

CHAPTER

4

Christology—"Who Do You Say That I Am?"

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from the EDITOR

To confirm our identity, we are often asked for photo identification, typically a driver's license. I have yet to come across anyone who likes his or her photo. One reason is that the camera takes a three-dimensional image and changes it to two dimensions, which distorts and flattens the real person. Successful painters and film and television directors and cinematographers, among others, learn to convincingly communicate through flat, two-dimensional mediums. A second reason for not liking the ID photo is that it says nothing really important about *who* the person is. If I know the person, I might cite as most important that she is lovable and loving, generous, thoughtful, and kind; has a great sense of humor; is sensitive, caring, peace-filled, honest, intelligent, insightful, and dedicated—a wonderfully unique individual.

The same can be said about Jesus the Christ. Though one cannot sit down with Jesus and learn from him in person because time and history create distance, "flattening" Jesus like a photo, one can draw upon a great deal of material about him in the Bible. This material comes from those who knew him, followed him, and experienced him; it tells of those who met him and whose plans changed radically after encountering him.

Theology tries to "thicken" or flesh out these sources and resources, allowing one the knowledge and freedom to encounter this same Jesus of Nazareth today. This has been part of the legacy of Christianity from the start: people asking questions in order to deepen their faith, or as Anselm might say, practicing "faith seeking understanding." Christology is at the heart of finding the answer to the identity question: Who is Jesus? This chapter examines three sources to thicken that understanding of who this Jesus really is and how he was perceived by others in his time and history. It begins with the source of that knowing, which is a narrative or story, and explores its purpose of telling something Christianity considers crucially important, namely Jesus' call to salvation in God.

THE QUESTION

In a turning point in his ministry, Jesus asks his disciples a question that seems innocent enough yet has remained the fundamental question for Christology ever since. Jesus and his ministry had developed quite a reputation by this point. He had numerous followers, both near and far, and perhaps just as many enemies. The question probably seemed a matter of information gathering, an attempt to discern the “beat on the street”: “Who do people say that I am?” (Mark 8:27). Jesus’ disciples reply with a variety of answers: some say “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets” (8:28). Jesus follows up with a more pointed and personal question, one that, like many of his questions, discloses not only something fundamental about himself but also something fundamental about the one whom he addresses: “But who do *you* say that I am?” (8:29a, emphasis added).

Peter ventures a reply that seems to represent the thought of the gathered disciples: “You are the Messiah” (Mark 8:29b). Peter seems to know quite well the meaning of his statement. Jesus is the “anointed one” of Israel (derived from the Hebrew *mesiah*), the one who will deliver God’s covenanted people from exile and bondage, the one elected by God to finally reestablish the unity and independence of Israel from Roman imperial domination, a leader like King David, who, 1,000 years earlier, was also hailed as God’s “anointed one” for his legendary religious, political, and military leadership. But Jesus never confirms Peter’s reply. Imagine the disciples’ surprise, then, as Jesus tells them not to tell anyone about him. Imagine their puzzled looks as he proceeds to tell them that the “Son of Man” will suffer and be rejected by Israel’s leaders, that he will be killed and rise after three days. No wonder Peter “took him aside and began to

rebuke him” (8:32b). How could Jesus possibly be Israel’s messiah if he was to endure rejection and humiliation? What kind of bizarre liberation could come from such demonstrable defeat? Indeed, what has messiahship to do with suffering and death? Now imagine the disciples’ shock when Jesus responds to Peter’s rebuke with his own: “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things” (8:33b).

Christology begins with a question—“Who do you say that I am?”—and is the attempt to answer the question of Jesus’ ultimate identity and purpose. In more precise terms, Christology is the systematic study of Jesus of Nazareth, the one called the “Christ” (*christos* is Greek for the Hebrew *mesiah*): his mission and person, his relationship to God, his ultimate significance for humanity. As the story in Mark’s Gospel so poignantly reveals, thinking Christologically often challenges our assumptions. It requires attention to paradox and surprise. The fact that one no less than Peter, Jesus’ closest disciple and leader of the primitive Christian movement, could get it wrong (while getting it right) indicates the challenge before us. For Peter was correct: Jesus is the messiah, the “anointed one” of God, but *not* in the way Peter and so many of his contemporaries imagined the messiah to be. Like the blind man who is healed just before this startling exchange (Mark 8:22–26), Peter is blind to Jesus’ true messianic mission. In fact, Jesus regards Peter’s vision as a dangerous illusion and temptation, hence the strong rebuke. What Jesus wants Peter and his disciples to “see” is a reversal of assumptions and values: “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it” (8:35).

