

Jesus of Nazareth and the Origins of Christianity

Christianity is rooted in the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth, often also referred to as “Jesus Christ.” Christianity is not simply the body of teachings that derive from Jesus of Nazareth – ideas that could be dissociated from the person and history of their originator. Marxism, for example, is essentially a system of ideas grounded in the writings of Karl Marx (1818–1883). But Marx himself is not part of Marxism. At a very early stage, however, the identity of Jesus became part of the Christian proclamation. The Christian faith is thus not merely about emulating or adopting the faith of Jesus of Nazareth; it is also about placing faith in Jesus of Nazareth.

The Significance of Jesus of Nazareth for Christianity

As we have already noted, the figure of Jesus of Nazareth is central to Christianity. Christianity is not a set of self-contained and freestanding ideas; it represents a sustained response to the questions raised by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

Before we begin to explore the historical background to Jesus and the way in which the Christian tradition understands his identity, we need to consider his place within Christianity. To begin with, we shall consider the ways in which Christians refer to the central figure of their faith. We have already used the name “Jesus of Nazareth”; but what of the related name, “Jesus Christ”? Let’s look at the latter in more detail.

The name “Jesus Christ” is deeply rooted in the history and aspirations of the people of Israel. The word “Jesus” (Hebrew *Yeshua*) literally means “God saves” – or, to be more precise, “the God of Israel saves.” The word “Christ” is really a title, so that the name “Jesus Christ” is better understood as “Jesus who is the Christ.” As a derivative of the verb “to anoint” (*chriō*), the word “Christ” is the Greek version of the Hebrew term “Messiah,” which

refers to an individual singled out or raised up by God for some special purpose (p. 23). As we shall see, this captured the early Christian belief that Jesus of Nazareth was the culmination and fulfillment of the hopes and expectations of Israel.

Initially, since so many of the first Christians were Jews, the question of Christianity's relationship with Israel was seen as being of major significance. What was the relation of their old religion to their new faith? Yet, as time passed, this matter became less important. Within a generation, the Christian church came to be dominated by "Gentiles" – that is, people who were not Jews – to whom the term "Messiah" meant little – if anything. The name "Jesus Christ" seems to have been understood simply as a name. As a result, even in the New Testament itself, the word "Christ" came to be used as an alternative way of referring to Jesus of Nazareth.

This habit of speaking persists today. In contemporary Christianity, "Jesus" is often seen as a familiar, intimate form of address, often used in personal devotion and prayer, whereas "Christ" is more formal, often being used in public worship.

As we have noted, Christianity is an historical religion, which came into being in response to a specific set of events, which center upon Jesus of Nazareth and to which Christian theology is obliged to return in the course of its speculation and reflection. Yet the importance of Jesus far exceeds his historical significance. For Christians, Jesus is more than the founder of their faith or the originator of Christianity: he is the one who makes God known, who makes salvation possible, and who models the new life with God that results from faith. To set this out more formally:

- 1 Jesus tells and shows what God is like;
- 2 Jesus makes a new relationship with God possible;
- 3 Jesus himself lives out a God-focused life, acting as a model of the life of faith.

In what follows we shall explore each of these ideas briefly; then we shall consider them further later in this volume.

First, Christianity holds that Jesus of Nazareth reveals both the will and the face of God. The New Testament sets out the idea that God, who is invisible, is in some way made known or made visible through Jesus. Jesus does not simply reveal what God is like, or what God expects of believers. Rather he enables us to see God. This point is made repeatedly in the New Testament – for example in statements like this: "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14: 9). God the Father is here understood to speak and act in the Son. God is revealed through, in, and by Jesus. To have seen Jesus is to have seen the Father.

This point is developed further in the doctrine of the incarnation – the characteristically Christian idea that God entered into the world of time and space in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The doctrine of the incarnation provides a basis for the distinctively Christian belief that Jesus opens a "window into God." It also underlies the practice, especially associated with the Orthodox church, of using icons in worship and personal devotion. The doctrine of the incarnation affirms that Jesus "fleshes out" what God is like.

In the second place, Jesus is understood to be the ground of salvation. One of the more significant titles used in the New Testament to refer to Jesus is "Savior." Jesus is the "Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2: 11). According to the New Testament, Jesus saves his

people from their sins (Matthew 1: 21); in his name alone is there salvation (Acts 4: 12); and he is the “author of their salvation” (Hebrews 2: 10). One of the earliest symbols of faith used by Christians was a fish. The use of this symbol may reflect the fact that the first disciples were fishermen. Yet this is not the main reason for adopting the symbol. The five Greek letters spelling out the word “fish” in Greek (I-CH-TH-U-S) are an acronym of the Christian creedal slogan “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior” (see p. 258).

Third, Jesus is understood to disclose the contours of the redeemed life. Jesus of Nazareth shows us both what God is like and what God wants from us. Jesus is not simply the basis of the life of faith; he is also the model for that life. Traditionally, this was interpreted ethically in terms of exercising self-denial and showing self-giving love. Yet this feature is also important spiritually – for example, in the Christian use of the “Lord’s Prayer,” a prayer also used by Jesus of Nazareth. The way in which Jesus prayed is seen as an example for the way in which Christians ought to pray, in much the same way as the moral example of Jesus is seen as normative for Christian ethics.

The Sources of Our Knowledge about Jesus of Nazareth

Christianity is an historical religion, which came into being in response to a specific set of events – above all, the history of Jesus of Nazareth. The fact that Jesus of Nazareth is an historical figure raises two fundamental questions, which remain integral to Christian reflection. First, how does the story of Jesus of Nazareth fit into his historical context – namely that of first-century Judaism? And, second, what documentary sources do we possess for our knowledge of Jesus and its perceived significance?

We shall consider both these questions in the present chapter.

Christianity began as a reform movement within the context of Judaism, which gradually clarified its identity as it grew and began to take definite shape in the world of the first-century Roman Empire. There are no historical grounds for believing that the term “Christian” originated from Jesus of Nazareth himself. Early Christians tended to refer to each other as “disciples” or “saints,” as the letters of the New Testament make clear. Yet others used alternative names to refer to this new movement. The New Testament suggests that the term “Christians” (Greek *Christianoi*) was first used by outsiders, to refer to the followers of Jesus of Nazareth. “It was in Antioch that the disciples were first called ‘Christians’” (Acts 17: 26). It was a term imposed upon them, not chosen by them. Yet it seems to have caught on.

However, we must be careful not to assume that the use of the single term “Christian” implies that this new religious movement was uniform and well organized. As we shall see, the early history of Christianity suggests that it was quite diverse, without well-defined authority structures or carefully formulated sets of beliefs. These began to crystallize during the first centuries of Christian history and became increasingly important in the fourth, when Christianity became a legal religion within the Roman empire.

Traditionally, the birth of Jesus of Nazareth is dated to the opening of the Christian era, his death being dated to some point around AD 30–33. Yet virtually nothing is known of Jesus of Nazareth from sources outside the New Testament. The New Testament itself

provides two groups of quite distinct sources of information about Jesus: the four gospels and the letters. Although parallels are not exact, there are clear similarities between the gospels and the classical “lives” written by leading Roman historians of the age – such as Suetonius’ *Lives of the Caesars* (written in AD 121).

The gospels mingle historical recollection with theological thought, reflecting both on the identity and on the significance of Jesus of Nazareth. The four gospels have their own distinct identities and concerns. For example, the gospel of Matthew seems especially concerned with establishing the significance of Jesus for a Jewish readership, whereas the gospel of Luke seems more concerned with explaining his importance to a Greek-speaking community. Establishing the identity of Jesus is just as important as recording what he said and did. The gospel writers can be thought of as trying to locate Jesus of Nazareth on a map, so that his relationship with humanity, history, and God may be understood and appreciated. This leads them to focus on three particular themes:

- What Jesus taught, particularly the celebrated “parables of the Kingdom.” The teaching of Jesus was seen as important in helping believers to live out an authentic Christian life, which was a central theme of Christian discipleship – most notably in relation to cultivating attitudes of humility toward others and obedience toward God.
- What Jesus did – especially his ministry of healing, which was seen as important in establishing his identity, but also in shaping the values of the Christian community itself. For example, most medieval monasteries founded hospitals as a means of continuing Christ’s ministry in this respect.
- What was said about Jesus by those who witnessed his teaching and actions. The gospel of Luke, for example, records Simeon’s declaration that the infant Jesus was the “consolation of Israel,” as well as the Roman centurion’s assertion that Jesus was innocent of the charges brought against him. These can be seen as constituting public recognition of the identity of Jesus.

