

[REDACTED]

Throughout the Christian world, the year reaches a climax towards the end of December, when the Christmas season marks the birth of the man Christians believe to have been the incarnate son of God, the manifestation of divine nature and purpose in a human life. Christians assert that in Jesus God reached out to conquer humanity's weaknesses.

To identify oneself as a Christian is to declare Jesus the lord and saviour of the world. The heavy emphasis that Christians place on that declaration is crucial for understanding the nature of Christianity, for to be a Christian is to make a commitment of faith in the doctrine that Jesus was the incarnate son of God.

Christians are found in every part of the world and form the world's largest religious community. Estimates place their number at a billion and a half—about one-quarter of the human family. They are the majority in Europe, the Americas, Australia and New Zealand, and many African countries. In the eastern Mediterranean, where Christianity originated, historic Christian communities remain, but as small minorities within their predominantly Muslim societies. In Asia, Christians constitute the majority only in the Philippines, although they are a significant minority (approaching one-third of the population) in Korea.

ORIGINS

The Life of Jesus

We know very little about the early years of Jesus, before he began his public life around the age of 30. Luke and Matthew recount a series of extraordinary events surrounding his birth in Bethlehem, a small town just southeast of Jerusalem. We are told that his childhood home was in Nazareth, a tiny Jewish village on a rocky hillside in the predominantly Greek-speaking northern region called Galilee, and we assume that he learned the trade of his father (a carpenter or builder). But from his youth we have only one story: at the age

of 12, after spending the High Holidays in Jerusalem with his family, he is said to have become so absorbed in discussing the subtleties of Jewish law with the teachers at the temple that his family started home without him.

His public years begin with his **baptism** by his older cousin, John the Baptist, during which he sees the heavens open and the holy spirit descending like a dove. Interpreting this mystical vision as a call to prophecy or ministry, he withdraws into the 'wilderness' on the eastern side of the Jordan River, on a kind of spiritual retreat. There he is joined by Satan, who offers him a series of temptations, each of which he refuses.

On his return from the wilderness Jesus goes to Capernaum, a town on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, where his mother, Mary, now lives with other family members (perhaps his younger siblings, although Roman Catholic doctrine—which holds Mary to be 'ever virgin'—identifies them as cousins). The reason for leaving Nazareth is never explained, but one theory suggests that it may have had something to do with the death of his father, Joseph.

Soon after his return from the wilderness, Jesus attends a synagogue service in Nazareth and volunteers to do one of the Torah readings. The passage he is given to read speaks of a time to come when the lame shall walk and the blind will see. He then declares to those present that this prophecy is now fulfilled. This episode sets the stage for a series of miracles and at the same time underlines the idea that he has come to fulfill prophecies of the Hebrew Bible.

Jesus recruits twelve male disciples, most of whom make their living as fishermen. Not surprisingly, fishing and the Sea of Galilee figure

◀ Built on foundations that were laid around 220 CE, the basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere may be the oldest church in Rome (Zeke Livingston). These mosaics date to the thirteenth century.

Timeline

- c. 3 BCE Birth of Jesus
- c. 30 CE Death of Jesus
- c. 65 Death of Paul
- 312 Constantine's vision of the cross
- 325 First Council of Nicaea
- 337 Constantine is baptized on his deathbed
- c. 384 Augustine's conversion experience
- 451 Council of Chalcedon
- 529 Benedict establishes monastery
- 842 Iconoclastic controversy ends
- 862 Cyril and Methodius in Moravia
- c. 1033 Birth of Anselm (d. 1109)
- 1054 Break between Rome and Constantinople
- 1095 Urban II calls for the first crusade
- 1187 End of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem
- c. 1225 Birth of Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae*) (d. 1274)
- 1517 Luther posts his 95 theses
- 1534 Henry VIII becomes head of the Church of England
- 1536 Calvin's *Institutes*
- 1563 Council of Trent concludes
- 1738 John Wesley's conversion experience
- 1781 Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*
- 1830 *Book of Mormon*
- 1859 Charles Darwin's, *On the Origin of Species*
- 1870 First Vatican Council concludes
- 1910 Publication of *The Fundamentals*
- 1948 First assembly of the World Council of Churches
- 1965 Second Vatican Council concludes

prominently in his teaching. He also attracts a number of women followers, among them Mary Magdalene, who play important roles. For the next year or more, Jesus travels the region around Capernaum, working miracles, teaching how

to apply Jewish law to everyday life, and telling **parables**, many of which point to an impending **apocalypse** that will lead to a new era of peace and righteousness he calls the kingdom of God. His main venues are synagogues or private houses,

but sometimes he preaches to larger crowds who gather to witness his miraculous cures, which include healing the blind and even raising the dead.

When he goes to Jerusalem with his disciples for the high holy days around Passover, he causes a disturbance at the temple by accusing the money changers of cheating on the rate charged to exchange regular Greek and Roman coins for the traditional Hebrew coins required to make offerings. On the Sunday before Passover, he fulfills another prophecy by riding into the town on a donkey. The people honour him by placing palm leaves in the road before he rides by and shouting his praises. A few days later, while praying in a garden outside Jerusalem, he is arrested by a mixed party of Roman soldiers and servants of the temple priests whose authority he has challenged. When



Children in Asuncion, Paraguay, take part in the annual celebration of Palm Sunday, commemorating Jesus' entry into Jerusalem (AFP/Getty Images).

one disciple tries to resist, Jesus tells him to put his sword away.

Taken first before the Sanhedrin and then before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, Jesus is accused of perverting the people and claiming to be the king of the Jews. Together with several other condemned men, he is paraded through the streets of Jerusalem to the place of execution, a hill called Golgotha, where he is nailed to a cross and left to die. Two days later, on the morning following the Sabbath, some of his women followers go to the tomb where his body was placed on the Friday, only to find it empty. In one account an angel tells the women that God has raised him from the dead; in others he appears to the disciples himself. In any event, it became the Christian belief that he had been resurrected and had gone to sit at the right hand of God in heaven, from where he would soon return to judge all persons and usher in the kingdom of God.

How Jesus understood his mission is not clear. His most frequent term for himself is 'the son of man'. In everyday Aramaic, this was the term for 'human', but it is also one of the terms used in the Hebrew literature to refer to an agent of God who will usher in a new era of justice and righteousness. 'Son of man' is not a synonym of 'messiah', but it has similar connotations, and Christians came to understand Jesus to be the long-awaited messiah. The Greek term *christos* was used as a synonym for 'messiah', and so he came to be known as Jesus the **Christ**, which is usually shortened to Jesus Christ.

The Gospels and Jesus

In Mark's account, a Roman soldier who is standing by as Jesus gasps his last breath is moved to say, 'Truly this was a son of God.'

It is fitting that Mark attributes this comment to a Roman soldier rather than one of Jesus' followers, for the Christian movement soon grew beyond its origins as a Jewish sect. Within a generation of his death, his followers had decided that his message was not for the Jews alone, and that anyone

Traditions at a Glance

Numbers

1.5 billion around the world

Distribution

Christians constitute the majority of the population in Europe and the Americas, Australia, New Zealand, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Philippines; over a third of the population of Lebanon; and almost a third of the population of South Korea.

Principal Historical Periods

c. 3 BCE–c. 30 CE	Lifetime of Jesus
c. 30–c. 120	The New Testament or Apostolic age
c. 120–451	The early Church
1517–c. 1600	The Protestant Reformation
17th century–present	The modern period

Founders

Founded by the followers of Jesus of Nazareth, called the Christ, on the basis of his teachings and resurrection. Among the early founders, the apostles Peter and Paul were especially important.

Deity

One God, called 'God' or 'Lord', who exists in three persons: as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Authoritative Texts

The Christian Bible consists of the Old Testament (the Hebrew Bible) and the New Testament. The Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches include as part of the Old Testament a number of books from the *Septuagint* that Protestants set apart as Apocrypha. In addition, Roman Catholics hold the teaching office (*magisterium*) of the Church to be authoritative.

Noteworthy Doctrines

Jesus is the second person of the Trinity, truly God as well as truly man, and his resurrection is the sign that those who believe in him will have eternal life. The authority of the Church has been passed down from the apostles.

could become a Christian. In that decision lay the seeds of Christianity's development as one of the world's three great missionary religions.

In the accounts of Jesus' life—known as **gospels**, from the Greek *evangel*, meaning 'good news'—he performs miracles. Today, the very stories that apparently impressed people 2,000 years ago may form a barrier to some minds. But the

insights into human personality and relationships that permeate his teachings, and the confidence with which he was ready to challenge traditional scriptural and legal interpretations, place Jesus among the world's most astute and perceptive teachers. He commands his followers to love their enemies as well as their friends, and in word and example emphasizes forgiveness to a degree that

Sayings of Jesus

The following passages come from the body of teachings in Matthew conventionally known as the 'Sermon on the Mount' (Luke presents similar material). The translation is from the New English Bible.

