



THIRD EDITION

# Christianity

AN INTRODUCTION

Alister E. McGrath

WILEY Blackwell



Christianity

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# Christianity

*An Introduction*

THIRD EDITION

Alister E. McGrath

**WILEY** Blackwell

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# Brief Contents

Preface	xii
List of Illustrations and Maps	xiii
Introduction	1
1 Jesus of Nazareth and the Origins of Christianity	3
2 The Christian Bible	28
3 Christian Creeds and Beliefs	54
4 Christian History: An Overview	121
5 Denominations: Contemporary Forms of Christianity	199
6 The Life of Faith: Christianity as a Living Reality	220
7 Christianity and the Shaping of Culture	251
Conclusion: Where Next?	278
Further Reading	280
Sources of Quotations	284
Index	291





# Contents

Preface	xii
List of Illustrations and Maps	xiii
Introduction	1
1 Jesus of Nazareth and the Origins of Christianity	3
<i>The Significance of Jesus of Nazareth for Christianity</i>	3
<i>The Sources of Our Knowledge about Jesus of Nazareth</i>	5
<i>Jesus of Nazareth in His Jewish Context</i>	7
<i>The Gospels and Jesus of Nazareth</i>	9
<i>The Birth of Jesus of Nazareth</i>	10
<i>The Early Ministry of Jesus of Nazareth</i>	13
<i>The Teaching of Jesus of Nazareth: The Parables of the Kingdom</i>	15
<i>The Crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth</i>	17
<i>The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth</i>	19
<i>Events and Meanings: The Interpretation of the History of Jesus</i>	21
<i>The New Testament Understandings of the Significance of Jesus</i>	22
<i>Jesus of Nazareth and Women</i>	25
<i>The Reception of Jesus of Nazareth outside Judaism</i>	26
2 The Christian Bible	28
<i>The Old Testament</i>	30
<i>Major Themes of the Old Testament</i>	32
<i>The creation</i>	32
<i>Abraham: Calling and covenant</i>	32
<i>The exodus and the giving of the Law</i>	33
<i>The establishment of the monarchy</i>	36
<i>The priesthood</i>	37
<i>Prophecy</i>	37
<i>Exile and restoration</i>	38

<i>The New Testament</i>	40
<i>The gospels</i>	41
<i>The New Testament letters</i>	44
<i>The fixing of the New Testament canon</i>	45
<i>The Christian Understanding of the Relation of the Old and New Testaments</i>	47
<i>The Translation of the Bible</i>	49
<i>The Bible and Tradition</i>	51
<b>3 Christian Creeds and Beliefs</b>	54
<i>The Emergence of Creeds</i>	55
<i>What Is Faith?</i>	59
<i>Faith and reason</i>	61
<i>Can God's existence be proved?</i>	63
<i>The Christian Understanding of God</i>	65
<i>Christian analogies for God</i>	66
<i>God as Father</i>	67
<i>A personal God</i>	69
<i>God as almighty</i>	71
<i>God as spirit</i>	72
<i>The doctrine of the Trinity</i>	74
<i>God as the creator</i>	78
<i>The Christian Understanding of Humanity</i>	82
<i>Humanity and the "image of God"</i>	83
<i>Humanity, the fall, and sin</i>	84
<i>Jesus of Nazareth</i>	86
<i>Early Christian approaches to the identity of Jesus of Nazareth</i>	87
<i>The Arian controversy and the incarnation</i>	88
<i>The incarnation: The Chalcedonian definition</i>	89
<i>Jesus of Nazareth as mediator between God and humanity</i>	90
<i>Islamic criticisms of the Christian understanding of Jesus of Nazareth</i>	91
<i>The Christian Understanding of Salvation</i>	92
<i>New Testament images of salvation</i>	93
<i>Christ the victor: The defeat of death and sin</i>	94
<i>Christ the harrower of hell: Atonement as restoration</i>	96
<i>Christ the redeemer: Atonement as satisfaction</i>	98
<i>The death of Christ as a perfect sacrifice</i>	99
<i>Christ the lover: Atonement and the enkindling of love</i>	100
<i>Salvation and the "threefold office of Christ"</i>	101
<i>Grace</i>	102
<i>The Pelagian controversy of the fifth century</i>	103
<i>The Reformation debates of the sixteenth century</i>	105
<i>The Church</i>	106
<i>The unity of the church</i>	106
<i>The holiness of the church</i>	107
<i>The catholicity of the church</i>	109
<i>The apostolicity of the church</i>	110