The letters of the New Testament – sometimes still referred to as “epistles” (Greek *epistolē*, plural *epistolai*) – are addressed to individuals and churches and often focus on issues of conduct and belief. These letters are important in helping us grasp the emerging understandings of the significance of Jesus of Nazareth within the Christian community. The example of Jesus is regularly invoked to emphasize the importance of imitating his attitudes – for example, treating others better than yourself (Philippians 2). Although the letters make virtually no direct reference to the teachings of Jesus, certain patterns of behavior are clearly regarded as being grounded in those teachings – such as humility, or a willingness to accept suffering.

The letters also emphasize the importance of certain patterns of behavior – for example repeating the actions of the Last Supper, using bread and wine as a way of recalling and celebrating the death and resurrection of Christ (pp. 112–117). The sacraments of both baptism and the eucharist are clearly anticipated in the New Testament and are traced back to the ministry of Jesus himself.

Yet, perhaps more importantly, the letters also reveal understandings of the identity and significance of Jesus of Nazareth that were becoming characteristic of early Christian

communities. The most important of the themes associated to such understandings are the following:

- Jesus of Nazareth is understood to be the means by which the invisible God can be known and seen. Jesus is the “image” (Greek *eikōn*) “of the invisible God” (Colossians 1: 15), or the “exact representation” (Greek *charaktēr*) of God (Hebrews 1: 3).
- Jesus is the one who makes salvation possible and whose life reflects the themes characteristic of redeemed human existence. The use of the term “savior” (Greek *sōtēr*) is highly significant in this respect.
- The core Christian belief in the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is seen as a vindication of his innocence, a confirmation of his divine identity, and the grounds of hope for believers. Through faith, believers are understood to be united with Christ and sharing in his sufferings at present, while also sharing in the hope of his resurrection.

Each of these themes would be further developed as the Christian community reflected on their significance and on their relevance for the life and thought of believers. We shall explore some of these more developed ideas about Jesus in a later chapter, setting out the shape of Christian beliefs.

Jesus of Nazareth in His Jewish Context

From the outset, Christianity saw itself as continuous with Judaism. Christians were clear that the God whom they followed and worshipped was the same God worshipped by the Israelite Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The New Testament sees the great hope of the coming of a “Messiah” to the people of Israel as having been fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. As we saw earlier (p. 3), the New Testament use of the title “Christ” (the Greek translation of the Hebrew word “Messiah”) reflects this belief.

There seems to have been a general consensus within Judaism that the Messiah would be like a new king David, opening up a new era in Israel’s history. While Israel looked forward to the coming of a messianic age, different groups understood this in diverging ways. The Jewish desert community at Qumran thought of the Messiah primarily in priestly terms, whereas others had more political expectations. Yet, despite these differences, the hope of the coming of a “messianic age” seems to have been widespread in early first-century Judaism and is echoed at points in the gospel’s accounts of the ministry of Jesus.

During the first phase of its development, Christianity existed alongside (or even within) Judaism. Christians insisted that the God who was known and encountered by the great heroes of faith of Israel – such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses – was the same God who was more fully and clearly revealed in Jesus. It was therefore of importance to the early Christians to demonstrate that Jesus of Nazareth, the central figure of the Christian faith, brought the great messianic hopes of Judaism to fulfillment.

The continuity between Judaism and Christianity is obvious at many points. Judaism placed particular emphasis on the Law (Hebrew *Torah*), through which the will of God was made known in the form of commands, and on the Prophets, who made known the will of

God in certain definite historical situations. The New Testament gospels report that Jesus of Nazareth emphasized that he had “not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but to fulfill them” (Matthew 5: 17).

The same point is made by Paul in his New Testament letters. Jesus is “the goal of the Law” (Romans 10: 4, using the Greek word *telos*, which means “end,” “goal,” or “objective”). Paul also stresses the continuity between the faith of Abraham and that of Christians (Romans 4: 1–25). The letter to the Hebrews points out the continuity of relationship both between Moses and Jesus (Hebrews 3: 1–6) and between Christians and the great figures of faith of ancient Israel (Hebrews 11: 1–12: 2).

The New Testament makes it clear that Christianity is to be seen as being continuous with Judaism and as bringing to completion what Judaism was pointing toward. This has several major consequences, of which the following are the most important. First, both Christians and Jews regard more or less the same collection of writings – known by Jews as “Law, Prophets, and Writings” and by Christians as “the Old Testament” – as having religious authority. Although some more radical thinkers within Christianity – such as the second-century writer Marcion of Sinope – argued for the breaking of any historical or theological link with Judaism, the main line within the Christian movement both affirmed and valued the link between the Christian church and Israel. A body of writings that Jews regard as complete in itself is seen by Christians as pointing forward to something that will bring it to completion. Although Christians and Jews both regard the same set of texts as important, they use different names to refer to them and interpret them in different ways. We shall consider this point further when we look at the Christian Bible.

Second, New Testament writers often laid emphasis on the manner in which Old Testament prophecies were understood to be fulfilled or realized in the life and death of Jesus Christ. By doing this, they drew attention to two important beliefs: that Christianity is continuous with Judaism; and that Christianity brings Judaism to its true fulfillment. This is particularly important for some early Christian writings – such as Paul’s letters and the gospel of Matthew – which often seem to be particularly concerned with exploring the importance of Christianity for Jews. For example, the gospel of Matthew notes at twelve points how events in the life of Jesus can be seen as fulfilling Old Testament prophecies.

This continuity between Christianity and Judaism helps us understand some aspects of early Christian history. The New Testament suggests that at least some Christians initially continued to worship in Jewish synagogues, before controversy made this problematic. The letters of Paul help us understand at least some of the issues lying behind those controversies. Two questions were of particular importance and were keenly debated in the first century.

First, there was a debate about whether Christian converts should be required to be circumcised. Those who emphasized the continuity between Christianity and Judaism believed they should be. Yet the view that ultimately prevailed was that Christians were no longer subject to the cultic laws of Judaism – such as the requirement to be circumcised or to observe strict dietary laws.

Second, there was the question of whether non-Jewish converts to Christianity were to be treated as Jews. Those who emphasized the continuity between Judaism and Christianity argued that Gentile believers should be treated as if they had become Jews – and hence they

would be subject to Jewish religious observances and rituals, such as the requirement for males to be circumcised. For this reason, a group within early Christianity demanded the circumcision of male Gentile converts.

Yet the majority, including Paul, took a very different position. To be a Christian was not about reinforcing a Jewish ethnic or cultural identity, but about entering a new way of living and thinking, which was open to everyone. By the late first century Christians largely saw themselves as a new religious movement, originating within Judaism but not limited by its cultic and ethnic traditions.

The Gospels and Jesus of Nazareth

Our primary sources for the life of Jesus of Nazareth are the four gospels of the New Testament – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The first three of these gospels are often referred to as “the Synoptic Gospels,” in that each lays out a summary (Greek *sunopsis*) of the activities and teachings of Jesus. There is little historical information about Jesus available from any other source. Thus the great Roman historians of this age provide little on this score, although they are important sources for our understanding of the way in which Jesus was received within early Christianity.

It is easy to understand this lack of interest in Jesus in the writings of Roman historians. They had relatively little time for events that took place in the backwaters of their empire, such as the distant and unimportant province of Judaea. Their histories focused on Rome itself and on the leading figures and events that shaped its destiny.