If, when you are bringing your gift to the altar, you suddenly remember that your brother has a grievance against you, leave your gift where it is before the altar. First go and make your peace with your brother, and only then come back and offer your gift (5: 23-4).

You have learned that they were told, 'Eye for eye, tooth for tooth.' But what I tell you is this: Do not set yourself against the man who wrongs you. If someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn and offer him your left. If a man wants to sue you for your shirt, let him have your coat as well. If a man in authority makes you go one mile, go with him two. Give when you are asked to give; and do not turn your back on a man who wants to borrow (5: 38-42).

Pass no judgment, and you will not be judged. For as you judge others, so you will yourselves be judged, and whatever measure you deal out to others will be dealt back to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye, with never a thought for the great plank in your own? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is that plank in your own? First take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's (7: 1-5).

is probably not exceeded in any other religious tradition.

Because Jesus lived at a time when there were no birth records, school transcripts, or employment files, our understanding of him depends on accounts produced a generation and more after his death. The Christian authors of those accounts had some extraordinary (and highly partisan) claims to make: that their teacher had been the long-awaited kingly deliverer, that his humiliating death on the cross was a victorious martyrdom, that he had come back from the dead, had risen to heaven, and would return in triumph. They even asserted that Jesus was the son of God, and that through his sacrifice of himself, he had become the saviour of humanity. Unfortunately for historians of the period, there are few non-Christian sources that might be used either to corroborate or to dispute those claims.

As historical evidence, then, what can the early Christian literature tell us? For more than a century scholars have agreed that, however suspect some of the details may be, it does demonstrate the existence of a community of faith centred on belief in Jesus as the risen lord. Whether or not Jesus actually did or said everything the texts attribute to him, the Christian message was crystallizing into recognizable form by the middle of the first century. The Christian movement was coming into focus, reporting the life of Jesus on earth, but also preaching an interpretation of that life as cosmically significant.

More than three centuries later, when Christianity became the established religion of the Roman Empire, church leaders made a list of the writings they acknowledged to be 'scripture'. That standard list, or **canon**, of books and letters is what Christians know as the New Testament. It includes

the gospels attributed to four of Jesus' disciples: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. By then, those four accounts had been accepted throughout Christendom. The situation was much more fluid in the late first and early second centuries, when the texts were first written, and they were not the only accounts in circulation. It is helpful to think of each gospel as the product of an individual author with his own particular interpretation and audience in mind. We will treat them in the order in which most modern scholars believe they were written, rather than in the canonical order (which puts Matthew first).

Mark

Mark's account is the simplest, shortest, most straightforward, and most likely the earliest of the four canonical gospels. It starts not with Jesus' birth, but with the beginning of his mature ministry following his baptism by John the Baptist, who prophesies that Jesus will be far greater than John. After a forty-day retreat in the wilderness, during which he wrestles with the temptations of Satan, Jesus launches his ministry in Galilee, proclaiming that the kingdom of God is at hand. His local reputation spreads as he performs healing miracles. He

also violates the Sabbath law by picking grain and healing on the day of rest, and when he is challenged for doing so, he takes the notion of Jewish legal authority into his own hands, declaring that the Sabbath is made for people rather than people for the Sabbath. It is in response to this apparent arrogance, Mark suggests, that the Pharisees conspire to do away with him.

Jesus selects from among his male followers a group of twelve (a significant number in Hebrew tradition, symbolizing a complete set) as his inner circle of disciples. Accompanied by them, he continues to heal, teach, and challenge the priorities of religious authority. Eventually he goes to Jerusalem, arriving with an entourage that shouts 'Hosanna' (a cry for divine deliverance in Hebrew prayer) and proclaims the coming of a king in the line of the Hebrew dynastic founder, David. Over the course of a week in Jerusalem, he disputes with the religious authorities, celebrates the Passover with his disciples, is betrayed by one of them (Judas), and is arrested. Brought to trial before Pilate, the Roman governor, Jesus does not deny that he is the king of the Jews and offers no defence.

Jesus is executed on the cross, crying out a quotation from one of the Hebrew psalms, 'My

Sources of the Gospel Narratives

Much of the Gospel material consists of Jesus' teachings. Some of these take the form of parables: narrative stories designed to teach a moral lesson. Others take the form of short sayings that could stand alone, apart from any narrative, as universally applicable proverbs or maxims. In chapters 5 through 7 of his account, Matthew describes Jesus as delivering a collection of these on a mountain in northern Palestine; the material is thus known as the Sermon on the Mount. Luke presents the same material—though in his gospel it is delivered on a plain.

In general, Luke and Matthew overlap to a considerable extent, and it has been assumed that both of them used Mark's narrative as a source for their accounts. Yet some of the material they both include is not found in Mark.

These discrepancies led German scholars in the nineteenth century to postulate that the material not in Mark must have come from a different source, one that both Luke and Matthew used and that has since been lost. This hypothetical document has come to be known as 'Q', from the initial letter of *Quelle*, the German word for 'source'.

God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' As he breathes his last, the Roman centurion identifies him as 'truly' a son of God, and before the Sabbath begins, his body is placed in a tomb, which is sealed by a large stone. The day after the Sabbath, three women followers go to the tomb to anoint the body, only to find the stone rolled away and the body missing; a figure appears to them and informs them that Jesus has risen from the dead and will meet with the disciples. In some manuscripts of Mark's gospel, Jesus appears to the eleven faithful disciples at a meal, commands them to preach the gospel (i.e., the 'good news'), and promises that they too will be healers.

Luke

Luke's account contains two chapters of material not found in *Mark*, detailing events before Jesus' adult baptism and ministry, including visions and portents anticipating the birth of John the Baptist as well as that of Jesus. It reports on Jesus' birth in Bethlehem and describes how shepherds in the fields, informed of the birth of the messiah by angels (divine messengers), come and pay their respects to the infant; Luke does not mention any wise men from the East, however; the *magi* (Persian for 'priests') are in *Matthew*. At a newborn-purification ceremony in the temple, a devout man is inspired to proclaim the infant to be the messiah. Luke's opening chapters also incorporate a number of hymns that were apparently already in use in the early Church.

These omens, portents, and declarations would have served to strengthen the case that Jesus was the long-awaited messiah. Whereas someone reading only Mark's account would likely understand Jesus to have embarked on his ministry following an adult decision marked by baptism, Luke's version of the story emphasizes that Jesus was born into his role and destined for it. Moreover, the signs and portents recounted by Luke would have appealed to gentiles as well as Jews, for such wonders were a standard part of the biographical traditions associated with important teachers and

healers in Greco-Roman as well as Hebrew antiquity. In fact, Luke appears to have had a Greek readership in mind, for the gospel is addressed to Theophilus—a Greek name meaning 'One who loves God'—and he presents his Jewish saviour as being important to the gentile world.

Luke also provides more information than Mark regarding the trial and crucifixion of Jesus. In his narrative, the charge against Jesus was that in claiming kingship, he was inciting rebellion. Although the Roman governor, Pilate, himself finds Jesus innocent of any crime, mob pressure demands execution, and Pilate yields to it. In *Luke* the Roman centurion who witnesses the crucifixion declares that Jesus is innocent, not (as in *Mark*) that he is a son of God. And after the discovery of the empty tomb, Jesus appears among his followers and speaks to them. Here again, as in his handling of the infancy narratives, Luke seems to consider signs and portents the most important evidence of Jesus' special role. References to the fulfillment of Jewish expectations are not numerous and appear only in statements attributed to Jesus himself.

Matthew

Matthew's account includes much of the same material as Luke's, but his focus is noticeably different. As a writer, Matthew has clearly designed his narrative to persuade a Jewish audience of the truth of Jesus' claim to be the messiah. It has been suggested that his account of Jesus' escape from the slaughter of infants by King Herod was specifically intended to echo the *Exodus* account of the Israelites' escape from the wrath of the Egyptian pharaoh. Thus in Matthew's narrative—and his alone—King Herod, on hearing of the birth of a child who is to be the king of the Jews, plots to kill every Jewish infant to protect his own reign. An angel warns Jesus' parents to take the child and escape to Egypt, where they remain until the tyrant's death. 'This,' writes Matthew, 'was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt have I called my son"'—an explicit reference

to a passage from the book of the prophet Hosea: 'When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.' Many scholars suspect that some details of Matthew's narrative were inspired by the existing Hebrew texts. On the other hand, many conservative Christians over the years have seen the content of the earlier texts as placed there by God expressly so that, when the time came, the words could be reinterpreted to reveal a meaning that had been divinely intended for them all along. Let us consider a few of the more challenging cases.

Matthew begins his account by tracing the genealogy of Jesus as the descendant of King David, in a lineage that runs through Joseph, the husband of Mary. However, Matthew then bypasses this genealogy and declares that Mary was already pregnant with Jesus before her marriage, with a child fathered by the Holy Spirit rather than Joseph. Part of Matthew's purpose in making this unusual claim is to associate Jesus' birth directly with a prophecy from the book of *Isaiah* (7: 14), which he quotes: 'Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel (which means, "God with us").'