<i>The Sacraments</i>	112
<i>What is a sacrament?</i>	112
<i>The function of sacraments</i>	113
<i>Debates about baptism</i>	115
<i>Debates about the eucharist</i>	116
<i>The Christian Hope</i>	117
<i>The New Testament and Christian hope</i>	117
<i>The nature of the resurrection body</i>	118
<i>Christian burial or cremation?</i>	119
<i>Conclusion</i>	120
<b>4 Christian History: An Overview</b>	121
<i>The Early Church, c. 100–c. 500</i>	122
<i>The apostolic age</i>	122
<i>Early Christianity and the Roman empire</i>	123
<i>Early Christian worship and organization</i>	125
<i>Women and early Christianity</i>	127
<i>The conversion of the Emperor Constantine</i>	129
<i>The cities and the rise of monasticism</i>	131
<i>The fall of the Roman empire</i>	133
<i>The Middle Ages and the Renaissance, c. 500–c. 1500</i>	135
<i>The development of Celtic Christianity</i>	135
<i>The rise of the monastic and cathedral schools</i>	137
<i>The “Great Schism” between East and West (1054)</i>	138
<i>The crusades: Spain and the Middle East</i>	139
<i>Academic theology: The rise of scholasticism</i>	141
<i>Secular and religious power in the Middle Ages</i>	142
<i>Popular religion: The cult of the saints</i>	143
<i>The rise of the Ottoman empire: The fall of Constantinople (1453)</i>	145
<i>The rebirth of western culture: The Renaissance</i>	146
<i>Competing Visions of Reform, c. 1500–c. 1650</i>	148
<i>Christian expansion: Portuguese and Spanish voyages of discovery</i>	149
<i>The Lutheran Reformation</i>	151
<i>The Calvinist Reformation</i>	153
<i>The Radical Reformation (Anabaptism)</i>	154
<i>The Catholic Reformation</i>	155
<i>The Reformation in England</i>	156
<i>The Council of Trent</i>	157
<i>The Society of Jesus</i>	158
<i>The Wars of Religion</i>	158
<i>Puritanism in England and America</i>	159
<i>A Protestant religion of the heart: Pietism</i>	160
<i>American Protestantism and the Great Awakening</i>	162
<i>The Modern Period, c. 1650–1914</i>	163
<i>The rise of indifference to religion in Europe</i>	164
<i>The Enlightenment: The rise of rationalism</i>	164

<i>Christianity in the American Revolution</i>	166
<i>Church and state in America: The “wall of separation”</i>	167
<i>The French Revolution and “dechristianization”</i>	168
<i>Orthodox resurgence: The Greek War of Independence</i>	169
<i>A new expansion of Christianity: The age of mission</i>	170
<i>The shifting fortunes of Catholicism</i>	173
<i>The First Vatican Council: Papal infallibility</i>	175
<i>Theological revisionism: The challenge of modernism</i>	176
<i>The Victorian crisis of faith</i>	177
<i>Pentecostalism: The American origins of a global faith</i>	179
<i>The Twentieth Century, 1914 to the Present</i>	180
<i>The Armenian genocide of 1915</i>	181
<i>The Russian Revolution of 1917</i>	182
<i>America: The fundamentalist controversy</i>	184
<i>The German church crisis of the 1930s</i>	186
<i>The 1960s: The emergence of a post-Christian Europe</i>	188
<i>The Second Vatican Council: Reform and revitalization</i>	189
<i>Christianity and the American Civil Rights Movement</i>	191
<i>Faith renewed: John Paul II and the collapse of the Soviet Union</i>	192
<i>Challenging the church’s establishment: Feminism and liberation theology</i>	194
<i>Christianity beyond the West: The globalization of faith</i>	196
<i>Conclusion</i>	198
<b>5 Denominations: Contemporary Forms of Christianity</b>	199
<i>Catholicism</i>	199
<i>Eastern Orthodoxy</i>	203
<i>Protestantism</i>	205
<i>Anglicanism</i>	206
<i>The Baptists</i>	207
<i>Lutheranism</i>	209
<i>Methodism</i>	209
<i>Presbyterianism and other reformed denominations</i>	211
<i>Pentecostalism</i>	212
<i>Evangelicalism</i>	213
<i>The Ecumenical Movement and the World Council of Churches</i>	214
<i>The Erosion of Protestant Denominationalism in the United States</i>	216
<i>Conclusion</i>	218
<b>6 The Life of Faith: Christianity as a Living Reality</b>	220
<i>Gateways to Exploring the Life of Faith</i>	220
<i>Christian Communities: The Life of the Church</i>	222
<i>Christian weddings</i>	222
<i>Christian funerals</i>	223
<i>The Service of Nine Lessons and Carols</i>	225
<i>Christian Worship</i>	226
<i>Prayer</i>	228