In this chapter, we shall learn to think Christologically and to discover how the story of Jesus’ life, death, and Resurrection provides the basic theological framework for understanding

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his identity and mission. We will begin by examining the life-story of Jesus of Nazareth and how, in light of their powerful Easter experiences, the disciples and other early Christians began a process of interpreting that story in daring theological terms. We shall also explore how the later Christological doctrines, or official teachings of the church, particularly those of the fourth and fifth centuries CE, continue to provide indispensable "grammatical rules" to assist Christians as they speak about Jesus, his relationship to God, and his significance for humanity. Throughout our study, we shall identify three touchstones that structure all Christological reflection:

1. All Christology derives from *story*.
2. All Christology is rooted in an experience of *salvation*.
3. All Christology springs from the conviction that in Jesus Christ the *presence of God* has been revealed and has taken hold of the world in an unprecedented way.

THE STORY BEGINS: JESUS OF NAZARETH AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Election and Eschatology

Jesus was a storyteller. He told fantastic stories, strange stories, stories that liberated and enlightened, stories that confused and upset. As a first-century Palestinian Jew living in a storytelling culture, Jesus lived by stories. Most of all, he lived (and died) by Israel's primary narrative.

As we have seen in the previous chapters, the people of Israel told and retold the story of *exodus* and the covenant. Their self-understanding was shaped by a faith that God had acted decisively in history to liberate their Hebrew ancestors from slavery and Egyptian imperial

domination, establishing them as a free people now beholden to their liberator God in mutual fidelity. As God promised to love and protect the Hebrew people, so they promised proper worship and ethical activity as codified in the Law (Torah). Freedom *from* slavery and bondage (*exodus*) implied a freedom *for* a committed community of faith and justice (the covenant). Throughout their subsequent history, from the time of the united kingdom under kings Saul, David, and Solomon (1022–922 BCE) to the time of devastation and exile during the Babylonian period (587–537 BCE), the people of Israel, and especially the prophets, viewed their fortunes as tied to their faithfulness to the covenant. In times of crisis, the prophets proclaimed messages of grief, judgment, and conversion, calling upon their people and leaders to return to the covenant with God in order to avert disaster. Often, the prophets cited social and economic injustices as reasons for their internal hardships and vulnerabilities to outside forces, for example, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and, during Jesus' time, the Romans. And often, with their messages of judgment and radical critique came messages of hope for a future when God, just as in the time of *exodus*, would bring an end to all that afflicted them.

If we are to understand how the larger pattern and the individual stories of Jesus' life make sense, we must see them as reflecting this broader historical and narrative context. There are two structural features about this context. The first is a theology of election. The people of Israel, including Jesus, resolutely believed that God had a unique destiny for them, a belief that in and through their specific history as a people, God's character was revealed and the original purposes for humanity disclosed. As part of God's covenant with Israel, the people were also God's "elect," marked with a distinctive responsibility to be a "light to the peoples" (Isa 51:4). The second structural feature is a particular theology of

history, or what we call "eschatology." *Eschatology* literally means the "study of the last things," that is, the study of history's ultimate future. Jesus passionately believed, as did many of his contemporaries, that God would soon bring about a fulfillment of Israel's history, a decisive resolution to the all-too-present realities of suffering, alienation, brokenness, and oppression. Theirs was an "eschatological imagination"—a worldview that imagined and yearned for a final future fulfillment of creation and history, for human well-being, for lasting peace and justice. The God of life and death, of past, present, and future, would soon bring about a new and final exodus in a way that would not just involve Israel, but because of Israel's special role in salvation history, it would also be a fulfillment for *all* people. It is important that we keep these two aspects in mind, particularly as we consider Jesus' specific focus on the people of Israel in his mission. Unquestionably, his mission is for Israel, but because it is for *Israel*, it is also for all humanity. Election (particularity) and eschatology (universality) go hand in hand.

As one might expect, this eschatological imagination was especially robust during times of historical crisis. During Jesus' time, Israel lived under the oppressive rule of the Romans. The once-independent nation of Israel was occupied by the external and "pagan" forces of an empire that seemed to many Jews very much like the Egyptians who had enslaved their ancestors more than twelve hundred years earlier. While the Romans allowed the Jews to practice their religion, run their Temple, and keep many of their customs, the burdensome taxation, ubiquitous military presence, and overall powerlessness to function as an independent nation with its own king provided more than enough evidence to any Jew that God's deliverance was needed. Consequently, several Jewish groups yearned for, spoke of, and, in some cases, fought for a future in which Israel would be internally healed of

religious and social divisions and freed from the external forces of oppression.