In citing this passage, Matthew set the stage for one of Christianity's most problematic teachings, for although the Hebrew text of *Isaiah* mentions only a 'young woman', the Greek translation is ambiguous and can be read as 'virgin'. In fact, *Matthew* and *Luke* are the only sources for the doctrine of the virgin birth.

In his determination to link Jesus to Hebrew scripture, Matthew also makes some outright mistakes. To provide a scriptural context for Jesus' use of parables, for instance, he attributes the passage 'I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world' to 'the prophet' or (in some manuscripts) 'the prophet *Isaiah*'. when in fact it comes from

having trusted in God, saying that God should rescue him now. Jesus says he is thirsty. His hands and feet are pierced. Soldiers cast lots to divide up his clothing. And Jesus cries out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' This phrase comes from the opening line of *Psalms* 22, which also contains several other details of the Passion, including the piercing of hands and feet.

How many of these details would an eyewitness to the crucifixion actually have observed? Jesus may well have cried out that he was forsaken, and quite possibly he had in mind the rest of *Psalms* 22, which concludes by expressing trust in divine deliverance. Did the other events recorded actually 'happen', or were they supplied by association as scripture-conscious narrators like Matthew retold the narrative? This sort of question will probably never be settled to everyone's satisfaction.

If the gospel writers have added associations and details to their stories of Jesus, what did Jesus himself actually intend? On this question Christian opinion varies widely, but some points stand out with clarity. Jesus wanted his fellow Jews to live up to ideals already present in their tradition. Like the Hebrew prophets before him, he placed ethics ahead of ritual. He was ready to challenge traditional interpretations, repeatedly declaring, 'You have heard it said . . . , but I say to you' He shares a popular expectation that the 'kingdom of God', which will in some way restructure society, is at hand, and he was willing to die a martyr's death for the cause. This much probably was true of the historical Jesus. But his followers soon developed a preaching message that went much further in what it claimed for him.

John

Despite their differences, the three gospels sketched so far (*Matthew*, *Mark* and *Luke* in order

• Expulsion of Jews from Spain 1492

• Torah compiled by 1300

• Sabbatai Zvi 1666

• Shema Yisrael d. c. 1760 •

• Jewish emigration 1881 •

• Israeli statehood 1948 •

• Between Rome and Constantinople 1054

• Luther's 95 theses 1517

• The Fundamentals 1910 •

• Vatican Council concludes 1870 •

• Vatican Council concludes 1965 •

• Jewish victory over Byzantines 1071

• 1111

• Mongol invasion of Baghdad 1258

• as an Islamic state 1947 •

• Islamic regime in Iran 1979 •

to a passage from the book of the prophet Hosea: 'When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.' Many scholars suspect that some details of Matthew's narrative were inspired by the existing Hebrew texts. On the other hand, many conservative Christians over the years have seen the content of the earlier texts as placed there by God expressly so that, when the time came, the words could be reinterpreted to reveal a meaning that had been divinely intended for them all along. Let us consider a few of the more challenging cases.

Matthew begins his account by tracing the genealogy of Jesus as the descendant of King David, in a lineage that runs through Joseph, the husband of Mary. However, Matthew then bypasses this genealogy and declares that Mary was already pregnant with Jesus before her marriage, with a child fathered by the Holy Spirit rather than Joseph. Part of Matthew's purpose in making this unusual claim is to associate Jesus' birth directly with a prophecy from the book of *Isaiah* (7: 14), which he quotes: 'Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel (which means, "God with us").'

In citing this passage, Matthew set the stage for one of Christianity's most problematic teachings, for although the Hebrew text of *Isaiah* mentions only a 'young woman', the Greek translation is ambiguous and can be read as 'virgin'. In fact, *Matthew* and *Luke* are the only sources for the doctrine of the virgin birth.

In his determination to link Jesus to Hebrew scripture, Matthew also makes some outright mistakes. To provide a scriptural context for Jesus' use of parables, for instance, he attributes the passage 'I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world' to 'the prophet' or (in some manuscripts) 'the prophet *Isaiah*'. when in fact it comes from

having trusted in God, saying that God should rescue him now. Jesus says he is thirsty. His hands and feet are pierced. Soldiers cast lots to divide up his clothing. And Jesus cries out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' This phrase comes from the opening line of *Psalms* 22, which also contains several other details of the Passion, including the piercing of hands and feet.

How many of these details would an eyewitness to the crucifixion actually have observed? Jesus may well have cried out that he was forsaken, and quite possibly he had in mind the rest of *Psalms* 22, which concludes by expressing trust in divine deliverance. Did the other events recorded actually 'happen', or were they supplied by association as scripture-conscious narrators like Matthew retold the narrative? This sort of question will probably never be settled to everyone's satisfaction.

If the gospel writers have added associations and details to their stories of Jesus, what did Jesus himself actually intend? On this question Christian opinion varies widely, but some points stand out with clarity. Jesus wanted his fellow Jews to live up to ideals already present in their tradition. Like the Hebrew prophets before him, he placed ethics ahead of ritual. He was ready to challenge traditional interpretations, repeatedly declaring, 'You have heard it said . . . , but I say to you' He shares a popular expectation that the 'kingdom of God', which will in some way restructure society, is at hand, and he was willing to die a martyr's death for the cause. This much probably was true of the historical Jesus. But his followers soon developed a preaching message that went much further in what it claimed for him.

John

Despite their differences, the three gospels sketched so far (*Matthew Mark and Luke* in order

• Expulsion of Jews from Spain 1492

• Bible compiled by 1300

• Sabbatai Zvi 1666

• Shabbat Tov d. c. 1760 •

• Jewish emigration 1881 •

• Israeli statehood 1948 •

• Peace between Rome and Constantinople 1054

• Luther's 95 theses 1517

• The Fundamentals 1910 •

• First Vatican Council concludes 1870 •

• Second Vatican Council concludes 1965 •

• Seljuk Turkish victory over Byzantines 1071

• Al-Ghazali d. 1111

• Mongol invasion of Baghdad 1258

• Creation of Pakistan as an Islamic state 1947 •

• Khomeini heads Islamic regime in Iran 1979 •

to a passage from the book of the prophet Hosea: 'When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.' Many scholars suspect that some details of Matthew's narrative were inspired by the existing Hebrew texts. On the other hand, many conservative Christians over the years have seen the content of the earlier texts as placed there by God expressly so that, when the time came, the words could be reinterpreted to reveal a meaning that had been divinely intended for them all along. Let us consider a few of the more challenging cases.

Matthew begins his account by tracing the genealogy of Jesus as the descendant of King David, in a lineage that runs through Joseph, the husband of Mary. However, Matthew then bypasses this genealogy and declares that Mary was already pregnant with Jesus before her marriage, with a child fathered by the Holy Spirit rather than Joseph. Part of Matthew's purpose in making this unusual claim is to associate Jesus' birth directly with a prophecy from the book of *Isaiah* (7: 14), which he quotes: 'Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel (which means, "God with us").'

In citing this passage, Matthew set the stage for one of Christianity's most problematic teachings, for although the Hebrew text of *Isaiah* mentions only a 'young woman', the Greek translation is ambiguous and can be read as 'virgin'. In fact, *Matthew* and *Luke* are the only sources for the doctrine of the virgin birth.

In his determination to link Jesus to Hebrew scripture, Matthew also makes some outright mistakes. To provide a scriptural context for Jesus' use of parables, for instance, he attributes the passage 'I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world' to 'the prophet' or (in some manuscripts) 'the prophet *Isaiah*'. when in fact it comes from

having trusted in God, saying that God should rescue him now. Jesus says he is thirsty. His hands and feet are pierced. Soldiers cast lots to divide up his clothing. And Jesus cries out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' This phrase comes from the opening line of *Psalms* 22, which also contains several other details of the Passion, including the piercing of hands and feet.

How many of these details would an eyewitness to the crucifixion actually have observed? Jesus may well have cried out that he was forsaken, and quite possibly he had in mind the rest of *Psalms* 22, which concludes by expressing trust in divine deliverance. Did the other events recorded actually 'happen', or were they supplied by association as scripture-conscious narrators like Matthew retold the narrative? This sort of question will probably never be settled to everyone's satisfaction.

If the gospel writers have added associations and details to their stories of Jesus, what did Jesus himself actually intend? On this question Christian opinion varies widely, but some points stand out with clarity. Jesus wanted his fellow Jews to live up to ideals already present in their tradition. Like the Hebrew prophets before him, he placed ethics ahead of ritual. He was ready to challenge traditional interpretations, repeatedly declaring, 'You have heard it said . . . , but I say to you' He shares a popular expectation that the 'kingdom of God', which will in some way restructure society, is at hand, and he was willing to die a martyr's death for the cause. This much probably was true of the historical Jesus. But his followers soon developed a preaching message that went much further in what it claimed for him.

