

*In Principio.*¹

Preface

This book finds its genesis in three formative encounters. The first was a graduate course I took from an orthodox rabbi on Judaism in the time of Jesus. That course not only painted a fuller and more nuanced portrait of the period than I had ever considered, but it also provided me with a thoughtful encounter with the Sanhedrin, especially the many ways in which its behaviour in the New Testament accounts of the trials of Jesus was inconsistent with Jewish law. That course also helped to sensitise me to the long and terrible history of Christian anti-Semitism that has grown out of the claim that the Jews were responsible for killing Jesus. The rabbi doubtless said many more sophisticated things than I can remember, for it was a long time ago, but he gave me the profound gift of a stubborn and fertile question.

The second was my initial encounter with the Jesus Seminar. Many years ago, I attended the lectures of a colleague, a New Testament scholar and affiliate of the Jesus Seminar, who was teaching a course on the historical Jesus. His required readings included Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, and E.P. Sanders, among others. It was there that I first encountered seriously the so-called ‘Third Quest’ for the historical Jesus. I also learned of its advances over the first two quests, many of which seemed quite sensible, such as paying attention to historical evidence beyond the pages of the New Testament and thinking carefully about one’s methodology for evaluating evidence. Under my colleague’s tutelage, I came to grapple with the Seminar’s procedures, assumptions, criteria, and provocative conclusions. In particular, I was struck by Crossan’s argument that it is unlikely that Jesus was ever buried after the Romans crucified him, for, he asserted, denial of burial was part of the standard punishment the Romans meted out to those they executed. As a Roman historian, I could understand where he got

1. *In principio* are the first words of Genesis and the Gospel of John in the Latin Vulgate translation: ‘In the beginning. . . .’

these ideas, but I also wondered what a careful scrutiny of the evidence for Roman executions might reveal. On the whole, I was impressed, but I was struck also by a niggling sense of disconnect between the study of the historical Jesus and the study of other historical subjects in the ancient world.

It took the better part of two decades for me to find the opportunity to connect the dots between these two encounters. I began by studying capital punishment in the Roman Empire, which led ineluctably to that most infamous of Roman executions, and backwards from there to the rest of the research that forms the foundation of this book.

The third encounter will explain the subtitle. When I was young, my family had a weekly ritual: we would gather round the television to watch ABC's *Wide World of Sports*. Every Saturday afternoon, the inimitable voice of Jim McKay greeted us: 'Spanning the globe to bring you the constant variety of sport, the thrill of victory, the agony of defeat. . . .' Those words and the accompanying music always raised the heartrate. I can't remember the pictures associated with the thrill of victory, but I'll never forget the agony of defeat: an ill-starred ski jumper, falling off the side of the ramp and bouncing like a rag doll down the icy slope. That ski jumper, I later learned, was Vinko Bogataj of Slovenia. He was actually quite a good jumper, except on March 21, 1970 when he suffered that terrible accident. Little did he know that he was destined to repeat that feat every Saturday afternoon for the next twenty-eight years. As an athlete and a student of history, I've thought a good deal about the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat but the story of the final days of Jesus seems to invert the premise, showing us instead the thrill of defeat, and the agony of victory.¹

1. I owe this phrasing to Dr Timothy Weber.