For many, these were necessarily linked. For example, there were those who imagined that what Israel needed most of all was an internal reformation and purification so that God would deliver Israel from its enemies. The Pharisees held this view, as did John the Baptist, Jesus' immediate predecessor and mentor, though he differed from the Pharisees in many ways. As the requirements for God's coming rule and solution to Israel's desperate circumstances, John preached total moral conversion and purification, ritually enacted by water baptism. Other groups, such as the Zealots, openly spoke of a military solution, in which Israel would throw off the yoke of oppression by force. Still others, like the Sadducees, the priestly and aristocratic class who ran the Temple in Jerusalem, and who had much at stake in keeping the peace with Rome so that the Temple might continue to function as Israel's religious and symbolic center, tended to maintain the status quo and compromise with Roman authorities. As we shall see, sometimes they actively cooperated with Roman leaders to identify and remove potential threats of religious and political unrest as a matter of security.

As should be clear by now, during Jesus' time there was little distinction between religion and politics. Whereas we tend to separate these terms, in the ancient world, religious practice was rarely a private matter but instead was bound up with all dimensions of human life, including the social, economic, and political. Only if we keep this in mind will we be able to fully grasp why Jesus was so threatening to so many parties, why he was killed, and why his message and ministry continue to be a powerful force for religious and social transformation today. However, we will not understand the particular mission and person of Jesus unless we also understand his historical context, his eschatological imagination, and the way he emerges as a distinctive voice in the

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diverse landscape of first-century Judaism. Jesus' message of the "kingdom of God" will resonate with all that we have examined thus far, but it will also provide a strikingly different alternative to the solutions just outlined. His is a story with an unexpected twist.

Proclamation of the Kingdom of God

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15). These words in Mark's Gospel inaugurate Jesus' public ministry. We need to examine several features of this bold proclamation to gain a better appreciation of Jesus' mission.

"*The time is fulfilled.*" Jesus' imagination was eschatological, possessed by the singular idea that Israel's story was coming to fulfillment. The future is now; God is doing something new and groundbreaking under our very noses. "*The kingdom of God has come near.*" God's rule is overtaking human history in an unprecedented way to bring about final healing and liberation, that is, "salvation." The kingdom of God is an event that is happening. It is "at hand," in the immediate future, but it is also, in a very real sense, "now." It is both present and future, or as theologians commonly put it, "already and not yet."

If we can keep these two aspects in a state of tension, we will be able to grasp something of the dramatic character of Jesus' stories, actions, and mission. "*Repent, and believe in the good news.*" The coming kingdom of God demands a decision, a reaction—conversion. This call to repentance quite literally means to "turn about-face," to go the opposite direction. Whereas we tend to think of repentance as a matter of apologizing for personal sins, repentance meant for Jesus the changing of one's entire worldview: how one perceives, thinks, speaks, and acts. Jesus is summoning people to a new and radical way

of life, one convicted by and committed to the "gospel" or "good news" that God is presently doing and will soon complete.

But what is this "kingdom of God," and what makes it "good news"? While it is the central symbol of his ministry, Jesus never strictly defines the "kingdom of God" in the way one might a philosophical category or scientific principle. The reason for this is at least two-fold. First, the "kingdom of God" is symbolic: it cannot be defined any more than "God" or "love" or "beauty" can be adequately defined. One must use multiple metaphors and analogies to even begin disclosing something of the richness of what is meant. For this reason, Jesus constantly uses stories, and most often parables, to speak of this extraordinary reality. He says, for example, that the kingdom of God is like the tiny mustard seed that grows beyond anyone's imagination to become larger than other bushes. The kingdom of God is a gift and a fullness of God encountering us in ways that may initially seem humble but will eventually exceed our expectations.

Second, the "kingdom of God" for Jesus is not merely an "idea" but a concrete reality that comes about through action, divine and human. It is something that is performed, something to be realized or made real in and through the cooperative activity of God and humanity. Jesus does not merely preach this reality; he lives it, enacts it, and summons others to do likewise, and this is exactly why it is "good news." For in his ministry of physical, spiritual, and social healing, of establishing peace and justice among people, he is seeking to bring about God's ultimate plan of well-being or salvation for humanity. Story alone is capable of capturing something of the dramatic revolutions in human affairs that the kingdom of God would bring about.

But what is "good news" for some may seem challenging and even offensive to others. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, for example, is a bold proclamation of liberation for the poor and

oppressed, for those who are meek, who mourn and hunger, who are merciful and make peace, "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:1-7:29). What is presently the situation of despair and alienation for many will soon be flipped upside down and turned inside out. Things are *not* what they are supposed to be, and God is doing something about it, says Jesus.

Along with this emancipatory message comes a message of confrontation and judgment. Those who maintain social and religious distinctions of "insider" and "outsider," and those who stand to benefit from the way things are—the privileged, the elite, the powerful, and the persecutors—stand under judgment and a call to total conversion. It is perfectly understandable that Jesus' ministry attracted just as many enemies as it did followers. His was a polarizing ministry in many ways, though he ultimately sought reconciliation between groups of people who stood in opposition to each other as part of a religious, social, and political system binding them in interminable conflict. One of Jesus' best-known parables (the Good Samaritan) illustrates the point.