John

Despite their differences, the three gospels sketched so far (*Matthew*, *Mark*, and *Luke* in order

• Expulsion of Jews from Spain 1492

• Law compiled by 1300

• Sabbatai Zvi 1666

• Jewish law d. c. 1760

• Jewish emigration 1881

• Israeli statehood 1948

• Between Rome and Constantinople 105

• Luther's 95 theses 1517

• The Fundamentals 1910

• First Vatican Council concludes 1870

• Second Vatican Council concludes 1965

• Seljuk Turkish victory over Byzantines 1071

• Al-Ghazali d. 1111

• Mongol invasion of Baghdad 1258

• Creation of Pakistan as an Islamic state 1947

• Khomeini heads Islamic regime in Iran 1979

to a passage from the book of the prophet Hosea: 'When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.' Many scholars suspect that some details of Matthew's narrative were inspired by the existing Hebrew texts. On the other hand, many conservative Christians over the years have seen the content of the earlier texts as placed there by God expressly so that, when the time came, the words could be reinterpreted to reveal a meaning that had been divinely intended for them all along. Let us consider a few of the more challenging cases.

Matthew begins his account by tracing the genealogy of Jesus as the descendant of King David, in a lineage that runs through Joseph, the husband of Mary. However, Matthew then bypasses this genealogy and declares that Mary was already pregnant with Jesus before her marriage, with a child fathered by the Holy Spirit rather than Joseph. Part of Matthew's purpose in making this unusual claim is to associate Jesus' birth directly with a prophecy from the book of *Isaiah* (7: 14), which he quotes: 'Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel (which means, "God with us").'

In citing this passage, Matthew set the stage for one of Christianity's most problematic teachings, for although the Hebrew text of *Isaiah* mentions only a 'young woman', the Greek translation is ambiguous and can be read as 'virgin'. In fact, *Matthew* and *Luke* are the only sources for the doctrine of the virgin birth.

In his determination to link Jesus to Hebrew scripture, Matthew also makes some outright mistakes. To provide a scriptural context for Jesus' use of parables, for instance, he attributes the passage 'I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world' to 'the prophet' or (in some manuscripts) 'the prophet *Isaiah*', when in fact it comes from

having trusted in God, saying that God should rescue him now. Jesus says he is thirsty. His hands and feet are pierced. Soldiers cast lots to divide up his clothing. And Jesus cries out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' This phrase comes from the opening line of *Psalms* 22, which also contains several other details of the Passion, including the piercing of hands and feet.

How many of these details would an eyewitness to the crucifixion actually have observed? Jesus may well have cried out that he was forsaken, and quite possibly he had in mind the rest of *Psalms* 22, which concludes by expressing trust in divine deliverance. Did the other events recorded actually 'happen', or were they supplied by association as scripture-conscious narrators like Matthew retold the narrative? This sort of question will probably never be settled to everyone's satisfaction.

If the gospel writers have added associations and details to their stories of Jesus, what did Jesus himself actually intend? On this question Christian opinion varies widely, but some points stand out with clarity. Jesus wanted his fellow Jews to live up to ideals already present in their tradition. Like the Hebrew prophets before him, he placed ethics ahead of ritual. He was ready to challenge traditional interpretations, repeatedly declaring, 'You have heard it said . . . , but I say to you' He shares a popular expectation that the 'kingdom of God', which will in some way restructure society, is at hand, and he was willing to die a martyr's death for the cause. This much probably was true of the historical Jesus. But his followers soon developed a preaching message that went much further in what it claimed for him.

John

Despite their differences, the three gospels sketched so far (*Matthew*, *Mark*, and *Luke*, in order

to a passage from the book of the prophet Hosea: 'When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.' Many scholars suspect that some details of Matthew's narrative were inspired by the existing Hebrew texts. On the other hand, many conservative Christians over the years have seen the content of the earlier texts as placed there by God expressly so that, when the time came, the words could be reinterpreted to reveal a meaning that had been divinely intended for them all along. Let us consider a few of the more challenging cases.

Matthew begins his account by tracing the genealogy of Jesus as the descendant of King David, in a lineage that runs through Joseph, the husband of Mary. However, Matthew then bypasses this genealogy and declares that Mary was already pregnant with Jesus before her marriage, with a child fathered by the Holy Spirit rather than Joseph. Part of Matthew's purpose in making this unusual claim is to associate Jesus' birth directly with a prophecy from the book of *Isaiah* (7: 14), which he quotes: 'Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel (which means, "God with us").'

In citing this passage, Matthew set the stage for one of Christianity's most problematic teachings, for although the Hebrew text of *Isaiah* mentions only a 'young woman', the Greek translation is ambiguous and can be read as 'virgin'. In fact, *Matthew* and *Luke* are the only sources for the doctrine of the virgin birth.

In his determination to link Jesus to Hebrew scripture, Matthew also makes some outright mistakes. To provide a scriptural context for Jesus' use of parables, for instance, he attributes the passage 'I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world' to 'the prophet' or (in some manuscripts) 'the prophet *Isaiah*'. when in fact it comes from

having trusted in God, saying that God should rescue him now. Jesus says he is thirsty. His hands and feet are pierced. Soldiers cast lots to divide up his clothing. And Jesus cries out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' This phrase comes from the opening line of *Psalms* 22, which also contains several other details of the Passion, including the piercing of hands and feet.

How many of these details would an eyewitness to the crucifixion actually have observed? Jesus may well have cried out that he was forsaken, and quite possibly he had in mind the rest of *Psalms* 22, which concludes by expressing trust in divine deliverance. Did the other events recorded actually 'happen', or were they supplied by association as scripture-conscious narrators like Matthew retold the narrative? This sort of question will probably never be settled to everyone's satisfaction.

If the gospel writers have added associations and details to their stories of Jesus, what did Jesus himself actually intend? On this question Christian opinion varies widely, but some points stand out with clarity. Jesus wanted his fellow Jews to live up to ideals already present in their tradition. Like the Hebrew prophets before him, he placed ethics ahead of ritual. He was ready to challenge traditional interpretations, repeatedly declaring, 'You have heard it said . . . , but I say to you' He shares a popular expectation that the 'kingdom of God', which will in some way restructure society, is at hand, and he was willing to die a martyr's death for the cause. This much probably was true of the historical Jesus. But his followers soon developed a preaching message that went much further in what it claimed for him.

John

Despite their differences, the three gospels sketched so far (*Matthew Mark and Luke* in order

to a passage from the book of the prophet Hosea: 'When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.' Many scholars suspect that some details of Matthew's narrative were inspired by the existing Hebrew texts. On the other hand, many conservative Christians over the years have seen the content of the earlier texts as placed there by God expressly so that, when the time came, the words could be reinterpreted to reveal a meaning that had been divinely intended for them all along. Let us consider a few of the more challenging cases.

Matthew begins his account by tracing the genealogy of Jesus as the descendant of King David, in a lineage that runs through Joseph, the husband of Mary. However, Matthew then bypasses this genealogy and declares that Mary was already pregnant with Jesus before her marriage, with a child fathered by the Holy Spirit rather than Joseph. Part of Matthew's purpose in making this unusual claim is to associate Jesus' birth directly with a prophecy from the book of *Isaiah* (7: 14), which he quotes: 'Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel (which means, "God with us").'

In citing this passage, Matthew set the stage for one of Christianity's most problematic teachings, for although the Hebrew text of *Isaiah* mentions only a 'young woman', the Greek translation is ambiguous and can be read as 'virgin'. In fact, *Matthew* and *Luke* are the only sources for the doctrine of the virgin birth.

In his determination to link Jesus to Hebrew scripture, Matthew also makes some outright mistakes. To provide a scriptural context for Jesus' use of parables, for instance, he attributes the passage 'I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world' to 'the prophet' or (in some manuscripts) 'the prophet *Isaiah*', when in fact it comes from

having trusted in God, saying that God should rescue him now. Jesus says he is thirsty. His hands and feet are pierced. Soldiers cast lots to divide up his clothing. And Jesus cries out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' This phrase comes from the opening line of *Psalms* 22, which also contains several other details of the Passion, including the piercing of hands and feet.

How many of these details would an eyewitness to the crucifixion actually have observed? Jesus may well have cried out that he was forsaken, and quite possibly he had in mind the rest of *Psalms* 22, which concludes by expressing trust in divine deliverance. Did the other events recorded actually 'happen', or were they supplied by association as scripture-conscious narrators like Matthew retold the narrative? This sort of question will probably never be settled to everyone's satisfaction.

If the gospel writers have added associations and details to their stories of Jesus, what did Jesus himself actually intend? On this question Christian opinion varies widely, but some points stand out with clarity. Jesus wanted his fellow Jews to live up to ideals already present in their tradition. Like the Hebrew prophets before him, he placed ethics ahead of ritual. He was ready to challenge traditional interpretations, repeatedly declaring, 'You have heard it said . . . , but I say to you' He shares a popular expectation that the 'kingdom of God', which will in some way restructure society, is at hand, and he was willing to die a martyr's death for the cause. This much probably was true of the historical Jesus. But his followers soon developed a preaching message that went much further in what it claimed for him.

