

CHRISTIANITY

The Life and Commemoration of Jesus

Lecture 16

Christianity is the largest, most widespread religion in the world. The element uniting the tradition is the figure of Jesus of Nazareth, born approximately 2,000 years ago as Yeshua, a Galilean Jew. How Jesus became Christ the Lord is one of the greatest stories ever told. So our study must begin with the life of Jesus.

The New Testament

- Most of what we know about Jesus comes from the biblical New Testament. Christianity began as a form of Judaism.
- During the period in which Jesus lived, many Jews looked for the imminent coming of the Messiah prophesied in the Hebrew Bible. It was into this world that Jesus was born, and as he taught, he began to attract followers. Jesus lived his entire life as a Jew, and all of his earliest followers were Jews.
- The scripture of the early followers of Jesus was the Hebrew Bible, the scripture of the Jewish people. This remains a part of scripture for Christians, who call it the Old Testament. Christian Bibles, therefore, contain the Hebrew Bible, often additional noncanonical Jewish texts called the Apocrypha, and the 27 books of the New Testament.
- The New Testament consists of four types of books—four Gospels containing narratives of the life of Jesus; a narrative called Acts of the Apostles; letters, called Epistles; and the book of Revelation.
- Most of our knowledge about the life and death of Jesus comes in particular from what are called the three synoptic Gospels, since they share so much material about the story of Jesus: Mark, Matthew, and Luke. The fourth Gospel, John, is quite different in

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content and style and more focused on theological reflections and less on narrative than the others.

The Gospels

- The gospels were written between the years 50 and 110 C.E., so none were written down during Jesus's life. After a long period of debate, the New Testament achieved its current form around the 4th century.
- The word "gospel" means "good news." The gospels deliver a message about hope and salvation, focusing on certain periods and events in the life of Jesus to deliver the message most powerfully.
- The events of Jesus's life that are the focus of the Gospel narratives are his birth, his baptism, his ministry (what he taught and preached), his miracles and healing work, and especially the final week of his life, which culminates in an account of his crucifixion and resurrection.

The Birth of Jesus

- When Mary was engaged to Joseph, the angel Gabriel told her that she would give birth by power of the Holy Spirit. Thus, Mary is understood to be a virgin when she gives birth to Jesus. When Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem, there was no room for them at the inn, and Jesus, whose name means "God saves," was born in a stable.
- The two periods of the year most sacred to Christians center on Jesus's birth and his death and resurrection. The series of holidays surrounding his birth include Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany.
- Advent culminates in Christmas itself, celebrated on December 25. The actual date of Jesus's birth is unknown. It is likely that this date, occurring near the Winter Solstice, was chosen to fold the pagan solstice ritual into the Christian celebration.

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Jesus's Adult Life

- John the Baptist was a prophet performing baptisms to cleanse people of sin and prepare them for the coming kingdom of God. At age 30, Jesus was baptized by John. John recognized that Jesus was someone very special, and told Jesus, "I should be baptized by you."
- Baptism is the ritual by which one is brought into a relationship with Christ and the church. A major division within Christianity is whether baptism should take place at birth or whether it should be offered only to those old enough to make a conscious commitment.
- Jesus's teaching demonstrates the inversion of traditional values. In a society that emphasized purity, Jesus touched lepers and associated with outcasts; in a strongly patriarchal society, Jesus welcomed women as disciples.
- Jesus stood with the poor, the weak, and the sick and called on the wealthy and powerful to repent and reform. Jesus's power was shown through selfless service, from washing disciples' feet and healing the sick to the ultimate sacrifice on the cross.
- Jesus taught a radical ethics, one that called on people to turn away from revenge and retributive justice to an ethic of love and forgiveness. He challenged his followers to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you," to suffer a blow rather than return it.
- Jesus's miracles reflected this spirit as well. While some of them were demonstrations of his power over the natural world, such as walking on water, many miracles were to help others—healing the sick (even raising the dead), casting out demons, and turning a few loaves of bread and pieces of fish into an abundant meal for multitudes.