Asked by a scholar of the law what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus in turn asks the scholar to summarize the law. The scholar responds, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). Jesus responds, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live" (v. 28). Apparently unsatisfied, the scholar further pursues the question and asks Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" (v. 29). With this question, Jesus has the opportunity to drive his point home. The question about "neighbor" has everything to do with the kingdom of God, so Jesus tells a story that begins quite conventionally. (Parables often begin with an ordinary scene, only to suddenly explode into paradox and surprise.)

A man falls victim to robbers and is left half-dead. A priest happens to be walking by. Here we might expect the priest to do something magnanimous. A priest is surely our model of holiness, but the priest passes by on the opposite side, as does the Levite after him. (Levites were subordinate Temple officials.) At this point in the story, the listener might actually suspend judgment about this ostensible breach of justice because the priest and Levite were required by the law not to touch the body of a corpse (and the man surely must have appeared dead). According to ritual purity laws, touching the body of a corpse would make them ritually impure to carry out their religious duties in the Temple.

The next to come along is the Samaritan. The Samaritan people, situated between Jerusalem to the south and Galilee to the north, were considered an "outsider" group, Jewish by ethnicity but heretical in their practices. They had become independent from mainstream Judaism about four hundred years earlier and had developed their own scriptures, worship practices, and sacred spaces. Often vilified for their heterodox ways, they were a ritually "unclean" people. Yet this Samaritan, despite whatever unorthodox beliefs he may have held, actually performs the reality of the kingdom. As the parable puts it, he is "moved with pity" at the sight of the wounded, naked man (Luke 10:33). In Hebrew, the word *compassion* refers to that "gut feeling" one has when deeply moved by a feeling of care and love. Importantly, it is just this kind of reaction metaphorically ascribed to God prior to the exodus: "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings" (Exod 3:7). Moved by God's own compassion for the dispossessed, the Samaritan performs the very thing one would expect from the priest and Levite. He pours oil and wine over the wounds, bandages them, and takes the man to a place of rest, even promising the innkeeper he will come

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carry anything through the temple. He was teaching and saying, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers." And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. (Mark 11:15–18)

The Temple area was the public square of Jerusalem, the place where pilgrims would have first arrived to exchange currency and buy animals for sacrifice. In this symbolic act, Jesus challenges the Temple system as such and in particular, its aristocratic and priestly administrators, the Sadducees. Jesus was certainly not alone in criticizing the Temple system. Numerous Jewish groups were deeply troubled by how the Sadducees compromised with Roman authorities for the sake of self-preservation and privilege, not to mention the heavy taxation for the Temple's upkeep. As Jesus overturns the money-changing tables and disrupts the buying and selling in the Temple's perimeter, he forces to a halt the entire apparatus surrounding this central symbol. In effect, Jesus is saying the Temple no longer effectively mediates the presence of God for Israel. It is thoroughly corrupt, a "den of robbers."

Though Jesus' authority was frequently questioned throughout his ministry, this striking elevation in prophetic rhetoric especially provoked his opponents. As Mark relates in a succeeding passage, "The chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to him and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things?'" (11:27–28). Who is this Jesus who challenges the Temple in this way, who presumes to authoritatively interpret the Law, who dares to forgive sins, who recklessly associates with the unclean, thus confusing what ought to be meticulously distinguished? Who is this who draws disciples unto himself—twelve, no less, to symbolize the number of Israel's

tribes? What manner of man is this who would speak on behalf of Israel's God in this way?

Although Jesus (as portrayed in the Synoptic Gospels) rarely speaks of his own person in any explicit or formal way—Jesus does not, for example, describe himself as the "Second Person of the Trinity" or "one in being with the Father," as later church doctrines will—it becomes progressively clear in the converging pattern of his sayings and deeds that Jesus presumes to personally embody the reality of God in a unique and powerful way, as though the message of the kingdom of God were directly and inseparably related to him, its messenger. He speaks and acts with an unprecedented authority. As scandalous as it may be, particularly within a monotheistic context, it becomes increasingly difficult to avoid identifying the person of Jesus with the God he reveals. With this move in our reflection, we are beginning to discover from the "ground up," that is, from the history and life-story of the man from Nazareth, who he ultimately is. That is to say, we are now thoroughly engaged in a process of Christological discovery, one that with the ensuing events of his death and Resurrection will reach its decisive point of departure.