John

Despite their differences, the three gospels sketched so far (*Matthew*, *Mark*, and *Luke*) in order

to a passage from the book of the prophet Hosea: 'When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.' Many scholars suspect that some details of Matthew's narrative were inspired by the existing Hebrew texts. On the other hand, many conservative Christians over the years have seen the content of the earlier texts as placed there by God expressly so that, when the time came, the words could be reinterpreted to reveal a meaning that had been divinely intended for them all along. Let us consider a few of the more challenging cases.

Matthew begins his account by tracing the genealogy of Jesus as the descendant of King David, in a lineage that runs through Joseph, the husband of Mary. However, Matthew then bypasses this genealogy and declares that Mary was already pregnant with Jesus before her marriage, with a child fathered by the Holy Spirit rather than Joseph. Part of Matthew's purpose in making this unusual claim is to associate Jesus' birth directly with a prophecy from the book of *Isaiah* (7: 14), which he quotes: 'Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel (which means, "God with us").'

In citing this passage, Matthew set the stage for one of Christianity's most problematic teachings, for although the Hebrew text of *Isaiah* mentions only a 'young woman', the Greek translation is ambiguous and can be read as 'virgin'. In fact, *Matthew* and *Luke* are the only sources for the doctrine of the virgin birth.

In his determination to link Jesus to Hebrew scripture, Matthew also makes some outright mistakes. To provide a scriptural context for Jesus' use of parables, for instance, he attributes the passage 'I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world' to 'the prophet' or (in some manuscripts) 'the prophet *Isaiah*', when in fact it comes from

having trusted in God, saying that God should rescue him now. Jesus says he is thirsty. His hands and feet are pierced. Soldiers cast lots to divide up his clothing. And Jesus cries out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' This phrase comes from the opening line of *Psalms* 22, which also contains several other details of the Passion, including the piercing of hands and feet.

How many of these details would an eyewitness to the crucifixion actually have observed? Jesus may well have cried out that he was forsaken, and quite possibly he had in mind the rest of *Psalms* 22, which concludes by expressing trust in divine deliverance. Did the other events recorded actually 'happen', or were they supplied by association as scripture-conscious narrators like Matthew retold the narrative? This sort of question will probably never be settled to everyone's satisfaction.

If the gospel writers have added associations and details to their stories of Jesus, what did Jesus himself actually intend? On this question Christian opinion varies widely, but some points stand out with clarity. Jesus wanted his fellow Jews to live up to ideals already present in their tradition. Like the Hebrew prophets before him, he placed ethics ahead of ritual. He was ready to challenge traditional interpretations, repeatedly declaring, 'You have heard it said . . . , but I say to you' He shares a popular expectation that the 'kingdom of God', which will in some way restructure society, is at hand, and he was willing to die a martyr's death for the cause. This much probably was true of the historical Jesus. But his followers soon developed a preaching message that went much further in what it claimed for him.

John

Despite their differences, the three gospels sketched so far (*Matthew*, *Mark* and *Luke*) in order

many conservative Christians over the years have seen the content of the earlier texts as placed there by God expressly so that, when the time came, the words could be reinterpreted to reveal a meaning that had been divinely intended for them all along. Let us consider a few of the more challenging cases.

Matthew begins his account by tracing the genealogy of Jesus as the descendant of King David, in a lineage that runs through Joseph, the husband of Mary. However, Matthew then bypasses this genealogy and declares that Mary was already pregnant with Jesus before her marriage, with a child fathered by the Holy Spirit rather than Joseph. Part of Matthew's purpose in making this unusual claim is to associate Jesus' birth directly with a prophecy from the book of *Isaiah* (7: 14), which he quotes: 'Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel (which means, "God with us").'

In citing this passage, Matthew set the stage for one of Christianity's most problematic teachings, for although the Hebrew text of *Isaiah* mentions only a 'young woman', the Greek translation is ambiguous and can be read as 'virgin'. In fact, *Matthew* and *Luke* are the only sources for the doctrine of the virgin birth.

In his determination to link Jesus to Hebrew scripture, Matthew also makes some outright mistakes. To provide a scriptural context for Jesus' use of parables, for instance, he attributes the passage 'I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world' to 'the prophet' or (in some manuscripts) 'the prophet *Isaiah*', when in fact it comes from *Psalms* 78.

The historical episode of deepest significance for Christians is the **Passion** (suffering) and death of Jesus on the cross. Bystanders mock Jesus for

comes from the opening line of *Psalms* 22, which also contains several other details of the Passion, including the piercing of hands and feet.

How many of these details would an eyewitness to the crucifixion actually have observed? Jesus may well have cried out that he was forsaken, and quite possibly he had in mind the rest of *Psalms* 22, which concludes by expressing trust in divine deliverance. Did the other events recorded actually 'happen', or were they supplied by association as scripture-conscious narrators like Matthew retold the narrative? This sort of question will probably never be settled to everyone's satisfaction.

If the gospel writers have added associations and details to their stories of Jesus, what did Jesus himself actually intend? On this question Christian opinion varies widely, but some points stand out with clarity. Jesus wanted his fellow Jews to live up to ideals already present in their tradition. Like the Hebrew prophets before him, he placed ethics ahead of ritual. He was ready to challenge traditional interpretations, repeatedly declaring, 'You have heard it said . . . , but I say to you' He shares a popular expectation that the 'kingdom of God', which will in some way restructure society, is at hand, and he was willing to die a martyr's death for the cause. This much probably was true of the historical Jesus. But his followers soon developed a preaching message that went much further in what it claimed for him.

John

Despite their differences, the three gospels sketched so far (*Matthew*, *Mark*, and *Luke*, in order of their appearance in the New Testament) share a good deal in common when they are contrasted with John's, the fourth gospel. Scholars therefore refer to the first three as the 'synoptic gospels'. The

term 'synoptic' (from Greek, 'viewing together') can be confusing. It does not mean that they offer a brief summary or synopsis. Rather, it implies that they have a unified perspective or viewpoint. John's gospel is a biography of another sort.

We have described the gospel accounts as interpretations. Even in Mark's relatively straightforward account, the selection and arrangement of material amounts to an interpretation. And we have seen how careful Matthew was to present Jesus' life as the fulfillment of earlier prophecies. Compared with these narratives, however, John's gospel is a major theological essay.

His purpose is to set out not just the narrative itself but its cosmic significance. Far from simply recounting the teachings and actions of Jesus, John proclaims Jesus' identity as messiah and saviour. Regarding his purpose as a writer, John is candid at the end of his twentieth chapter:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name (*John* 20: 30-1).

In his opening passage, or prologue, John shows his theological interest at once. 'In the beginning,' he writes (recalling the opening words of *Genesis* in the Hebrew scriptures) 'was the *logos*, and the *logos* was with God, and the *logos* was God; all things were made through him.' *Logos* is a Greek term with an important range of meaning in the philosophy and religion of the Hellenistic world at the time of Jesus. It meant 'word' not just as a vocabulary item, but the whole idea of divine intelligence and purpose. A God who can create the world through his word who can command the world through his word, and who can redeem the world through his word, is what John wants his hearers to appreciate here. This *logos* is the 'word' with a capital W.

A few verses later in the prologue, John declares Jesus to be the **incarnation** of that divine Word: 'The *logos* became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.' For John, the eternal divine purpose has manifested itself as a personal presence in human form, in the recent experience of the community. He goes on to emphasize the distinction that the early Christian movement as a Jewish sect was making between its message and the traditional Jewish law, the contrast between law and gospel: 'For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.'

Here John is in step with the writings of an early convert, Paul, who probably contributed as much as anyone to the shaping of the early Christian message. Like Paul, John is now using the title 'Christ' (the Greek translation of the Hebrew word for messiah, 'anointed') practically as a second personal name for Jesus. John's view of the significance of Jesus is encapsulated in a frequently quoted passage: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life' (*John* 3: 16).

As the gospel continues, the idea that Jesus is the messiah becomes something more than John's personal interpretation: Jesus himself repeatedly declares it in his own words. Whereas Mark's Jesus will neither confirm nor deny that he is the long-awaited king, John's Jesus has no such reluctance. Even in the first chapter, when a questioner declares him to be the son of God, Jesus responds: 'Truly, truly I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.'

Repeatedly throughout John's gospel, Jesus declares himself to be the means of salvation in passages that begin with 'I am':

I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst (6: 35).

I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life (8: 12).

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep (10: 11).

I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die (11: 25-6).

I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me (14: 6).

I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing (15: 5).

John's Jesus is more than a teacher with an insight into human nature; he is the definitive link between God and humanity.

