

The Last Temptation of Christ Study Guide

The Last Temptation of Christ by Nikos Kazantzakis

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Contents

The Last Temptation of Christ Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapters 1-5.....	4
Chapters 6-10.....	7
Chapters 11-15.....	11
Chapters 16-20.....	15
Chapters 21-25.....	19
Chapters 26-29.....	23
Chapters 30-33.....	26
Characters.....	29
Objects/Places.....	41
Social Concerns And Themes.....	46
Techniques/Literary Precedents.....	47
Themes.....	48
Style.....	51
Quotes.....	55
Adaptations.....	60
Key Questions.....	61
Topics for Discussion.....	62
Related Titles.....	63
Copyright Information.....	64



Plot Summary

The Last Temptation of Christ is an unorthodox portrayal of Jesus of Nazareth battling with the responsibilities of being the Messiah. Hanging from the cross, he dreams of what his life could have been and—realizing the consequences for humanity—completes his mission by dying triumphantly.

Jesus wants not to accept the fate of being God's Messiah. He conquers all sins except fear. He builds crosses on which the Romans execute would-be Messiahs, hoping that God will give up on him but regularly feels God pick him up by the head with vulture-like talons and continue recruiting. Reviled at the Zealot's crucifixion, Jesus leaves home for a desert monastery but arrives too late for Abbot Joachim to interpret his dreams. Judas Iscariot, a blacksmith and Zealot tasked with assassinating Jesus, lets him live until they can see whether he is the Messiah. Jesus leaves, retaining the white robe.

Jesus reaches Capernaum in time to keep a mob from stoning prostitute Mary Magdalene and for the first time offers to hungry crowds simple parables. Gathering a band of followers including Judas, Jesus heads to the Jordan to let John the Baptist decide on his authenticity. With John's blessing and warning, Jesus tests himself in the desert. Learning when he emerges that John has been beheaded, Jesus adopts John's fiery message and attitude. It backfires in Nazareth, where Jesus initiates his ministry, and he settles into Capernaum for the winter, sending out disciples and himself healing the sick.

As Passover nears, Jesus preaches in Jerusalem, making deadly enemies. Raising Lazarus from the dead shows Jesus he can do anything. Through Judas, Jesus arranges with the High Priest Caiaphas the only sequence of events that can save the world. After the Passover meal, Jesus prays in Gethsemane for a reprieve but endures the blasphemy trial and Roman sentence of death. Simon of Cyrene carries the cross after Jesus' strength gives and Simon alone sees angels affix Jesus to the cross and pierce his side.

After crying out, "Eli, Eli," Jesus faints. In an instant, he dreams of a long "normal" married life with many children and grandchildren. When the disciples visit, decrepit, bitter old men, Judas calls Jesus a traitor and coward for not keeping his promises. Jesus finds himself in agony on the cross, finishes his cry, "lama sabachthani," adds "It is accomplished," and begins a new era for mankind.



Chapters 1-5

Chapters 1-5 Summary

Jesus' nights are tormented by dreams of being pursued as "The One," and his days pass in vain because he cannot vanquish Fear. As Nazareth awakens to the rabbi's usual cry to God, "How long?" Jesus wonders whether it is God or the devil who visits him in dreams. Judas Iscariot visits, arguing that Jesus cannot provide a cross for today's execution. Barabbas and the Zealots plan on stopping the crucifixion and everyone expects the Messiah to join in the fight. Jesus believes that the Messiah will be different: he will die alone, in rags, on a mountain, crowned in thorns. As a seething crowd passes Jesus' workshop, taunting him as a "Cross-maker," Judas wonders whether this gaunt figure—constantly deteriorating—could indeed be The One. As Judas thinks this, Jesus recognizes that Judas is the main character in his nightmares and mulls over miraculous legends of his own birth. Declaring that he is no public speaker and a shameless sinner besides, Jesus hears Judas curse him.

As Jesus finishes work, he feels an invisible vulture claw into his skull, drawing blood. What begins as a pleasant tickle at age 12, at age 20 keeps him from proposing to Mary Magdalene, and now hits whenever he feels pleasure. With it comes, it demands he preach the Kingdom of Heaven, to which Jesus insists he is unsuited and sins to make God detest him. At noon, Jesus staggers out under the weight of the cross and falls. His mother looks at him with disappointment. Simeon insists that God, not a demon, torments Jesus, so there can be no exorcism. As Jesus brushes past her, bearing the cross, Mary recalls visitors bringing gifts when he is young.

Lifted high, the rabbi rallies the people to faith. Before the Galileans can storm the gates, the Romans lead out the Zealot. As Jesus approaches with the cross, Magdalene taunts him and men move to block his path, but Simeon says not to impede God's will. Peter, a fisherman, takes over carrying the cross. The Zealot holds his mother and takes her blessing and, as he is being hoisted, the cross tilts. Jesus must pound in wedges and ignores his mortified mother. As they drive in the nails, Jesus feels pain in his palms and feet. All bellow "Adonai!" The Zealot's mother curses Jesus and Mary, and Jesus receives the victim's bloody kerchief. Judas and Barabbas rush the rabbi to safety in the synagogue, which Simeon once painted with pictures of Ezekiel's vision of bones reconnecting and a dazzling New Jerusalem. To give people hope, Simeon reveals that God has assured him that he will live to see the Messiah. When the people leave, Simeon paces, fighting with a madness that claws at his mind, and recalls Jesus' eyes, full of heaven as he carries the cross—another Moses. He goes to Mary's house, where she is spinning wool and wishing he would explain why a white dove has climbed onto her knees. When it coos "Hail, Mary!" she recalls the thunder when God strikes down her fiancé. Cautiously, Simeon suggests that Jesus may be The One. Mary wants him to be normal. When Jesus arrives and tells Simeon he will resist God until he dies, Mary collapses and Joseph screams "Adonai!"



Chapters 1-5 Analysis

The first five chapters of *The Last Temptation of Christ* establish that Jesus is a guilt-ridden young man who is physically declining at an alarming rate. Having inherited his crippled father's wood shop, Jesus is the only carpenter in Nazareth who does not refuse to make crosses for the Romans. This has given him and his family a bad name in the small town. For years, Jesus has been suffering painful seizures that feel like a vulture sinking its talons into his skull. They are accompanied by God's request that he become a preacher. Jesus does whatever he can to make himself vile to God, to get God to drop the order, but God keeps coming back to him. Note that Jesus' uncle, Rabbi Simeon, suffers similar seizures and sleeplessness.

Afraid of nightmares, Jesus flagellates himself with a nail-studded strap before bedtime, but still he sees his one-time boyhood friend, the red-bearded Judas Iscariot, leading a band of strangers searching all over the Land of Canaan for The One who keeps himself hidden. The dream sequence lays open all the places and characters who will figure in this long and complex novel. As Jesus resumes working on the cross needed for today's execution, Judas enters and demands to know if he is ready to join the brotherhood of terrorists dedicated to ridding Israel of the Romans. Jesus recognizes Judas from his nightmares, and Judas for an instant considers that this odd, cowardly young man might be The One.

Jesus feels guilty for three things beyond his control: his father's paralysis, caused when he is struck by lightning on Mt. Carmel with Mary, his fiancée, Mary Magdalene, his boyhood playmate and would-be fiancée—had the seizures not intervened—and Israel's continuing enslavement by the Romans. This guilt follows him through the novel, particularly the last two.

The Apocryphal stories of Mary's birth to aged Joachim and Anne and Joseph being chosen for the holy girl's husband when his staff alone buds, are incorporated seamlessly, as is the archangel's "Hail Mary," which she recalls coming from the cloud that strikes Joseph down. He spends his days and nights trying to stutter out the syllables, "Adonai," the pronunciation of the name of God that pious Jews substitute for the printed JHWH (Yahweh / Jehovah). Mary has grown bitter over what God has thrown at her: a crippled husband and fit-prone, oddball son. Denied physical pleasure, she at least wants to be a grandmother.

She often consults her brother-in-law, the 85-year-old Rabbi Simeon, whom God has assured will not die until the Messiah comes. The old man is a firebrand who has grown to distrust the mercy of God. Each crucifixion of a rebel, however, convinces him that the Messiah is nearer at hand. He has been spying on Jesus and notices he glows in the dark as the fires of God consume him. He sees in him another Moses. That is in Jesus' eyes as he carries the Zealot's cross, which he has built, to the place of execution and then helps wedge it upright. All of Nazareth scorns him and his mother. The Zealot's mother curses them, wishing on them the pain of crucifixion.



Present at the crucifixion are a number of Galilean fishermen, drawn by the hopes that the Messiah will appear and intervene. Peter and Jacob's characters begin to be developed, while a sinister Thomas darts about the background. The enormous Zealot Barabbas comes down from the mountains to lead the revolt they are sure the Messiah will start. Various views on the Messiah are debated in these chapters. Judas, from the beginning an unsavory figure, is an itinerant blacksmith with ties yet undisclosed to the terrorists. As a child, he beats up Jesus, which begins Jesus' withdrawal into himself. It is also told how Mary Magdalene, the rabbi's daughter, is Jesus friend and almost fiancée. When the engagement falls through, she goes off to Magdala and becomes a prostitute. She returns to Nazareth on the eve of the crucifixion to offer sexual delight to the condemned, but he has taken vows of chastity. She sings dirges at his feet as he hangs crucified, after cursing Jesus for his part in the atrocity.



Chapters 6-10

Chapters 6-10 Summary

At God's gentle invitation, Jesus leaves home to enter a desert monastery, but his joy is interrupted by bare feet behind him. Seeing no one, he runs and people laugh and curse at him. He passes through Cana unseen, is fed by an old woman embittered that the monastery has claimed her son, and, nearing pagan Tiberias, meets old Zebedee of Capernaum, who keeps Philip from murdering him as a Cross-maker. Jesus flees, wishing he could walk across the lake. Hearing footsteps again, Jesus expects his mother, but sees an armor-clad woman with an eagle's head: a vision known as "The Curse."

That night, feeling crucified, Jesus sees Magdalene ride by, fetched by wealthy clients, has a dream turn obscene, scourges himself, and is shocked to find himself in Magdala, where he knows that he must beg forgiveness. Jesus sits aloof behind five clients, who listen to love-making, chatter, and snack. Jesus' turn comes at sunset. Seeing Jesus, Magdalene covers herself, curses him and his God, orders him out, and dares him to admit that fear drives him to the desert. Jesus wishes he could comfort her and give her a normal life. When a storm traps Jesus, Magdalene recalls their infant play as Jesus struggles to focus on God, whom she reviles as a cruel enemy of happiness. After dinner, she shows him where to sleep unmolested, listens to him breathe all night, sees him leave in the morning, and then weeps.

As the storm rages, the monks pray that it is not another Noah's Flood. Abbot Joachim listens to his gifted novice John, son of Zebedee, read nervously from Daniel's prophecy of the four beasts. The abbot is starving himself to death to bring Israel's grievances before God face-to-face for breaking his promises by not sending the Son of Man. He has John summon the monks to hear his last words, about freedom, slavery, and liberation. If God will not show mercy, humans must act, producing the Messiah. The monks must be ready any time. Joachim crumbles; Habakkuk, the eldest monk, pronounces him dead, but all gasp when he revives. John is sent to Nazareth for Simeon.

As ten fishermen work in Capernaum, bossed by old Zebedee, Philip comes by. Women begin singing the dirge for the wheat harvest destroyed by the storm. Judas rides by, hating both men, but stops, in hopes of business. He and Zebedee clash over greed and the Messiah, while Philip dares not take Judas' side, for Zebedee owns the pasture lands. When Judas leaves, Philip catches up and insists he wants to stop being a coward. He balks at joining the freedom fighters who murder Jewish collaborators. Judas would have killed Jesus had he not been with Zebedee's elder son Jacob. When he returns from making tools at the monastery, Judas will see if Philip is ready to join. Philip quickly talks himself into minding his own business. The fishermen boil stew and talk about justice until Zebedee silences them.



Also trapped by the storm in Magdala, Jacob finds Jesus commiserating with women over the lost harvest. Rough like his father, Jacob is surprised to see the Cross-maker shining like Elijah. As they walk together, Jesus is quiet and elusive, making Jacob suspect that he is Rufus' spy. Out of sorts, Jacob stalks past the fishermen and into the village. Jonah approaches, looking like he has been vomited up by a fish like his namesake and freakish enough to be a prophet like Elijah and Enoch. Zebedee has two men walk him home and sends the rest out with baskets of fish and instructions to gouge consumers. John gallops by, too hurried to stop, calling out that the abbot is dying.

Watching Jacob walk away angry, Jesus wonders why people hate him, why he is cowardly, why he cannot marry Magdalene, why God's claws grab him, and why he is going to the desert. A lizard, two butterflies, and an army of ants convince Jesus that all are God's creatures—even The Curse, whom he senses. He marvels at a rich camel caravan and then is crushed, knowing they will stop and use his Magdalene. Unable to talk her out of sin, Jesus intends to pray her out. Thomas the peddler comes along and advises Jesus that Judas is headed for the monastery, swearing to kill him. Jesus contemplates God's will and hopes to die swiftly if he must. The Curse urges him on.

In Nazareth, Mary feels far from blessed as she prepares to search for her only son and, nearing the monastery, Jesus feels hopeless. The guest master, Jeroboam, welcomes him, but the dying abbot will be unable to interpret his dream. When Jesus ventures into the abbot's cell, bliss crosses the old man's face and he says, "You've come." Simeon arrives too late for anything but the funeral. Seeing Judas work the anvil, young John is afraid, but Jesus and Judas both see God throwing them together. Simeon contemplates how God demands and rejects both sacrifices and psalms. Seeing Jesus silent in the corner, Simeon rebukes him for lacking pity for his mother and wonders what hidden pain devours him. Jesus cannot confess his temptations but says he is saving himself from God who hunts him. Jesus' only defense is to commit every conceivable sin to make God detest him. Magdalene is a whore because at age three they play together naked. Having often found that marriage drives out demons, Simeon advises it, but Jesus says he dreams of being the prophesied Son of David, the Son of God, and even God himself. Simeon sits shocked as the windstorm whips around the monastery.

Chapters 6-10 Analysis

The story continues as Jesus, unable to bear the scorn of his neighbors in Nazareth, slips unnoticed away from his parents' home forever. God invites him to go with uncharacteristic gentleness. Twice on the road he is taunted as Cross-builder and nearly assaulted. Zebedee and Philip, significant characters going forward, are introduced and Zebedee's unpalatable character as a skinflint and skeptic are gradually developed.

Most significantly, a specter is introduced, pursuing Jesus. He recognizes the frightful, merciless, armor-clad woman with an eagle's head as "The Curse." She continues, on



and off, to goad him forward to his destiny. More painful to Jesus emotionally is Mary Magdalene, whose forgiveness he craves for having turned her to a life of degradation. Determined to avoid her, Jesus finds himself drawn to her town and then to her house. Life in her one-woman brothel is described in debauched detail, as anxious clients while away the hours waiting for those ahead of them in line to finish with their pleasure. When Jesus' turn comes, he enters her bedroom filled with trepidation and receives a hostile, taunting welcome. A massive rainstorm traps Jesus overnight.

At Jesus' destination, the monastery, described as tomb-like, the aged abbot is starving himself to death, determined to lay before God's face the urgency of his keeping his promise to send the Messiah. John, son of Zebedee, is his innocent but promising novice. Later in the story, John will receive from Jesus' mouth the opening themes of the Book of Revelation, which bears John's name.

The storm that holds Jesus and, it turns out, Zebedee's eldest son, Jacob, a loud-mouthed, temperamental lout like his father, in Magdala, destroys the wheat crop that Jesus has enjoyed watching the farmers cut and thresh. Starvation threatens Galilee. Some hold that it, on top of the Zealot's crucifixion, are a sign of the end times, but worldly, rich Zebedee, whose livelihood depends on the lake, is unimpressed. There are no end of messiahs and crosses, he reasons. Philip, a shepherd whose cowardice matches that of Jesus, and ever-fanatic Judas meet briefly, and Judas lets out that he plans to murder Jesus at the monastery, whither he is invited to fashion some tools. Jacob decides that taciturn, confused Jesus must be the Centurion Rufus' new spy and also wants to do him in, in time. Jonah, named for the prophet and looking very much like a great fish has vomited him up, is sketched. His troubles with his sons, Peter the drunk and Andrew the ascetic, leave the old man wondering.

When Jesus reaches the monastery, the abbot is dying, so he cannot explain Jesus' dream with which the novel opens. Joachim dies with a beatific smile, and the Messianic declaration to Jesus, "You've come." Jesus walking in the funeral procession and Judas, banging away at his anvil, both see God at work, making their paths cross. Judas manipulates the guest master into putting them in a single room overnight to make the killing easier.

Finally, Jesus and Simeon, summoned too late to heal the abbot, have a tense conversation. Jesus shocks the old man (who tries to convince Jesus that confession is good for the soul and that the more demons one has inside the more potential angels there are to liberate) by telling him how at age three he corrupted Simeon's daughter Mary, starting her on her life of prostitution and reveals that a gypsy once predicted that he will be "King of the Jews." Since that encounter, Jesus has felt himself to be the Son of God and, indeed, God himself. He has never told anyone this. Great tensions are being built up that must be released in the pages ahead.

Kazantzakis' description of Lake Gennesaret amusingly take on shades of the Mediterranean, which surround Crete, where he grows up. Salt water animals include a flying fish that Zebedee sees as an omen he cannot interpret. Jewish fishermen snack here and further in the book on octopus and other creatures forbidden in the Law of

Moses. It is also mildly amusing that a Jewish ascetic would take the name of Jeroboam, who leads the Northern revolt against Judea and Israel into sin.