Three Roman historians make reference to Jesus in their writings: Pliny the Younger, writing around AD 111 to the Emperor Trajan about the rapid spread of Christianity in Asia Minor; Tacitus, who wrote around AD 115 concerning the events of AD 64, when Nero made the Christians scapegoats for the burning of Rome; and Suetonius, writing around AD 120 about certain events during the reign of Emperor Claudius. Suetonius refers to a certain “Chrestus” who was behind rioting at Rome. “Christus” was still an unfamiliar name to Romans at this stage, whereas “Chrestus” was a common name for slaves at this time (the Greek adjective *chrēstos* meant “useful”).

Four points emerge from the brief comments of these three historians:

- 1 Jesus had been condemned to death by Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judaea, during the reign of the Roman Emperor Tiberius (Tacitus). Pilate was procurator (governor) of Judaea from AD 26 to AD 36, while Tiberius reigned from AD 14 to AD 37. The traditional date for the crucifixion is some time around AD 30–33.
- 2 By the time of Nero’s reign, Jesus had attracted sufficient followers in Rome for Nero to make them a suitable scapegoat for the burning of Rome. These followers were named “Christians” (Tacitus).
- 3 “Chrestus” was the founder of a distinctive group within Judaism (Suetonius).
- 4 By AD 112, Christians were worshipping Jesus of Nazareth “as if he were a god,” abandoning the worship of the Roman emperor to do so (Pliny).

The main sources for the life of Jesus of Nazareth are thus the four gospels. Each of these texts presents related, though distinct, accounts of the ministry of Jesus. Matthew's gospel, for example, brings out the importance of Jesus for the Jewish people and is particularly concerned to explore the way in which Jesus brings the expectations of Israel to their proper fulfillment. Mark's gospel takes the form of a rapidly paced narrative, often leaving readers breathless as they are led from one event to another. Luke's gospel has a particular interest in bringing out the importance of Jesus for non-Jewish readers. John's gospel is more reflective in its approach, characterized by a distinctive emphasis on the way in which the coming of Jesus brings eternal life to those who believe in him.

The gospels cannot really be thought of as biographies of Jesus in the modern sense of the term, although they unquestionably provide much helpful biographical information. They do not present us with a full account of the life of Jesus. Mark's gospel, for example, focuses on a few years of Jesus' life, which are characterized by his intensive public ministry and end in his crucifixion and resurrection. Matthew and Luke both give brief accounts of the birth and childhood of Jesus before resuming their narratives of his public ministry.

It is clear that the gospels weave together several sources to build up their overall portrayal of the identity and significance of Jesus. Thus Mark's gospel draws on material that is traditionally attributed to Peter, Jesus' leading disciple. Furthermore, the gospels are more concerned with bringing out the significance of the life of Jesus than with documenting it in full detail. Nevertheless, they present us with a portrait of Jesus that mingles history and theology to tell us who Jesus is – not simply in terms of his historical identity, but in terms of his continuing importance for the world.

We will follow the account of the birth and early ministry of Jesus of Nazareth as laid out in the Synoptic Gospels. Space does not allow a detailed interaction with the historical, theological, and cultural issues raised by these accounts. In what follows we shall set out the basic narratives and reflect on their general significance.

The Birth of Jesus of Nazareth

Mark's account of the ministry of Jesus begins with Jesus' appearance as an adult in Galilee; it makes no reference to his birth or childhood. Matthew and Luke provide different yet complementary accounts, which narrate the birth of Jesus and have had a major impact on Christian art (and subsequently on traditional Christmas cards and carols). Matthew's account is related from the standpoint of Joseph, and Luke's from that of Mary. Neither the day nor the year of Jesus' birth are known for certain. Non-Christians often assume that Christians believe that Jesus was born on December 25. In fact Christians have chosen to celebrate the birth of Jesus on Christmas Day. December 25 is the date fixed for the celebration of the birth of Jesus, not the date of his birth itself.

Early Christian writers suggested a variety of dates for the celebration of Jesus' birth – for example, Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–c. 215) advocated May 20. By the fourth

century the date of December 25 had been chosen, possibly to take advantage of a traditional Roman holiday associated with this date. For Christians, the precise date of the birth of Jesus is actually something of a non-issue. What really matters is that he was born as a human being and entered into human history.

The traditional Christmas story has become somewhat stylized over the years. For example, most traditional versions of the story tell of the “three wise men” and of Jesus “being born in a stable.” In fact the New Testament relates that the wise men brought three gifts to Jesus; many have simply assumed that, as there were three gifts, there must have been three wise men. Similarly, we are told that Jesus was born in a manger; many have assumed that, since mangers are kept in stables, Jesus must have been born in a stable.

The birthplace of Jesus is identified as Bethlehem, a minor town in the region of Judaea, not far from Jerusalem. Its significance lies in its associations with King David, given particular emphasis by the Prophet Micah. Writing in the eighth century before Christ, Micah declared that a future ruler of Israel would emerge from Bethlehem (Micah 5: 2). This expectation is noted in Matthew’s gospel (Matthew 2: 5–6), where it is presented as one of many indications that the circumstances of the birth and early ministry of Jesus represent a fulfillment of Israelite prophecies and hopes.

Luke stresses the humility and lowliness of the circumstances of the birth of Jesus. For example, he notes that Jesus was placed in a manger (normally used for feeding animals), and that the first people to visit him were shepherds. Although the force of the point is easily lost, it needs to be remembered that shepherds were widely regarded as socially and religiously inferior people in Jewish society, on account of their nomadic lifestyle.

Both Matthew and Luke stress the importance of Mary, the mother of Jesus. In later Christian thought, Mary would become a focus for personal devotion, on account of her obedience and humility. She often had a particular appeal to women, who felt marginalized by the strongly masculine ethos of Christianity, for example during the Middle

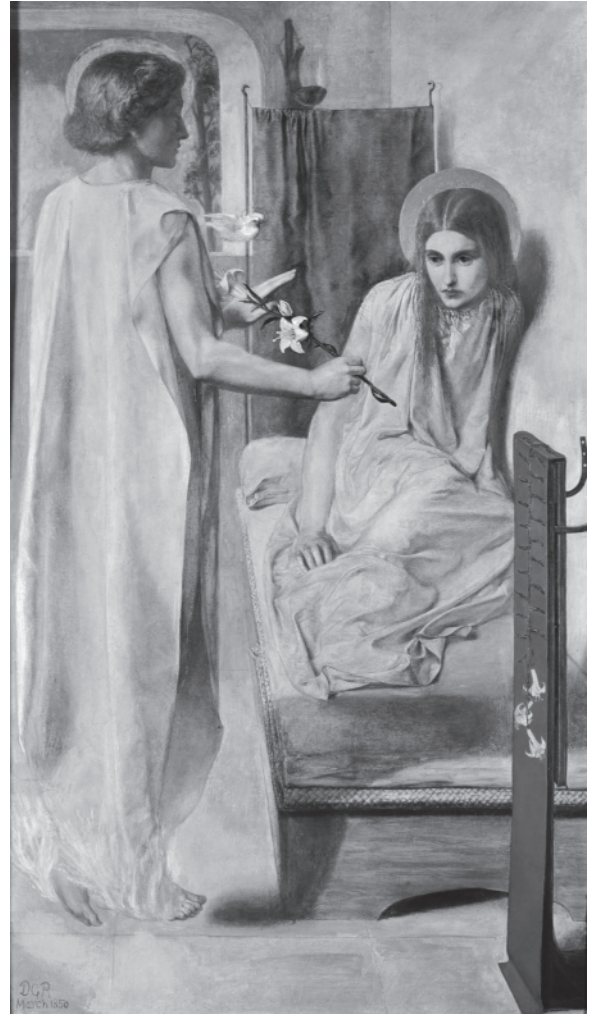


Figure 1.1 The angel Gabriel declaring to Mary that she is to bear the savior of the world, by Dante Gabriel Rossetti; this incident is related early in Luke’s gospel. Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882), *Ecce Ancilla Domini (The Annunciation)*, 1850. Oil on canvas, mounted on wood, 72 × 42 cm. Source: Erich Lessing/AKG Images.