<i>Praise</i>	229
<i>The public reading of the Bible</i>	229
<i>Preaching</i>	230
<i>The reciting of the creeds</i>	230
<i>The Sacraments</i>	231
<i>Baptism</i>	232
<i>The eucharist</i>	234
<i>Rhythms and Seasons: The Christian Year</i>	236
<i>Advent</i>	238
<i>Christmas</i>	238
<i>Epiphany</i>	239
<i>Lent</i>	240
<i>Holy Week</i>	241
<i>Easter</i>	243
<i>Ascension</i>	245
<i>Pentecost</i>	245
<i>Trinity</i>	245
<i>The Structuring of Time: The Monastic Day</i>	246
<i>The Structuring of Space: Pilgrimage and the Christian Life</i>	247
<i>Conclusion</i>	250
7 <i>Christianity and the Shaping of Culture</i>	251
<i>Christianity and Culture: General Considerations</i>	252
<i>Christian Symbolism: The Cross</i>	256
<i>Christian Art</i>	259
<i>Icons</i>	262
<i>Church Architecture</i>	263
<i>Stained Glass</i>	268
<i>Christian Music</i>	270
<i>Christianity and Literature</i>	271
<i>Christianity and the Natural Sciences</i>	275
<i>Conclusion</i>	277
<i>Conclusion: Where Next?</i>	278
<i>Further Reading</i>	280
<i>Sources of Quotations</i>	284
<i>Index</i>	291

# Preface

The study of Christianity is one of the most fascinating, stimulating, and intellectually and spiritually rewarding undertakings available to anyone. This book aims to lay the foundations for such a study, opening doors to discovering more about the world's leading religion. It can only hope to whet its readers' appetites and lead them to explore Christianity in much greater detail.

Anyone trying to sense the modern world or the process by which it came into existence needs to understand something about the Christian faith. Christianity is by far the largest religion in the world, with somewhere between 2,500 and 1,750 million followers, depending on the criteria employed. To understand the modern world, it is important to understand why Christianity continues to be such an important presence in, for example, the United States and is a growing presence in China.

This book sets out to provide an entry-level introduction to Christianity, understood both as a system of beliefs and as a social reality. It is an introduction in the proper sense of the term, in that it has been written on the basis of the assumption that its readers know little or nothing about the history of Christianity, its practices and beliefs. Every effort has been made to keep the language and style of this book as simple as possible.

Alistair McGrath  
Oxford University

# List of Illustrations and Maps

- 1.1 The angel Gabriel declaring to Mary that she is to bear the savior of the world, by Dante Gabriel Rossetti; this incident is related early in Luke's gospel. Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882), *Ecce Ancilla Domini* (*The Annunciation*), 1850. Oil on canvas, mounted on wood, 72 × 42 cm. Source: Erich Lessing/AKG Images. 11
- 1.2 The birth of Christ, as depicted by Fra Angelico in a mural in the monastery of San Marco, Florence, between 1437 and 1445. Fra Giovanni da Fiesole (1387–1455) and workshop, *Birth of Christ, with the Saints Catherine of Alexandria and Peter the Martyr* (1437–1445). Fresco, 193 × 164 cm. Florence, S. Marco, upper storey, dormitory, cell No.5 (east corridor). Source: Rabatti-Domingie/ AKG Images. 12
- 1.3 Jesus of Nazareth calling Peter and Andrew by the Sea of Galilee (1481), by Domenico Ghirlandaio. Domenico Ghirlandaio (Domenico Bigordi) (1449–1494), *The Calling of SS. Peter and Andrew*, 1481. Fresco. Source: Vatican Museums and Galleries/Bridgeman Art Library. 14
- 1.4 The Galilean ministry of Jesus (map). 16
- 1.5 Piero della Francesca's depiction of the resurrection of Christ, c. 1460–1464. Piero della Francesca (c. 1410/20–1492), *The Resurrection of Christ* (c. 1460–1464). Fresco (removed), 225 × 200 cm. Sansepolcro, Pinacoteca Comunale. Source: Rabatti-Domingie/AKG Images. 20
- 2.1 The route of Israel's exodus from Egypt and conquest of Canaan (map). 35
- 2.2 The Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the greatest wonders of the Ancient World; after Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach, c. 1700. Source: AKG Images. 39
- 2.3 The gospel of Mark: a manuscript illumination from the Lindisfarne Gospels, c. 698–700. Manuscript illumination, Irish–Northumbrian,