Salvation, then, is John's goal for us humans, who need to be delivered from the flaws and constraints of our condition. He is especially concerned with our mortality, and he offers the hope of life. Paul, as we shall see, is also concerned with our sinfulness, and offers the hope of **justification**—being 'set right' with God. In the final analysis, only God can save us from sin and death, that is, from the limitations of our human existence.

A theological issue has been raised, to which subsequent thinkers would devote centuries of reflection. How is it that the transcendent God enters into the human condition to perform these saving acts? Jesus' status as a manifestation of God was eventually spelled out in the doctrine of the **Trinity**, after the middle of the third century, but the link between the divine and the human in Jesus continued to be a doctrinal issue well into the fifth century. And the process by which human sin is conquered or atoned for

remained a central doctrinal question throughout the centuries.

From Sect to Church

The small circle of disciples who were left to carry on after Jesus' execution bore little resemblance to the institution that within four centuries would become the state church of the Roman Empire. The disciples were peasants and fishermen from rural Galilee, a small Jewish sect whose teacher had stirred in them the hope that low-status and marginalized people (the poor, women, Samaritans, sinners) had a place in God's plan. They expected the end of the age, and the glorious return of their teacher, to come at any moment.

Various explanations are offered for how early Christianity transformed itself from a small sect within Judaism to an independent missionary religion. Not surprisingly, the New Testament book *Acts of the Apostles*, which is Luke's sequel to his gospel, describes a miraculous event. In *Acts* 2 the disciples have gathered to celebrate the festival of Shavuoth, seven weeks after the Passover crucifixion, when the Holy Spirit appears to them as a rush of wind and fire. Suddenly they are able to speak and be understood in diverse languages—and therefore to preach to all people.

Acts also provides more everyday information about the **apostles**, as the original Christians are called. Chapter 15, for instance, tells of a genuine debate over whether prospective members who are gentiles need to be circumcised as Jews in order to join the movement. This debate would have taken place around the year 49, when the Christians had been preaching for nearly two decades. In *Acts*, Peter and James, Jesus' brother or kinsman, who are depicted as leaders among the apostles, steer a middle course between exclusive Jewish and gentile definitions of the movement. (The answer comes in *Galatians* 2, where the Christians reach a consensus that circumcision is not required.)

In his writings, Luke makes hardly any explicit reference to the Zealot-inspired rebellion against

Roman rule in 66–73—in the course of which the Temple was destroyed—even though it must have been the century's watershed political event for any Jew in Palestine. We may speculate that the Christians would have sought to distance themselves from Jewish nationalist ambitions, and to some extent from identification with Judaism altogether.

Hints of such an effort can be seen in Luke's description of Jesus entering Jerusalem for his final week in the city:

And when he drew near and saw the city he wept over it, saying, 'Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace! But now they are hid from your eyes. For the days shall come upon you, when your enemies will cast up a bank about you and surround you, and hem you in on every side, and dash you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave one stone upon another in you . . .'
(Luke 19: 41–4).

With the destruction of the city fresh in his mind, it is not surprising that Luke depicted Jesus and his followers as mild-mannered in word and deed. But there are hints to the contrary in *Mark* 14 and *Matthew* 26. In their accounts of Jesus' arrest, Mark and Matthew say that the disciples were armed, that they resisted arrest, and that Peter used his sword to cut off the ear of one of the arresting men.

Paul

The principal influence on the direction of the early Church was not one of Jesus' unprepossessing band of twelve, but an educated and sophisticated convert who took the name Paul. A cosmopolitan figure with the privileged status of a Roman citizen, Paul was a Pharisee from the diaspora Jewish community in Tarsus (on the southern coast of what is now Turkey) who had gone to Jerusalem for religio-legal study.

Paul had not known Jesus personally. Yet—as Luke tells it—while Paul was travelling to Damascus for the purpose of persecuting Christians, he experienced a vision of the post-resurrection Jesus that turned his life upside-down. For the next quarter century he travelled tirelessly around the eastern Mediterranean, initially preaching to the diaspora Jewish communities, but eventually reaching out to gentiles as well, teaching that all were heirs in Christ to the promises of God.

Paul corresponded with the scattered communities of Christian converts in letters whose content ranges from personal greetings through liturgical blessings to essays on questions of theology. His letters, written before the gospels themselves were composed, constitute the earliest Christian literature, and their influence on Christian theology can hardly be overestimated.

In his letters, Paul refers to himself as the apostle to the gentiles. He rejects the idea that in order to follow Jesus one must first become a Jew and follow the various regulations of Pharisaism. For Paul, it is not through observance of ritual laws or even correct moral conduct that salvation is attained, but rather through faith in Jesus and the divine grace that comes through him. Divine grace, transmitted through Christ, frees people from bondage to the law of Moses. Paul expresses his sense of this freedom with the certainty of intense personal experience.

At the same time, Paul takes up some broader issues with his gentile audience. To educated citizens of the Greco-Roman world, goodness amounted to virtue, that is, the cultivation of right moral conduct. But action that is morally correct by gentile standards is no more effective than action that is ritually correct by Pharisaic standards. Basically, human beings are inherently self-willed and sinful, as the Church was later to spell out in its doctrine of 'original sin'. It was in order to liberate humans from their sinful nature, Paul says, that God sent Jesus to die a self-sacrificing death. Fifteen centuries later, the idea that salvation—redemption from sin—depends solely on

trusting faith would be central to the Protestant Reformation.

Another major theme in subsequent Christian theology that can be traced to Paul is the contrast between life 'in the spirit'—centred on lasting religious values such as faith, hope, and love—and life 'in the flesh': the pursuit of what passes away, including worldly ambition or pleasure. Whether or not it was Paul's intention, his rejection of 'life in the flesh' was interpreted as meaning that the body must be controlled or repressed—a concept that would become a major issue in later Christian theology.

Thanks to Paul's voyages, Christian communities were established in many of the port cities of the Roman Empire by the time he died, about the year 65. At the beginning of his involvement with Christianity, Paul had assisted the people who stoned the apostle Stephen to death, by holding their coats. Now, at the end, Paul was to become a martyr (etymologically, a 'witness') himself, executed in Rome as part of the emperor Nero's persecution of Christians.

Marcion and the Canon

If we identify Paul as the architect of Christianity, then Marcion (d. c. 160) might be described as the author of a blueprint that was rejected. Marcion, who lived a century after Paul, was a wealthy ship-owner, the son of a bishop, from the region of the Black Sea who made his way to Rome. Although his teachings led to his **excommunication** (formal expulsion) from the Church in 144, this did not deter him from making his views known.

In his theology, Marcion takes Paul's ideas to astonishing lengths. Paul's contrast between law and gospel becomes for Marcion a contrast between the Old Testament and New, not just between one scripture and another but between one god and another. Marcion sees the 'Demiurge', the creator God of the Hebrew scriptures, who gives the law to Moses, as stern and fearsome, capricious, despotic, and cruel. The coming of Jesus reveals an

utterly different God, a God of love and mercy, who will take the place of the Demiurge.

In that case, of course, the Hebrew scriptures must be rejected as well. In *Matthew* 5, Jesus says that he comes not to destroy 'the law and the prophets' (i.e., scripture) but to fulfill them. Marcion, however, rejected *Matthew* as well as the entire Hebrew canon. He accepted as scripture only ten letters by Paul and an edited text of Luke's gospel and *Acts*.

Marcion had a following in some circles, particularly in Syria, but it appears to have died out by the fifth century. His principal influence can be seen in the responses he drew from other Christian theologians. Emphatically, they rejected Marcion's view and affirmed that the Christian message was indeed rooted in the faith of ancient Israel. Staking its claim to the heritage of Moses and the prophets, the early Church established its credentials as a religion with a legitimate historical pedigree.

By raising questions about Christianity's Jewish past and scriptural authority, Marcion pushed the Church to ratify the Hebrew scriptures as a part of the Christian message. Thus even though his ideas were rejected, he contributed to the Church's eventual definition of its scriptural canon: the list of writings that make up the Old and New Testaments.

The Gnostics

Paul was not the only writer to distinguish between the spirit and the flesh, nor was Marcion the only one to distinguish between negative and positive divine principles. Another spiritual and doctrinal challenge to early Christianity came from the movement known as **Gnosticism**.

The Gnostics claimed to have privileged, secret knowledge. (The Greek word *gnosis* means 'knowledge'.) To their Christian adherents they offered an inner meaning of Christianity (and to Jewish Gnostics, of Judaism). At first they were not a separate community, but rather a school of thought within the network of the Christian churches.

The Gnostic philosophical narrative is dualistic: the divine powers of good are opposed by demonic forces of evil, and spirit is in a cosmic struggle with matter. In the beginning, the material world was created through the entrapment or fall and fragmentation of spirit into matter. Depending on the particular account, spirit is the victim of temptation or treachery or attack. In any case, there will be battles before the cosmos is redeemed and spirit is restored to its proper place.