Chapters 11-15

Chapters 11-15 Summary

Jeroboam first hears the snakes mating as the windstorm draws them out of the dry well. Simeon wonders what the hidden meaning is behind the snakes coming out after Jesus' confession, and Jesus is sure the snakes have come from within his bowels. The rabbi sees that Jesus' entire life is miraculous, but the rabbi has been too often deceived by God to accept Jesus as the Messiah without testing. He asks if Jesus is ready to speak to mankind and says pity for people is not enough. There must be love. Jesus' destiny may be to take on all human sorrows. Tired, Jesus goes to his new room.

In the darkness, Jesus sees Judas watching, luring him within knife range. When Judas declares his mission, Jesus invites him to strike: with soul unburdened, he can go to God. Judas needs a struggle. Jesus knows that Judas cannot understand him building crosses to prevent being enlisted as The One and angers Judas with talk of pitying all of creation. For Judas, only Israel matters. For Jesus, death is a door to God, and if Judas spares him, he will do and say whatever God decides. Seeing the light intensify around Jesus' face, Judas wavers. Jesus sleeps tranquilly while Judas fidgets and at dawn flees. Jesus tells The Curse that his hour is not yet come.

As autumn arrives, Capernaum joyously processes grapes in Zebedee's yard. Arthritic Salome is joyous because John is home, albeit broken by excessive prayer and fasting. Judas is making barrels, silently, soaking up everything to report to the brotherhood and waiting for God's vengeance. As Philip, Jacob, Peter, and Nathaniel tread grapes, Andrew arrives in a black goatskin and with a fiery yellow face and begins lecturing about frivolity. Fed up with apocalyptic lies, Zebedee orders Peter to drag Andrew home, but Salome objects to the scoffing, and Jacob agrees.

When Jesus' mother arrives, Salome welcomes her and is sure Jesus will leave as John has. John reports that the monks want Jesus as their abbot but he refuses. News comes that Barabbas has caught Magdalene "working" on the Sabbath and a mob is chasing her to Capernaum. When it arrives, Salome shelters Magdalene, but Barabbas drags her out. Only Jacob resists, insisting on observing Moses' law. A figure in white leading an army of poor folk sweeps in yelling, "Maran atha!" As people chant "Death!" Jesus says only the sinless may throw a stone. When slapped, he inexplicably offers the other cheek. Happy that someone stands up to Zebedee, but unhappy with Jesus' theme, Judas orders Barabbas to leave, who does, vowing vengeance.

Still hungry, the poor look to Jesus, who leads them to a small hill and as a simple man tells a parable about seed falling into various kinds of soil. Andrew is as excited as when John the Baptist preaches. When Jesus explains that the seed is the commandment "Love one another!" the crowd knows that this is impossible. Jesus yells about the blessedness of those who depend on God to provide for them rather than, as Andrew insists, about purifying fire. Salome drags Zebedee away and prevents Mary from



cursing Jesus when he refuses to go home. When calls go up to burn and loot, Jesus calms Andrew by touching his head. At dark, alone, Jesus is melancholy, but sends Magdalene home when she appears, promising to call her when his time comes. Jesus had wanted to talk about fire, but God put "Love!" in his mouth. Jesus dreams of planting an apple seed that instantly becomes a fruiting tree. Andrew brings him food and calls him "Rabboni" (My Master).

Jesus considers himself not a prophet but Earth's bridegroom, so it is natural that he laugh and dance. God is evident everywhere. The Pharisees object and Judas, caring about Israel alone, objects to concentrating on the Kingdom of Heaven. That can wait until the Romans are expelled. John confides to Jesus that he is afraid of Judas, to whom a black angel speaks. Jesus spends the most time with Judas because he most needs love. By following Jesus, Andrew finds his heart and enjoys life. He worries about Peter, Jacob, John, and their fathers, but Jesus assures him there is room for all.

In Bethsaida, rich Ananias, who suffers nightmares about hell, gives a banquet and asks "sorcery" from Jesus. Jesus tells of a rich man who ignores starving Lazarus but after death begs him for water in hell. After a debate, Jesus assures listeners that God is both just and good and changes the ending so God lets both drink for eternity. Ananias begs forgiveness and begins giving things away. Judas warns that Jesus' death sentence is still open and proposes consulting John the Baptist. They set off at dawn with John and Andrew, pick up Peter and Jacob in Capernaum, but fail to enlist Philip.

As Jesus' fame spreads, Magdalene weeps and prays herself clean and dreams of a normal married life with Jesus. When Nathaniel invites Jesus to bless his nephew's wedding in Magdala, guests are offended to see Jesus with the "slut." He tells a parable about ten virgins, asks Nathaniel if the foolish ones should be admitted to the feast and congratulates him on entering Paradise by saying yes. While this may go against the Law, the Law goes against Jesus' heart. After the ceremony and party, Jesus and his companions head for Jerusalem, singing the psalm of journeying.

Judas wants to avoid heretical Samaria, but Jesus insists they must save all. Entering a village, the disciples beg alms while Jesus asks a young woman for a drink and offers "immortal water" in return. He knows her marital situation and is touched by her concern for God, whom he says is worshiped only in spirit. The disciples' return saves him from having to say if he is the Messiah. Judas alone refuses to eat or drink. Picking pomegranates embitters the farmers who ask how they dare eat food that their law falsely condemns. Jesus declares all land holy, for God is everywhere and, when the old man asks if God even welcomes Lucifer, Jesus says that is God's business.

After a cold night huddled in a cave, the band enters rocky, arid Judea. Unable to sleep that night, Jesus wanders through the tombs and feels the souls of humankind screaming in his heart. He dreams of flying with Magdalene and constructing the Messiah. As they resume the climb, Jesus says that every good deed or word brings the Messiah closer and every evil one makes him turn back. This makes Judas first happy and then puzzled: can the whole people be the Messiah needing only to take up arms? At the first sight of the city, the disciples do a circle-dance around Jesus.



Chapters 11-15 Analysis

The windstorm that attends the abbot's funeral continues all night. The monks are regularly amused that when God throws such events at them, the snakes get the urge to copulate. Jesus feels that a clump of serpents has been freed within him, but cannot yet say he loves humankind, which Simeon makes the prerequisite for beginning a preaching ministry. The spiritual cleansing does, however, prepare him for death at the hands of Judas, who is disappointed that Jesus does not struggle. Perplexed, Judas suspends sentence but keeps the threat hanging over Jesus as their lives increasingly intertwine.

From this dark, sinister scene, the book turns to the bucolic rapture of autumn harvest and devotes many pages to the harvesting and processing of grapes, which for the young is a major, joyous, and even lusty event. Zebedee hangs as a cloud, meticulously charging poor neighbors for the use of his wine press. A heavier cloud arrives when Andrew arrives from the desert demanding an end to the unseemly jocularly and attention on the fast-approaching end of times. John, the other ascetic, is already home, having come to use his knowledge of herbs to alleviate his mother's arthritis. As things calm down, Mary, Jesus' mother arrives, frantic and exhausted, having gotten a tip that he has passed through Capernaum en route to the monastery. John reports that the monks want Jesus to become their abbot and are ready to hold him against his will. Mary Magdalene then bursts in, pursued by a lethal mob bent on stoning her to death, and then off the desert sweeps a figure in white yelling "Maran atha!" — "Our Lord comes!" in Aramaic, the now nearly-dead vernacular of the region.

Barabbas the Zealot leads the mob. He apparently has decided to wage a bit of jihad—holy war—before returning to the mountains. He finds Magdalene not only committing adultery but daring to do it on the Sabbath. These are stoning offenses under the Law of Moses. Only Jacob son of Zebedee stands up to Barabbas, arguing a legal technicality. Most of the mob wants to see the famous Magdalene naked and bloodied. When Jesus declares only s/he who is without sin may throw a stone, Zebedee volunteers. Earlier in the chapter it has been specified that he dallies with the local widows now that his wife is old and infirm, and he is on the verge of foreclosing on yet another neighbor's property. Judas is fortunately on hand in Capernaum making wine barrels and is able to step between Barabbas and Jesus. This is an indication of how senior a member of the Brotherhood of Zealots Judas is. Jesus now has a second, very dangerous killer vowing to get even with him.

Surrounded by starving people, since the good people of Capernaum ignore the injunctions in the Law of Moses to leave part of each crop untouched so the poor can gather it and be fed, Jesus has little choice but to address them. He wants to be another John the Baptist preaching fire, but God presses into his heart and puts into his mouth brotherhood and universal love. Judas and Andrew, of course, take exception. Zebedee, who attends the first sermon looking for opportunities to heckle, sees an incipient socialism brewing, and indeed there are calls to burn him out and loot the rubble. The social justice theme develops.



Human relations are examined as characters are deepened. John, his mother Salome's beloved, soon becomes Jesus' beloved disciple. Firebrand Andrew blows in like a hot wind, but Jesus calms him with a touch, and he becomes the first to confess Jesus as Rabboni (My Master in Aramaic). Salome sees throngs of angels' wings around Jesus and his mother, but Mary wants only to become a grandmother and live a normal life. She demands that her boy come home with her, and Salome has to restrain her from issuing a mother's curse on him for ignoring her. Earlier, at the monastery, Uncle Simeon has asked Jesus how he can be so cold to his mother.

The rousing success of Jesus' early ministry is sketched with a minimum of words, Kazantzakis most likely depending on his readers' familiarity with the Gospel tales to fill in the details from memory. The Parable of the Rich Man and Poor Lazarus gets extraordinary treatment, for it allows the disciples to debate justice and goodness and for Jesus to alter the ending from what becomes the "official" version. The more compassionate ending—because Lazarus cannot enjoy Paradise while his neighbor is consigned to the fires of hell, God lets them both enjoy water for eternity—angers Judas, who reminds Jesus of his tenuous footing and suggests they let John the Baptist decide whether Jesus is the Messiah. If not, he is dead. Judas reserves the right to disagree with Jesus publicly.

The Parable of the Ten Virgins is also explicated, as Jesus tells it when self-righteous guests at a wedding sneer at him for holding hands with the repentant Magdalene. The "official" meaning of this parable also gets softened in discussions. After the wedding party, at which Jesus and the disciples eat, drink, and dance, the band heads off to see the Baptist. The stopover in Samaria includes the famous encounter of Jesus and the Samaritan woman, with its subtext of bitter religious schism between Samaritans and orthodox Jews dating back centuries to the return from the Babylonian Exile. Judas refuses Samaritan bread, saying it is as unclean as pork, to which Jesus retorts: when bread (or pork) enter a clean Galilean, it becomes Galilean and clean.

Twice in Samaria Jesus finds himself in an awkward position, asked to declare if he is the Messiah and if God can be reconciled to Lucifer (Satan). On the first question, he gets lucky when the disciples arrive; on the second he declares that it is outside his expertise. He is increasingly being forced to confront hard questions. On the final ascent to Jerusalem (built in the mountains), Jesus talks enigmatically about peoples' words and deeds drawing the Messiah nearer or pushing him away, providing Judas food for thought.



Chapters 16-20

Chapters 16-20 Summary

Jerusalem is clothed in green, has driven the scapegoat into the desert, overflows with the blood of sacrifices, and stinks. After a few days of piety, pilgrims turn to prostitutes. Nauseated, Jesus hurries through, keeping his followers away from Peter's friend, Simon of Cyrene. They have washed to enter the Temple when Jesus staggers, seeing a fiery, menacing angel, and flees, convincing Judas that he is too squeamish to be the Messiah. Jesus' half-brother, Jacob, a Pharisee, is seen writhing in religious ecstasy. Andrew and John shield Jesus from the man who is hunting this family disgrace. In the grove at Gethsemane, Jesus revives. Andrew describes John the Baptist as another Elijah. They descend into an Inferno, are again refreshed in Jericho, and continue to the lifeless Dead Sea. Andrew wants to introduce Jesus, but Jesus prefers to go alone. Judas insists on following. John senses Jesus' approach, turns, and they study one another. Recalling a vision of the Messiah seen while reading Isaiah, John welcomes Jesus. Jesus sheds his robe and steps into the water without repenting, the Spirit of the Jordan rises, fish dance, and a bird identifies "the son of God, the Hope of mankind."

For three days and nights, Jesus and John deliberate love vs. axe and fire and how Satan can be in the desert as readily as God. When they kiss goodbye, John's lips are like a live coal. Jesus should grow firm and take the difficult road to God. When Jesus rejoins his disciples, Judas is angry at having been left out and at having to stay behind as Jesus speaks with God—alone. Jesus' earliest dream is of being suckled by a lioness. In the desert, he will see if his soul is immortal. He wants God to tell him the truth. Coming on the swollen scapegoat, Jesus buries it and halts at a large flat rock. Famished like all desert creatures, he imagines seraphim protecting him and sleeps peacefully. Awakening in a blast furnace, Jesus refuses to leave until God speaks clearly. By night, the Baptist shows Jesus Jerusalem's whorings, her gates: Hunger, Fear, Injustice, and Infamy, and God sends down Fire, Leprosy, and Madness. After silently examining Jesus the third night, John declares him too soft and sympathetic, but leaves judgment to God.

Thought of food and water induces mirages, but thought of God vanquishes the pain. God could convert Herod and the rich—or flatten them like Sodom and Gomorrah. A snake with the head and breasts of a woman appears, enticing him to save not the world but just Magdalene and live a respectable, productive life. Eyes in the air signal Jesus to say no; the snake explodes, and Jesus weeps for what he has given up. Jesus next dreams of an enormous snake luring in and digesting a partridge—God dealing with man's soul. A lion shows how he will stamp on Babylon, Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Rome. Jesus must remember the palm reader and reign as the Son of David. Jesus sees the cities sown with leprosy and madness and then burnt to ashes. Jesus awakens, fearing he has gone mad, but the Archangel Gabriel says he has come to help him become God—but it is really Lucifer, who promises to return soon. A voice tells Jesus to say: "I am coming!"



Invisible hands bring Jesus back to the Dead Sea, and God leads him to Bethany and the house of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, who is at the Jordan. Martha invites him in to warm and feed him, and the village elders arrive to meet him: Melchizedek, venomous Samuel, and a stumpy, blind man. All are about to leave, since Jesus is sleepy, when Lazarus brings news that Herod has beheaded the Baptist. Jesus recalls the destroyed cities and being commissioned to build an Ark for the virtuous, and Melchizedek is sure that Jesus is The One. John's last words are that Jesus must return to the world. Jesus' disciples are in Simon's Inn, fearing a general persecution. Mary and Martha prepare bedding for Jesus, but he cannot sleep, yearning for the Ark. Martha will serve Jesus, and Mary can be his wife. Jesus feels like Adam freshly created, listening to the birds boast of their virtues. One says that the doors to heaven and hell are adjacent and identical so caution is in order.

Seeing the union of God and humankind as possible, Jesus hurries to Jerusalem. There, the disciples slink cautiously to Simon's Inn, to be taunted as cowards but given wine. Judas declares that he alone will never abandon Jesus. Peter wants to return to Galilee, but Jacob insists they must wait for and protect Jesus. John concludes from the Baptist's last words that Jesus is the Messiah, something no one before has considered, but it seems to fit. If Jesus is Messiah, war is imminent and his followers will be great lords. Judas condemns their hypocrisy. If Herod hears John's last words, Jesus—and they—will be beheaded. Simon brings in a roasted lamb's head that looks like John's, and they can eat only after being diverted with stories.

At that point, Barabbas enters, calling Jesus a Roman emissary, whose preaching is lulling people into forgetting their slavery. When Judas orders him to stand down, Barabbas leaves, again vowing vengeance. Simon worries that every dead Roman means 10-15 butchered Jews. Peter wants to leave but John feel that Jesus is near. When the High Priest Caiaphas rides by with trumpets blaring, Peter grows more desperate and tells Simon to put the drinks on his tab in the afterlife. Jesus enters, staring, muttering about Herod—and looking and sounding like the Baptist. God has granted John time to do what he needs, and Jesus prays for time to ripen. Blushing over sexual feelings, Jesus leads his "partisans" to Galilee. Evening prayers make Jesus wonder why God does not open the door. Judas alone sees in Jesus' hand the Baptist's ax. Since they come for a wedding not a war, Jesus lets the disciples leave, but Peter boasts that he will die for Jesus. When Jesus warns that death precedes immortality, Judas chuckles, watching the others weigh the risks. He follows the ax—and Jesus while he holds it. Henceforth, they march under God's war banner of star and cross. Silently, all grow valorous.

Jesus tells a parable that John will understand when he is an aged ascetic. Peter sees hornlike flames on Jesus' forehead as he describes his desert battle and God's telling him to build a new Ark and sail as Son of David until he is enthroned in the New Jerusalem. Jesus must begin the war in Nazareth. That night, the disciples' souls branch out to invade their whole bodies, filling them with joy. Jesus feels heavy until he hears the mysterious footsteps, but he also stumbles, feeling horrible pain in his hands and feet and falls. Seeing his heart sail away like a boat, he rises and leads onward, faster.