Figure 1.2 The birth of Christ, as depicted by Fra Angelico in a mural in the monastery of San Marco, Florence, between 1437 and 1445. Fra Giovanni da Fiesole (1387–1455) and workshop, *Birth of Christ, with the Saints Catherine of Alexandria and Peter the Martyr* (1437–1445). Fresco, 193 × 164 cm. Florence, S. Marco, upper storey, dormitory, cell No.5 (east corridor). Source: Rabatti-Domingie/AKG Images.

Ages. The hymn “Stabat mater” (a Latin title that means “The Mother Stood [by the Cross]”), which was written in the thirteenth century, describes the deep feeling of sorrow experienced by Mary at the death of her son on the cross. This hymn, which was subsequently set to music by several major composers, had a deep impact on the spirituality of the Middle Ages and beyond. At the time of the Reformation, devotion to Mary was often criticized. It was suggested that this devotion could threaten the central place of Jesus Christ in Christian prayer and worship. Nevertheless, most Christians regard Mary as an excellent example of several cardinal Christian virtues, especially obedience to and trust in God.

The place of Joseph in the gospels’ accounts of Jesus should also be noted. At no point is he described as the “father of Jesus,” despite the numerous references, here and elsewhere, to Mary as the “mother of Jesus.” Matthew shows how Joseph was legally related to David (Matthew 1: 1–17), so that Jesus possessed the legal status of being descended from David. Yet Joseph is not understood to be Jesus’ physical father. For Matthew and Luke, it is understood that the conception of Jesus is due to God, although the theme of the virginity of Mary – seen as immensely important by some Christian writers – is given less weight than might be expected.

The Early Ministry of Jesus of Nazareth

The gospels all locate the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus in the countryside of Judaea, by the Jordan River. It is specifically linked with the activity of John the Baptist, who attracted widespread attention with his calls to repentance. It is clear that John's ministry takes place at a moment of some significance in the history of Israel. Perhaps there were those who felt that God had abandoned Israel; perhaps there were those who felt that the great acts of divine deliverance and encouragement in the past would never be repeated. Israel was under Roman occupation and seemed to have lost its identity as the people of God.

The New Testament picks up two themes that may help us understand why John the Baptist attracted such enormous interest at the time. The final work of Jewish prophecy – the book of Malachi, probably dating from the fifth century before Christ – spoke of God sending a messenger, to prepare the way for the coming of God (Malachi 3: 1–2). It also hinted at the return of Elijah, one of the great figures of faith in Israel, before this event. When John the Baptist appeared, he wore the same simple clothes of camel's hair as Elijah had before him. Malachi spoke of the need for corporate repentance. The whole people of God needed to repent of its sins before national restoration to divine favor was possible. John the Baptist spoke of this same need for repentance and offered baptism as a symbol of an individual's willingness to repent. (The word "baptism" comes from a Greek word meaning "to wash" or "to bathe.")

The implications of these developments would have been clear to anyone with a knowledge of the Jewish prophets and alert to the signs of the times. The coming of John the Baptist could be seen as a pointer to the coming of God. John himself made this point, declaring that someone greater than him would follow him – someone whose sandals he was not worthy to untie (Mark 1: 8). And at that moment Jesus appeared. Mark's vivid and racy account of this encounter makes it clear that John was referring to Jesus, even though he did not specifically name him. John is thus seen as the forerunner of Jesus, pointing the way to his coming – a bridging figure between the Old and New covenants.

After Jesus was baptized by John, he slipped away into a solitary place for 40 days and nights. This period of Jesus' ministry – usually referred to as "the temptation of Christ" – involved his being confronted with all the temptations he would encounter during his ministry. Although Mark only hints at this (Mark 1: 12), Matthew and Luke provide fuller details (e.g., Luke 4: 1–13), allowing us to see how Jesus was confronted with the temptation to personal power and glory. The New Testament writers subsequently stress the importance of Jesus' obedience to the will of God. The period of Lent, immediately before Easter (pp. 240–241), marks the time of year when Christians are encouraged to examine themselves in this way, following the example of Christ.

A theme that now emerges is that of the rejection of Jesus by his own people. This theme culminates in the crucifixion, in which Jesus is publicly repudiated by a crowd in Jerusalem and taken off to be crucified by the Roman authorities. The theme also appears at earlier points in the ministry of Jesus and is particularly linked with the severely hostile criticism of Jesus by the Pharisees and the teachers of Jewish law. For the New Testament writers, the paradox is that those who were most deeply committed to and familiar with the Jewish law failed to recognize its fulfillment when this took place.

Nevertheless, the theme of “rejection” can be found much earlier than this. One incident in particular illustrates this point: the rejection of Jesus in his home town of Nazareth. Luke’s gospel relates how Jesus attended synagogue regularly on the sabbath. On one occasion he was asked to read a section from the prophecy of Isaiah, which included the following words:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour. (Luke 4: 18–19)

After reading these words, Jesus solemnly declared that he they had been fulfilled – implying that he himself was their fulfillment. The synagogue congregation was outraged by what it clearly saw as a self-serving publicity stunt, probably amounting to blasphemy. Its members threw him out of their town, even trying to push him over the edge of a nearby hill. After this, Jesus moved to minister in the region of Capernaum, on the northwestern shore of Lake Galilee.

Jesus then gathered around himself a small group of disciples, who would accompany him as he traveled and would subsequently form the core of the early church. The group of twelve apostles (often referred to simply as “the twelve”) was drawn from a variety of backgrounds, mostly from jobs in the rural economy of the region. Two pairs of brothers – Peter and Andrew, James and John – were called to leave behind them their fishing business on Lake Galilee and follow Jesus. At a late stage, possibly a year or so into his ministry, Jesus



Figure 1.3 Jesus of Nazareth calling Peter and Andrew by the Sea of Galilee (1481), by Domenico Ghirlandaio. Domenico Ghirlandaio (Domenico Bigordi) (1449–1494), *The Calling of SS. Peter and Andrew*, 1481. Fresco. Source: Vatican Museums and Galleries/Bridgeman Art Library.

divided the twelve into two groups of six, sending them out into the countryside to preach the kingdom of God.

Jesus began his ministry of teaching and healing in the region around Galilee and subsequently expanded it into Judaea. On the basis of the accounts provided in the gospels, it may be estimated that this period lasted roughly three years. Important though both the teaching and healing are in their own rights, their true importance lies partly in what they demonstrate about Jesus. This becomes clear from a question posed later by John the Baptist. By this stage, John had been imprisoned by Herod Antipas, ruler (or, more precisely, “tetrarch”) in the region of Galilee. Still uncertain as to the true identity of Jesus, John asked him this question: “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?” The implications of the question are enormous. Is Jesus the Messiah? Has the messianic age finally dawned?

Jesus answers this question indirectly, by pointing to what has happened in his ministry: “The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor” (Matthew 11: 6). In other words, the expected signs of the messianic age were present in his ministry. Jesus does not directly answer the question of whether he is the Messiah. The implication, however, is that the healing miracles are to be seen as signs, pointing to a right understanding of the identity and significance of Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah.

The Teaching of Jesus of Nazareth: The Parables of the Kingdom

The theme of the “kingdom of God” (or, in the case of Matthew’s gospel, “the kingdom of heaven”) is widely agreed to be central to the preaching of Jesus. The public ministry of Jesus begins with his declaration that the kingdom of God has “drawn near” and that “the time is fulfilled” (Mark 1: 15). The Greek word *basileia*, traditionally translated as “kingdom,” does not so much express the idea of a definite political region over which a king rules as the action of “ruling” itself. In other words, the Greek word refers to the idea of “kingship” rather than of a “kingdom.”

The “Sermon on the Mount” (the block of teaching contained in Matthew 5: 1–7: 29) is often referred to as setting out the “ethics of the kingdom of God.” The acknowledgement of the rule of God is expected to lead to a certain pattern of behavior, which is embodied in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth himself and echoed in his teaching. The basic theme of Jesus’ preaching can thus be thought of in terms of the coming of the kingly rule of God. This theme is expressed in the prayer that Jesus instructed his followers to imitate, which is widely known as “the Lord’s Prayer.”