Crucifixion, Death, and Resurrection

In the passage previously cited, we read that following the incident at the Temple, various Jewish authorities sought to have Jesus killed. The provocation proved too much, especially given the context of Rome's zero-tolerance policy toward potential insurgency. Jesus is arrested and brought to stand trial before the Sanhedrin, a formal judicial assembly of chief priests, elders, and scribes. Various allegations are made against him, including blasphemy, messianic ambition, and threats against the Temple (Mark 14:53–65). Whatever the ultimate motivation for the Sanhedrin's handing over of Jesus to the Romans, perhaps foremost among them was the desire

back to pay whatever is further needed in restoring the man's health (Luke 10:34–35). There is surprising excess to the gift. The kingdom of God comes by way of reversing and even overflowing expectations.

"Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" Jesus asks (Luke 10:36). Jesus turns the tables, and now the questioner is the one questioned. The legal scholar, faced by the parable, responds in the only sensible way: "The one who showed him mercy" (v. 37a). "Go and do likewise," says Jesus (v. 37b), concluding a repartee that, with a few swift verbal strokes, dismantles the questioner's assumptions about demarcating lines of ritual purity and the groups distinguished by them. It is not that Jesus rejects the Law, for he seeks to fulfill it (Matt 5:17). Jesus is outraged by how the Law had been used as a weapon and source of division, when its original purpose was to bring reconciliation between people. The Law, and many of Israel's central symbols, especially the Temple, as we shall see, had been co-opted by the powerful and elite for self-aggrandizement. "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. . . . How can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye?" (Matt 7:1, 4). Woe to those who occupy places of privilege. Woe to those who place heavy demands (religious and economic) on the people. Woe to the hypocrites obsessed with obtaining personal purity by way of separating themselves from sinners (see Matt 23:1–36). "The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted" (Matt 23:11).

Miracles

Along with the sayings of comfort and judgment recorded by the Gospels, we also find many deeds

whereby Jesus symbolically enacts something of the reality of God's kingdom. All four Gospels relate numerous episodes of Jesus healing persons bearing physical and spiritual affliction. While modern people may have difficulty with these stories, consigning them to an archaic or "mythological" way of thinking long superseded by modern science, there is little question that acts of a miraculous character were ascribed to Jesus during his lifetime.

If we are to fully appreciate the miracles in the Gospels, we cannot simply view them as a suspension of nature's laws in a kind of holy magic show or as proof of Jesus' divinity. Rather, the miracles disclose God's kingdom in a unique way, for by them God brings about healing for people in the reality of their concrete situation, in their bodies and private suffering, and often openly giving them dignity by restoring them to their community (for example, lepers, sick, blind, deaf). Jesus' ministry is all-encompassing and holistic, transforming ordinary people in the socially isolating experience of suffering. Often, people who suffer from some kind of physical infirmity also suffer from it socially and spiritually. Perhaps you have personally witnessed or even experienced how a chronic disease or disability can isolate a person from social groups, even those that are supposed to be the most inclusive and nurturing. The conventional wisdom of Jesus' time tended to view physical infirmity as a visible sign of impurity, as though disease and disability were manifestations of personal sin. Consequently, those suffering from chronic disease and dysfunction were often excluded from participating fully (if at all) in Jewish religious life. Jesus rejected this arrangement outright. "As [Jesus] walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, 'Neither this

man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him" (John 9:1-3).

As Jesus touches and heals the "untouchables"—the leper, the woman with a hemorrhage, the demoniac boy, the man with a withered hand—he simultaneously restores to them those social and spiritual relationships that in many cases had been denied them from birth. Jesus does not explain evil; he simply confronts it. The leper is healed and told to present himself to the Temple (Mark 1:40-45). The paralytic's sins are forgiven, just as he is given his health (Mark 2:1-12). The Gerasene demoniac condemned to roaming night and day among the tombs is healed and told to return to his family (Mark 5:1-20). The crippled woman stands up and praises God (Luke 13:10-13). The mute person is given the capacity of speech (Matt 9:32-34). "Great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the maimed, the blind, the mute, and many others. They put them at his feet, and he cured them, so that the crowd was amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the maimed whole, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel" (Matt 15:30-31).

The New Testament (NT) describes such events as "acts of power" (*dynameis*) or "signs" (*sēmeia*), whereby Jesus directly confronts the palpable forces of evil in its diverse and mysterious manifestations. A miracle, theologically understood, is the dramatic in-breaking of God's rule into the world in order to restore human beings to that physical, social, and spiritual wholeness intended for them from the beginning of creation. Evil and suffering represent the antikingdom and are emphatically not God's will for humanity. Miracles are therefore filled with eschatological significance: they are fragmentary realizations of God's ultimate future of well-being for human beings, and thus part of the overarching narrative that Jesus is proclaiming and manifesting in his ministry.