Chapters 16-20 Analysis

Chapter 16 opens with a description of Jerusalem during the Jewish High Holy Days in autumn. Yom Kipper (Day of Atonement) is past. This is a day of total fasting and purity, during which the High Priest selects one goat to offer to God and another to be driven into the desert to die, carrying away a year's worth of the Jews' sins. This event appears to be past, and the Jews have returned to eating, drinking, and making merry. Prostitutes have a thriving business, particularly among naive country pilgrims. When Jesus and the disciples arrive in Jerusalem, it is decked out for Succoth (Festival of Booths), when observant Jews are supposed to live seven days outdoors under a "booth" or tent decorated with leaves and fruit from the harvest. It honors the forty years of wandering in the desert after the Exodus. All these motifs play a strong role in the rest of the novel as Jesus feels himself called to become the New Jerusalem and savior of the world. Jerusalem nauseates Jesus (convincing Judas that he is too squeamish to be the Messiah) so they leave quickly. It is but a courtesy call as they head for their true destination: a meeting with John the Baptist.

Two new characters are introduced during this brief visit to Jerusalem. Simon of Cyrene (a native Libyan) is an hard-drinking, brawling friend of Peter's. His inn near David's Gate (where the lepers congregate, conveniently for Jesus' preaching purposes) becomes a gathering point for the disciples. A second new character is a dervish-like Pharisee, another Jacob, Jesus' half-brother, who is searching for him to end the family's disgrace. Jacob's younger brother by Joseph's first marriage, Simon, is seen earlier as the Nazareth town crier, thrown out of the house by Mary.

The band continues on to the Dead Sea, an "Inferno" with Jericho an oasis in its midst. Jesus and John the Baptist meet in an tense and awkward conversation, with Jesus knowing that Judas will kill him if the Baptist does not recognize him as the Messiah and the Baptist struggling to recall where he has seen Jesus before. Jesus' white robe (taken from the monastery) and a green leaf in his mouth (plucked from the riverside) help John make the connection with the Prophet Elijah. Jesus is The One. Although John feels it right for Jesus to baptize him, not vice versa, Jesus proceeds to the sacrament. Kazantzakis incorporates all the details found in an Eastern Orthodox icon of the baptism: the personification of the Jordan, the dancing fish, the waters halting, and the Spirit in the form of a dove hovering over Jesus head. Later the disciples will debate what they actually see and how their motivations determine that.

John puts on hold for three days baptizing the masses for round-the-clock planning sessions with Jesus about the fate of the world. He knows that his time is up and that Jesus could be tempted in either direction. Note that Judas is put out by being excluded from these discussions. John is throughout this section in a league with the great Hebrew prophets Elijah and Isaiah. He continues to come to Jesus in dreams during the first three nights in the desert, planting in him the great apocalyptic themes that he will begin preaching: the destruction of Jerusalem and powerful nations at the hands of God's avenging angels. The desert temptations begin as food mirages and turn into sexual enticement. Magdalene is held out to Jesus as his way out of the suffering he



knows is coming. He can be a normal person, reconciled with his family, respectable, even condescending towards others' foibles. He is ready to say yes when heaven shows him to say no—and he instantly regrets obeying. A lion reinforces the images of the fall of kingdoms, and Jesus fears he is going insane. He is comforted by the Archangel Gabriel, who says he is helping him fulfill his boyhood blasphemy of becoming God—but then laughingly reveals himself as Satan and promises they will meet again at Passover.

Utterly collapsed, Jesus is somehow transported out of the desert and pointed in the direction of Bethany. This is a pivotal moment because it introduces Mary and Martha, who join Magdalene in entertaining non-chaste thoughts about him, which are realized in the dream sequence at the end of the novel, and their brother Lazarus. The independent sisters invite this ragged-looking stranger in even though Lazarus is not at home, having gone to baptism, hoping it will improve his severely damaged kidneys. The village elders who come to check out the stranger appear superfluous to the story — and the women who come behind them to see if this young male will take a liking to either of the unmarried sisters or remain free for them to woo — until Lazarus staggers in, fresh from the Dead Sea, with news that King Herod has beheaded the Baptist. Long the subject of John's moralistic harangues, Herod gets fed up and gives in to his stepdaughter's gory request. Jesus realizes that his time has now come, and one of the elders, who has been reading prophecies, declares that Jesus' happening to be there at this moment proves he is the Messiah. Jesus muses on being the newly-created Adam, facing identical doors to heaven and hell and also senses that God and mankind can be united in his body.

As Jesus is hurrying to Jerusalem, the disciples are a pitiful, sniveling bunch, hanging out in Simon's Inn, drinking wine, recoiling from a baked lamb's head that Simon reminds them looks like the Baptist's — a fine touch of black humor, followed by an earthy legend about the first cultivation of grapes for wine. They are ready to run away, leaving Jesus high-and-dry if and when he shows up, and then Jesus arrives, looking and sounding like the late Baptist, and determined to rally his cowardly followers into an army of God. He gives them an opportunity to flee, rightly, since they signed up for a wedding party rather than a war. Proudly, they reiterate they will die for him and resent his skepticism. Peter is moving into the foremost position, excluding Judas who is always aloof from the others but near Jesus. Barabbas makes another cameo appearance to remind Jesus and the readers that he is waiting to get even, and again Judas demonstrates his clout in the secret Brotherhood. Jesus predicts that John the son of Zebedee will grow old, live on an island, and understand great mysteries. This fits Eastern Orthodox tradition for the "Son of the Thunder." Later, Jesus will be seen dictating to John the visions that form the early chapters of the Book of Revelation, which John writes on Patmos. Jesus needs to start his ministry in Nazareth. The sign of the cross and star becomes his flag. The followers become "partisans." On the way, Jesus again feels the nails of crucifixion.



Chapters 21-25

Chapters 21-25 Summary

The synagogue has emptied after Simeon preaches disjointedly about signs of the Messiah when Jesus arrives with four timid followers and surly Judas. His first words are vague, draw boos as the words grow stronger, and, when he becomes a new Moses, he is tied up by half-brothers Simon and Jacob. Rocks fly as Jesus begs to be heard; his mother wails about mental illness and is disowned. The rabbi disperses the crowd and walks them out of town. Jesus welcomes Philip and Matthew, a hated customs officer. The disciples worry about being run out of every town and frustrate Jesus by not understanding a parable about a nobleman whose invitations draw only excuses. Before parting, the rabbi asks who Jesus is really and is shocked to hear him identify himself as Daniel's Son of Man. God has kept his promise to Simeon.

In Cana, Peter takes the lead in proclaiming the Day of the Lord and new Ark and Jesus heals the sick Rufus who returns from hunting rebels, recognizes Jesus, and warns him about putting ideas in people's heads. Rufus then asks help for his daughter who lies paralyzed in Cana. Jesus goes to his house, takes the 12-year-old by the hand, feels strength, love, and mercy flow into her, and is frightened when she stands and leaps into her father's arms. Judas is angry that Jesus has wasted help on an enemy. Peddler Thomas stops resisting and joins the band in dancing around Jesus. While Rufus may not release his prisoners, Jesus claims a favor, later. Rufus orders a celebration.

While the others sleep, Matthew takes dictation from an angel about Jesus' genealogy and writes until dawn. When they set out, Thomas goes in front, blowing his horn, Judas is in the rear, collecting alms, and the mob grows immense. Peter refuses to tell Matthew anything, but Matthew collects facts from locals about John's beheading. In Magdala, Mary is weaving a special cloak for Jesus. When she hears the horn, she runs to Jesus' feet. As he raises her up, they seem like a bridal pair. She distributes pomegranates to refresh them. Outside, the crowd demands miracles, and Jesus has little success telling them about God's kingdom, which is narrow and uphill. When the crowd grows ominous, they depart. Mary Magdalene abandons all and joins them.

Tired and troubled that he cannot heal everyone, Jesus reaches Capernaum. Philip stops to convince Nathaniel to join them; even Thomas has bought in, and they will profit in the Kingdom. They go to Zebedee's, where Salome, ignoring her pains, is distributing winter clothing. Zebedee views them as robbers—nine uninvited mouths to feed—and Salome an insistent idiot. He drinks hard and banter with them about doing very well in this Kingdom of Heaven. When Jesus tells about a rich man whose wealth perishes when he dies overnight, Zebedee falls silent.

Nathaniel is welcomed with bread and wine that fill him with spirit and is convinced that he has chosen the right path by Jesus' story of three men claiming to be too poor, too rich, and too handsome to study the Law. After the evening prayer, Jesus and the



disciples sleep; Zebedee grumbles about being dispossessed; Matthew writes, and Peter dreams about Jesus walking on the water to save the disciples. Hearing it, Matthew is sure this miracle has happened somewhere.

The fishermen talk about how John seems to have scooped up his head and hidden inside Jesus. Old Jonah gets angry at his sons, but Zebedee advises that they are beaten. Jesus talks of extending, not abolishing the Law, as the heart expands to do God's will more fully. Judas and Jesus debate spirit vs. body, and Jesus blesses Peter, Jacob, and John to be apostles. People gather daily in Zebedee's yard, demanding healing, and Matthew keeps busy, correlating everything to Scripture. When the angel demands that Matthew square the story with prophecy—by making Mary a virgin who gives birth in Bethlehem—Matthew balks but is forced to write the story that way.

Life continues until midwinter, when the remaining disciples fan out to preach. One day Jesus talks about God's army turning Jerusalem and Rome to ash and the one escape: his Ark and the New Jerusalem. That evening, Rabbi Simeon arrives, badly aged and haunted by dreams. Atop Mt. Carmel he is sure he sees Jesus talking with Elijah and Moses. Stories of miracles conflict with others about breaking the Sabbath, so Simeon must see for himself. The disciples return and the apostles also arrive, beaten bloody, which Jesus says is what one must expect in war. Ashamed to be spending time in Capernaum, Jesus strikes off for Jerusalem, with Simeon, Salome, and Mary Magdalene joining the group.

Haughty Jehovah cannot be pleased. He crushes hearts by commandments, establishes authority, builds a Temple, and then, as Jesus, wants to pull it down and build a new one in three days. Simeon worries that Jesus is "courting death," and Jesus knows that no one can understand how he is widening the Law so the commandments can blossom. Jesus is ready for heaven or hell, as God commands.

Pilgrims throng Jerusalem for Passover and the envious poor debate Jesus' intentions. Melchizedek brings word of Jesus ordering Lazarus back to life, which eavesdropping Barabbas declares a Roman lie, but Rufus drives him away. Jacob the Pharisee convinces him to silence Lazarus. Suddenly, a happy throng arrives from Bethany, escorting Jesus with palms. On fire, knowing that he can do anything, Jesus condemns injustice and states that God is not an Israelite and his kingdom is not a ghetto. Fearing this blasphemy and knowing that Jesus is finished, Simeon returns to Bethany. Lazarus looks and smells dead but lives. Simeon begs Magdalene, who has been having nightmares, to get Jesus to run away. The disciples straggle in, saying that Jesus has gone with Rufus to see Pilate. On the road to Bethany, they have argued over preeminence and are ashamed.

Chapters 21-25 Analysis

Chapters 21-25 build the novel's tension. Jesus returns to his native town, where Rabbi Simeon has for decades been preaching apocalypticism, a fiery finale to the powers of this world, liberating the Jews from bondage. Jesus arrives and begins to speak, and



the people are dissatisfied. Why has he changed his tune? Why is he no longer preaching love? Where are concrete miracles—not the general miracle of nature, but extraordinary events proving that he has God's power? Jesus' half-brothers try to tie him up and hide him away, and his mother declares him mentally ill. Judas from the start is itching to defend Jesus physically, and the others gradually find valor, but the rabbi disperses the mob and walks Jesus out of town. He cannot resist asking who Jesus thinks he is, is shocked to hear him apply to himself the Messianic title "Son of Many," but whispers, "Adonai," the confession heard so often in the opening chapters.

Rufus, the Centurion who supervises the Zealot's crucifixion, is in Cana when the group arrives. After issuing a pro forma warning to Jesus not to rouse civil unrest, he quietly asks him to heal his paralyzed daughter. He makes it clear that he detests Jews and does not want to debate theology. He rejects God justly demanding that children pay for their parents' sins but looks for a God of love in whom he can believe. Jesus goes with him and shocks himself by raising the girl from her bed. Rufus is duty-bound not to release the criminals he has captured as Jesus asks in payment but promises anything in his power. Jesus takes a rain-check, which turns out to be quite surprising.

The band of disciples is augmented by Philip and Matthew in Nazareth. The others ostracize Matthew for his previous work in service to Rome, collecting customs tax, so he spends his time writing down all Jesus says and does. He knows the Hebrew Scriptures by heart and works to identify realized prophecies. Today, this is called "proof-texting." Matthew hears an angel dictating to him and balks when proof-texting distorts the truth, particularly about the Virgin Birth. Struggle as he may, however, the angel forces his hand to follow his words. The description recalls the reception of the Qur'an, and modern biblical criticism has disproved any idea of an eyewitness account to Jesus' life having survived. Matthew's gospel in particular shows multiple sources. Still, Kazantzakis' portrayal shows an indomitable spirit doing the best he can in a difficult situation. When Peter reveals his dream about Jesus walking on water, Matthew is certain it is a real event which has happened "somewhere" in space and time.

The band lays over comfortably in Capernaum, putting Zebedee out but enlivening Salome. Nathaniel joins them, recruited by Philip as a commercial venture. They agree that at the first sign of trouble they will bail out—and they later do. Jesus names three "apostles" and sends them out to preach; notice that they depart during a bad storm. Later, the others go out on forays nearer Capernaum. Simeon arrives struggling with a dream of Moses and Elijah, two figures in Hebrew Scripture (along with Enoch earlier mentioned) who are taken to heaven without dying. Simeon joins the group, needing to see how the conflicting stories about Jesus can be resolved. If Jesus is the Messiah, Simeon knows his days are limited, and he worries about death. Contrast the old Abbot who had wanted whole-heartedly to die so he could face off against God.

Jesus' claims that he will tear down the old, corrupt Jerusalem and build a new one in three days is prefaced by a treatise on Jehovah's fickleness, a theme brushed upon several times earlier. Similarly, the description of Jesus and his band traveling around Galilee is prefaced by a meditation on the positive points of Roman rule: roads and law and order. Feeling guilty about his relative inactivity in Bethany, Jesus returns to the



dangerous maelstrom of Jerusalem. His preaching annoys the Pharisees and Sadducees, and they begin whining with little effect to Caiaphas the High Priest and through him to the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, to eliminate Jesus. When Jesus raises Lazarus from Hades, the powers that be perceive a real threat. Jesus, too, sees the light; he can no longer hide behind his own weakness. If he can raise the dead, he can move mountains, reconcile nations, create the Kingdom of Heaven. Lazarus story is told breathlessly through pious, loud-mouthed Melchizedek, one of the elders of Bethany the reader met earlier. This perspective heightens the anticipation. Jesus half-brother Simon enters an unholy alliance with Barabbas, both conveniently being on hand to overhear Melchizedek's tale. Lazarus alive is a threat, so he must be returned to Hades, even though his physical condition is no advertisement for resurrection.

Jesus is swept into the city with palms—the full Palm Sunday entrance is still in the future—and, seeming to have stepped out of "God's kiln"—utters supreme blasphemies denying Israel's exclusive claim on God. Simeon knows his nephew is doomed and tries to get his daughter, with whom he has reconciled thanks to Jesus, to keep Jesus from returning to Jerusalem. She has already dreamed about his death. The disciples have again been arguing about who will be first in the Kingdom. Peter makes Matthew read back Jesus' words about him holding the keys and being the rock on which the "church" will be built. They reveal with foreboding that Jesus has stayed behind with Rufus and Pontius Pilate.



Chapters 26-29

Chapters 26-29 Summary

Judas follows Jesus and Rufus to Pilate's palace, and, before entering, Jesus calls in his favor: not to save him. To Pilate Jesus denies being a king in a political sense and warns that Rome will fall like a great statue when he strikes its clay feet. Pilate is unwilling to be provoked into crucifying Jesus so his followers can claim he has risen and ascended to heaven, reveals his wife's nightmares, and advises Jesus to return to Galilee. Jesus retorts that God has picked him up and he is no deserter. Washing his hands, Pilate lets Jesus leave, laughing at his madness.

Judas waits, wondering about why Jesus preaches wildly by day and spends nights on Golgotha. Annas and Caiaphas argue that Jesus is a revolutionary, but Pilate thinks he is harmless to Rome. Caiaphas arrives in state as Jesus exits. They face one another, and Jesus holds his ground. On the road, Jesus confides to Judas, the only disciple who can bear it, that Isaiah has revealed that Jesus is the scapegoat and lamb led voluntarily to slaughter. Judas demands that the Romans be slaughtered and the Messiah seated on David's throne. Jesus promises after three days to return in glory to judge all.

Magdalene agonizes; Peter is in rapture hearing Matthew's story, but Jesus, already upset by Lazarus' incomplete restoration and Salome's request for special places for her sons, finds the book full of lies, but accepts that the angel may bring God's higher truth. In a fury, Jesus insists that what is written on his heart by God—not what is on paper—is true. He tells of his terror while raising Lazarus and is put off by Simeon's stories about Herod's death until the rabbi says it comes from a newly-found parchment. Jesus envisions beloved John as an old man, to whom he dictates about Alpha and Omega, seven angels falling to destroy the earth and open the Abyss. Jesus then asks Simeon to tell about Isaiah's martyrdom, which shows that the body is a tent; heaven is the homeland, and death is the door to immortality.