- c. 698/700. Mark the Evangelist. From the Lindisfarne Gospels, written and illuminated by Bishop Eadfrith in Lindisfarne monastery. Source: British Library/AKG Images. 42
- 2.4 The frontispiece to the King James Bible of 1611, widely regarded as the most influential English translation of the Bible. *The Holy Bible*, published by Robert Barker, 1611. Source: Alamy. 50
- 3.1 One of the most famous attempts to represent the Trinity: Andrei Rubljov's icon of 1411, depicting the three angels with Abraham, widely interpreted as an analogue of the Trinity. Illustration: Rubljov, Andrei c. 1360/70–1427/30, *The Holy Trinity (The Three Angels with Abraham)* (1411). Icon painting. Moscow, Tretjakov Gallery. Source: AKG Images. 76
- 3.2 William Blake's watercolor "The Ancient of Days" (c. 1821), depicting God in the act of creating the world. Blake, William (1757–1827), "The Ancient of Days," frontispiece of *Europe: A Prophecy* (c. 1821). Relief etching, pen, and watercolor. Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge, UK. Source: Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge/ Bridgeman Art Library. 80
- 3.3 Michelangelo's fresco *The Creation of Adam* (1511–1512) from the Sistine Chapel, Rome. Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564). Fresco, 280 × 570 cm. Rome, Vatican, Cappella Sistina (Sistine Chapel), 4th image. Source: Erich Lessing/AKG Images. 82
- 3.4 Karl Barth (1886–1968). Source: Ullstein Bild/AKG Images. 85
- 3.5 Mosaic depicting Jesus Christ, in the Byzantine church of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, c. 1260. Istanbul/Constantinople (Turkey), Hagia Sophia, North Gallery. *Deesis (Christ with Mary and John the Baptist)*. Mosaic, Byzantine, c. 1260. Source: Erich Lessing/AKG Images. 90
- 3.6 A triumphal procession in Rome celebrating Titus' victory over the Jews in AD 70; carved on the Arch of Titus, triumphal arch in the Forum Romanum erected in AD 81. The New Testament portrays Jesus of Nazareth as a triumphant victor over sin and death. Rome (Italy), the Arch of Titus, section of the left internal relief: Triumphal procession with the seven-armed candlestick from the Temple of Solomon. Source: Erich Lessing/AKG Images. 95
- 3.7 The Harrowing of Hell, as depicted in Jean de Berry's *Petites Heures* (14th century). Harrowing of Hell, folio 166 from Jean de Berry's *Petites Heures*. Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, BNF Lat 18104. 97
- 4.1 Constantine, the first Christian Roman emperor. Source: Nimatallah/ AKG Images. 130
- 4.2 The Abbey of Montecassino. Source: Pirozzi/AKG Images. 133
- 4.3 A Celtic Cross from Ireland, widely regarded as a symbol of the distinctive forms of Christianity that emerged in this region. Source: Juergen Sorges/AKG Images. 137



4.4	Thomas Aquinas, from the series of portraits of famous men in the Palazzo Ducale in Urbino (c. 1476), by Justus van Gent (active between 1460 and 1480). Source: Erich Lessing/AKG Images.	142
4.5	Erasmus of Rotterdam, c. 1525/30, after the painting (1517) by Quentin Massys (1465/66–1530). Source: Pirozzi/AKG Images.	147
4.6	Portrait of Martin Luther (1528); from the studio of Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553). Source: AKG Images.	152
4.7	Portrait of the Genevan reformer John Calvin. Source: AKG Images.	153
4.8	Henry VIII (1540), by Hans Holbein the Younger (1497–1543). Source: Nimatallah/AKG Images.	156
4.9	Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus (1556), by Jacopino del Conte (1510–1598). Source: AKG Images.	158
4.10	Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1870–1924), leader of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. Source: AKG Images.	182
4.11	The opening of the second session of the Second Vatican Council, September 29, 1963, with Pope Paul VI (formerly Giovanni Battista Montini). Source: Keystone/Getty Images	190
6.1	A Russian Orthodox wedding at the Church of the Transfiguration, St. Petersburg. Source: © Robert Harding Picture Library Ltd/Alamy.	223
6.2	Christian baptism by total immersion in the Indian Ocean in the island of Zanzibar. Source: © World Religions Photo Library/Alamy.	233
6.3	The Last Supper celebrated and commemorated in the eucharist; according to Jacopo da Ponte Bassano (c. 1510–1592). Source: Cameraphoto/AKG Images.	235
6.4	Queen Elizabeth II hands out Maundy Money during the Royal Maundy Service held at Liverpool's Anglican Cathedral in 2004. The purses containing the coins were handed to 78 men and 78 women, the number selected to mark the Queen's 78th year. Source: Phil Noble/PA Archives/Press Association Images.	243
6.5	Santiago de Compostela, the center of a major pilgrimage route in northern Spain. Source: Andrea Jemolo/AKG Images.	249
7.1	Saint Augustine of Hippo in a monastic cell, as depicted by Sandro Botticelli, c. 1495. Source: Rabatti-Domingie/AKG Images.	253
7.2	Ground plan of York Minster, one of the greatest Gothic cathedrals of Europe. Note especially its cruciform structure. Source: © The Dean & Chapter of York.	258
7.3	The crucifixion, as depicted by Matthias Grünewald in the Isenheim Altarpiece, executed c. 1513–1515. Source: Erich Lessing/AKG Images.	261
7.4	Byzantine icon of the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, showing Mary with the infant Jesus. Source: Cameraphoto/AKG Images.	263
7.5	The south transept of the cathedral of Notre Dame de Chartres, one of the best examples of Gothic church architecture. The façade was completed in the mid-thirteenth century. Chartres (Dep. Eure-et-Loir, France),	