Table Fellowship

In addition to his proclamation and miracles of healing, Jesus symbolically enacts the reality of the kingdom through his inclusive "table fellowship." Though it might be difficult to grasp this in our contemporary context of supermarkets, microwaves, and "fast food," in the ancient world, and in ancient Judaism in particular, eating and sharing a meal was an intimate act charged with wide-ranging social and religious significance. Indeed, the table functioned as a kind of microcosm of Jewish society and practice. For a first-century Jew, an array of purity laws and customs regulated all aspects of eating—what one ate and when, how it was to be eaten and with whom, and so on. While such laws and customs can promote an appreciation for the sacredness of meal, they could also (and frequently did) become a source of division between those regarded ritually "clean" and "unclean."

As we have already noted, for certain prominent groups in first-century Judaism, and here we may point to the Pharisees as an example, a conception of holiness prevailed that fostered a sense of distinction and even separation from other (ritually impure or "unclean") groups through the rigorous adherence to laws and ancestral customs. However, it is just this comprehensive "purity system" that Jesus consistently challenges as a false path for Israel, and nowhere more forcefully than in his table fellowship of shocking hospitality to and inclusivity of the sinner and outsider. "When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?' When Jesus heard this, he said to them, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners'" (Mark 2:16-17).

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Jesus' mission is not intended primarily for those who imagine they are already righteous before God but for the outcast and unclean. By including sinners at the table, Jesus is quite deliberately enacting a story alternative to the one told by those who anticipate Israel's deliverance through the heroic and self-justifying adherence to a purity system. "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile" (Mark 7:14–15).

To be sure, Jesus is passionately interested in moral and spiritual conversion. One need only survey the difficult sayings and precepts scattered throughout the Gospels to become aware of the true demands of discipleship, but the kind of conversion Jesus envisions is not that, instead of resulting in opposition between groups according to degree of purity, results in lasting reconciliation between them. God's coming kingdom precisely means the dismantling of "insider" and "outsider" suspicion and rivalry. Jesus' meal practices therefore anticipate God's ultimate future for humanity, where all are welcome to the eschatological banquet, even (and especially) those who appear to have received no formal invitation. Importantly, it is just this understanding of inclusion and reconciliation at the table that informs the early church's practice of Eucharist.

Confrontation at the Temple and the Question of Jesus' Authority

While much more could be said about Jesus' public ministry, we must now turn our attention to the culminating developments of Jesus' life that led to his death—and the apparent failure of his mission.

It should be obvious by now that Jesus was a dangerous man—dangerous because he preached empowering messages of hope to the marginalized and oppressed; he was reputed to

heal persons of physical affliction, even forgiving them of their sins; he boldly challenged many of Israel's religious leaders to radical conversion; he was associated with John the Baptist, who had recently been beheaded by the local Roman ruler Herod; and some publicly hailed him as the "messiah" who would deliver Israel from Roman domination. As if all this were not enough to lead to a tragic end, like so many prophets before him, Jesus did something that, perhaps more than any other single act, sealed his fate. To more fully grasp the dramatic significance of this act, both historically and theologically, an understanding of its context is crucial.

The time was the annual Passover celebration, and the place, Jerusalem. The Passover celebration commemorated Israel's primary narrative, the exodus. As thousands of Jews streamed into Jerusalem for this central religious holiday, the atmosphere was electric and volatile. As might be expected, the Roman military presence in Jerusalem during this religious/national holiday was greatly intensified, for the exodus was not merely a memory of the distant past but a live hope among Jews for future emancipation from their Roman occupiers. Therefore, as all manner of pilgrims entered David's city, including those groups like the Zealots who openly spoke of a military overthrow of their oppressors, the slightest gesture of revolution was swiftly met by Rome's brutally efficient military. That Jesus and his followers entered Jerusalem under these combustible circumstances probably made him a marked man, but then Jesus engages in a provocative act at the very epicenter of the Jewish world:

Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to

to quell any potential uprising that would result in a devastating response by Rome—not unlike what eventually happened forty years later when the Temple was destroyed (70 CE) to suppress a civil war. Assigning blame for Jesus' death is a delicate matter, but about this we can be quite clear: both Jewish and Roman authorities were involved in Jesus' brutal execution. If Jesus had already aroused significant opposition among the powerful and elite within Israel, enough that some of them wanted Jesus dead, the fact that he was crucified indicates Roman involvement because crucifixion was a specifically Roman form of torture and execution reserved for non-Roman citizens. It was intended to be gruesome theatre, orchestrated to instill terror and compliance among an occupied populace.

With cruel irony, Jesus died on a cross with a plaque above his head inscribed with these words, "The King of the Jews." The so-called "anointed one" of Israel died a criminal's death. The kingdom of God had not come, it seemed, but suffered demonstrable defeat as its chief messenger hung naked from a cross. Panic and fear set in among the disciples as they fled, leaving only the women to mourn at the tomb.