As spring arrives, Jesus fears last-minute cowardice, begs Simeon to hold on until Passover, and has Philip and Nathaniel borrow a donkey for him to ride into Jerusalem. He dismounts and clears Solomon's Porch of commerce. When the crowd wants to burn the city, armed Levites move in. Jesus falters and leads a humiliating retreat. Back in Bethany, Jesus asks Judas to tell Caiaphas the details. When Jesus mentions the Passover meal, Lazarus offers to provide a lamb, but is murdered on the road by Barabbas. Jesus rails against people twisting his words to suit their interests. Magdalene washes Jesus' feet with perfume and dries them with her hair, and he sends Peter and John to Jerusalem to confirm Passover plans. As Simeon dies happily, having again seen Jesus, Elijah, and Moses, Jesus promises to see him tomorrow.

Jesus wistfully says farewell and apologizes to Judas for the dirty role he must play. In the city, the others are lurking in shadows and bickering. The paschal meal proceeds



per tradition, but Jesus explains the new meaning and distributes bread and wine as his body and blood. Matthew recites from Isaiah about the suffering servant. Their wailing almost makes Jesus lose heart. When Jacob vows to establish a new order in Jesus' name, Jesus is appalled and promises a Comforter's guidance. Cutting off debate, Jesus dispatches Judas and with resolve leads the way, losing Thomas, Philip, and Nathaniel. In Gethsemane, Jesus twice begs God to remove the bitter cup but, seeing a torchlight procession approach, surrenders to God's will. He screams when Judas approaches but then welcomes those who arrest him as God's envoys and orders Peter to put his knife away.

They drag Jesus to Caiaphas' palace. Shivering outside, Peter three times denies knowing Jesus. At daybreak, Jesus is hauled before Pilate, who alone may impose the death sentence. "Israel's nobility" is enraged, and Jesus is already bloodied but tranquil. Pilate is hoping to avoid another Passover massacre as Jesus is brought in, but the mob wants Barabbas released instead of Jesus. Presenting Jesus beaten and dressed like a king does not soften their hearts, so Pilate washes his hands of the matter. Jesus is beaten and kicked toward Golgotha, Jesus is hoping to see a friendly face. No one is there.

The disciples meanwhile hide in Simon's Inn, waiting to leave town after dark. Everyone else in Jerusalem runs, sated from the Passover meal, to enjoy a crucifixion. The disciples worry if Jesus is or is not the Messiah. Thomas puts it in business terms: their investment has gone badly and it is time to cut and run. Matthew is now writing selectively so they will not look bad. Simon arrives, bloodied from defending Jesus, and damns the cowardly disciples out of his inn. He recommends one of them carry Jesus' cross and when no one will, does so himself as Jesus staggers by. Behind Jesus, those who he has not healed curse him. He looks around for his disciples.

On stinking Golgotha, The Curse/Mother appears to Jesus to say farewell. Jesus refuses wine, commends himself to God, is berated as a deceiver, and hoisted to the cross. As the nails go in, the sun vanishes and people are overcome with fright. An earthquake seems imminent. Simon sees a multitude of angels crucifying Jesus and piercing his side with a lance. Realizing that God himself is doing this, Simon is torn as Jesus cries out, "ELI... ELI..." and faints.

Chapters 26-29 Analysis

The story continues with Jesus confronting the kindest face that Rome is able to put on. He calls in Rufus' favor, asking him not to interfere if he is arrested, jailed, or even killed. This confirms for Rufus what an odd people the Jews are, but he agrees. Pilate is portrayed as believing in nothing and no one, not even himself. He wears a razor blade on a chain to facilitate suicide should he tire of eating, drinking, and governing. The inscription on his ring, "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die," belongs to the Greek philosopher Epicurus in the 4th century BCE, and is quoted both by Isaiah and the author of 1 Corinthians, St. Paul, who as Saul plays a bit part in this section and figures more prominently in the final chapters. These Judeo-Christian authors dispute



that pleasure is the main goal of human life. In his first meeting with Jesus, Pilate wants to avoid trouble for Rome by getting him to leave Jerusalem, but Jesus is adamant; he will not be a deserter in God's war.

Immediately after this, Caiaphas, morbidly fat and egotistical (suggesting a second murderous Herod the Great), is carried up to Pilate's door with great fanfare to lodge yet another protest about Jesus. Jesus emerges and they stand eye-to-eye. Jesus does not give way, and Judas prevents his being manhandled out of the way. Judas has been wondering about Jesus' peculiar behavior lately, particularly spending nights on Golgotha, the place where Rome's enemies are crucified and left to rot or be eaten by scavengers — a reality already grimly introduced in Nazareth at the novel's beginning. Jesus himself later mentions talking there with Moses and Elijah, the threesome that Rabbi Simeon sees atop Mt. Carmel. Judas still wants the Messiah to be a fighter, rallying the dead to slaughter the Romans and enthrone their leader, but Jesus tells him the only way is for them together to effect his death as Isaiah's lamb led to the slaughter and the scapegoat that Jesus buried in the desert as his innocent brother. Judas alone has the strength to betray Jesus to Caiaphas.

Life in the comfortable house in Bethany is frenetic as Jesus becomes obsessed with death. He pictures beloved young John grown old and dictates to him the opening themes of the Book of Revelation. This follows closely on mention of the Testament of Moses as being just discovered in the desert, being Moses' dictation to Joshua of the things he sees before dying on the other side of the Jordan River. The document is actually written in the time of Jesus and not discovered until the 19th century. The story of Isaiah's martyrdom, which Rabbi Simeon is fond of telling, is another Jewish apocryphal work that is expanded and popular in early Christianity.

The novel swings into the familiar scenes of the Christian Holy Week: the Palm Sunday entrance to Jerusalem, the clearing of the Temple, the Last Supper in the Upper Room, the prayer and betrayal in Gethsemane, the trial before Annas and Caiaphas and their appeal to Pontius Pilate to issue a death sentence. Kazantzakis adds salt: Lazarus offers to provide the brotherhood's paschal lamb but is waylaid and murdered along the way by Barabbas. As a semi-ghost, Lazarus proves difficult to kill, but is eventually torn apart and his body tossed in the bushes, where the Romans find it within a day and arrest Barabbas for murder. The items prescribed for the Seder meal are discussed, including their symbolism in terms of the Exodus from Egypt and any new meaning that Jesus introduces. At the end, Jesus gives them bread and wine as his body and blood, and they feel within themselves his terror at the point of death. As Jesus is being tried, the disciples cower in Simon's Inn and consider their best options. Simon finds them as repulsive as Judas always has, and when he cannot shame them into carrying Jesus' heavy cross for him, stands in himself. Simon alone is on Golgotha when Jesus is crucified. He has a mystical vision of angels crucifying Jesus rather than the gypsies, who appear always to enjoy this task on behalf of the Romans. Jesus gets out the words of his famous cry, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthnai" (Aramaic for "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" taken from Psalm 22) before he dramatically faints.



Chapters 30-33

Chapters 30-33 Summary

Jesus opens his eyes, leaning on a flowering tree as buds heal his bloody wounds. A warm, friendly angel with great green wings says that he is Jesus' guardian angel sent by God to sweeten the bitterness he has endured and has kept him from being crucified. He leads Jesus to taste the pleasures for which he has longed, first of all marriage to Magdalene. Saying that a mob is hunting him to finish the crucifixion, Magdalene leads Jesus to a lemon grove where they make love. Overwhelmed by the experience, Jesus wants to name their son Paraclete. Magdalene leaves Jesus to sleep in the care of her "faithful little Negro," Saul. Frightened, Jesus follows her to a ravine where God intends her to be his First Martyr at the hands of a mob of Levites and slaves. Saul of Damascus offers to spare her if she gives up her lover, and Magdalene tries to convince him to follow the Messiah in order to conquer the world. Magdalene wants them to meet but does not trust Saul. Stones fly. Wondering if this is a dream, Jesus hears from the angel that Magdalene is happily dead in heaven, beyond grief, but all women are just different faces of the world's one woman. Lazarus' sister Mary wants to give Jesus a son.

The angel carries Jesus across the night sky to the familiar house in Bethany and assumes the form of the Negro errand boy to stay nearby. The sisters touch Jesus to be sure he is real, and he becomes master of the house, doing all the male chores and changing to resemble a mature and healthy Lazarus. He is done with poverty, chastity, and wrestling with God, and wants to work as a carpenter and let his mother raise grandchildren. Martha yields to Mary as Jesus' wife and serves his material needs, but reminds Jesus of Ruth and Boaz. Jesus and Mary make love on the roof. Next day, villagers drop in, and only the blind elder is not fooled by the impostor. Time passes; a son is born, Jesus/Lazarus works in the shop. At night, the angel resumes his form and by day teases Martha about being a virgin. He tells Jesus to forget about big words and ideas like "eternity" and be content with family life, the road to God. When someone knocks, Jesus pretends to sleep. A woman curls up and identifies herself as Ruth: Martha yearns for children.

As the years pass, Mary and Martha compete for the most children and Jesus/ Lazarus works happily. One night Mary dreams about a seraph that says their life together is a dream, the Tempter's lie; Jesus has been crucified. Days pass and a stranger arrives, Simon of Cyrene, who reports that Pilate has been found crucified on Golgotha. Jesus' blue wound marks flare red. Another day, bloodthirsty Saul, Magdalene's murderer visits, claiming that since Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus, he calls himself Paul and is out to save the whole world by preaching Christ's Gospel. Jesus paces frothing and the Negro calls him a liar on every count. Jesus identifies himself and denies Paul's blasphemies. Paul counters that the world needs consolation, factual or not, and obstinacy, longing, and faith create truth. Now that the wheels are in motion, Jesus is superfluous. If he makes troubles, believers will burn him as a blasphemer.



Paul leaves, warning Jesus/Lazarus to stay out of his business. Mary and Martha lift him into bed, and Jesus asks the Negro not to leave him.

Jesus is a white-bearded grandfather with aged wives proud of their accomplishments. The Negro is like an adopted son but does not age and has lost his sense of humor. One day he announces that the end is near. When word comes that Jerusalem is burning, the women bolt the door, but the Negro offers to open it for his old companions, now unrecognizable by years and bitterness. Thomas reminds Jesus that a prophet is one who despairs when others hope and hopes when others despair, and declares that Judas is the only one who has endured time.

Having heard stories of Judas' exploits, Jesus tries to engage him in conversation. Everyone is afraid. Jesus claims to have done his best in his youth to save the world and then becomes a normal worker and father. Offspring conquer death. Suddenly, Judas calls Jesus a traitor and deserter, and Jesus' companions abandon him a second time. Judas bellows that Jesus belongs on the cross where God puts him to fight. He is not a Rabbi. He has produced no armies of angels, no springboard to heaven. He comes to the cross and faints. Judas' heart is broken. He curses the day both are born and when they met. Judas trusts all the talk about lamb of God and door to immortality.

As Judas rants, Jesus' wounds open and bleed. Judas declares that Jesus' guardian angel is Satan and reminds him of his many words. He drags Matthew into reading about Nicodemus and shedding wings. Judas cannot forgive Jesus but will not harm him. He is pitiful and dead already. When Jesus begs forgiveness and tries to hug him, Judas steps away. The women wail; the disciples glare, and the Negro disappears.

Jesus confesses that he is a cowardly traitor and wishes he could relive his life. The others ask what witchcraft Jesus has used to deceive them and rendered their lives useless. Matthew is particularly bitter because of all he has written. The old men repeatedly chant, "Coward! Deserter! Traitor!" Thomas alone remains loyal. Everyone else follows Judas into the darkness. Jesus is alone and suddenly he feels searing pain and completes his cry: "LAMA SABACHTHANI!"

Jesus realizes that he is on the cross and joy takes possession of him: he is not a coward, deserter, or traitor. He has stood his ground and kept his word. For an instant, the Devil has used the normal joys of life to lead him astray, but his disciples, who travel the world to proclaim Good News are alive. Everything has turned out to the glory of God. Jesus tries out triumphantly, "IT IS ACCOMPLISHED!" but could have said, "Everything has begun."

Chapters 30-33 Analysis

Jesus' guardian angel appears, warm and friendly, claiming that God has decided not to crucify Jesus and wants him to enjoy all the good things he has been denying himself. Jesus has not had good luck heretofore with angels, but Jesus accepts this angel, particularly since Jesus recalls being crucified, and the wounds are drying up. The first



order of business is to marry Magdalene, after an analogy is established to a bull let loose on a herd of heifers. Jesus reels at the experience of sex, having never imagined it could be so good, falls asleep, and dreams about Magdalene's demise. She, too, has never enjoyed sex like that and pleads for her life, but God tells her what better time to die than when one is satisfied? Saul of Damascus, seen earlier in a cameo role, reappears as the leader of the posse legally entrusted with executing breakers of Moses' Law. Magdalene tries to buy Saul off with an introduction to Jesus but does not trust Saul and is savagely killed as Barabbas had intended earlier.

The guardian angel cynically tells Jesus not to worry: all women are incarnations of the singular woman and, pretty or ugly, they reproduce. This view is carried forward. The angel takes Jesus to Bethany, and they show up at Mary and Martha's doorstep with gifts in hand. The angel adopts the form of Magdalene's "faithful little Negro," Saul, and is soon appearing to Jesus alone at night as an angel and as the errand boy during the day. Only over the course of years is it noticed that the Negro does not age. At one point, he turns into a snake and slithers away. He also makes Jesus resemble a robust Lazarus when he marries Mary. Soon, he is like Jacob, married to Leah and Rachel both, when Martha comes into his bed claiming to be Ruth to his Boaz. Those not versed in the Hebrew scriptures can without harm to understanding gloss over this as colorful detail.

The threesome has many children and lives happily until word comes that Pilate has been found crucified, first apparently having lost his mind identifying with Jesus' sufferings. Next comes Saul of Tarsus, renamed Paul, who is out to evangelize the world based on facts that he makes up. When Jesus objects, Paul warns that believers will do away with him as a blasphemer for removing their hope. It is another piece of cynicism but beautifully constructed. Recall that Jesus when facing Pilate the second time is sorrowful that the Roman cannot understand truth. This self-proclaimed evangelist does not seek truth; he proudly manufactures it.

Jesus gives in and continues to enjoy life into a ripe old age, but his peace is shattered by a visit from his former disciples, decrepit, bitter old men. Judas alone remains true and denounces Jesus as a coward and traitor for not allowing himself to be crucified. The extent of Judas' loyalty to Jesus is shown in him admitting that the betrayal by Jesus has broken his heart. Matthew tells a story about Nicodemus, which is found only in John's Gospel. As things are falling apart, the angel/Negro slips away. Satan has done it again. As the old men chant at Jesus derisively, he snaps back into reality suddenly, realizes that he is on the cross and rejoices, despite his agony, that he has not failed in his mission. He completes the interrupted cry of desertion, sees that all is as it should be, and declares "It is accomplished." Kazantzakis rather saccharinely turns this into "Everything has begun."



Characters

Jesus

Most often referred to as the "Son of Mary," occasionally the "Son of the Carpenter" (aged, bed-ridden Joseph), and later by the Messianic titles: "Son of David," "Son of Man" and "Son of God"—and calling himself God—Jesus is the central figure in Nikos Kazantzakis' novel *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

As the novel opens, Jesus suffers nightmares about being pursued by would-be followers of the Messiah, flagellates himself before bedtime to prevent dreams. He has deep feelings of guilt about Joseph's condition, Mary Magdalene's fall into prostitution, and the Roman occupation. Jesus conquers other sins, including sexual temptations, but cannot conquer fear. He is obstinate, proud, emaciated, pale, with a coal-black, curly beard, hooked nose, thick lips, white teeth, luxurious thick eyelashes, and large, black, intimidating, snake-like eyes—a face not beautiful but having a "disquieting charm." Besides scourging himself to keep dreams away, Jesus has given up normal carpentry to produce crosses on which the Romans execute the many freedom fighters who fill Galilee. He hopes that this will make God give up on him as the Messiah. Jesus has long felt God pick him up by the head with vulture-like talons and try to induce him. The description sounds like epilepsy, and Jesus' mother is tired of having to scrape him up after public seizures and carry him home. Mary's only son thoroughly humiliates her.

Both are reviled at the Zealot's crucifixion, and Jesus steals away from home unseen and heads for the desert monastery where his uncle, Rabbi Simeon, lived in his youth. Mary learns of this and follows him. Jesus arrives as the Abbot Joachim, renowned as an interpreter of dreams, is dying. He recognizes Jesus as the Messiah and dies happy. God helps Jesus slip away from being forcibly made abbot. He comes to Capernaum in the monastic white robe just in time to prevent a mob led by Barabbas from stoning Mary Magdalene to death. On a hillside, Jesus begins talking to hungry crowds in simple parables for, he explains, he is a simple, uneducated man. Soon, however, Jesus is Rabbi of a band of disciples including Judas, who spares his life in the monastery to see whether his words and deeds conform with being the Messiah. They decide to let John the Baptist decide. John recognizes Jesus in prophecy, spends three days and nights consulting with Jesus, and sends him into the desert unsure of whether Jesus will have the strength to wield the ax against the rotten tree and bring fire on the earth. Jesus comes back as a mixture of his old loving self and the Baptist.

After wintering in Capernaum, Jesus feels compelled to get back to work and heads to Jerusalem, where the actions of both the pious and the impious annoy him. He preaches fire and brimstone in Solomon's Porch by day and spends the nights in nearby Bethany with Lazarus, Mary, and Martha, plus his own growing entourage. When he raises Lazarus from the dead—forcing himself to realize that he cannot hide behind the excuse "I can't" any more—Jesus is conveyed into Jerusalem in Messianic glory. He assigns Judas to meet with the High Priest Caiaphas to arrange his arrest, trial, and



crucifixion, this being in Jesus' mind the only way in which the world can be saved. He tells Judas that being crucified is easier than betraying one's Master.

