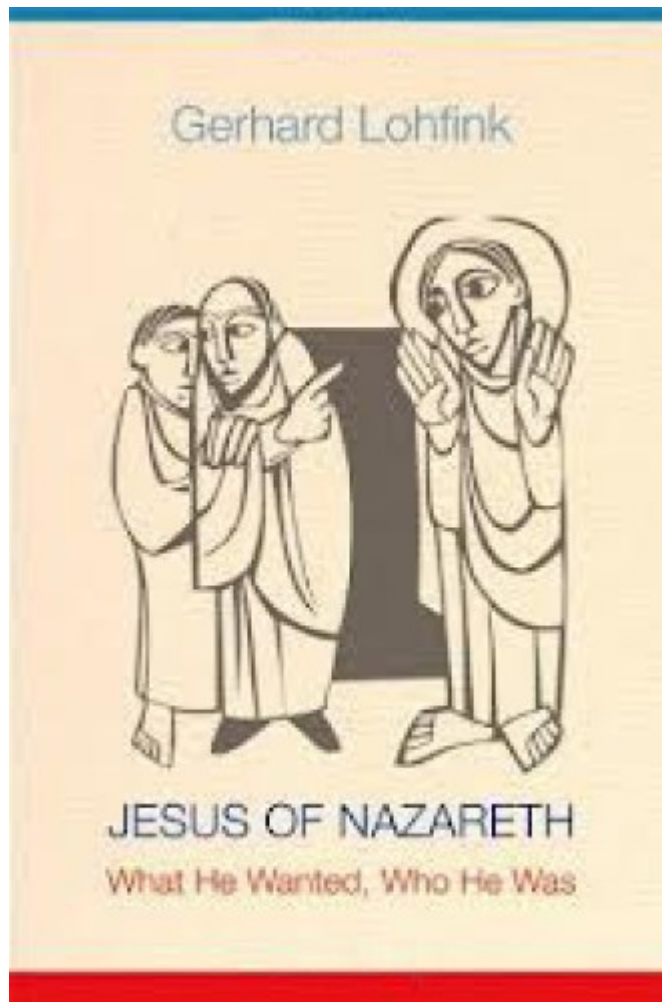


What Jesus knew

by [Greg Carey](#) in the [January 23, 2013](#) issue

In Review



Jesus of Nazareth

By Gerhard Lohfink
Liturgical Press

Gerhard Lohfink clearly loves Jesus, and his book demands readers who share that love. Because the readers love Jesus, they want to know more about him, and collecting facts takes them only so far. They want to understand Jesus, to appreciate

in a fundamental way how Jesus perceived his world and to glimpse Jesus' vision for the reign of God. In the three weeks I've had this book, I've recommended it to three such readers.

Lohfink introduces a Jesus who proclaims the reign of God—God's decisive irruption into human affairs. More important, Jesus bears the very presence of God in his own person. Grounded in Israel's scriptures and heritage, Jesus gathers disciples and builds community; he demonstrates God's reign through prophetic actions and healing works; and by telling vivid parables, he prepares people to imagine what God is doing. Israel's God always begins with particular people and particular places. Jesus calls Israel to enter into God's reign, resisting evil but rejecting violence. He invites people into a joyful, unconditional embrace of God's reign in their lives and in their society.

Nothing controversial so far. Interpreters of the parables may object that Lohfink understates the parables' potential to disorient their audiences. Some will not share his principled belief that divine activity contributed to Jesus' miracles. Apart from his claim that Jesus would have learned important parts of scripture in his youth, Lohfink has little to say about Jesus' origins or childhood. Just the same, many interpreters emphasize Jesus' Jewish identity and attend to the practices of teaching, community building and restoration that mark his ministry.

One simple thing distinguishes Lohfink's account: his Jesus possesses a fundamental self-awareness of his person and his mission. Jesus knows he is the Messiah, but even that title bears limitations and does not account for his full identity. He claims authority as Son of Man, embodying in his own person "the new society of the eschatological Israel." When his work achieves only partial success in Galilee and when he encounters resistance from the authorities in Jerusalem, Jesus perceives not only a personal rejection but Israel's outright rejection of God's reign.

Confident in his divine vindication, Jesus interprets his own death as the means by which God will overcome even Israel's rejection. His death, "utterly and entirely death for others," opens the way to life for all. Jesus' tomb was empty, an event that prompted his followers to understand that they had entered an eschatological situation. The Easter narratives, Lohfink insists, say nothing about our individual afterlives; instead, they call Jesus' followers into mission. The most distinctive thing about Lohfink's Jesus is that he embodies God's presence as a decisive intervention in human history—and he knows it. In his person Jesus bears the full presence of

God.

Lohfink's ideal reader need not be a scholar, though it will help to have a solid college-level understanding of the Bible. Lohfink writes clearly and accessibly, but he also expects readers to share his assumptions concerning the nature of the Gospels as historical sources. He never explains why Jesus surely did not say the kinds of things we find in John's Gospel, or why that same Gospel might provide our only source for particular bits of historically accurate information.

A Catholic priest, a New Testament scholar by training and a former Tübingen professor, Lohfink lives and works as a theologian for the Catholic Integrated Community, a renewal movement based in Germany. His publications include works in New Testament studies and ecclesiology.

Lohfink participates in a major trend in contemporary Jesus research. Until the 1990s, historians tended to build their portraits of Jesus from the ground up. Like the notorious Jesus Seminar, they sifted through the Gospels, picking out specks of "authentic" material from the theology, mythology and interpretation that account for a significant amount of the Gospels. Lohfink instead starts with a big picture and fills in the details.

This volume reflects a fierce independence; I cannot recall a book very much like it. Lohfink rarely engages the work of other Jesus scholars directly. Just the same, a reader acquainted with Jesus scholarship will encounter familiar ideas. Lohfink's description of the Gospels as interpretations of the impact Jesus made on people evokes James Dunn's work on memory in early Christian communities. The Jesus who advances Israel's story into its eschatological fullness, not in some remote future but in the here and now, recalls the work of N. T. Wright. The Jesus who seeks revolution but rejects violence resembles the Jesus of Richard Horsley. And Lohfink's high estimation of Jesus' symbolic behaviors, including building community at table and through healing, brushes the edges of John Dominic Crossan's work. Significantly, Lohfink shares his refusal to separate historiography from theology with Dale Allison, who has offered a brilliant critique of Jesus scholarship.

The book ends, as not all Jesus books do, with a reflection on Jesus' basic claim regarding himself and with the church's most basic confession concerning him: "Jesus, true human and true God." Lohfink is frustratingly indirect on these points. He all but says that Jesus possessed an awareness of his divine identity: he

understood his own acts as works of God, yet they were “accomplished by his own power.” Even his proclamation of God’s reign implied a christological claim. But this is a sensitive subject: why doesn’t Lohfink come out and say whether Jesus possessed a divine self-consciousness? And why doesn’t he say definitively that the church’s confession of Jesus emerged from Jesus’ own person? Instead, he writes: “Jesus found others who saw what was happening through him and who he was.”

Perhaps I am small-minded to want Lohfink to say clearly and directly how he imagines Jesus to have understood himself. I suspect that Lohfink would trace his own elusiveness back to Jesus, who knew better than to spell out such things for his followers.