- Cathédrale Notre-Dame (1134–1514; choir 1194–1221, transept after 1194–c. 1250, nave c. 1200–1220, west façade 1134–1514). Exterior: façade of the south transept. Source: Archives CDA/St-Genès/AKG Images. 265
- 7.6 The pulpit in St. Peter's Cathedral, Geneva. Source: J.-P. Scherrer/ Geneva 2005. 267
- 7.7 The great rose window above the main portal of the cathedral of Notre Dame, Strasbourg, France, one of the finest examples of stained glass in Europe. Strasbourg (Alsace, France), Minster: Cathédrale Notre-Dame (12th–15th century). West façade (planned in 1276 by Erwin von Steinbach): Window rose above the main portal. Source: Hedda Eid/AKG Images. 269

# Introduction

At some point around AD 60, the Roman authorities woke up to the fact that there seemed to be a new secret society in the heart of their city, which was rapidly gaining recruits. They had not the slightest idea what it was all about, but it seemed to involve some mysterious and dark figure called Chrestus or Christus (Latinized form of the ancient Greek word Christos, “anointed”) as the cause of all the trouble. His origins lay in one of the more obscure and backward parts of the Roman empire. But who was he? And what was this new religion all about? Was it something they should be worried about, or could they safely ignore it?

It soon became clear that this new religion might have the potential to cause real trouble. The great fire that swept through Rome at the time of the Emperor Nero in AD 64 was conveniently blamed on this new religious group. Nobody liked them much, and they were an obvious scapegoat for the failings of the Roman authorities to deal with the fire and its aftermath. The Roman historian Tacitus (c. 56–c. 117) gave a full account of this event some fifty years after the fire. He identified this new religious group as “the Christians,” a group that took its name from someone called “Christus,” who had been executed by Pontius Pilate back in the reign of Tiberius. This “pernicious superstition” had found its way to Rome, where it had gained a huge following. It is clear that Tacitus understands the word “Christian” to be a term of abuse.

Yet, muddled and confused though the official Roman accounts of this movement may be, they were clear that the movement centered in some way on that figure called Christus. It was not regarded as being of any permanent significance, being seen as something of a minor irritation. At worst, it was a threat to the cult of the emperor (or emperor worship). Yet, three hundred years later, this new religion had become the official religion of the Roman empire.

So what was this new religion? What did it teach? Where did it come from? Why was it so attractive? How did it come to be so influential in its first few centuries? What happened after it had achieved such success at Rome? And how has it shaped the lives of individuals and the history of the human race? It is these questions that the present book will begin to answer.

So where do we start? What is the most helpful entry point to a study of Christianity? Looking at Christian beliefs? Exploring the history of the church? Surveying Christian art? In the end, the best place to begin is the historical event that got all of these under way. It is impossible to think or talk about any aspect of the Christian faith without talking about Jesus of Nazareth. He is the center from which every aspect of the Christian faith radiates outward. We therefore turn immediately to Jesus and his significance for Christianity, to begin our exploration there.

# Jesus of Nazareth and the Origins of Christianity

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

## The Significance of Jesus of Nazareth for Christianity

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## The Sources of Our Knowledge about Jesus of Nazareth

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

We shall consider both these questions in the present chapter.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

## Jesus of Nazareth in His Jewish Context

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## The Gospels and Jesus of Nazareth

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **The Birth of Jesus of Nazareth**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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



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

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

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