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The Crucifixion and Afterward

- Given the concerns that authorities had about Jesus, it was dangerous for him to go to Jerusalem. Nevertheless, on Passover, a Jewish pilgrimage festival, Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey as a crowd praised and blessed him.
- In the Passion narrative, an account of his final days and death, Jesus seemed to know that his final days lay ahead. In fact, the plan to betray him had already been set in motion, as one of his disciples, Judas, had sold information that would lead to Jesus's arrest by the Romans.
- Jesus has one final meal with his 12 apostles. This is known as the Last Supper, which is understood to have been a Passover Seder. This meal becomes the origin for the sacrament of Holy Communion. At the Last Supper, a popular subject for Christian art for centuries (most famously portrayed in Leonardo da Vinci's 1498 painting), Jesus predicts that one of his apostles will betray him.
- Virtually all Christians observe the Eucharist, or Holy Communion, a ritual meal. For Catholics, the bread and wine is, in its essence, Christ's body and blood. A priest brings this about through consecration of the bread and wine.



The Crucifixion of Christ, commemorated by Christians on Good Friday, is the origin of the main Christian symbol, the cross.

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- When congregants receive the bread and wine, they are both experiencing communion with Christ and remembering the event of the Last Supper. This ritual is a central feature of Catholic worship services, called masses.
- After his betrayal by Judas, Jesus undergoes trials by both the Jewish authorities, where he is charged with blasphemy, and then by Roman governor Pontius Pilate. Pilate, in response to the demands of a crowd, gives Jesus over to Roman soldiers, who beat him and bring him to the hill of Golgotha to be crucified.
- The event of Jesus's crucifixion is commemorated in the Christian observance of Good Friday, or Holy Friday, the Friday before Easter Sunday. During Lent, the period before Easter Sunday, Christians in some denominations, especially Catholic, stage a Passion play, a dramatic reenactment of the passion of Jesus Christ (the trial, suffering, crucifixion, and death; "Passion" here is connected with the root of "passive," "to suffer").
- The crucifixion provides the most powerful symbol of Christianity—the cross. It evokes Jesus's selfless sacrifice and that reminds Christians that the instrument of death—in fact death itself—along with sin, have been conquered through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.
- After Jesus's death, his body was placed in a sealed and guarded tomb. Many of the disciples were grief-stricken, frightened, and disheartened.
- Women followers of Jesus, including Mary Magdalene, went to the tomb to prepare his body for burial rituals, but they found the tomb was empty. They were visited by angels who told them Jesus rose from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus is celebrated on Easter Sunday, the Sunday following Good Friday.
- After this, Jesus makes a number of appearances to disciples to remove doubt.

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Major Christian Observances

- The second major period of observance, one associated with the end of Jesus's life, begins with Lent, a period of 40 days (from Ash Wednesday to Easter) where Christians repent and renounce as a form of fasting to share in Christ's sacrifice. The period of 40 days evokes that 40 days that Jesus spent fasting in the desert, where he overcame the temptations by Satan.
- The last week of Lent, which culminates in Easter Sunday, is called Holy Week. The Thursday before Easter is known as Maundy Thursday. On the Friday before Easter Sunday, Christians observe Good Friday (or Holy Friday). Catholics see this as a fast day, with only one full meal and abstention from meat.
- Easter celebrates the resurrection of Christ and is thus the most theologically significant holiday in Christianity. This is the holiday in which the promise of triumph over death and the attaining of eternal life through the sacrifice of Christ are celebrated.
- The two most celebrated Christian holidays—Christmas and Easter—are both syncretic, combining pre-Christian pagan elements (such as trees, mistletoe, bunnies, and eggs).
- The Christmas tree, an evergreen that was originally a pagan nature symbol, can be seen as representing the eternal life promised by Jesus. Easter, which occurs in the spring, brings in pagan celebrations of the vernal equinox, which highlights the return of life after the cold of winter.