Jesus presides at the traditional Passover seder, adding the sharing of bread and wine as his Spirit-filled body and blood, and goes to Gethsemane to pray that the cup of suffering might pass. An angel presses a chalice to his lips, and Jesus falls, limp but accepts his fate. The Jewish authorities easily convict him of blasphemy and take him to Pontius Pilate, who alone can inflict the death penalty. Pilate has earlier tried to talk Jesus into leaving town and tries again to get him released as the annual Passover amnesty, but the mob demands he be crucified. Simon of Cyrene carries Jesus' cross after Jesus' strength gives out, and none of the disciples is there to show a friendly face. Simon alone sees God's angels affix Jesus to the cross and pierce his side.

After crying out, "Eli, Eli," Jesus faints. In an instant, he dreams of marrying Mary Magdalene, only to lose her to the murderous Saul of Damascus, marrying Mary and Martha while taking on Lazarus' appearance (albeit healthy), fathering many children and living to enjoy grandchildren. The disciples then visit, decrepit, bitter old men, and Judas calls Jesus a traitor and coward for not dying on the cross as he had promised. Jesus' wounds open, and he finds himself in agony on the cross. He finishes his cry, "lama sabachthani," adds "It is accomplished," and begins a new era for humankind.

Judas Iscariot

A native of Kerioth, a village in flinty Idumea south of Judea, Judas is Jesus' boyhood friend and nemesis in Nazareth, who becomes his most fervent, dedicated, and closest follower. Early in the novel, Judas is most consistently referred to as "Redbeard." With the two sides of his face rarely agreeing on emotion, Judas has flashing, hawk-like turquoise eyes, huge hands, and a vile, accusing mouth, and despises his fellow disciples for their lack of backbone and action. He is a physical colossus, open-shirted and bare-footed, a blacksmith who abandons his wife and children and becomes an itinerant, so he can search for the Messiah. He also serves high up in the Brotherhood of the Zealots, a terrorist organization dedicated to eliminating Roman rule in the Land of Canaan. As such, he vows never to drink alcohol or touch women. Judas demands that God save Israel today, not tomorrow.

Judas first appears to Jesus in nightmares as a Redbeard leading a band of dwarfs who carry the implements of crucifixion. Redbeard challenges Jesus to accept that he is the Messiah. As Jesus finishes building a cross for another crucifixion, Judas challenges him in person, and Jesus recognizes him from the dream. Judas sees light around Jesus' head and wonders if he could be The One. Jesus does not explain that he makes crosses to be repellent to God, so God will not demand he accept his fate. Accepting the Zealot's orders to assassinate Jesus as a collaborator, Judas finds himself summoned to a desert monastery to make tools at the same time as Jesus is heading there to save himself. Each sees it as fate. Judas suspends the sentence until he can better evaluate whether Jesus is the Messiah. Judas means to kill Jesus but finds him



with Jacob, son of Zebedee. He talks skeptically with the wishy-washy shepherd Philip about joining the brotherhood and continues on his way.

As Jesus collects followers, Judas becomes his untamable companion, the closest and yet the most distant. Jesus and Judas often debate priorities: saving body or soul. Judas despises the other disciples as weak and always walks and sits aloof. He refuses to eat or drink in a "heretical" Samarian village. Judas proposes they let John the Baptist decide whether Jesus is the Messiah, and Judas resents being left out of three days and nights of planning for the coming Kingdom of God when the Baptist decides that Jesus is authentic. Judas also resents not being allowed to go with Jesus into the desert to face God. As time goes on, Jesus depends more heavily on Judas, causing dissension in the ranks, and entrusts him with making arrangements for his own crucifixion. Jesus says that being crucified is easier than betraying one's master, but both are equally necessary.

In the dream sequence as Jesus faints on the cross, Judas appears as a hot-headed old man, the only disciple who has not been destroyed by a useless life. Judas demands by what right Jesus has evaded his fate to die on the cross. He feels betrayed, having believed all the promises and fine words. Judas' badgering makes the wounds in Jesus' hands, feet, and side re-open, and as the other disciples join in taunting him, Jesus snaps out of his dream and completes his ministry of dying to establish the Kingdom of God.

Zebedee and Salome, Jacob and John

The most prosperous family in Capernaum, a village on Lake Gennesaret, consists of an old fisherman/businessman, his aging wife, and their two grown sons. They appear throughout the novel, always linked together, and colored in a variety of ways. With a forked white beard, thick lips, a bull neck, huge, sensitive ears, and dark, rapacious eyes, Zebedee is loquacious and cunning. He owns the village wine press and takes a portion of each vintner's processed grapes, and also owns most of the pasture land in the vicinity, forcing people like Philip to watch what they say about him.

Salome is the daughter of a rich shipowner. She is given to Zebedee among many suitors as an exquisite girl. While still beautiful, she is hampered by joint pain, and Zebedee makes the rounds of local widows on the sly. He blusters, concluding arguments with the signature saying, "Two and two make four," but Salome in fact rules the roost. While Zebedee laments that his sons are "thorns in the flesh," of no value to his business, one too pig-headed and the other too pious, Salome secretly blesses their spiritual quests.

Jacob, the elder, is a "rough and unaccommodating soul" and loud mouth like his father. Jacob is first seen in company with Jesus, who has left Nazareth in shame as a Cross-maker; Jacob wants Jesus to get his just desserts. When Jacob comes around to appreciating Jesus, it is in the constant company of another fisherman, Peter, who also has a mystical younger brother, Andrew.



John, the younger son, begins the novel as a novice in the desert monastery, assigned to Abbot Joachim. John is fuzzy-cheeked with eyes full of affliction, submissive and yet ferocious, sweet and intelligent. When the family visits at Passover, Joachim's stare lures the 16-year-old to leave fishing and come to the monastery. After learning about herbal remedies, John goes home to care for his arthritic mother, and the parents refuse to let him go back. He is pallid and thin from excessive fasting. After John the Baptist's death, Jesus assigns to John the sobriquet "Son of the Thunder" in anticipation of his authoring the Book of Revelation.

Jesus thrusts himself into the family's lives by rescuing Mary Magdalene from stoning, when Salome gives her refuge. Zebedee claims the honor of casting the first stone as a sinless man, but is reminded of various transgressions. When John invites the band of nine to winter in his parents' home, Salome gladly distributes woolen clothing and provides sleeping space, but Zebedee complains about mouths to feed and mobs of cripples in the yard seeking healing. Gradually, listening to Jesus, Zebedee softens through the second half of the novel.

Mary Magdalene

The only daughter of Simeon, Rabbi the of Nazareth, Mary enters the novel as a "proud-gaited, high-rumped," raven-black haired prostitute who "smells of all nations." Mud she boasts, is her salvation—shame, filth, bed, body. She is Jesus' cousin, a year older than he, and his childhood playmate. Jesus as an adult feels guilty that they once sat naked, foot-to-foot, feeling power spread between them, and at age 20, he fails to propose to her as he wants because God sinks his vulture-like claws into Jesus' skull and pulls him away. This drives her into prostitution, and she moves to nearby Magdala and becomes known as the Magdalene. Her house has a green door decorated with intertwined snakes and a yellow lizard above the lintel.

Clients come around the clock, and Mary is open on the Sabbath. This gets her in trouble with the crusading Zealot Barabbas, who forms a vigilante group to kill her. They corner her in Capernaum and are about to throw when Jesus intervenes successfully. He sends her home, where she remakes herself so fully that she feels like a virgin again. When Jesus comes to town for a wedding and ignores taboos to be seen with and touch her, Mary becomes his constant companion. Sensing that Jesus' end is near, Mary breaks open a vial of expensive perfume that a former client has given her and anoints Jesus' feet and dries them with her hair. Jesus justifies the expense.

In the dream sequence, as Jesus faints on the cross, Mary secrets Jesus into a lemon grove to evade those who want to crucify him. They have sex, which both for very different reasons find amazing, and decide to call the son whom they have conceived Paraclete ("Comforter," the term by which Greeks refer to the Holy Spirit). Mary lets Jesus snooze, but is waylaid by murderous Saul, who barter her life for Jesus, but ends up letting her be savagely stoned to death.



Annas and Caiaphas

Annas and Caiaphas are the Jewish High Priests who demand that the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate arrest and execute Jesus. Caiaphas is depicted as a pampered fat slob who is carried around Jerusalem with pomp and circumstance. He resembles Herod the Great, whose death the Rabbi Simeon often recounts. Caiaphas and Jesus come face-to-face at Pilate's door, and Jesus does not back off but is whisked away by Judas before the Levites can attack. Jesus uses Judas as a middleman with Caiaphas to arrange his crucifixion, which Jesus sees as the only path to the salvation of the world.

Barabbas

A senior officer in the secret order of Zealots fighting the Roman occupation, Barabbas vows to kill Jesus for collaborating with the enemy by building crosses. Barabbas normally lives and fights in the mountains of Galilee but comes down to Nazareth to lead the fight to save a brother from crucifixion. He targets Jesus for assassination but is thwarted on the road outside Capernaum, and goes aside to Magdala to lead a morality crusade. Creating a mêlée there, Barabbas pursues the fleeing Mary Magdalene, a flagrant prostitute, to Capernaum, and is about to execute her by stoning when Jesus arrives and intervenes. Barabbas' superior, Judas Iscariot, orders him to stand down until they see whether Jesus is the Messiah.

Barabbas grudgingly obeys but vows vengeance. Barabbas confronts Jesus again in Jerusalem with the same result and appears to be stalking him when Jesus raises Lazarus of Bethany from the dead. Jesus' half-brother Jacob the Pharisee convinces Barabbas that Lazarus must be eliminated before he becomes a powerful sign of Jesus' power, and Barabbas kills him on a lonely road. The body is swiftly found and Barabbas is arrested. When Pontius Pilate offers Barabbas and Jesus to the Jewish masses for the traditional Passover clemency, the mob chooses to free Barabbas, who returns to terrorism in the mountains, while Jesus is crucified.

Herod

Kazantzakis uses the name Herod loosely, causing the reader confusion. The man who orders John the Baptist executed is Herod Antipas, Tetrarch (Roman governor) of Galilee and Perea. He is not a king. He builds himself a capital in the Roman style at Tiberias on Lake Gennesaret, which Jesus remembers visiting as a child and being traumatized. Herod Antipas' troubles with the Baptist arise from falling in love with his half-brother's wife (another Herod, son of Herod the Great), Herodias (Herod the Great's granddaughter), then divorcing, and marrying her. Herodias' seductive daughter from the earlier marriage, Salome, demands that her stepfather behead the prophet and give her his head on a platter, and Herod Antipas happily complies. In the novel, Rabbi Simeon of Nazareth, a healer, recalls with revulsion being summoned to Jericho to treat Herod as he rots to death, leaving no son worthy to succeed him. This is Herod the



Great, who rebuilds the Temple in Jerusalem, a massive, beautiful edifice whose ill use nauseates Jesus during his visits. This Herod also arrests the young Zealots who tear down the Roman eagle in Jerusalem and sentences them to death. The one who escapes is crucified in Nazareth at the beginning of the novel

Jacob the Pharisee and Simon the Lame

The grown sons of Joseph, the Carpenter of Nazareth, by a marriage before Jesus' mother Mary, Jacob has become an ecstatic Pharisee living in Jerusalem, covered with talismans and every few minutes being thrown down by an evil spirit. Simon is the Nazareth town crier, long necked and skinny, despised for making announcements on behalf of the Roman officials. He takes the job when his stepmother Mary banishes him from the house, for which Jesus blames himself. Jacob and Simon want to bring Jesus home and shut him up to end the family's embarrassment. Jacob late in the novel convinces Barabbas, a terrorist, to kill Lazarus of Bethany, whom Jesus has raised from the dead, lest Lazarus' raising from the dead increase people's belief in Jesus' powers.

Joachim

Abbot of the nameless desert monastery in which Jesus seeks salvation after being driven out of Nazareth as a Cross-maker, Joachim is skinny, short of breath, white-bearded, and starving himself to death in order to present his grievances before God face-to-face. Joachim is attended by a young novice, John, son of Zebedee, who is a distant relative of Joachim's. When the family visits at Passover, Joachim's stare lures the 16-year-old to leave fishing and come to the monastery. Joachim appears to die after giving final words to his flock, but revives, and is surrounded by the brotherhood. Jesus arrives but is denied entrance. Finally he steps in and Joachim recognizes him as the Messiah. He dies with a smile on his face and is buried in a shallow desert grave during a great windstorm. The brothers want to make Jesus abbot in Joachim's place—by force if necessary—but God helps Jesus slip away.

John the Baptist

Wrapped in animal skins, gnawed by the sun, devoured by prayer, vigils, and fasting, John seems little more than a pair of fiery eyes and a voice yelling "Repent!" as he gathers crowds on the Jordan River. Andrew son of Jonah, who becomes a follower of Jesus, talks about his former master as another Elijah. Andrew has seen a crow feed him a lighted coal, but John denies being the Messiah, God's seed. Andrew leaves him to find that seed. John operates in a calm, reed-surrounded pool on the Jordan River just above the inlet to the lifeless Dead Sea. Throngs of people from far and near come to hear him, offer public confession of sins, wade out chin-deep in the water, and have John pour water over their heads.

From his reading of the prophet Isaiah, John is watching for a figure in white with a green leaf between his teeth; thus, Jesus comes to him as such and accepts baptism.



John alone understands a voice proclaiming him the Son of God. John and Jesus confer for three days and nights, while pilgrims wait their turns, and John sends Jesus into the desert warning that the devil can as easily await him there as God. While Jesus is in the desert, Herod beheads John to please his stepdaughter Herodias. His last words are said to be a plea to Jesus to return and take up his ministry. When Jesus does, some say it is as though John has picked up his severed head and run inside Jesus, whose message turns to fire and ax and the end of the earthly kingdoms as John directs him in his desert dreams.

Jonah, Peter, and Andrew

Fishermen on bountiful Lake Genesseret, Jonah is a short, stocky, slow-moving, sunburned, dull-eyed, scaly widower, with a huge head covered by curly white hair. His son Peter is already white-haired, has tattooed on his chest a fish beneath a four-barbed anchor, and is chided as "Weathercock" for constantly changing his opinion. When he goes up to Nazareth with Jacob, son of Zebedee, and the shepherd Philip, hoping to see a miracle as the Romans crucify the Zealot, Peter joins in reviling the "Cross-maker," who carries the dread implement of death, but recognizes the son of a woman who in her 60s gives birth in Cana, across the street from their home. Peter's mother was midwife to Anne. When Jesus falters under the weight, Peter drags the cross the rest of the way. Peter is a drunkard who regularly drinks and brawls in Jerusalem in Simeon of Cyrene's Inn. Like old Zebedee, Jonah complains that his sons leave him to fish alone.

Andrew had been engaged to pretty Ruth, but when God lets her drown in the lake, Andrew takes to the desert where he transforms from a chubby young athlete into another John the Baptist, whom he sees as Elijah, eating lighted coals fed to him by a crow. John, however, denies being the Messiah, but merely God's seed, so Andrew leaves him to find the seed. He re-appears in Capernaum at vintage time wearing a tattered black goatskin and preaching against frivolity. Meeting Jesus, Andrew mellows. Peter, when he begins to follow Jesus, continues to be a "Windmill," but Jesus blesses him to grind wheat into bread. As the disciples debate among themselves who will have priority in the Kingdom of Heaven, Peter depends on Jesus' words concerning the keys and the ability to remit sin. Old Zebedee remarks that Peter is likely to be crucified upside down. As Jesus predicts, Peter denies Jesus three times before dawn on the night of his arrest, and Peter longs to return to his beloved fishing boat.

Mary and Joseph

Mary and Joseph of Nazareth are Jesus' parents. Mary, who was born in Cana to the righteous Joachim and Anne when Anne is already in her 60s, becomes at age 15 engaged to Joseph, a widowed carpenter in his 60's, when his staff buds for her, fulfilling the prophecy. Joseph is struck by lightning atop Mt. Carmel, where they climb on a cloudless day to ask that their first child be a son. Joseph is already the father of grown sons, Jacob the Pharisee and Simon the Lame. Joseph's brother, Simeon, is the



local rabbi. Jesus' conception is said to have occurred through an angel's ministrations when Mary smells a white lily. She vaguely remembers strange visitors bringing her infant son gifts and the voice of thunder on Mt. Carmel saying, "Hail Mary!"

As the novel begins, Joseph has been bedridden for years, struggling for hours each day to get out the name "Adonai," and then falling back utterly exhausted. Mary cares for him and keeps house, much of the time spinning wool. Jesus blames himself for Joseph's condition. Mary has lost the first bloom of youth, has blue rings around her eyes, but a firm mouth and chin. She is disgusted with Jesus' seizures, which he has suffered since age 20 and which prevent his getting married. Mary is also disgusted by Jesus' abandonment of all other carpentry work to serve as the Romans' despised "Cross-maker." She is worn out hearing from her brother-in-law that God, not a demon, torments Jesus, so he cannot exorcise him. Mary has used up her allotment of tears over her husband, son, and her own wasted life. She is forever raking her cheeks with her nails.

When Jesus leaves Nazareth, Mary frantically searches for him and, hearing that he has gone to the desert monastery, stops in Capernaum en route to rest. There she watches him intervene in the stoning of the prostitute Mary Magdalene and has to be restrained from issuing a potent mother's curse when Jesus refuses to come home with her. When Jesus finally does return to Nazareth to preach, Mary pleads with the angry mob that he is mentally ill.