Now, had the story ended here, the man from Nazareth would be little more than a footnote in history. Jesus was certainly not the only Jew to be crucified, nor was he the only one hailed as Israel's "messiah." But Jesus' story does not end here, for not only will his once-dispersed and despairing group of disciples continue to tell the story of his life and death, but they also will begin proclaiming with boundless enthusiasm a most unlikely twist in its telling: that God raised this crucified Jesus from the dead, vindicated him in his messianic mission, and revealed him as "Lord." What is more, his death and Resurrection grant salvation—the forgiveness of sins, a new freedom from the power of violence and death, and a sure hope in the future that all creation will attain its ultimate destiny. A passage

from Acts 2 concisely and powerfully frames the essence of the early church's proclamation. Here, as Peter addresses the people of Israel, he is able to "see" what was only obscure to him during Jesus' public ministry:

"You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know—this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. . . . This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. . . . Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified." . . . Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:22–24, 32, 36, 38)

At the beginning of this chapter, we observed that "thinking Christologically" requires an imagination open to paradox and surprise. That which appears to be utter failure becomes God's victory. This Jesus, who died not out of some masochistic death wish but because of his solidarity with the outsider, the unclean, and the sinner, becomes himself an outsider and a victim, one cursed as a common criminal. In other words, Jesus dies very much as a consequence of the life he led, and to the very end, even as he breathes his last, he offers peace and reconciliation to those who accuse and murder him: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

In this pattern of total self-giving love, even unto death, Jesus enacts a life-story that entails

the reversal of conventional values. Authority comes not from domination but from humility; power is not manipulative but empowers others; authentic life results not from pursuing self-interest but dying to self. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and the servant of all" (Mark 9:35). Jesus' messianic vocation is not, therefore, a pursuit of a military revolution or the establishment of mighty fortresses but a vocation whose fundamental characteristic is living life wholly for the Other. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength' . . . [and] 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:30-31). "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13).

Jesus' Resurrection from the dead is not a kind of reward for a life well lived, nor is it merely a happy ending to an otherwise tragic story. It is an event filled with tremendous significance for understanding who God is and the destiny God has for human beings. By raising Jesus from the dead, God is revealed as one who sides with the outsider and marginalized, as one who provides an ultimate hope for the victimized and oppressed. God is the God of life and death, and no power or threat can vanquish the divine will of well-being for humanity. However, just as God is revealed as a God for the oppressed, the Resurrection of Jesus is also an offer of forgiveness and grace. In the passage from Acts 2 previously cited, Peter declares that by raising Jesus from the dead, those who crucified him (and by extension, all who say "No" to God's kingdom) are given the opportunity to be fully reconciled to God. Having become victim to the violent rejection of God's will for humanity, Jesus is raised victorious as God's ultimate "Yes." God's love for humanity is so excessive and tenacious that even though Jesus, commended by God to Israel, is rejected and crucified as a criminal, God raises him from

the dead as the ultimate gift of life. As Saint Paul puts it, "And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. . . . So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Cor 5:15, 17).

How did the disciples come to believe in this "newness," and what specific meaning does Resurrection language possess for Christians? This early Christian proclamation stands upon two pillars. The first was the discovery of the empty tomb by the women followers of Jesus. By itself, the empty tomb does not necessarily imply Jesus' Resurrection. It remains an ambiguous sign, as there are many possible reasons why it might have been empty, including the possibility that the disciples stole Jesus' body (see Matt 27:62-66). The second pillar is the tradition of Resurrection appearances in which Jesus reveals himself to his disciples as one who has triumphed over death. The accounts are varied, as a cursory examination of the Gospels demonstrates.

Despite their diversity, however, they all agree on two basic points. First, the risen Jesus who appeared to the disciples is the self-same Jesus of Nazareth, not some apparition or hallucination. The Gospels insist that Jesus, after his death and by the power of God, manifests himself in a way that is not the result of human imagination. The encounter comes from "beyond" them. Second, while this is the self-same Jesus of Nazareth the disciples knew and loved before his death, he is also transformed into a state of existence that is different from ordinary space-time existence. Jesus does not simply come back to life, as though he returns to his premortem life. Resurrection does not mean resuscitation; it means transformation—transformation into a manner of life that exceeds our capacity to imagine.

We may put it this way: Jesus' Resurrection is both in full continuity with his historical exis-

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tence and in discontinuity to the extent that he has passed through death and been given a life no longer susceptible to corruptibility. Jesus' total human existence has reached its final and eternal fulfillment in God, and it is just this fulfilled life with God for which human beings are made. Jesus' Resurrection is the future of all creation, a future already present. The kingdom has come in the very person of Jesus.