The Meaning of Jesus

- The story of Jesus has served as an inspiration and an example to Christians for the last 2,000 years. At the same time, there is a deep mystery in the story, and it raises a question with which Christians have grappled ever since: Who—and what—was Jesus?
- To most Christians, Jesus is a savior. Jesus's death and resurrection ushered in a kingdom of God on Earth in which people can

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The Jewish and Roman Worlds of Jesus

Lecture 18

Almost from the beginning, the relationship between this god and his chosen people was tempestuous, to say the least. Poets and prophets likened it to a marriage—a marriage that was sometimes tender and loving, and sometimes on the verge of divorce.

Jesus of Nazareth lived at the intersection of two very different cultures: ancient Judaism and the Roman Empire, each of which decisively shaped his life and teachings. Ancient Judaism was more than our modern idea of a "religion"; it was a culture, touching every aspect of life. Judaism traces its roots to a nomad named Abram who responded to the call of the god Yahweh to leave his home in Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq) and journey to Canaan—later known as Palestine—where the state of Israel is now located. Over time, the 12 Jewish tribes living in Canaan were forged into the kingdom of Israel. But the cultural and political tensions between the groups became too great, and the kingdom was eventually split into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah, from which the terms "Jew" and "Judaism" were derived. But the citizens of both kingdoms regarded themselves as the children of Abraham and as the chosen people of the god Yahweh. The people of both kingdoms likewise blamed their many misfortunes on their own lack of fidelity to their god.

Between the 8th and 1st centuries B.C.E., the people of Israel and Judah suffered under repeated invasions by the armies of the massive empires that surrounded them, including Babylon, Assyria, Persia, Macedonia, and finally Rome, which greatly changed their way of life. Religion in the Jewish homeland between the Babylonian Exile and the time of Jesus was not at all homogenous. The most prominent sects were the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Essenes. Pharisaism arose in the 2nd century B.C.E. as a movement among lay Jews who believed in the authority of what was called the Oral Torah (later preserved in writing as the Mishnah) and were resistant to the idea of the priesthood. They also believed in the resurrection of the dead; an idea that developed rather late in ancient Judaism. The Sadducees,

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In essence, held the opposite positions—supporting the priesthood and the written Torah and opposing the doctrine of resurrection. Rabbinic Judaism of today—Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform—is directly descended from Pharisaism. The Essenes were also active in this period, living in small, quasi-monastic, apolitical communities and focusing their practices on maintaining ritual purity. Each of these sects was a part of the world of Jesus.

The Roman Empire was the latest in a centuries-long series of foreign conquerors of this tiny region.

In 63 B.C.E., the Romans captured Jerusalem, and the Jewish homeland became a client state of Rome, with profound ramifications. Roman domination

exacerbated the existing class divisions and tensions within Jewish society. The small, wealthy, privileged Jewish ruling class, on behalf of their Roman overlords, levied heavy taxes upon the tenant farmers, fishermen, craftsmen, and servants who made up 90 percent of the population. Peasant life was precarious, and life expectancy for a peasant was a mere 30 years. This tenuous existence became even more so under the reign of King Herod the Great, one of the client rulers appointed by Rome. Despite his Jewish heritage, he was not particularly sensitive to the plight of other Jews. He confiscated peasant lands, essentially forcing the population into serfdom. When Herod died in 4 B.C.E., revolts—some led by organized groups like the Zealots and Sicarii—erupted throughout the kingdom and legions of imperial soldiers were dispatched to silence the rebels. Two thousand insurgents were crucified in Jerusalem, but the resistance movement continued to grow.

After Herod's death, Palestine was ruled Roman governors, including the famous Pontius Pilate. The chief priest of Jerusalem and his associates, known as the elders, were appointed by Rome and asked to manage internal Jewish affairs and to maintain peace. Their position brought them great power and wealth, yet their status was extremely precarious. This was Palestine in the time of Jesus: a world full of tension, a world on edge. ■

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Important Terms

Essenes: A Jewish sect active between the 2nd century B.C.E. and 1st century C.E. whose members lived in quasi-monastic communities and were heavily concerned with maintaining ritual purity.