When Matthew, an ex-publican, is writing down Jesus' words and deeds, an angel dictates to him that, in order to fulfill Jewish prophecy, he must say that Mary is a virgin, immaculately conceiving Jesus at a word from the Archangel Gabriel, that she gives birth to him in Bethlehem, not Nazareth, and that she flees with Jesus and Joseph to Egypt. When Jesus reads this, he vehemently denies it all, but accepts that God must have some higher truth to tell and allows Matthew to continue.

In the dream sequence when Jesus faints on the cross, Jesus marries Mary and Martha in Bethany and wants his mother to move in with them to raise his flock of grandchildren, as a recompense for all she has suffered.

Mary, Martha, and Lazarus

Grown, unmarried siblings in their thirties, the children of Manachem, Lazarus, Mary, and Martha live in an immaculate cottage in Bethany, near Jerusalem. Lazarus is jaundiced, with flabby cheeks, faded, cat-like green eyes, suffering a kidney ailment. He is at the Jordan when the sisters take in Jesus, famished and exhausted from his trial in the desert. Mary is thin-boned and pale, with large, sad eyes, and black braids that she ties in a bun. She wears a charm to ward off the evil eye. Mary most often is sitting at her loom, weaving and singing. Martha is short and chubby, with thick lips, and constantly bustling about at household chores. Both long to marry Jesus, but Martha accepts Mary's priority.



After Nazareth rejects its native son's teaching and Jesus grows tired of relative inactivity in Capernaum, the band returns to Bethany and uses it as a nightly refuge from forays into Jerusalem. Jesus is away when Lazarus dies and is buried, but rushes back on receiving word and is begged by the sisters to raise Lazarus from Hades. Doing so fills Jesus with dread that he can—and must—do the Messiah's work. Lazarus remains disturbingly corpse-like. The Pharisees and Zealots agree that Lazarus is a dangerous monument to Jesus' power, and Barabbas murders Lazarus on a remote stretch of road.

In the dream sequence as Jesus faints on the cross, he sees himself assuming Lazarus' appearance, marrying both sisters, fathering many children, and resuming his work as a carpenter. The three are white-haired grandparents when Jesus returns to consciousness and dies on the cross.

Matthew

A Roman customs officer with a post on the edge of Nazareth, Matthew follows Jesus and secretly records his words and deeds. Short, stout, jaundiced, ink stained, with long hairy ears and a eunuch's high voice, Matthew is hated in Nazareth for serving the Romans and ostracized by the disciples for a long time until Peter needs to unburden himself about a dream. Matthew is troubled that an angel insists on dictating fabulous versions that better agree with the words of Hebrew scripture, helping it be seen that Jesus is the Messiah. When Jesus condemns the outright lies, Matthew offers the angel defense and Jesus accepts that God may have a higher truth. In the dream sequence while Jesus faints on the cross, Matthew claims to be the disciple most wronged by Jesus' refusal to be crucified. He should have been immortal for recording the Gospel, but now is a nothing.

Philip and Nathaniel

Jesus' disciples, Philip is a loud-mouthed, hairy colossus of a shepherd, but also "bashful and irresolute." He is first seen anxious to kill the "Cross-maker," and joins Jesus' band only after thieves make off to Lebanon with his animals. Naïve, enormous, gawky Nathaniel is a native of Magdala, but works as Capernaum's cobbler. He once breaks the Sabbath by having a full day of sex with Mary Magdalene and trusts in God to forgive. Nathaniel enjoys Jesus' words, but Philip wants miracles—like curing his sheep of itch. When Nathaniel's nephew marries in Magdala, Jesus attends and so, too, his disciples. Philip finally accepts Jesus as the Messiah in Nazareth, the low point in Jesus' ministry, and convinces Nathaniel when they pass Capernaum. Philip emphasizes that this is such a good deal that even Thomas the peddler has joined. Nathaniel's business is then prospering, but he agrees. The friends agree to abandon Jesus if trouble comes, and do indeed after the Passover supper in Jerusalem.



Pontius Pilate

The Roman Governor of Judea, Pilate is an agnostic who despises the filthy Jews but takes a liking to Jesus. Pilate summons Jesus privately to warn him to flee to Galilee, for the high priests Annas and Caiaphas are pestering Pilate for Jesus' head. Not long after, however, Pilate gives in when the mob demands Barabbas' release rather than Jesus for the traditional Passover amnesty. A chronic hand-washer, Pilate tells them that he washes his hands of the innocent man's blood. Pilate's wife suffers nightmares about Jesus. Pilate keeps a razor suspended from his neck for whenever he tires of eating, drinking, and governing. In the dream sequence as Jesus faints on the cross, Simon of Cyrene brings word to an elderly Jesus that Pilate has gone crazy, lost his wife, been recalled to Rome, and just found crucified on Golgotha.

Rufus

The centurion heading the Roman garrison in Nazareth, Rufus cold-heartedly does his duty for ten years, crucifying dozens of Galilean rebels. His weak spot is his daughter, bedridden with paralysis. In Cana, Rufus asks Jesus to heal her, which Jesus does, reserving for later the favor that Rufus insists on giving in return. Jesus wants Rufus not to interfere in his arrest and possible execution. Rufus knows that Rome cannot win against the hated Jews because they do not fear death. After her cure, Rufus' daughter often sneaks out to listen to Jesus.

Simeon

Jesus' paternal uncle, aged Simeon is Nazareth's long-time rabbi, now ravaged by tuberculosis and skeletal but constantly calling on people to rise up against Rome to facilitate the Messiah's coming. A true mystic, Simeon once paints on the walls of his synagogue Ezekiel's vision of dry bones being reconnected by the Messiah and God's hand holding a dazzling New Jerusalem. As the people mourn yet another crucified would-be Messiah, Simeon finally reveals how years ago, he strips naked before God to rouse God's pity is assured that he will live to see the Messiah. At age 85, he figures that the Messiah cannot be far away.

Simeon lives eleven years in the unnamed desert monastery to which Jesus takes refuge after the crucifixion of a Zealot in Nazareth. He speaks often of the place that he leaves when "tempted" to marry. To his intense chagrin, Simeon is father to an infamous prostitute named Mary, who has moved to Magdala and become known as the Magdalene. They are not on speaking terms as the novel begins. A noted healer who is also able to converse with birds (but not snakes), Simeon takes Jesus as a boy to sinful Tiberias and is nauseated treating King Herod as he dies in Jericho. He tells this tale often as well. When the Abbot is dying, the monks send for Simeon, but he arrives too late to do anything but take part in the funeral. He and Jesus have a deep spiritual conversation in which Jesus reveals for the first time how Jesus is responsible for Magdalene's falling into sin. Simeon is left wondering if Jesus might be the Messiah.



Still wondering as his strength runs out, Simeon finds Jesus in Bethany and never leaves him again. He struggles with Jesus' seeming blasphemies against the Law of Moses. Dying, Simeon accepts that he has indeed seen the Messiah and will be with him after the crucifixion and resurrection.

Simon of Cyrene

A drunk and brawler, a native of Libya (North Africa), Simon is an old friend of Peter. He owns and runs a celebrated inn near the David's Gate in Jerusalem. Simon is baptized by John the Baptist simply because everyone is doing it and because it might bring new patrons to his inn. When Jesus leaves the disciples with John the Baptist and goes alone into the desert—and King Herod then decapitates the Baptist—they rush to Simon's Inn to hide out. On fire with the spirit, Jesus rallies them and takes them back to Galilee to begin a formal ministry. When time comes to celebrate the Passover, Peter suggests holding the meal in Simon's Inn, but Jesus has another plan. When Jesus is arrested and tried, the disciples again cower in Simon's Inn, while Simon stands up for Jesus and is beaten soundly. When Simon fails to inspire even Peter to carry Jesus' cross as he passes by, Simon does so and becomes the only one to witness angels crucifying Jesus and piercing his side with a spear. During Jesus' dream sequence, Simon appears with news that Pontius Pilate has been found crucified on Golgotha.

Thomas

A hairless, cross-eyed peddler with a "sharp, skinny snout," Thomas is present at the Zealot's crucifixion in Nazareth, and asks, when Rabbi Simeon reveals God's promise that he will live to see the Messiah, what happens if God lets him live forever like Enoch and Elijah. One cannot tell whether Thomas' "wry eyes" are "rejoicing or scoffing." He believes in nothing. Thomas is a long time in giving up his lucrative peddling to become a disciple, but when he decides, after Jesus' failure in Nazareth, he uses his peddler's horn to summon people to listen. As Jesus is on his way to the cross, Thomas tells the other disciples that they have taken a risk and failed and must now cut their losses and move on.

The Zealot

The last in the long lineage of Maccabees, the man who is never named is crucified in Nazareth at the beginning of the novel. He is the sole survivor of King Herod's torching of 40 young Jews who tear down the Roman eagle from the Temple. The Zealot fights for years in the mountains for the liberation of Israel until he is captured by Centurion Rufus and condemned. People come from across Galilee for the execution, hoping that God will save him. Mary Magdalene, an infamous prostitute, keeps vigil with the Zealot in the Roman stockade on the eve of his crucifixion, sad that he cannot accept her sexual comfort because of his religious vows. Instead, he meditates on the New Jerusalem to come. The Zealot's mother is present for the execution, blesses her son,

urges him to be courageous, and curses both Jesus and his mother Mary, hoping that the cross will come their way as well.



Objects/Places

Adonai

"Adonai" is the pronunciation that pious Jews substitute for the written word in scripture Jehovah (or Yahweh or YHWH). The novel opens with the Rabbi of Nazareth, Jesus' Uncle Simeon, crying out for Adonai to bring freedom to Israel. Jesus' paralyzed father, Joseph, spends all his time and energy trying to get the three awe-filled syllables out of his mouth. Whenever a Messianic atmosphere is to be conveyed, Adonai rather than God is used.

Bethany

The home of grown siblings Lazarus, Mary, and Martha, Bethany is conveniently located at the foot of the Mount of Olives on the approach to Jerusalem. Jesus first happens upon Bethany in a rainstorm, after battling God and Satan in the desert. Mary and Martha take him in, warm and feed him before the village elders come to meet the stranger. These include huge old Melchizedek, venomous, snake-eyed Samuel, and a stumpy, light-hearted blind man. Other notables gather behind them, and women come to see if the visitor will hit it off with Mary or Martha—or be available to them—but Jesus is too tired to talk. Before the crowd can leave, however, Lazarus arrives with news that King Herod has beheaded John the Baptist.

Jesus leaves to retrieve his disciples in Jerusalem, fails at a mission to Nazareth, and eventually settles in, taking advantage of Bethany's proximity to Jerusalem to make it their nighttime retreat after daily forays that stir up trouble with the Jewish authorities. When Jesus hears that Lazarus has died, Jesus hurries there to resuscitate him, and both Pharisees and Zealots see good reason to return Lazarus to Hades. Barabbas kills the half-ghost on his way to buy a Passover lamb. The people of Bethany form Jesus' entourage as he enters Jerusalem in glory.

The dream sequence that flashes through Jesus' mind as he is crucified is mostly set in Bethany. He marries Mary and Martha and fathers many children, looking like a healthy Lazarus, and working as a carpenter. As a white-bearded grandfather, Jesus/Lazarus is confronted by his decrepit former disciples, and charged with being a sell-out by refusing crucifixion.

Cana

Cana is a small village near Nazareth where Jesus' mother Mary is born and raised, as is his disciple Nathaniel and Peter's mother, who is midwife for Mary's mother Anne. When Jesus is 20, Mary takes him to Cana to select a wife, and he is about to propose to Mary (the future Magdalene) when God seizes him painfully by the skull, and his



mother in shame takes him home. He suffers seizures regularly thereafter and gives up on marriage.

Capernaum

A thriving fishing village on the western shore of the Lake Genesseret Sea of Galilee, Capernaum is home to the fishermen Peter and Andrew, sons of Jonah, and Jacob and John, sons of Zebedee, the rich man who dominates the local economy. Capernaum becomes Jesus' headquarters for a good part of the novel after he flees Nazareth to escape the reputation as a spineless Roman collaborator (making crosses) and before he goes to meet his fate in Jerusalem. Arriving with the first chill of winter, Jesus and the disciples are given woolen clothing and sleeping space by Zebedee's independent wife Salome. Throughout the winter and into the spring, cripples congregate in the yard seeking healing. Jesus eventually feels guilty for wasting time in Capernaum and sets out for Jerusalem.

The Dead Sea and Jericho

A "thick and poisonous" salt water lake, the Dead Sea is an "Inferno" of tar and brimstone located between the steep, lime white mountains of Moab and those of Idumea. The descent is described as hellish, over sharp rock paths. A view of Paradise then opens in the meadows and orchards of Jericho, renowned for its dates and roses. When Jesus and the disciples arrive in Jericho, they collect a meal by asking alms, and while the others sleep, Jesus hears the trumpets that once make its walls crumble at the time of Joshua. Moving on, they reach the lifeless Dead Sea, where pious legend says that one can see on the bottom the rotting corpses of the whores Sodom and Gomorrah embracing. John the Baptist ministers in a calm, reed-surrounded pool on the river above the inlet to the sea.

Jerusalem

Ostensibly the Holy City of David, Jerusalem at a distance is "beautiful, white and proud," standing on double-peaked Mount Zion, its palaces and towers glistening, and dominated by the gold, cedar, and marble Temple. Up close and as a symbol, however, Jerusalem is depicted throughout the novel as "inhuman," a great whore defiled by the Romans and by the Jewish officials who fawn over them. John the Baptist convinces Jesus that Jerusalem, along with Babylon, Alexandria, and Rome, are to be destroyed by fire and pestilence. Jesus looks forward to a New Jerusalem rising on its ashes.

The current Temple is the third place that the Jews' God has called home. The first was a tent when they travel in the wilderness. The second is built of stone by King Solomon. The current Temple is the most magnificent, built recently by the apostate King Herod the Great. It consists of three "courts," one allowing infidels, the next for Israelites only, and the third for Israelite priests only. It flows with the blood of sacrifices and stinks of dead meat, smoke, and dung. In John the Baptist's vision, Jerusalem's gates are



Hunger, Fear, Injustice, and Infamy, and for every three fat persons there, there are 3,000 emaciated and starving. Jesus' sees both the pious and the impious polluting Jerusalem. Emblematic of this is the presence of a Roman fortress and garrison, commanded by Pontius Pilate. An earlier, more foolish governor affixes the hated Roman eagle to the Temple facade, and young Zealots tear it down. The novel opens with the crucifixion of the last of those zealots.

Nearby Jerusalem lie the Mount of Olives, where Jesus is arrested, and Golgotha, the traditional hill of crucifixion, where he dies. Simon of Cyrene owns a thriving inn near David's Gate, which is also where the lepers congregate begging alms. During Jesus' first visit to Jerusalem, he is disgusted and hurries through to visit the Baptist. During his second visit, he preaches daily at Solomon's Porch about tearing down the temple and rebuilding it in three days. At night, he retreats to nearby Bethany, across the Cedron (Kedron) Valley. As his time arrives, Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey with Bethanites waving palms and singing, then clears Solomon's Porch of merchants, but has to retreat in dishonor. He and his disciples celebrate the Passover meal in the upper room of an unspecified building and then depart for the Mount of Olives. He is dragged back to face trial in the High Priest's residence, sentenced to death in Pilate's fortress, and crucified on Golgotha.

Jordan River

"God's royal artery," the Jordan River pass through sandy wastelands and rich orchards flowing south from the Sea of Gennesaret (also known as the Sea of Galilee and Lake Tiberias) to the Dead Sea. John the Baptist attracts vast crowds of penitents to a section of the river just before the inlet to the Dead Sea, where the water turns saline and supports no life forms. John works in a marshy area, filled with tall reeds. He preaches from atop a flat rock and pours water from a shell over those who have confessed their sins publicly and wade beneath his hand.

When Jesus comes to baptism, without confession, people believe they see a variety of miracles, including the Spirit of the Jordan, personified as a seaweed covered old man, rise up to witness, colorful fish dancing around, and a dove circling overhead saying something that John alone can understand at the time. When Jesus later reads Matthew's account of the event, he declares it all lies but accepts that God's truth need not match human truth.

Magdala

"A charming, openhearted, but wicked hamlet" near Capernaum on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Magdala gives its name to Mary, the profligate daughter of the Rabbi of Nazareth, who moves there to ply her trade as a prostitute after Jesus fails to marry her. Magdala lies on the major east-west caravan route. A bare-breasted, painted woman who always sits at the well at the entrance to town, offering refreshment to visitors. Mary's house is at the far end of town, surrounded by a pomegranate grove. It has a



green door decorated with intertwined snakes and a yellow lizard above the lintel. An old women cooks snacks outside. The Zealot leader Barabbas invades Magdala following a colleague's crucifixion in Nazareth and rouses a mob to stone Mary for her sins. She flees, hotly pursued, to Capernaum, where Jesus says only the sinless may throw a stone at her. Mary returns to Magdala and reforms her ways, and when Jesus visits to attend a wedding, she becomes one of his permanent followers.