Jesus’ preaching about the kingdom is best understood in terms of “inauguration.” Something has happened that sets in motion a series of events that has yet to reach its fulfillment. A series of parables express the idea that the kingdom is something that progresses from a seemingly insignificant starting point to something much greater. The Parable of the Mustard Seed (Matthew 13: 31–32) illustrates this idea of growth and development. The Parable of the Vineyard (Matthew 21: 33–41) makes the point that those who are entitled to be tenants of the vineyard are those who produce its fruit, a clear indication of the

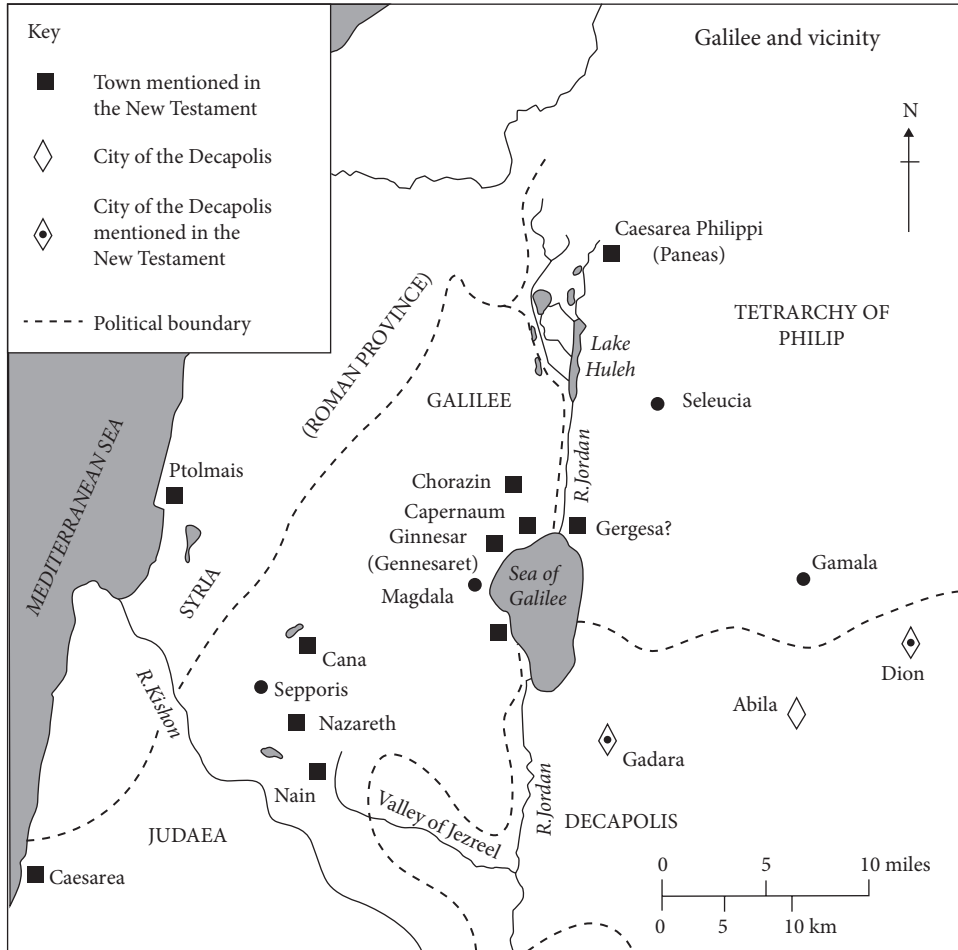


Figure 1.4 The Galilean ministry of Jesus.

need, for those who claim to be within the kingdom, to conform to its ethics. The kingly rule of God carries obligations.

Jesus' teaching about the kingdom is largely expressed using "parables," which can be thought of as earthly stories with heavenly meanings. The word "parable" conveys a number of ideas, including "illustration" and "mystery" or "riddle." A parable conveys a spiritual truth – but the meaning may not be clear, and may therefore require illustration. Some of the parables are based on shrewd observation of everyday life in rural Palestine. Just as a pearl of great value is worth one's selling lesser possessions in order to own it, so the kingdom of God is worth one's giving up everything for it (Matthew 13: 45–46). Just as a small amount of yeast can raise a large amount of dough, so the kingdom of God can exercise a wide influence throughout the world, despite its small beginnings (Matthew 13: 33). Just as a shepherd will go out and look for a sheep that has got lost, so God will seek out those who have wandered away (Luke 15: 4–6).

Sometimes the parables are more complex. The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15: 11–32) tells of a son who decides to leave his father’s home and to seek his fortune in a distant land. Yet life away from his father turns out not to be as rosy as the prodigal son had expected. He falls on hard times. The prodigal son comes to long to return home to his father. However, he is convinced that his father will have disowned him and will no longer wish to acknowledge him as his son. The remarkable feature of the parable is the picture of God it gives us. The father sees the returning son long before the son notices him; he rushes out to meet him and to celebrate the return of the son he had given up for lost. The message of the parable is that, just as the father was overjoyed at the return of his son, so God will be overjoyed at the return of sinners.

The teaching of Jesus concerning the kingdom of God is an important element in the Christian faith. However, Christianity is not only about what Jesus taught. It is also about the person of Jesus himself. Who is he? And what is his importance? For the New Testament, the death and resurrection of Jesus are of central importance to any full understanding of his identity and significance. We shall consider these themes in what follows.

The Crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth

Christianity is the only major faith to focus attention on the death of its founder and to see this episode as being of pivotal importance to its ideas and ethos. This emphasis is not a later development; it can be seen from the outset. One of the earliest literary witnesses to the central importance of the crucifixion is Paul’s first letter to the Christian church at Corinth, which probably dates from the early months of AD 55. In the first chapter of this letter, Paul lays considerable emphasis upon the fact that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified. The subject of his preaching was “Christ crucified” (1: 23); the power lying behind the gospel proclamation is “the cross of Christ” (1: 17); the entire Christian gospel can even be summarized as “the message of the cross” (1: 18).

Yet crucifixion was seen as a scandalous form of death within Roman imperial culture. It was reserved for traitors, rebels, and the lower classes. Crucifixion was a widespread form of execution in the Roman empire, and we possess many accounts of the process from classical writers. The Latin word “crucifixion” literally means “being placed on a cross.” The victim was generally flogged or tortured beforehand, and then might be tied or nailed to the cross in practically any position. This form of punishment appears to have been employed ruthlessly in order to suppress rebellions in the provinces of the Roman empire – such as the revolt of the Cantabrians in northern Spain, as well as those of the Jews. Probably the most famous example of crucifixion being used as a deterrent was in 71 BC, when the Romans crucified 6,000 slaves who had joined Spartacus’ rebellion. The crosses were erected along the Appian Way, one of the busiest commercial transport routes in Italy.

Josephus’ accounts of the crucifixion of the many Jewish fugitives who attempted to escape from besieged Jerusalem at the time of its final destruction by the Roman armies in AD 70 make deeply disturbing reading. In the view of most Roman legal writers, notorious criminals were to be crucified on the exact location of their crime, so that “the sight may deter others from such crimes.” Perhaps for this reason, the Roman Emperor Quintillian

crucified criminals on the busiest thoroughfares, in order that the maximum deterrent effect might be achieved.

Crucifixion was a punishment reserved for the lowest criminals, which clearly implied that Jesus belonged to this category of people in Roman eyes. For a Jew, anyone hanged upon a tree was cursed by God (Deuteronomy 21: 23), which would hardly commend the Christian claim that Jesus was indeed the long-awaited Messiah. Indeed, one of the Dead Sea scrolls suggests that crucifixion was regarded as the proper form of execution for a Jew suspected of high treason.

The New Testament makes two statements about the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, which are integral to its understanding of his identity and significance. First, the crucifixion really happened – specifically, during the time when Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor of Judaea. And, second, this event needed to be interpreted correctly. It did not signify shame, guilt, or rejection by God. When rightly understood, it was about the forgiveness of sins and the dawn of new hope.

Before we reflect further on the interpretation of the crucifixion, we need to outline the basic structure of the gospel narratives of this event. The background to the crucifixion is the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, mounted on a donkey, in fulfillment of a great messianic prophecy of the Old Testament (Zechariah 9: 9). Jesus enters Jerusalem as its king, an event recalled and celebrated by Christians on Palm Sunday. Yet this final week in the life of Jesus is marked by increasing controversy, culminating in his betrayal, arrest, and execution. Luke relates how Jesus and his disciples gather together “in an upper room” to celebrate Passover (Luke 22: 14–23).