Pharisees: A Jewish sect that arose in the 2nd century B.C.E. and is the ancestor of modern rabbinic Judaism. Its members believed in the significance of the Oral Torah (later written down as the Mishnah), the primacy of scriptural study over Temple sacrifice, and the doctrine of resurrection of the dead.

Sadducees: A Jewish sect that arose in the 2nd century B.C.E. that promoted traditional Temple-centered worship and the authority of the priestly class over the scholarly (rabbinic) class.

Sicarii: A violent anti-Roman Jewish sect of the 1st century C.E. believed to be named for the daggers (*sica*) they carried. Judas Iscariot may have been a member of this group.

Zealots: An aggressively anti-Roman Jewish political sect active between the 1st century B.C.E. and 1st century C.E.

Question to Consider

1. In what ways was the political world in the time of Jesus similar to that of Confucius? Of the Buddha? In what ways was it different?

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The Son of Mary

Lecture 19

We face difficulties in getting to the historical Jesus, the real individual who lived and died in human history. Our primary sources offer various portraits of the man, and the ways we and others since his time have construed those literary portrayals are profoundly shaped by our preconceptions.

Few persons in history have been subject to such a wide range of interpretations as Jesus, for clear reasons. The only texts that relate historically relevant material about his life are the four Gospels in the Christian New Testament and the noncanonical Gospel of Thomas, each presenting different viewpoints on who he was and what he taught. But perhaps more importantly, for Christians, who have been the sources of most explanations of his life and teachings, Jesus functions not only as a savior or as the incarnation of the god of the Jews but as the personification of ideal humanity. Because of this, those who interpreted his life were apt to impute their own values and beliefs to the man.

What can we say with reasonable certainty about the life of Jesus? Virtually all credible scholars believe he was a real person who grew up in the village of Nazareth in the Galilee. Sometime within the last three years of his life, he began to work publicly as an itinerant teacher, preacher, and healer, garnering a modest following, and was executed as an insurrectionist against the Roman Empire. Beyond this, scholars debate which words and events reported in the Gospels can be taken as authentic and which might be embellished or invented.

Most historians believe that the synoptic Gospels—Mark, Matthew, and Luke—contain more historically reliable material than the Gospel of John, which is mainly theology told as biography. Mark was likely the first Gospel, written down around 70 C.E., near the time of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem. Matthew and Luke were written a decade or two later and clearly use Mark's narrative as a source, along with a lost text called *Q*, short for *Quelle*, the German word for "source." About 75 percent of the noncanonical

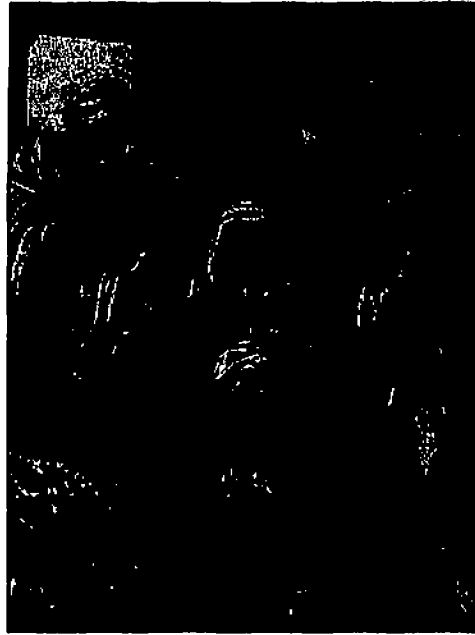
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Gospel of Thomas is also found in the synoptics. But these books are by no means identical, nor do they always relate historically precise material.