The Monastery

Located east of Lake Genesseret in an unspecified area and given no name, the monastery is a place where men dressed in white pray ceaselessly to God and abstain from meat, wine, and women. They are versed in herbal medicines and secret charms for expelling demons from people. Jesus' uncle, Rabbi Simeon of Nazareth, speaks of them often, having spent eleven years among them before being "tempted" to marry and father Mary Magdalene. In crisis after being reviled at the Zealot's crucifixion, Jesus steals away from home unseen and heads there to the monastery. It is built of huge, ash-red rocks in a circular design, paved with flagstones, and utterly without trees, flowers, or birds. The monks' cells are carved into rock-like tombs.

Among the brothers, most mentioned in the novel are the Abbot Joachim, who is first seen on the verge of death and whose death and burial are narrated; the novice John, son of Zebedee, who becomes Jesus' "beloved" disciple; and the guest master, Jeroboam (nicknamed "Brother Crackbrain" and "The Hunchback"). Judas, a member of the Brotherhood of Zealots, is assigned to kill Jesus for collaborating with the Romans and arranges to get Jesus alone in a cell at the monastery. Jesus' willingness to die makes Judas hold off the execution. Jesus' donning the monastery's white robe helps him fit John the Baptist's mental picture of the Messiah when they have their fateful meeting.

Nazareth

Nazareth is a critical trade center in Galilee north of Jerusalem along the Roman road. Carpentry is an important industry. Along with brick and mud houses with flat cane-lathed mud roofs, the town has a synagogue, whose walls are painted by the current aged rabbi with scenes from Ezekiel's vision of the bones of humankind being reconstituted by God at the end of time. Outside, the Romans maintain a garrison, commanded by the cruel Rufus, and nearby is the hill where frequent crucifixions are carried out.

Despite what an angel purportedly dictates to Matthew, Jesus maintains that he is born and raised in Nazareth, not Bethlehem, and that none of the elaborate nativity myths are true. His mother Mary, however, recalls incipient versions of some of the events. She cares for Joseph, who is struck by lightning and paralyzed on Mt. Carmel before their wedding. Joseph has two grown sons from a previous marriage, one of whom is the despised town crier and the other a dervish-like Pharisee who wanders around the



region. Jesus has taken over Joseph's carpentry business but is so determined to keep God from making him accept Messiahship that he demeans himself by making crosses for the Romans.

After the crucifixion of a Zealot, Jesus flees Nazareth. He later returns, after realizing his destiny in the desert, but his preaching fails and the people are ready to kill him. Jesus accepts that prophets are never honored in their own town and leaves for Capernaum.

Samaria

Considered heretical by the Jews, Samaria is dominated by Mount Gerizim, where God appears to Abraham under the oak trees. Samaritans insist that theirs is the Promise Land and that Gerizim is the only place for true worship, rather than Jerusalem, which murders the prophets. Heading for Jerusalem from a wedding in Magdala, Jesus and his disciples stop in a Samaritan village where an old woman dares to slip them a loaf of bread, and a young woman draws water for them. She asks Jesus about the religious rift and if he is the Messiah, but to his relief the disciples arrive and he does not have to answer. Farmers debate the religious question and are amazed when Jesus declares all land holy, for God is everywhere.

Tiberias

An idolatrous town in Galilee, filled with painted women, statues, and theaters, Tiberias lies on Jesus' route from Nazareth to the desert. As a boy he visits Tiberias with his Uncle Simeon, when the rabbi/healer is summoned to rid a rich Roman lady of devils. Young Jesus faints when she runs naked down the street. Simeon tells him that God has damned the city. As an adult, entering the teeming city festooned with Roman eagles, Jesus recalls the carcass of a dead mule he once saw in a bog and associates it with Sodom and Gomorrah. An old man tells Jesus that Tiberias is a whore, mounted by "Greeks, Romans, Bedouins, Chaldeans, Gypsies and Jews."



Social Concerns And Themes

In what many view as the most controversial fictional adaptation of Biblical materials written in this century or possibly any other, Kazantzakis transforms the story of Jesus of Nazareth into a penetrating examination of the role of the hero in society.

The tale of Christ's mission to save mankind is adapted into an existential framework: the man of greatness discovering meaning in his life and ultimately sacrificing himself to fulfill both his personal destiny and his role as savior.

The Last Temptation of Christ explores man's relationship to God, in the special, perhaps unique way that Kazantzakis sees it: God and man are inextricably linked in the same struggle for salvation, and God needs man as much as man needs God for survival.

This radical (and, to many, heretical) view is at the core of Kazantzakis's religious philosophy. The work shows Christ coming to realize his role as a savior as he struggles with a series of temptations that pit spirit against flesh.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

Kazantzakis combines scenes of graphic realism with descriptions of surrealistic dreams and psychodrama to create this portrait of Christ as existential hero. The realism is often as disturbing as the nonrealistic scenes are confusing.

Readers may find it uncomfortable to encounter Christ being actually seduced by a voluptuous Mary Magdalen; yet it is through such scenes that Kazantzakis is able to vivify the notion of temptation, making it clear what it means to be tempted and to give up everything for a higher cause.

The highly metaphorical nature of the dream scenes also takes some getting used to; fortunately, Kazantzakis uses traditional images (for example, the spirit represented as a bird) to make his points. The jar to one's sensibilities comes once again, though, when one discovers that images of God and those of the devil are the same.

Such daring use of imagery, grounded in a radical philosophy, gives the work its special impact — one that is likely to leave the reader astounded or repulsed, but hardly unmoved.

Unquestionably, the primary source for Kazantzakis's story and characterizations is the Bible. From it he takes his general outline, and several specific scenes upon which he builds his philosophical framework. He does expand several scenes, continuing beyond the Biblical text and often modifying the moral lesson of the gospels. He also invents on occasion, but seldom strays far from the general outlines of his source.



Themes

Apocalypticism

Apocalypticism is the belief that prophecies concerning the end of the world are about to come true. This spirit fills Nikos Kazantzakis' *The Last Temptation of Christ*. It is first seen in Rabbi Simeon in Nazareth, who harangues parishioners from the apocalyptic prophets (Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Daniel) and has been told directly by God that he will not die without seeing the Messiah. It is seen in the Brotherhood of Zealots, two of whose members, Judas Iscariot and Barabbas, are prominent in the novel. These are terrorists dedicated to throwing the mighty Romans out of Israel and purging any Jews who collaborate. Every time the Romans crucify a Zealot, people gather to see if the Messiah will come to save the victim and begin their liberation. The Abbot in the desert monastery feeds on apocalyptic texts and cannot wait to die so he can present Israel's grievances at being so long overlooked directly to God's face. Finally, on the Jordan River, John the Baptist preaches about coming to lay the ax to the root of the rotten tree, set the world on fire, and prepare the way for the Messiah.

When finally convinced to accept his fate and preach, Jesus emphasizes universal brotherhood and love. The Zealots are ready to assassinate him, but Judas wants him to meet John the Baptist for an evaluation of whether he might be the Messiah. John recognizes Jesus from an apocalyptic vision and dedicates three days and nights to convincing Jesus that the fiery way is the only one possible. When Jesus goes into the desert to meet God and/or the devil—dualism is a key concept in apocalypticism—the Baptist remains his mentor in dreams, showing him the destruction of four great cities by fire and leprosy, and the creation of a New Jerusalem on the ashes of the old. When Jesus returns, his appearance and his message are John's. He uses the Messianic titles, particularly Isaiah's Son of Man, but goes on to see himself as Son of God and even God.

Sex

Sex pervades Nikos Kazantzakis' *The Last Temptation of Christ*. It begins with its antithesis: Jesus' intense aversion to sex, to the point of flagellating himself before bedtime. He holds himself responsible for Mary Magdalene becoming a prostitute and spends most of the first third of the novel worrying about how to redeem her. When he finds himself in Magdala after trying consciously to avoid it, he waits in line among her customers for most of a day, for the chance to apologize. Kazantzakis describes the playful atmosphere among the waiting clients, particularly as one staggers out weakly and another rushes to Mary's bed. When Jesus' turn comes, both are flustered. Mary declares she has nothing to be ashamed of; she is living out her fate. Earlier, she goes to the Roman stockade to offer her services to the condemned Zealot, but he has taken vows of celibacy. She keeps vigil anyway. Mary goes on plying her trade, even on the Sabbath, and Barabbas the Zealot raises a mob against her, which backs down only



when Jesus says the sinless alone can throw a stone. Old Zebedee, who makes the rounds of local widows, has to refrain himself from throwing.

Prostitution is also the dominant theme when discussing Jerusalem. During the High Holy Days and again as Passover, pilgrims are seen praying a few days and then swelling the income of the city's prostitutes. Country boys are amazed at what sex can be like. Symbolically, Jerusalem is seen whoring itself to the occupying Romans and must be consumed by fire before a New Jerusalem can rise on the ashes. When John the Baptist is beheaded, it is at the request of Herod's sexy stepdaughter. The perverse sexual appetites in Tiberias has been one of the Baptist's constant themes.

The reverse side of the coin—the goodness of sex—is less depicted but quite powerfully shown because it is tied into the Messianic hope. In the autumn, after the grape harvest, and again in the spring, the young people celebrate life exuberantly. Jews marry and have sex in order to produce the Messiah. Every act of copulation has that potential and is at least at the back of the couple's minds. Jesus' mother Mary, who is denied the joys of sex when God's lightning bolt strikes down her fiancé on Mount Carmel before the wedding, laments the absence of physical pleasure her entire life. She conceives the Messiah, Jesus, while smelling a lily and is not at all pleased with the outcome.

Ethnocentrism

The belief that one's own racial or ethnic group alone matters in the world pervades Nikos Kazantzakis' *The Last Temptation of Christ*. First-century Common Era Palestine is a hotbed of closed-minded ultra-nationalists. Jewish ethnocentrism centers on the Messiah, whose coming is fervently expected every time another prophet is nailed to a cross by the Romans. When Jesus begins his preaching ministry, talking about universal brotherhood and love, he is booed and laughed at and the Zealots, a band of terrorists, puts a contract on his head, as they do on anyone who collaborates with the Romans and/or breaks the Law of Moses. Judas Iscariot, Jesus' closest follower, is a Zealot and argues consistently and insistently that Rome must be expelled before social justice for the poor can be implemented. Judas cares nothing about a Kingdom of Heaven. He wants Israel to be cleared of foreigners. Eventually, Jesus comes around to the view that Rome, along with Babylon, Alexandria, and Jerusalem must be destroyed by fire and leprosy before a purified New Jerusalem can arise. In that ideal time, God will not be in charge of a "ghetto," but rule all human beings in equality.

As Jesus and his disciples head for Jerusalem the first time, he encounters the ethnocentrism of the Samaritans, Jews who remained in Palestine during the Babylonian Exile and whose descendants resent the establishment of Jerusalem as the exclusive locus of worship when the Temple is rebuilt. They hold that Mount Gerizim, where God appeared to Abraham, is the only acceptable place for prayer and sacrifice. Judas argues that the band should cross the Jordan River and avoid Samaria completely. When Jesus refuses, saying that he must bring salvation to all people, Judas remains aloof and critical. When Jesus asks water from a Samaritan woman at



the well, she is amazed that he would break the taboo. He tells her that God must be worshiped in spirit rather than in Jerusalem or on Mount Gerizim. That is a radical position.

Finally, the Romans are shown as ethnocentric as anyone. They are proud conquerors and masters of the known world. They build roads and enforce laws for the common good, and Rome welcomes the gods of all the peoples it conquers. Roman officials loath the Jews among whom they live, particularly their conflicting claim to be a Chosen People. Rufus, the centurion in Nazareth, deigns to talk to Jesus only because no one else has been able to cure his beloved daughter of paralysis. Rufus does not wish to debate theology but just to see her well. Jesus amazes himself by curing her and is instantly condemned by Judas for misusing his power. Governor Pontius Pilate likewise despises the Jews but puts up with such customs as the granting of one amnesty at Passover. Pilate, too, is embarrassed to talk about private matters with a Jew but mentions at the conclusion of their first, "friendly" meeting, his wife's nightmares about Jesus' fate.



Style

Point of View

Nikos Kazantzakis' novel, *The Last Temptation of Christ* is told consistently by a neutral and anonymous narrator using the third person omniscient, past tense. The narrator is fond of the central character, Jesus of Nazareth, despite Jesus' many neuroses and obsessions. He shows Jesus fighting with God, who for a decade has been picking him up by the head with vulture-like claws and insisting that he accept his fate as Messiah. Jesus petulantly turns to cross-making for the Romans so God will give up on him. He is a pariah in town and his long-suffering mother's immense disappointment. When he runs away to a monastery, however, she follows to bring him back.

God convinces Jesus to preach about the Kingdom of God, and he uses familiar imagery to speak in parables. Starving people, however, want food not words, and a tension is set up that lasts through the novel. Working-class men become his disciples. A social outcast begins writing down Jesus' words and deeds, accepting dictation from an angel, whose goal is to square it with Hebrew prophecy. This sets up another enduring conflict and allows the narrator to show how legends and myths become entrenched.

The overarching conflict is prioritizing the Messiah's tasks: to throw off the Roman yoke and then attend to social justice or to give birth to the Kingdom of Heaven. Love vs. fire and the ax are weighed back-and-forth with the narrator showing no bias. When Jesus' preaching sets the disciples arguing who will be most important in the Kingdom, the narrator sides with Judas Iscariot who sees them as silly, overgrown boys.

Setting

Nikos Kazantzakis' novel, *The Last Temptation of Christ* takes place entirely in the so-called "Holy Land" or "Promised Land," now the disputed lands of Israel and Palestine. Much of the early action occurs in Nazareth, a critical trade center in Galilee north of Jerusalem along the Roman road. The town has a synagogue and a Roman garrison. Jesus has taken over his aged and paralyzed father's carpentry shop but has given up making normal household items and produces crosses on which the Romans crucify the many false messiahs who crop up in Galilee. Tormented by this despised activity, Jesus flees to nearby Capernaum, a fishing village on the western shore of the Lake Gennesaret, home to fisherman Peter and Andrew, sons of Jonah, and Jacob and John, sons of Zebedee, and the toll-collector Matthew. Capernaum becomes Jesus' headquarters for a good part of the novel. Nearby on the lake is Magdala, a small village where Mary, profligate daughter of the Rabbi of Nazareth moves to ply her trade as a prostitute.



East of the lake is a monastic establishment that Jesus visits but finds there no vocation. The Sea of Galilee is fed primarily by the Jordan River from the north and from it flows southward into the lifeless, stinking Dead Sea, bounded by steep cliffs and said in legend to be where God crushes Sodom and Gomorrah for their great sins. Near the inlet of the Jordan to the Dead Sea are the marshy places where fiery John the Baptist preaches and baptizes penitents. Beyond these bodies of water to the east is the desert where Jesus, after baptism, goes to talk out his fate, face-to-face with God.

The novel's climax occurs in Jerusalem, ostensibly a holy city, site of the Temple of Jehovah, but depicted throughout the novel as a great whore defiled by the Romans and the Jewish officials. The current temple, built by Herod the Great, is a magnificent edifice flowing with the blood of sacrifices, stinking of dead meat, smoke, and dung. The Romans maintain a garrison there, commanded by Pontius Pilate. Pilate is fond of Jesus but gives in to pressure from the priests and Pharisees and allows him to be crucified on Golgotha, the traditional hill of execution.

At the foot of the Mount of Olives, conveniently near Jerusalem for Jesus and his disciples to retreat there between forays into the city, is the small village of Bethany. There live the siblings Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. Hearing that his friend Lazarus has died, Jesus hurries there to resuscitate him. Jesus is arrested on the Mount of Olives in the Garden of Gethsemane. In his dream sequence while hanging on the cross, Jesus lives in Bethany with the sisters growing old and white-haired and having many children and grandchildren.

Language and Meaning

The Last Temptation of Christ is originally written by Nikos Kazantzakis in Demotic Greek, the modern dialect rather than the high-brow official language of that time. Some of the implications are pointed out in English translator P. A. Bien's reflection, which follows the novel. Bien describes the diverse intellectual and spiritual influences on Kazantzakis' stormy life, following among others the Buddha and Nikolai Lenin. This shows in a Jesus torn between love and revolution.

Kazantzakis period of contemplation on Mount Athos, the most famous of the Eastern Orthodox monasteries, shows in his presentation of the Jews' desert monastery and his description of their rituals. No strict archaeologist or anthropologist, Kazantzakis peoples his novel with nineteenth-century Cretan farmers, fishermen, shepherds, peasants, and laborers rather than with first-century Jewish ones. Kazantzakis presents a radically unorthodox view of Christ (for which he is not allowed to lie in state in a church when he dies) but relishes in drawing out aspects of the folk beliefs about Jesus. The scene in which Jesus is baptized in the River Jordan by John the Baptist has all of the elements of the Greek Orthodox icon of Theophany. Jesus' mother Mary and others recall odd incidents from his infancy that are taken from the pseudepigrapha—legends that did not make it into the canonical Christian gospels but which have a strong influence on the liturgy of the Eastern Orthodox church. During the dream sequence



when Jesus realizes he has conceived a son with Mary Magdalene, he hails her as "Mother of God," and Mary and Martha greet Jesus with verses from the paschal liturgy.

Above all, the Buddha-Lenin conflict dominates as Jesus and his childhood friend, Judas Iscariot, now a revolutionary Zealot, debate priorities and methodology for establishing the Kingdom of Heaven. As a corollary, the other disciples bicker over who will get the top jobs in this kingdom. The Bolsheviks had already shown what happens when idealists achieve power. One of Jesus' most shocking remarks in the novel is that God does not rule a Jewish ghetto; he wants to redeem the whole world. In the dream sequence, Saul/Paul appears as a religious fabricator in order to offer Jesus to the world. At several points, Kazantzakis daringly (if unscientifically) demonstrates how myth and scriptures evolve. In all these aspects, Kazantzakis applies forceful, descriptive, powerful language, which Bien renders into flowing, natural English.