The Jewish feast of Passover commemorates the events leading up to the exodus and the establishment of the people of Israel. The Passover lamb, slaughtered shortly before and eaten at the feast, symbolizes this great act of divine redemption. It is thus very significant that the Last Supper and the crucifixion of Jesus took place at the feast of Passover. The Synoptic Gospels clearly treat the Last Supper as a Passover meal where Jesus initiates a new version of the meal. While Jews celebrated their deliverance by God from Egypt by eating a lamb, Christians would henceforth celebrate their deliverance by God from sin by eating bread and drinking wine.

John’s gospel suggests that Jesus is crucified at exactly the same moment as the slaughter of the Passover lambs, so that Jesus is to be seen as the true Passover lamb, who died for the sins of the world. In the light of this, the full meaning of the words of John the Baptist, as presented in John’s gospel, becomes clearer: “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1: 29). The point being made is that the death of Christ is understood to take away sin and to cleanse believers from its guilt and stain.

The coincidence of the Last Supper and of the crucifixion with the Passover feast makes it clear that there is a connection between the exodus and the death of Christ. Both are to be seen as acts of divine deliverance from oppression. However, while Moses led Israel from a specific captivity in Egypt, Jesus of Nazareth is seen as delivering his people from a universal bondage to sin and death. While there are parallels between the exodus and the cross, there are also differences. Perhaps the most important difference relates to the New Testament’s affirmation of the universality of the redemption accomplished by Christ. For the New Testament, the work of Christ benefits all who put their trust in him, irrespective of their ethnic identity or their historical or geographical location.

The Last Supper – famously depicted by Michelangelo in 1498 – is of particular importance to Christians, in that it is remembered in Christian worship. The use of bread and wine as a remembrance of Jesus – which focuses on the sacrament usually referred to as “Holy Communion,” “the Lord’s Supper,” “the eucharist,” or “the mass” – has its origins here. We shall return to consider this “remembrance” in greater detail later (pp. 116–117). The Last Supper is followed by the betrayal of Jesus to the Jewish authorities for 30 pieces of silver (Matthew 27: 1–10).

After a theological interrogation, Jesus is handed over to the Roman authorities. He is brought before Pontius Pilate, who was the Roman governor of Judaea from AD 26 to AD 36. Pilate’s inclination would probably have been to order some token punishment, but to take things no further. However, the crowd demands that Jesus be crucified. Washing his hands of the whole affair, Pilate sends Jesus off to be flogged and crucified. Jesus is then humiliated by the Roman soldiers, who dress him up in a caricature of royal costume, including a crown of thorns.

The floggings administered by the Romans were vicious; they had been known to cause the death of victims before they were crucified. Under Jewish law, victims were only allowed to be flogged with 40 strokes; this was invariably reduced to 39, as an act of leniency. But under Roman law there were no limits to the extent of the suffering to be inflicted. The whips used for this purpose generally consisted of several strands of leather with small pieces of metal or broken bones at the end; these tore apart the skin of those being whipped, with the result that many did not survive the ordeal.

Clearly Jesus was severely weakened by his beating and proved unable to carry his own cross. Simon of Cyrene was forced to carry it for him. Finally they reached Golgotha, the place of execution (Matthew 27: 32–43). This place is also often referred to as “Calvary,” from the Latin word *calvaria*, which means “skullcap, top of the skull” – the literal meaning of the Aramaic word of “Golgotha.” As Jesus hangs on the cross, he is mocked by those watching him die, while the Roman soldiers cast lots for his clothes. After being taken down from the cross, Jesus is buried in a borrowed tomb (Matthew 27: 57–61). That is not, however, the end of the story, according to the New Testament.

The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth

The gospels now turn to narrate a series of events traditionally referred to as “the resurrection.” This phrase is used to refer to both an historical event – the “empty tomb” – and a specific interpretation of the significance of this event. The discovery of the empty tomb was not in itself the resurrection; other interpretations were possible, such as the body’s having been stolen. The idea of “resurrection” is a specific interpretation of the discovery of the empty tomb.

The gospels’ resurrection narratives have three main elements:

- 1 The tomb in which the corpse of Jesus was laid late on the Friday afternoon was discovered to be empty on the Sunday morning. Those who discovered the empty tomb were frightened by what they found; their reports were not taken seriously by many of those in Jesus’ close circle of friends.

- 2 The disciples reported experiencing personal encounters with Jesus, in which he appeared to them as a living human.
- 3 The disciples began to preach Jesus as the living Lord rather than as a dead teacher from the past.

The “empty tomb” tradition is of considerable importance here (Matthew 28: 1–10; Mark 16: 1–8; Luke 24: 1–11; John 20: 1–10). The story is told from different angles in each of the gospels and includes divergence on minor points of detail, which is so characteristic of eye witness reports. Interestingly, all four gospels attribute the discovery of the empty tomb to women. The only Easter event to be explicitly related in detail by all four of the gospel writers is the visit of the women to the tomb of Jesus. Yet Judaism dismissed the value of the testimony or witness of women, regarding only men as having significant legal status in this respect. Mark’s gospel even names each of the women three times: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome (Mark 15: 40, 47; 16: 1). It is interesting that Mark does not mention the names of any male disciples who were around at the time.

The resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth appears to have come as a surprise to the disciples. There was, in Jewish thought, no real precedent for a resurrection of this kind. Far from fitting into popular Jewish expectations of the resurrection of the dead, what happened to



Figure 1.5 Piero della Francesca’s depiction of the resurrection of Christ, c. 1460–1464. Piero della Francesca (c.1410/20–1492), *The Resurrection of Christ* (c. 1460–1464). Fresco (removed), 225 × 200 cm. Sansepolcro, Pinacoteca Comunale. Source: Rabatti-Domingie/AKG Images.

Jesus actually contradicted them. Most Jews at the time seem to have believed in the resurrection of the dead at the end of time itself. The Pharisees, for example, believed in a future resurrection, and held that men and women would be rewarded or punished after death according to their actions. The Sadducees, however, insisted that there was no resurrection of any kind. No future existence awaited men and women after death. (Paul was able to exploit the differences between Pharisees and Sadducees on this point: see Acts 26: 6–8.)

Thus the Christian claim about the resurrection of Christ in history – rather than at the end of history – does not fit any known Jewish pattern at all. The resurrection of Jesus is not declared to be a future event, but something that had already happened in the world of time and space, in front of witnesses.

In addition to reporting the basic events that underlie the Christian gospel, the New Testament includes extensive reflection on the identity and significance of Jesus. The present chapter provides an analysis of the main lines of reflection we find in the New Testament, as well as exploring how Jesus has been understood as a result of the church's long reflections on how best to represent and describe him. This process of reflection and development is often likened to the growth of a plant.

But, before we can begin to explore Christian understandings of the meaning of Jesus, we need to consider the all-important distinction between events and meanings. In what way can something that happened in history be said to possess a meaning over and above the event itself?

Events and Meanings: The Interpretation of the History of Jesus

In thinking about the significance of Jesus, we need to explore the relation between the events of his life and their deeper meaning. Christianity does not merely recite the history of Jesus; it affirms a specific way of making sense of that history, particularly his death on the cross and resurrection. The Christian faith certainly presupposes that Jesus existed as a real historical figure, and that he was crucified. Christianity is not, however, simply about the mere facts that Jesus existed and was crucified. Some words of the Apostle Paul, probably written 15 years after the resurrection, will help make this point clear.

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved ... For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve [Apostles]. (1 Corinthians 15: 1–5)

Paul here seems to be using (and passing on to his readers) an accepted formula or form of words, which was in general use in the early church and which he transmits to Corinthian Christians. This formula makes a clear distinction between the *event* of the death of Christ and the *significance* of this event. That Christ died is a simple matter of history; that Christ died *for our sins* is an insight that lies right at the heart of the Christian faith itself.