Invented or historically doubtful material was intended not to deceive but to make important theological statements. For example, the narrative of Jesus's birth in Matthew connects him to the lineage of King David, places his birth in Bethlehem, and matches in detail the prophecies in the book of Isaiah, linking Jesus to Jewish expectations of the messiah (*christos* in Greek). Herod's Slaughter of the Innocents likely

never occurred (it appears in no other sources, Christian or otherwise) but is consistent with Herod's historical character and triggers the Flight into Egypt, which recalls the story of Moses—a comparison that continues throughout Matthew's Gospel. Luke, on the other hand, traces Jesus's lineage all the way to Adam and places the story in a Roman, not a Jewish, political context, underscoring Jesus's universal importance. The importance of Mary in the story, the contrast to Augustus, and the presence of the shepherds in Luke's account associate Jesus with the commoners and the disenfranchised.

Do those differences really matter? We should at least acknowledge that the authors' choice of details is shaped by their theological presuppositions and intentions. It is more plausible to say that these are different stories,



Unlike in popular Nativity stories, which have the wise men arriving near the time of Jesus's birth, Matthew indicates that they arrived two years later.

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addressed to different audiences, and told to convey different ideas about who Jesus was. Neither author is interested in objectively reporting events.

In Jesus's own lifetime, those who knew him had a great many ideas about who he was and what he meant when he taught and performed mighty deeds. A half-century later, when the Gospels were being written down, the diversity of viewpoints about his life and teachings remained. Since that time, the interpretations have only continued to amass. ■

Important Terms

christos: The Greek translation of the Hebrew term "messiah," meaning "anointed one."

Q: A lost source text used by the authors of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

synoptic Gospels: The collective name for the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Question to Consider

1. If you are a member of a faith tradition (particularly one of those founded or inspired by one of our four sages), how important is the historical accuracy of scripture to your faith?

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The First 30 Years

Lecture 20

What did Jesus look like? What was he like as a child? How did he treat his parents and other family members? Was he educated? Could he read and write? Did he live in Nazareth up until he began his public work? Was he married and, if so, why do the Gospels fail to mention his wife? ... We simply do not know enough based on the evidence we now have available.

There is very little that we can say about Jesus's first 30 years. Beyond the stories of his birth, we have only the biblical mentions of Jesus's circumcision and an incident at the Temple in Jerusalem when he was found astonishing the scholars with his wisdom. Our curiosity naturally urges us to wonder about many things that concerned some of the earliest Christians as well. In the absence of information, the human imagination, of course, steps in.

Tradition has been very happy to suggest answers to our natural questions. The Infancy Gospel of Thomas (different from the previously mentioned Gospel of Thomas) briefly describes Jesus during his first 12 years, about which the Bible is completely silent. This collection of about a dozen tales was probably written in the latter half of the 2nd century C.E. and features tales of the preteen Jesus performing miracles, including raising a friend from the dead, some of them childishy impulsive or ethically questionable. In essence, they attribute to the boy the powers of the man but add the element of immaturity. Scholars think these stories contain little historical fact, subordinating history to theology.

One persistent idea has been that as a young man, Jesus traveled to India, where he studied under Hindu and Buddhist gurus, and then returned to Palestine to preach a Judaized version of these religions. Advocates of this view point to the remarkable parallels between Christianity and Mahayana Buddhism, which also developed in the first centuries C.E. A different version of this story suggests that Jesus escaped death on the cross and made his

Lecture 20: The First 30 Years

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way to Kashmir, where *he* taught the Buddhist and Hindu scholars. Modern scholars think both stories are highly unlikely.

In recent years, the question of whether or not Jesus was married has become a matter of public discourse and has stirred up a good deal of controversy. What is interesting is the way the suggestion of a married Jesus meets with such resistance and horror by many. Perhaps people find something so troubling about the whole sexual dimension of human experience that they regard it unworthy of the one they consider truly god and truly human. Once

There are hints, however, that John's relationship to Jesus was more than simply that of a herald or harbinger.

again, we see how preconceptions about divinity and humanity can inform and perhaps even skew an interpretation of Jesus.