Structure

The Last Temptation of Christ consists of a four-page prologue by Nikos Kazantzakis describing why he has written this "confession" of spiritual struggles to help "free men" better love Christ; thirty-three numbered but untitled chapters of varying lengths; and an enlightening ten-page reflection on Kazantzakis' life and career by translator P. A. Bien. There are no formal divisions above the chapter level.

The opening, showing an unnamed pursued in dreams by a Redbeard and dwarfs carrying implements of crucifixion, and Redbeard describing the novel's content in capsule form is confusing. This young carpenter seems compulsive/obsessive, masochistic, and thoroughly guilt-ridden. Nazareth, where he lives wakes up begging for the Messiah to come. A true red-beard, Judas Iscariot, appears and fails to talk him out of making crosses for the Romans. A host of characters are introduced and lightly drawn and a complex of relationships suggested. This is fleshed out later. Jesus is forced to participate in crucifying a man; he and his mother are cursed, and he slips out of town to head to the desert. More characters are introduced along the way, making for heavy reading. Much local color is provided, which helps.

At the desert monastery, more characters are introduced in a tone of heavy mysticism. Jesus and Judas again square off, with Judas refraining from assassinating Jesus. The mood is elevated as Capernaum celebrates the grape harvest but grows tense as a fiery preacher, vigilantes, Jesus' bitter mother, and Jesus himself, dressed in white all arrive. Jesus tries his clumsy hand at preaching, and a few people begin following him permanently, Judas among them, keeping tabs on this would-be Messiah to decide whether to fight with him or kill him. At Judas' insistence, they go to get John the Baptist's opinion. Much local color and many familiar bible stories are tucked in, often with twists. John confesses Jesus as the Messiah and sends him into the desert to test his calling. The desert scenes are chilling.

The Baptist's death wakes Jesus up to the fact that his own time has come. His public ministry begins disastrously in Nazareth, so he winters in Capernaum, and in the spring,



heads to Jerusalem to become God's sacrificial lamb. He angers the powers that be with his preaching, raises Lazarus from the dead, assigns Judas to see that he is properly arrested, tried, and sentenced to death, and then goes through with it. Much of this section shows dissension among the disciples over who will be most important in the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus and Judas, who still do not agree are methodology, are both revolted.

Jesus is nailed to a cross on Golgotha, cries out, "Eli, Eli," and faints. What turns out to be a charming dream sequence then begins, in which Jesus sees what his life might have been had he taken the "normal" path of marriage and children. Several times, snippets of Jesus' true fate slip in, shaking him. Most interesting is his theological confrontation with Saul/Paul, who makes up convenient truths about Jesus as he evangelizes the world. Finally, in old age, Jesus is reunited with his former disciples who mock him as a coward. Jesus dramatically comes to in agony, rejoices that he has not let the world down, and dies triumphant.



Quotes

"The rocks bruised his knees. He changed his position, leaning against the trunk of the cedar and closing his eyes. And then, without losing his tranquility or uttering a cry, he saw her—inside his eyes. But she had not come in the way he expected. He expected to see his bereaved mother with both her hands on his head, calling down her curse upon him. But now that was this! Trembling, he gradually opened his eyes. Flashing before him was the savage body of a woman covered head to foot with interlocking scales of thick bronze armor. But the head was not a human head; it was an eagle's, with yellow eyes and a crooked beak which grasped a mouthful of flesh. She looked tranquilly, mercilessly, at the son of Mary.

'You did not come as I expected you,' he murmured. 'You are not the Mother.... Have pity and speak to me. Who are you?'

He asked, waited, asked again. Nothing. Nothing but the yellow glitter of the round eyes in the darkness.

But suddenly the son of Mary understood.

'The Curse!' he cried, and he fell face downward onto the ground." Chapter 7, pg. 79.

"He looked at the old rabbi, but the other had placed his head between his knees and did not speak.

'It's my fault, mine! mine! the son of Mary cried, beating his chest. 'And if it were only this!' he continued after a moment. 'But ever since my childhood, Rabbi, I've not only kept the devil of fornication hidden deeply within me but also the devil of arrogance. Even when I was tiny—I could hardly walk at the time; I used to go along the wall, clinging to it to keep myself from falling—even then I shouted to myself—oh, what impudence! what impudence!—"God, make me God! God, make me God! God, make me God! And one day I was holding a large bunch of grapes in my arms, and a gypsy woman passed by. She came over to me, squatted, and took my hand. Give me the grapes, she said, and I'll tell you your fortune. I gave them to her. She bent over and looked at my palm. Oh, oh, she cried, I see crosses—crosses and stars. Then she laughed, You'll become King of the Jews! she said, and went away. But I believed her and swaggered; and ever since then, Uncle Simeon, I haven't been in my right mind." Chapter 10, pg. 145.

"Do you hear, Galileans? That is what the Scriptures say. Whoever wants to worship, therefore, ought to worship here in this holy land and not in Jerusalem, which murders the prophets!

'Every land is holy, old man,' Jesus said with a calm voice. 'God is everywhere, old man, and we are all brothers.'

The other turned, astonished. 'Samaritans and Galileans too?'

'Samaritans and Galileans too, old man—and Judeans. All!'

Stroking his beard, the old man fell deep into thought. He examined Jesus from head to toe.

'God and the devil too?' he asked finally. He spoke in a lowered voice so that the



invisible powers would not hear.

Jesus was terrified. Never in his life had he been asked if God's mercy was so great that one day he would forgive even Lucifer and welcome him back into the kingdom of heaven.

'I don't know, old man,' he replied; 'I don't know. I am a man, and my concern is for men. What's beyond is God's affair.'

The old man did not speak. Still stroking his beard and still deep in thought, he watched the strange passers-by proceed, two by two, and disappear under the trees." Chapter 15, pg. 224.

"Suddenly the Baptist, still looking at him, cried out. He remembered: one day at exactly noon he had lain down on the bank of the river and taken out the Prophet Isaiah, written on a goatskin. All at once stones, water, people, reeds and river vanished; the air filled with fires, trumpets and wings, the words of the prophet opened like doors, and the Messiah stepped forth. He remembered that he was dressed all in white, thin, gnawed by the sun, barefooted and, like this man, he held a green leaf between his teeth! The ascetic's eyes filled with joy and fear. He tumbled down from his rock and approached, stretching for his gnarled neck.

'Who are you? Who?' he asked, his terrible voice trembling.

'Don't you know me?' said Jesus, advancing one more step. His own voice was trembling: he knew that his fate depended on the Baptist's reply." Chapter 16, pg. 238.

"The rabbi leaned against Jesus. 'Who are you?' he asked softly, so that the others should not hear.

'You've been with me such a long time Uncle Simeon—from the hour of my birth—and you still haven't recognized me?'

The old man's heart stood still. 'It's more than my mind can hold,' he murmured, 'more than it can hold...'

'And your heart, Uncle Simeon?'

'My child, I do not listen to my heart. It leads one to the abyss.'

'To God's abyss—to salvation,' said Jesus, looking sympathetically at the old man. And in a moment: 'Father, don't you remember the dream the prophet Daniel had about the race of Israel one night in Babylon? The Ancient of Days was sitting on his throne, his clothes white as snow, the hair of his head like the white fleece of a ram. His throne was made of flames, and a river of flames flowed at his feet. The Judges were enthroned to his left and right. Then the heavens opened up and upon the clouds descended—who? Do you remember, Father?'

'The Son of man,' answered the old rabbi, who had been nourishing himself on this dream for generations. There were even nights when he dreamed the same dream himself.

'And who is the Son of man, Father?'

The old rabbi's knees gave way. He looked at the youth, terrified. 'Who?' he whispered, hanging on Jesus' lips. 'Who?'

'I,' Jesus replied tranquilly, and placed his hand on the old man's head, as if blessing him." Chapter 21 pgs. 316-317.



"But Mathew grew angry. He turned toward the invisible wings at his right and growled softly, so that the sleeping disciples would not hear him: 'It's not true. I don't want to write, and I won't!'

Mocking laughter was heard in the air, and a voice: 'How can you understand what truth is, you handful of dust? Truth has seven levels. On the highest is enthroned the truth of God, which bears not the slightest resemblance to the truth of men. It is this truth, Matthew Evangelist, that I intone in your ear. Write: "And three magi, following a large star, came to adore the infant. ..."

The sweat gushed from Matthew's forehead. 'I won't write! I won't write!' he cried, but this hand was running over the page, writing.

Jesus heard Matthew's struggle in his sleep and opened his eyes. He saw him bent over and gasping under the lamp, the squeaking quill running furiously over the page, ready to break.

'Matthew, my brother,' he said to him quietly, 'why are you groaning? Who is above you?'

'Don't ask me, Rabbi,' he replied, his quill still racing over the paper. 'I'm in a hurry. Go to sleep.'

Jesus had a presentiment that God must be over him. He closed his eyes so that he would not disturb the holy possession." Chapter 23 pgs. 349-350

"Jesus took them both by the hand and lifted them up. 'Let us go,' he said.

We all ran behind them until we came to the grave. There Jesus stopped. All the blood went to his head, his eyes rolled and disappeared, only the whites remained. He brought forth such a bellow you'd have thought there was a bull inside him, and we all got scared. Then suddenly while he stood there, trembling all over, he uttered a wild cry, a strange cry, something from another world. The archangels must shout in the same way when they're angry. ... 'Lazarus,' he cried, 'come out!' And all at once we hear the earth in the tomb stir and crack. The tombstone begins to move; someone is gradually pushing it up. Fear and trembling ... Never in my life have I feared death as much as I feared that resurrection. I swear that if I was asked what I wanted to see more, a lion or a resurrection, I would say a lion." Chapter 25 pg. 369.

"'What is this?' he screamed. 'Lies! Lies! Lies! The Messiah doesn't need miracles. He is the miracle—no other is necessary! I was born in Nazareth, not Bethlehem; I've never even set foot in Bethlehem, and I don't remember any Magi. I never in my life went to Egypt; and what you write about the dove saying "This is my beloved son" to me as I was baptized—who revealed that to you? I myself didn't hear clearly. How did you find out, you, who weren't even there?'

'The angel revealed it to me,' Matthew answered, trembling.

'The angel? What angel?'

'The one who comes each night I take up my pen. He leans over my ear and dictates what I write.'" Chapter 26 pgs. 391-392.



"'I'm sorry, Judas, my brother,' Jesus said, 'but it is necessary.'

'I've asked you before, Rabbi—is there no other way?'

'No, Judas, my brother. I should have liked one; I too hoped and waited for one until now—but in vain. No, there is no other way. The end of the world is here. This world, this kingdom of the Devil, will be destroyed and the kingdom of heaven will come. I shall bring it. How? By dying. There is no other way. Do not quiver, Judas, my brother. In three days I shall rise again.'

'You tell me this in order to comfort me and make me able to betray you without rending my own heart. You say I have the endurance—you say it in order to give me strength.

No, the closer we come to the terrible moment ... no, Rabbi, I won't be able to endure!'

'You will, Judas, my brother. God will give you the strength, as much as you lack, because it is necessary—it is necessary for me to be killed and for you to betray me. We two must save the world. Help me.'

Judas bowed his head. After a moment he asked, 'If you had to betray your master, would you do it?'

Jesus reflected for a long time. Finally he said, 'No, I do not think I would be able to. That is why God pitied me and gave me the easier task: to be crucified.'" Chapter 28, pgs. 420-421.

"'And then God the Father took pity on you. Hey, there, why are you sitting? he called to me. Aren't you his guardian angel? Well, go down and save him. I don't want him to be crucified. Enough's enough!

'Lord of host,' I answered him, trembling, 'didn't you send him to earth to be crucified in order to save mankind? That's why I sit here undisturbed: I thought that such was your will.'

'Let him be crucified in a dream,' God answered; 'let him taste the same fear, the same pain.'

'Guardian angel,' cried Jesus, grasping the angel's head with both his hands so that he would not lose him, 'guardian angel, I'm bewildered—wasn't I crucified?'

The angel placed his all-white hand on Jesus' agitated heart in order to calm it. 'Quiet down, don't be disturbed, beloved,' he said to him, and his bewitching eyes fluttered.

'No, you weren't crucified.'" Chapter 30, pg. 445.

"Now it was Paul's turn to explode. 'Shut your shameless mouth!' he shouted, rushing at him. 'Be quiet, or men will hear you and die of fright. In the rottenness, the injustice and poverty of this world, the Crucified and Resurrected Jesus has been the one precious consolation for the honest man, the wronged man. True or false—what do I care! It's enough if the world is saved!'

'It's better the world perish with the truth than be saved with lies. At the core of such salvation sits the great worm Satan.'

'What is "truth"? What is "falsehood"? Whatever gives wings to men, whatever produces great works and great souls and lifts us a man's height above the earth—that is true. Whatever clips off man's wings—that is false.'

'You won't keep quiet, will you, son of Satan! The wings you talk about are just like the



wings of Lucifer.'

'No, I won't keep quiet. I don't give a hoot about what's true and what's false, or whether I saw him or didn't see him, or whether he was crucified or wasn't crucified. I create the truth, create it out of obstinacy and longing and faith. I don't struggle to find it—I build it.'" Chapter 32, pg. 477.

"His head quivered. Suddenly he remembered where he was, who he was and why he felt pain. A wild, indomitable joy took possession of him. No, no, he was not a coward, a deserter, a traitor. No, he was nailed to the cross. He had stood his ground honorably to the very end; he had kept his word. The moment he cried ELI ELI and fainted, Temptation had captured him for a split second and led him astray. The joys, marriages and children were lies; the decrepit, degraded old men who shouted coward, deserter, traitor at him were lies. all—all were illusions sent by the Devil. His disciples were alive and thriving. They had gone over sea and land and were proclaiming the Good News. Everything had turned out as it should, glory be to God!

He uttered a triumphant cry: IT IS ACCOMPLISHED!

And it was as though he had said: Everything has begun." Chapter 33, pgs. 495-496.

Adaptations

The Last Temptation of Christ was made into a very controversial motion picture in 1988. Director Martin Scorsese overdoes the sexual aspect of the novel, but manages to present a strong portrayal of Christ's struggle to accept or reject His own divinity. Church groups throughout Europe and the United States protested against the motion picture even while it was still in production, tried to prevent the motion picture's release before even seeing it, and picketed theaters where it was shown. The presentation of Christ as a man with self-doubts and sexual desires was and is seen as heretical and downright blasphemous by many people. It stars Willem Dafoe as Christ, with Harvey Keitel, Barbara Hershey, Harry Dean Stanton, David Bowie, Verna Bloom, and Andre Gregory in supporting roles. The screenplay is by Paul Schrader.

Key Questions

Virtually every fictional account of Christ's life has met with controversy among readers; hence, Kazantzakis's choice of a hero for his novel is bound to generate passionate discussion among readers regardless of their religious background. For those who adhere closely to Biblical accounts, the humanizing of the Son of God may seem sacrilegious; others will find in Kazantzakis's handling of the psychological dimensions of Christ's struggle to redeem humanity a scintillating example of self-sacrifice. Readers versed in modern philosophy, especially existentialism, will find in the work a complex analysis of the plight of all men struggling to make sense of life where science and philosophy have made it hard to cling to traditional religious values.

1. In the Prologue of the novel, Kazantzakis says his aim is to present the incessant struggle between "the flesh and the spirit." How does the format of the novel permit him to do so in a way that traditional Biblical narratives do not?

2. At various times during the novel, Christ experiences what might best be described as psychological fantasies.

Why does Kazantzakis use this technique to explain his hero's attitudes and motivations?

3. Like the title character in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, the hero of Kazantzakis's *The Greek Passion* is also a Christ-figure, and the story of that novel is borrowed from the Passion narratives of the Bible. In what ways are the two protagonists similar? How are they different? In what ways does Kazantzakis use the Biblical narrative in these two novels to explore questions about the meaning of human existence?

4. One of the principal techniques used to "update" the portrait of Christ and make him more contemporary is Kazantzakis' revision or extension of a number of traditional parables, such as the story of the wise and foolish virgins. How do these modifications of the Bible change readers' view of Christ?

5. The distinguished critic of Kazantzakis Peter Bien has compared the Jesus of *The Last Temptation* to the portrait of "superman" developed in the philosophy of Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche. Why is this appropriate? Why might those devoted to traditional religious values find such comparisons particularly unpalatable?



Topics for Discussion

What is the novel's attitude toward women?

What are the Romans' positive contributions to Palestinian society and what are their crimes?

How is "truth" deal with in the novel? Do you find it satisfactory?

How does the scapegoat help unify the novel?

How is the creation of Adam pictured in the novel?

Why does Lazarus' resurrection mark a turning point in the novel? Would it have mattered had he not been murdered?

How are social castes and hierarchy handled in the novel?

Related Titles

Almost all of Kazantzakis's works deal in some way with questions of religion, but several share close affinities with *The Last Temptation of Christ* both in subject and technique. *The Greek Passion* (1953), set in contemporary Crete, tells the story of a shepherd boy who is to play Christ in a re-enactment of the Passion; in preparing for the part he becomes another Christ in his actions and his sufferings. *Saint Francis* (1956) deals with the same temptations and sufferings as Kazantzakis dramatizes in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and contains much of the same kind of dream-language and highly metaphoric description.



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