This important distinction between an *event* and its *meaning* can be illustrated with the help of an event that took place in 49 BC, when the great Roman commander Julius Caesar crossed a small river with a legion of soldiers. The name of the river was Rubicon, and it marked an important frontier within the Roman empire. It was the boundary between Italy and Cisalpine Gaul, a colonized region to the northwest of Italy, in modern-day France.

Considered simply as an event, Caesar's crossing was not especially important. The Rubicon was not a major river, and there was no particular difficulty about crossing it. People had crossed wider and deeper rivers before and since. As a simple event, it was not remarkable. But that is not why the crossing of that river was important. It is the meaning of the event that guarantees its place in history books, in that its political significance was enormous. Crossing this national frontier with an army was a deliberate act of rebellion against Rome. It marked a declaration of war on the part of Caesar against Pompey and the Roman senate. The *event* was the crossing of a river; the *meaning* of that event was a declaration of war.

In many ways, the death of Christ may be said to parallel Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon. The event itself appears unexceptional, except to those who know its significance. On the basis of contemporary records, we know that an incalculable number of people died like that at the time. Jesus would not have been alone in being executed in this way. Indeed the gospels' accounts of the crucifixion make it absolutely clear that two other criminals were crucified with Jesus on that day, one on either side of him. As an event, the crucifixion hardly seems important or noteworthy. It is one more witness to the cruel and repressive measures used by the Romans to enforce conformity throughout their empire.

Yet the New Testament makes it clear that behind the external event of the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth lay what this event *signified*; and this is the reason why it was *important*. Pompey and the Roman senate were not especially interested in the mechanics of how Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon: for them, the bottom line was crystal clear – it meant war. Similarly, Paul was not particularly interested in the historical details of the crucifixion of Jesus. The historicity of the crucifixion is assumed; what really matters is its theological significance as the ground of salvation, forgiveness, and victory over death. The Christian proclamation was about far more than the simple historical fact that Jesus was crucified. It was about the significance of this event for humanity: Jesus was numbered among sinners, so that sinners might be forgiven.

Thus far we have focused on the distinction between “event” and “meaning.” Once the importance of this distinction has been appreciated, we are in a position to move on and look at some of the interpretations of Jesus that we find in the New Testament.

The New Testament Understandings of the Significance of Jesus

Who is Jesus of Nazareth? What does he *mean*? One of the easiest ways to begin to reflect on these questions is to look at the terms used to refer to Jesus in the New Testament, especially in the gospels. These terms are often referred to as the “Christological titles” of the New Testament. Each of them must be considered as the outcome of a process of reflection on what Jesus said and did and on the impact that he had upon people. In what follows we

shall explore three of these titles – “Messiah,” “Lord,” and “Son of God” – which have found their way into the creeds of the churches, and we shall consider their implications for the Christian understanding of the identity of Jesus.

1 *Messiah* It is very easy for a modern western reader to assume that “Christ” was Jesus’ surname and to fail to appreciate that it is actually a title – “Jesus the Christ,” or “Jesus the Messiah.” The Hebrew word “Messiah” means “the anointed one” – someone who has been ritually anointed with oil, as a mark of having been singled out by God as having special powers and functions. Some of Israel’s greatest kings were referred to as “the Lord’s anointed” (1 Samuel 24: 6). As time passed, the term gradually came to refer to a deliverer, himself a descendant of David, who would restore Israel to the golden age it enjoyed under the rule of David.

During the period of Jesus’ ministry, Palestine was occupied and administered by Rome. There was fierce nationalist feeling at the time, fueled by intense resentment at the presence of a foreign occupying power, and this appears to have given a new force to the traditional expectation of the coming of the Messiah. For many, the Messiah would be the deliverer who expelled the Romans from Israel and restored the line of the greatest king of Israel, David.

Jesus does not appear to have been prepared to accept the title “Messiah” in the course of his ministry. For example, when Peter acclaims him as Messiah – “You are the Christ!” – Jesus immediately tells Peter to keep quiet about it (Mark 8: 29–30). It is not clear what the full significance of the “Messianic secret” is. Why should Mark emphasize that Jesus did not make an explicit claim to be the Messiah, when he was so clearly regarded as such by so many?

Perhaps the answer may be found later, in Mark’s gospel, when Mark recounts the only point at which Jesus explicitly acknowledges his identity as the Messiah. When Jesus is led, as a prisoner, before the High Priest, he admits to being the Messiah (Mark 14: 61–62). Once violent or political action of any sort is no longer possible, Jesus reveals his identity. He was indeed the deliverer of the people of God – but not, it would seem, in any political sense of the term. The misunderstandings associated with the title “Messiah,” particularly in Zealot circles, appear to have caused Jesus to play down the messianic side of his mission.

2 *Lord* A second title used to refer to Jesus of Nazareth in the New Testament is “Lord” (Greek *kurios*). The word is used in two main senses in the New Testament. It is used as a polite title of respect, particularly when addressing someone. When Martha addresses Jesus as “Lord” (John 11: 21), she is probably, although not necessarily, merely treating him with proper respect. However, the word is also used in another sense.

The confession that “Jesus is Lord” (Romans 10: 9; 1 Corinthians 12: 3) was clearly regarded by Paul as a statement at the heart of the Christian gospel. Christians are described as those who “call upon the name of the Lord” (Romans 10: 13; 1 Corinthians 1: 2). But what does this imply? It is clear that there was a tendency in first-century Palestinianism to use the word “Lord” (Greek *kurios*; Aramaic *mare*) to designate a divine being, or at the very least a figure who is decidedly more than just human – in addition to this word’s function as a polite or honorific title. But of particular importance is the use of this Greek word *kurios* to translate the special cypher of four letters used to refer to God in the Old Testament.

This cipher was often referred to as the “Tetragrammaton” (a Greek word meaning “the four letters”), and written as “Yahweh.”

When the Old Testament was translated from Hebrew into Greek, the word *kurios* (“Lord”) was generally used to render this special sacred name of God. Of the 6,823 instances in which the sacred name is used in the Hebrew, the Greek word *kurios* is used to translate it on 6,156 occasions. This Greek word thus came to be an accepted way of referring, directly and specifically, to the God who had revealed himself to Israel at Sinai and had entered into a covenant with his people on that occasion. Jews would not use this term to refer to anyone or anything else. To do so would be to imply that this person or thing was of divine status. The historian Josephus tells us that the Jews refused to call the Roman emperor *kurios*, because they regarded this name as reserved for God alone.

The writers of the New Testament had no hesitation in using this sacred name to refer to Jesus, with all that this implied. A name that was used exclusively to refer to God was regarded as referring equally to Jesus. In fact, on several occasions the New Testament takes an Old Testament text that refers to “the Lord” – in other words, to “the Lord God of Israel” – and deliberately applies or transfers the reference to “the Lord Jesus.” Perhaps the most striking example of this tendency may be found by comparing Joel 2: 32 with Acts 2: 21. The passage in Joel refers to a coming period in the history of the people of God, in which the Spirit of God will be poured out upon all people (Joel 2: 28). On this “great and dreadful day of the Lord” (that is, God) “everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved” (Joel 2: 31–32) – in other words, all who call upon the name of *God* will be saved.

This prophecy is alluded to in Peter’s great sermon on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2: 17–21), which ends with the declaration that “everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2: 21). Yet the “Lord” in question here is none other than “Jesus of Nazareth,” whom, Peter declares, God has made “both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2: 36).

3 *Son of God* A third title used by the New Testament to refer to Jesus is “Son of God.” In the Old Testament the term is occasionally used to refer to angelic or supernatural persons (see Job 38: 7; Daniel 3: 25). Messianic texts in the Old Testament refer to the coming Messiah as a “Son of God” (2 Samuel 7: 12–14; Psalm 2: 7). The New Testament use of the term seems to mark an intensification of its Old Testament meaning, with an increased emphasis upon its exclusiveness.

