come to heal the sick, cleanse lepers, restore sight to the blind and make the deaf hear, cause the lame to walk and the dead to be raised; and he did it.

He said he would suffer for the sins of many and in his death cleanse them of sin; and he did it.

He said he would suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again; and he was.

He said, Lo, I will be with you always, even to the close of the age; in congregation and worship, in scripture and sermon, in the sacraments of water and of bread, and in the misery of the poor, he is. As only God can do, he does what he plans to do.

Taken cumulatively, these three lines of evidence point to the fact that not only did Jesus understand that the whole life of God was in him but that indeed the claim is so true that it only waits upon our acceptance of it.

Word of God -- God -- and also human: this is the third dimension of Jesus of Nazareth that I have come to appreciate anew through my studies. I find Jesus to be a person, like ourselves, of infinite complexity but who, unlike us, was able to bring unparalleled wholeness to his life.

He knew first-hand both strength and vulnerability: an undoubted leader of women and men, one whom others sought out in moments of despair and crisis, he was himself vulnerable to denial and betrayal, grief and sorrow, to death itself, the total human condition. He was able to relate just ice and compassion; he was hard when he needed to be hard and soft when he needed to be soft, and he was sensitive enough to know the difference. Faith was fundamental to him and doubt was familiar; and on the cross he transcended the most shattering doubt about God's love and purpose by committing his life and his future to a God whose presence seemed withdrawn. He knew suffering and he knew glory. He resonated to the unarticulated sufferings of the poor, embodied them, even; and his own suffering and death had such a redemptive quality about it that it carried an aura of the glory of God and brought those who suffered with him a new experience of the God who suffers. Above all, his life became the point of intersection between God and humans: no one, Jesus pointed out, is truly human unless he or she is in communion with God, a fellowship so incredibly intimate that his spirit and God's were one. In his own person Jesus was all that God expects a human being to be and all that anyone can expect God to be.

He stands alone; there is no one who can stand beside him. Name anyone; stand him or her beside Jesus; and Jesus towers beyond them. Moses, Elijah? Jesus' covenant was more comprehensive than Moses', his prophetic role more profound than Elijah's. Socrates and Plato? Jesus' teaching is more memorable and has impacted the lives of many more persons than did these. Gautama and Mohammed? His spirituality transcends theirs, his intimacy with God far deeper. Gandhi, Florence Nightingale, Dorothea Dix, Albert Schweitzer? All acknowledged their debt to him. It was said of the great Renaissance artist Tintoretto that after a lifetime of painting seascapes one day he cast his brushes aside saying. "The sea grows always greater. Who can paint it?" So with Christ. The deeper one probes, the more unplumbed the depths of his person; the more one observes him, the more there is to see; the longer one walks with him, the more impressive his leadership and courage. Of all the human race who have lived and died he is preeminent; Jesus stands alone.