THE STORY CONTINUES: THE CHRISTOLOGY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

Understandably, the early Christian proclamation was met with resistance and misunderstanding. The Gospels relate that even the disciples only gradually understood the nature and significance



Ministry of Jesus

of this event. Nevertheless, once the conviction set in, it completely revolutionized their imagination. As the disciples continued to tell and retell the remarkable events they witnessed, they began to see Jesus' life, death, and Resurrection as the ultimate revelation of God to humanity. This process of telling the story is an act of Christology. Recalling the definition provided at the outset of this chapter, Christology is the attempt to formally articulate Jesus Christ's mission and identity, his relationship to God, and his significance for humanity. In the NT, several Christological statements and patterns attempt to say something important about his identity and mission. Let us briefly examine three.

Jesus as "Lord" (*Kyrios*)

Early on in the primitive Christian movement, Jesus was hailed as Israel's "Messiah" and "Lord." In Greek, these words are *christos* and *kyrios* respectively. Importantly, Christians attributed to Jesus titles such as these in the context of worship: while they gathered in community to remember Jesus' deeds, death, and Resurrection; as they prayed through and rediscovered the scriptures; as they ritually enacted Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples before his death, and so on. The earliest Christians very much experienced the presence of the risen Christ among them, even singing hymns to him in a way that, from an outsider's point of view, might seem as though they regarded him as God. This is not to say that the earliest Christians had yet developed a specific vocabulary to speak of Jesus as "God," but the evolution of early Christian language and practice shows an unmistakable and steady process of coming to precisely this conclusion.

By hailing Jesus as "Lord," the earliest Christians were not just acknowledging Jesus' authority as God's true emissary in the world, and thus one to whom his disciples owed allegiance. They were also saying something about Jesus' exalted

status after his death. By raising him from the dead, God has triumphed over chaos, violence, and death. Jesus is "Lord" of creation, sovereign in human history, sovereign among the world's powers, be they social, political, or religious. Paul summarizes this conviction in one of his letters as he writes that, although many people allege and worship other gods, "for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (1 Cor 8:6). One cannot help but notice the closest relationship between "God" and "Jesus" in this passage. Though explicitly monotheistic, both the "Father" and the "Lord Jesus Christ" together are sovereign over creation and human history.

Death and Resurrection/Exaltation Christology

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul quotes an early hymn that epitomizes a second Christological pattern. It too tells a story but does so in a condensed narrative format, rich with meaning and mystery:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:5–11)

Notice here the pattern of descent and ascent. Jesus first "descends"; though in the "form of God,"

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he empties himself (*kenōsis*) and becomes the lowliest of the lowly, taking on a life of complete self-expenditure for others, even unto death on a cross. In Jesus, God's shocking humility is expressed. God's "power" is of the sort that it identifies with the powerless, itself becoming utterly vulnerable to the violent resistance of God's own creation. The "descent" is one of love. Yet, precisely because of this self-expenditure for others, God "highly exalted him" and gave Jesus the "name that is above every name." He ascends to the very honor of God the Father so that all should acknowledge Jesus Christ's lordship over creation. The pattern here echoes the very subversion and paradox we find in so many of Jesus' parables. Powerlessness becomes true power; humility becomes might; lowliness and service become transcendence and eminence. As Paul puts it elsewhere, "For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor 1:25). Jesus is God's living parable, his life, death, and Resurrection the very embodiment of divine wisdom and love.

Wisdom and Logos Christology

A third Christological pattern exhibits what is sometimes described as "high Christology." Its counterterm is "low Christology." These spatial images are helpful when talking about Jesus as divine (high) and human (low). This Christological pattern begins by characterizing Jesus' ultimate identity and mission in relationship to the eternal wisdom of God, even before Jesus' historical existence. Let us look briefly at two notable examples.

He [Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things

have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. . . . For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (Col 1:15–20)

Much could be said about this dense passage, but we must limit ourselves to just a few observations. First, this passage, also an early Christian hymn, draws deep from the well of Israel's wisdom tradition, as can be found in such OT writings as Proverbs, the Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, Job, and many of the Psalms. What is distinctive about this Christological pattern is the way it speaks of Jesus as the personal embodiment of God's wisdom: the same wisdom originally bringing forth creation, the same wisdom responsible for order and beauty in the cosmos, the wisdom that inspires all human wisdom. As the "image of the invisible God," Jesus is the earthly and historical manifestation of divine transcendence. In Jesus, the fullness of God dwelt, reconciling humanity to God through the self-sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Divine solidarity and forgiveness are together offered to humanity in his life, death, and Resurrection. Because Jesus so thoroughly manifests God's original plan for creation, it is possible to say that all things were created in, through, and for him. Jesus is the completion of all creation. The future of creation is eschatologically realized in him.

Second, as an instance of "high Christology," this passage speaks of Jesus' ultimate identity by highlighting his preexistence. The exalted status of Jesus as "Lord" of creation revealed to his disciples after his Resurrection is the identity Jesus always possessed, not only throughout his life but even prior to his historical existence, prior to creation itself. What God accomplished in and