The belief that Jesus was the “son of God” arose partly from reflection on the resurrection. Paul opens his letter to the Christians at Rome by stating that Jesus “was descended from David at the human level, and was designated as the Son of God ... by his resurrection from the dead” (Romans 1: 3–4). This brief statement picks out two reasons why Jesus was understood to be the Son of God. First, on the physical level, he was a descendant of David, the great king of Israel to whom God had promised a future successor as king. A similar point is made by Matthew as he opens his gospel (Matthew 1: 1). Second, Jesus’ resurrection established his identity as the Son of God. We see here how an appeal to the resurrection clinches the argument as to the true identity of Jesus as the “son of God.”

The New Testament uses other terms to refer to Jesus of Nazareth – for example, “Son of Man” (traditionally understood to emphasize the humanity and humility of Jesus), and “Savior” (a theme we shall explore in more detail in Chapter 3, when we consider the Christian understanding of the nature and grounds of salvation).

Later in this work we shall be exploring some classic approaches to the identity of Jesus, along with other basic ideas of the Christian faith, when we reflect on the creeds.

Jesus of Nazareth and Women

Much recent discussion within Christian churches in the West has focused on the place of women within the church, particularly in professional ministries. Should women be ordained? The gospels' accounts of the ministry of Jesus are important to such discussions. They show that women were an integral part of the group of people who gathered round him. They were affirmed by him, often to the dismay of the Pharisees and other Jewish religious traditionalists. Not only were women witnesses to the crucifixion; they were also the first witnesses to the resurrection. The only Easter event to be explicitly related in detail by all four of the gospel writers is the visit of the women to the tomb of Jesus. Yet, as stated above, first-century Judaism disparaged women's testimonials and their credibility.

It is interesting to note that the gospels occasionally portray women as being much more spiritually perceptive than men. For example, Mark portrays the male disciples as having little faith (Mark 4: 40, 6: 52), while he commends women: a woman is praised for her faith (Mark 5: 25–34), a foreign woman, for responding to Jesus (Mark 7: 24–30), and a widow is singled out as an example to follow (Mark 12: 41–44). Further, Jesus treated women as human subjects rather than simply as objects or possessions. Throughout his ministry, Jesus can be seen engaging with and affirming women – often women who were treated as outcasts by contemporary Jewish society on account of their origins (e.g., Syro-Phoenicia or Samaria) or their lifestyle (e.g., prostitutes).

Jesus refused to make women scapegoats in sexual matters – for example in adultery. The patriarchal assumption that men are corrupted by fallen women is conspicuously absent from his teaching and attitudes, most notably toward prostitutes and the woman taken in adultery. The Talmud – an important source of Jewish law and teaching – recommended that its readers (who are assumed to be men) should “not converse much with women, as this will eventually lead you to unchastity.” Such advice was studiously ignored by Jesus, who made a point of talking to women (the conversation with the Samaritan woman, related in John 4, being an especially celebrated instance). In much the same way, the traditional view that a woman was “unclean” during her period of menstruation was dismissed by Jesus, who taught that it is moral impurity that defiles a person (Mark 7: 1–23).

Luke's gospel is of particular interest in relation to understanding Jesus' attitude to women. Luke brings out clearly how women are among the “oppressed” liberated by the coming of Jesus. Luke also sets out his gospel in a way that emphasizes that both men and women are involved in, and benefit from, the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. The following passages demonstrate this parallelism especially clearly:

Luke 1: 11–20, 26–38	Zacharias and Mary rejoice at God's faithfulness
Luke 2: 25–38	Simeon and Anna praise the infant Jesus
Luke 7: 1–17	A centurion and a widow
Luke 13: 18–21	A man with mustard seed and a woman with yeast
Luke 15: 4–10	A man finds a lost sheep and a woman finds a lost coin

By this arrangement of material, Luke expresses that men and women stand together side by side before God. They are equal in honor and grace; they have the same gifts bestowed upon them and have the same responsibilities.

Luke also draws our attention to the significant role of women in the spreading of the gospel. For example, Luke indicates that “many women” (Luke 8: 2–3) were involved in spreading the news of the coming of the Kingdom of God. Indeed, Luke specifically names some of these women: “Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod’s household; Susanna; and many others.” Granting women such a significant role would have seemed incomprehensible to the male-dominated society of contemporary Palestine.

It is probably difficult for modern western readers, who are used to thinking of women as having the same rights and status as men, to appreciate how novel and radical these attitudes were at the time. Possibly the most radical aspect of Jesus’ approach to women is that he associated freely with them and treated them as responsible human beings, indulging in theological conversation with them, encouraging and expecting a response. It is hardly surprising that early Christianity proved to have a deep appeal for women.

It is entirely possible that Jesus’ teachings attracted women partly on account of the new roles and status they were granted in the Christian community. There were many cults in Greece and Rome that limited their membership to men or allowed women to participate only in very limited ways. We shall explore developments in Christian attitudes toward women during the Roman empire in a later section of this work (pp. 127–129).

The Reception of Jesus of Nazareth outside Judaism

Although its historical origins lay in Palestine, Christianity rapidly gained a following in the Greek-speaking world, especially within the cities of the Roman empire. The missionary journeys of Paul of Tarsus, described in the New Testament, played an important role in spreading Christianity in Europe and Asia Minor. Paul was a Jewish religious leader who converted to Christianity, changing his name from “Saul” to “Paul.” His missionary expeditions took him to many cities and regions throughout the northeastern Mediterranean area – including Europe. As Christianity began to gain a foothold on the European mainland, the question of how it was to be preached in a non-Jewish context began to be of increasing importance.

Early Christian preaching to Jewish audiences, especially in Palestine, tended to focus on demonstrating that Jesus of Nazareth represented the fulfillment of the hopes of Israel. Peter’s sermon to Jews in Jerusalem (Acts 2) follows this pattern. Peter argues there that Jesus represents the culmination of Israel’s destiny. God has declared him to be both “Lord and Christ” – highly significant terms (pp. 23–24), which Peter’s Jewish audience would have understood and appreciated. But what were Christians to do when preaching to Greek audiences, who knew nothing of the Old Testament and had no connection with the history of Israel?

An approach that came to be particularly significant in the early Christian world can be found in Paul’s sermon; it was preached on the Areopagus, the famous hill in the Greek city

of Athens, possibly around AD 55. Since his audience included no Jews, Paul made no reference there to the ideas and hopes of Judaism. Instead he presented Jesus of Nazareth as someone who revealed a god whom the Athenians knew about but had yet to encounter definitively. “What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you” (Acts 17: 23). Paul declared that the god who was made known through Jesus of Nazareth was the same god who had created the world and humanity – the god in whom, as the Athenian poet Aratus declared, “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17: 28).

Where early Christian preaching to Jewish audiences presented Jesus as the fulfillment of the hopes of Israel, Paul’s preaching to Greek audiences presented the Christian faith as the fulfillment of the deepest longings of the human heart and of the most profound intuitions of human reason. This view was easily adapted so as to incorporate some of the core themes of classic Greek philosophy, such as the idea of the “word” (Greek *logos*) – the fundamental rational principle of the universe, according to popular Platonic philosophy in the first century. This theme is developed in the opening chapter of the gospel of John, which presents Jesus of Nazareth as the “word” by which the universe was originally created and that entered into the world to illuminate and redeem it. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory” (John 1: 14).

This was not necessarily seen as dismantling or displacing Christianity’s historical and theological roots in Judaism. Rather it was seen as a way of affirming Christianity’s cultural origins, while at the same time setting out the universal appeal of the Christian faith, which was held to transcend all ethnic, racial, and cultural barriers. The universal validity of the Christian gospel meant that it could be proclaimed in ways that would resonate with every human culture. As we shall see, this approach to the appeal of Christianity would be of immense significance throughout its history, especially in missionary contexts.

The material presented in this chapter clearly leads us into other areas of the Christian faith. One is that of its ideas, particularly those concerning the identity and significance of Jesus of Nazareth. We shall consider these further in Chapter 3. Yet our reflections in the present chapter also lead us to think further about the Christian Bible, the source of our understanding of the context against which Jesus of Nazareth is to be set, of our knowledge of his teaching and deeds, and of our information about how Jesus was understood within the first Christian communities. In the next chapter we shall consider the Christian Bible in more detail.