The Christian Gnostics understood Jesus as an emissary from the realm of the spirit who took on the appearance of human form for his earthly life but did not take on material existence. In their view, his purpose was to transmit to humans the saving secret knowledge of how to rise above this life to the realm of spirit. This view also implied a practical agenda for religious life: if matter was evil, then physical comforts and satisfactions, even for the purpose of procreation, were to be avoided (or at least ignored) in favour of abstinence, celibacy, and asceticism.

Later Christian centuries knew about Gnostic teachings largely from the arguments against them in the writings of early Christian theologians. Critics of Gnostic teachings, who termed them doctetic (from Greek *dokesis*, 'appearance'), argued that to treat Jesus as a spiritual apparition was to rob Christianity of the extraordinary power associated with the doctrine of divine incarnation in human form.

Grounds for a more sympathetic view of Gnostic ideas became available to historians in the mid-twentieth century, when an important collection of Gnostic manuscripts on papyrus was discovered at Nag Hammadi in Egypt. Among the Nag Hammadi texts is the *Gospel of Thomas*, one of many writings, Gnostic and otherwise, that did not win ratification as scripture by the Church at large. Although it was probably written after Jesus' death, it reports his sayings as though he were still alive and does not describe his death. In it the disciples ask, 'Tell us how our end will be.' Jesus replies, 'Have you already discovered the beginning, that

you now seek the end?' This may be a cryptic reference to the complex Gnostic teachings about the origin of the world.

One small Gnostic community survives today. Concentrated, until recently, in southern Iraq, the Mandeans (from Aramaic and Syriac *manda*, 'knowledge') came to be known as 'Christians of St John' because of their reverence for John the Baptist. A separate religion of the Gnostic type arose in third-century Iran. Mani, who was raised in Gnostic circles, declared himself to be a prophet, produced scriptural writings, and organized an independent community. Mani was a synthesizer who claimed to sum up the teachings not only of Jesus but of Zoroaster and the Buddha. **Manichaeism**, the tradition of 'the living Mani', spread through much of the Roman Empire and competed with Christianity for adherents in the fourth and fifth centuries. It won converts in Egypt and North Africa, including the theologian Augustine, who was a Manichaean before he turned to Christianity.

The development of Christian doctrine responded to the challenges first of Gnostic and then of Manichaean teachings. Christians came to stress the unity and sovereignty of God, the humanity of Jesus, and the goodness of life in the material world. Nonetheless, some Gnostic ideas, such as the reality of the devil as an antagonist to God and the value of asceticism, continued to find a place in Christianity.

✠ CRYSTALLIZATION

Emerging Church Organization

Although spontaneous at first, the Christian movement became formally organized during the early centuries. Some role specialization developed, with teachers providing leadership in established groups, probably on the pattern of synagogue study, and evangelists spreading the message to form new groups. Before long, formal ordination

was required to perform ritual and administrative functions. The most basic ordained position was that of deacon, and women as well as men were so designated in the early Church. During the first two centuries, women apparently performed a variety of ecclesiastical roles, but in later ages even the role of deacon came to be monopolized by men.

Apostle, deacon, and elder (*presbyter* in Latin) are the only leadership roles mentioned in the New Testament, but sometime between the writing of the New Testament books and the early Christian councils the priest emerged as the person in charge of rituals and instruction in Christian congregations. Although the role of deacon survived, deacons were subordinate to priests. The ranking priest in a particular political jurisdiction was known as a **bishop** (from Greek *episkopos*, 'supervisor'). His was the responsibility to ordain deacons and priests, symbolized by 'laying hands' on the head of the inductee. Similarly, although any Christian could induct someone into the faith by performing the symbolic bathing ritual, it was the bishop, making his rounds in his diocese (administrative district), who would confirm the baptism of new initiates.

The hierarchy of priests was further developed to include the role of archbishop: the bishop chosen to supervise all the bishops in a large region. By the third century, four even larger episcopal jurisdictions or 'sees' had gained prominence in the Roman Empire because of the importance of their cities: Alexandria in Egypt, Jerusalem, Antioch in Syria, and Rome in Italy. The bishops of these cities came to be known as **patriarchs**. A fifth patriarch was added in Constantinople when the imperial capital moved there in the fourth century. The boundaries and lines of authority within the Church were drawn along the lines existing in the political arena.

To give legitimacy to their claims of authority, Christians often invoked the apostles. Thus an early affirmation of faith was called the Apostles' Creed, and the ordination lineage of bishops was

referred to as apostolic succession. Various nations claimed that their peoples had been converted by the missionary activity of one or another of the apostles—Egypt by Mark, India by Thomas, and Armenia by Thaddeus and Bartholomew.

Saints

Paul referred to all loyal members of the Church collectively as 'saints', but in time that title came to be reserved for individuals who were considered channels of divine grace, or who had distinguished themselves by displaying an unusual degree of piety. Contemporaries of Jesus, including his parents, his faithful disciples, the four gospel writers, and the early missionaries, became saints as a matter of course. Persons who accepted martyrdom—the ultimate sacrifice for the cause—were singled out, as were leading theologians and bishops in the early Christian centuries. The saints even included a pre-Christian figure (John the Baptist) and a non-human (the archangel Michael). Later, the Church would develop elaborate criteria for bestowing the title of saint on a deceased Christian.

Asceticism

In the eastern Mediterranean, people wishing to retreat from society to practise contemplation or austerity moved to the margin of the desert. The Hellenistic Jewish sect widely identified as the Essenes built their community in the desert, near the shores of the Dead Sea. John the Baptist and his movement were associated with the desert. In the gospels, it is to the desert that Jesus withdraws to wrestle with the question of his own calling, and it is in the desert that he resists the devil's temptation.

In India, centuries before Jesus, a Hindu man whose sons were grown and able to care for the family might embark on a new life as a forest-dwelling, contemplative ascetic. Among Buddhists and Jains, even young men and women were encouraged to depart the householder life and follow the rules for living as monks or nuns for the

rest of their lives. There are even suggestions that these Indian spiritual practices might have served as models for early Christian monasticism, since Buddhist inscriptions in India claim contact with the world of the Greeks, but such suggestions remain undocumented.¹

Several factors likely contributed to the emergence of Christian asceticism. No doubt some of the early ascetics wanted to prepare for the end of the world and the return of Christ, which they expected imminently, and the practice of a strict discipline was widely believed to deepen spiritual experience. During the periods of persecution in the second and third centuries, life in the desert became an alternative to martyrdom. And in more secure periods, to give up comfort or wealth was an effective way to make a public statement repudiating the laxity and complacency of the wider community, particularly after the fourth century, when, with imperial patronage, Christianity became fashionable and even began to acquire some opulent trappings.

The origins of Christian monasticism are traced to Antony, who was said to have lived 105 years (c. 251–356) in Egypt. The account of his life attributed to the Alexandrian theologian Athanasius describes the spiritual temptations that Antony sought to overcome by withdrawing to the solitude of the desert frontier:

The enemy would suggest filthy thoughts, but Antony would dissipate them by his prayers. The wretched devil even dared to masquerade as a woman by night. It was as though demons were breaking through the four walls of the little chamber and bursting through them in the forms of beasts and reptiles. All at once the place was filled with the phantoms of lions, bears, leopards, bulls, of serpents and asps, of scorpions and wolves. Antony said: 'It is a sign of your helplessness that you ape the forms of brutes' (Meyer 1950: 22–8).

Antony and others who pursued their discipline in solitude were termed hermits, from the Greek *eremos*, 'solitary'. Noteworthy among them was Simeon (c. 390–459) in northern Syria. After having already been a hermit for ten years, in his mid-twenties Simeon built a pillar on which he would sit for the rest of his life, using a basket to haul up the supplies provided by his admirers. At first low, the pillar was gradually raised to a height of 18.5 m (60 ft). Simeon's example of dedication attracted converts and pilgrims, and other 'stylites' (pole-sitters) copied him.

Although the monastic life came to be permanent and corporate, its origins appear to have been temporary and sometimes individual. As the Greek word *monos* ('one', 'alone') suggests, monasticism entailed a life apart from the wider society. In time, however, the 'desert fathers' took up locations near one another for safety and mutual support. Such groupings were at first informal. In Egypt, Pachomius established nine monasteries for men in the first half of the fourth century, and his sister Miryam (Mary) two for women. Basil, a fourth-century bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia (east-central Turkey), drew up regulations for monks that included vows of poverty and chastity, specified hours of prayer, and assigned manual tasks. Some communities in or near towns or cities dedicated themselves to social service. Monasticism was coming to be formalized as a corporate discipline and an integral part of Christianity.

Persecution and Martyrdom

Roman society had civic gods and rituals that the population at large was expected to support. But the Christian minority stood aloof from the public religion, which they rejected as the worship of idols. From their point of view, they were keeping faith with their heritage of exclusive Hebraic monotheism, but from the Roman perspective they were guilty of insubordination. To the

technically justifiable charges of insubordination the state from time to time added false accusations of incest, cannibalism, and black magic—practices that some Romans believed would provoke the gods to mete out punishment in the form of epidemics and natural disasters. As a consequence, Christians in the first and second centuries were sometimes subject to persecution by local mobs.

In the third century, however, the empire was in a crisis of deepening military, administrative, and economic instability. The emperor Decius, seeking to revitalize his shaky regime, commanded public sacrifices to the Roman civic gods, with the penalty of death or imprisonment for anyone who would not comply. Throughout the empire, in the years 250–1, Christians were systematically persecuted as a matter of state policy, and in 257–9 the emperor Valerian conducted another campaign of official persecution. It was in this period that acceptance of martyrdom became the ultimate test of faith for Christians who modelled their own conduct on the self-sacrificing death of their lord, confident that they would be rewarded with eternal life in fellowship with him.

'The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church,' said Tertullian (c. 160–c. 220), who came from Carthage in North Africa and was the first theologian to write in Latin. He had a point. By making martyrs of Christians, the Roman state helped to build a tradition of bravery and fidelity that the Christians could be proud of. According to a number of accounts, the example of steadfast faith set by the martyrs helped to persuade many pagans to become Christian. The last and fiercest of the official persecutions of the Christians came in 303 under the emperor Diocletian. For the next nine years, Christians were killed, church properties destroyed, and Christian sacred writings burned. But the 'Great Persecution' was no more successful in suppressing the Christians than the earlier campaigns had been.

Imperial Christianity

Constantine

A shift of policy under Diocletian's successor forever changed Christianity's place in the world. Constantine (r. 306–37) gradually abandoned the persecution policy, issuing an edict in 313 that gave Christians liberty to practise their religion, and eventually granting them state support and patronage. What accounted for this dramatic shift?

Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea in Palestine, who lived through the transition, attributed it to God's providence. According to his *Life of Constantine*, the emperor's **conversion** to Christianity was sparked by a vision he experienced on the eve of a decisive battle in 312, in which a cross appeared in the heavens, accompanied by the words 'conquer in this sign'. The following day, his troops won the battle and he gained control of the western half of the empire.

Modern historians have speculated about Constantine's motives, however. The allegedly sudden vision does not square with the gradual pace of change in imperial policy. Christian symbols appeared on Constantine's coinage alongside pagan symbols for some time, and it was several years before the pagan symbols disappeared. Sunday did not become a public holiday until 321, and even then it coincided with popular worship of the sun, a kind of nature monotheism. Finally, even though his mother was a Christian, Constantine himself was not baptized until he was on his deathbed. On the other hand, defenders of his sincerity argue that baptism in his day was understood to bring about a total cleansing from sin that guaranteed salvation; therefore it was typically postponed until the last moment, so that the dying person would enter heaven with the cleanest slate possible.

Whatever his religious motives, Constantine must have been a shrewd enough politician to recognize that the Church as an institution had the potential to serve as a much-needed stabilizing force. The Church was dispersed throughout

distinctions may seem excessive today, but at the time, when Christianity was emerging as the empire's establishment religion, doctrine was a highly political matter. Doctrinal issues were rallying points around which rivalries for Church leadership crystallized. The problem was not so much that the differences between competing views were unbridgeable as that the people involved were unwilling to bridge them.

Because of the political implications, the public was intensely interested in theological issues. The climate in the new capital, Constantinople, was portrayed by one fourth-century bishop as follows:

If in this city you ask anyone for change, he will discuss with you whether God the Son is begotten or unbegotten. If you ask whether the bread is any good, you will receive the answer that 'God the Father is greater, God the Son is less.' If you say that you need a bath, you will be told that 'there was nothing before God the Son was created' (adapted from Frend 1965: 186–7).

In a time when doctrine is still developing, **orthodoxy**—'right teaching'—does not exist: it can be identified only in retrospect, once we know which view prevailed. Orthodoxy is the consensus that can be affirmed—with the wisdom of hindsight—as having been intended all along.

By the same token, an idea that was generally accepted at one moment might well be heresy a few years later. Around the year 260, Paul of Samosata (a town now in eastern Turkey) was chosen bishop of Antioch, partly because of his theological acumen. He had a binitarian theology of God as father and son. He described God as father, wisdom, and Word, and believed that the Word rested on, but was not identical with, Jesus. But Trinitarian theology was developing, and in 268 the very views that had favoured his appointment were condemned as heretical: accordingly, he was deposed.

In the early fourth century, a priest named Arius (c. 250–c. 336) was put in charge of a major church in Alexandria, Egypt. Likely taking his cue from the prologue to *John*, which seems to suggest that God and the Word (*logos*, here identified with Christ), were distinct, Arius proposed that the son of God was not eternal, but was created within time by the father as part of the creation of the world; in other words, 'there was an existence when the Son was not'. This meant that the son was not eternal by nature, but was subject to change. Another Alexandrian, however, took the opposite view. Athanasius (c. 296–373) asserted the coeternity and coequality of father and son, underlining the power of the son to be a saviour.

Constantine, hoping that a unified Church would promote stability in his empire, called a meeting of the bishops in Nicaea, not far from Constantinople, in 325. The dispute between Arius and Athanasius was part of the agenda, and the decision went against Arius. But the matter was not laid to rest. Arian views continued to attract support, and they continued to surface in various compromise formulas for half a century before they were definitively rejected under the emperor Theodosius I at the Council of Constantinople in 381. Although Arianism survived for a while among the Teutonic tribes beyond the northern boundary of the empire, where it was carried by a Gothic-born missionary named Ulfilas, its influence came to an end with the conversion of the Teutonic Franks to Catholicism in 495.

Meanwhile, no sooner had the dust settled on the debate over the Trinity in 381 than a corollary to Athanasius' position cried out for attention: if, as the new orthodoxy had it, the eternal son was coequal with the father, then how did the eternal divinity of Jesus relate to his historical humanity? Trinitarian doctrine had preoccupied the fourth century; Christological doctrine—doctrine regarding the incarnation of God in Christ—was to become the obsession of the fifth.

Regional divisions developed around three positions on this question. The incarnate Christ could be

- two separate persons, one divine and one human (as the **Nestorian churches**, stretching eastward across Asia, believed);
- one person, with only a divine nature (as the **Monophysites**, from Ethiopia and Egypt to Syria and Armenia, believed); or
- one person, but with both a divine nature and a human nature (as the Greek- and Latin-speaking churches believed).

Each of these positions has continued to find adherents, from the fifth century to the present day.

✠ DIFFERENTIATION

Despite the many controversial issues of the early centuries—Christianity's relationship to Jewish scripture and law, the divine versus human nature of Jesus, the trinitarian understanding of God—the majority of Christians had remained members of a single 'catholic' (universal) church. Gradually, though, the divisions became more serious, and they involved growing numbers of Christians.

Alexandrian versus Antiochene Christology

The split that produced the Nestorian churches was the result in part of political rivalry and in part of a doctrinal dispute between theologians in Alexandria in Egypt and others in Antioch in Syria. The Alexandrians, such as Cyril (d. 444), understood Christ in terms reminiscent of the prologue to *John*: the eternal *logos* or Word was incarnated in the human person of Jesus, and therefore experienced all the changes that he did: birth, the gaining of wisdom, suffering, death.

By contrast, the Antiochenes, such as Theodore of Mopsuestia (in what is today southern Turkey; c. 350–428), argued that the *logos* was an entity distinct from the human Jesus, over whom it exercised a controlling influence. These differences came to a head when the theologians tried to define the status of Mary, the mother of Jesus. For the Alexandrians, Mary was the *theotokos* (in Greek, 'bearer of God'). But for the Antiochenes, she was the *christotokos* ('bearer of Christ'): the mother of the man Jesus but not of the eternal son of God. What was at stake here was not merely doctrine; the allegiance of popular devotion was at stake if one sided with Antioch against the Alexandrian *theotokos* concept.

Nestorianism

Politically, the rivalry was between Cyril, the patriarch of Alexandria, and Nestorius (d. 451), patriarch of Constantinople. (Although Nestorianism was named after him, he was more a sponsor than an author of the Antiochene position.) Soon after his appointment in 428, Nestorius caused a furor by supporting the Antiochenes who rejected the view of Mary as the mother of God. Within three years, at the Council of Ephesus in 431, he was deposed; in 435 the emperor Theodosius II, who had appointed him bishop, condemned his writings; and the following year Nestorius was banished to a monastery in southern Egypt.

Despite the victory of the Alexandrians, Nestorian Christianity persisted in the east, eventually spreading from its centre in northeastern Syria (today in southeastern Turkey) across central Asia as far as western China and the southwestern coast of India.

The Monophysites

After the Council of Ephesus in 431, the doctrinal pendulum swung towards the position of Cyril of Alexandria. A key figure in this development was Eutyches, who headed a large monastery near Constantinople and had influential connections at the court of Theodosius II. Eutyches taught that