Any real knowledge we have about the historical Jesus does not start until the debut of his public activity near the age of 30, near the point at which Mark, the oldest Gospel, begins. The New Testament Gospels all regard John the Baptist as Jesus's forerunner and all identify John with a figure from the book of Isaiah who "shouts in the wilderness: Make ready the way of the Lord." He performed ritual cleansings—baptisms—in the Jordan River, in the wilderness of Judea, where he lived an ascetic life, which has led some to speculate that he was an Essene.

It was only after John's arrest and imprisonment that Jesus began his own work, and his message was the same as John's: Repent, for the Kingdom of God is near. We could therefore speculate that John was not just Jesus's precursor but also his mentor and teacher. After Jesus's death and resurrection, his earlier relationship with John became a bit of a problem: If Jesus were the messiah, his baptism and discipleship with John might seem an embarrassment. Perhaps later traditions recast John as Jesus's forerunner to keep him subordinate.

Scholars agree that the coming of God's kingdom was the substance of Jesus's message, but there has been much debate about the details. What exactly did Jesus mean by "the Kingdom of God"? Was this kingdom earthly

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or heavenly? What did Jesus mean by "at hand"? What changes would the coming entail? How did he understand his own role? Jesus never addressed these issues directly. Instead, he tried to illustrate his meaning by parable and paradox and to demonstrate it by acts of healing, exorcism, and flouting religious customs. According to the Gospels, even his closest associates did not always grasp his meaning. ■

Questions to Consider

1. Is filling in the gaps in Jesus's biography merely an academic exercise, or could this information have theological repercussions for Christians?
2. Does the idea of Jesus having a mentor affect your opinion of claims about his divinity?

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The Kingdom of God

Lecture 21

For Jesus, the Kingdom of Heaven was not a place where the streets were paved with gold and Saint Peter guarded the pearly gates. ... The important thing to bear in mind is that for Jesus, the Kingdom of God was not a location. ... The kingdom, for Jesus, was an invisible or intangible reality.

There is little disagreement among biblical scholars that the reign of God was the focus of Jesus's life's work. The debates arise when these scholars try to determine what exactly Jesus meant by this phrase. In the Gospels of Mark and Luke, we find the Greek term *Basileia tou Theou*; Matthew, however, uses slightly different words: *Basileia tōn Ouranōn*, the "Kingdom of Heaven." Matthew probably used the word "heaven" as a euphemism since his Gospel was addressed primarily to a Jewish audience and the Jews customarily avoided using God's name. (You might also recall how in ancient China "heaven" and "god" were sometimes used interchangeably.) But neither "Kingdom of Heaven" nor "Kingdom of God" should be understood as a physical location at all.

The kingdom, for Jesus, was an invisible or intangible reality. Although it is not localized to a particular place, it is understood to be an earthly reality. It is not territorial, but it is terrestrial. Contrary to the popular mythology of later Christianity, Jesus never spoke of human beings going to heaven but said that the Kingdom of Heaven would come to earth. Everything Jesus said about it suggests that God's kingdom would be an earthly utopia, a blessed state of affairs free of suffering and poverty, in which justice and harmony flourish. Jesus's descriptions of and analogies for the reign of God seemed to suggest that it was the exact opposite of the reign of Caesar.

One of the best-known descriptions of the kingdom is the Beatitudes, which appears in different forms in Luke and Matthew. Reading or hearing this passage from the perspective of a politically oppressed, economically struggling community, the political overtones of the message become obvious; certainly they were not lost on his listeners. The juxtaposition

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of these blessings and curses in Luke intimates the paradoxical character of God's dominion, contravening the common values of the world.

Paradox abounds throughout the teachings of Jesus, particularly in his parables. For example, in the story of the Good Samaritan, the real point is not that people should be compassionate but the sense of surprise—and even shock—that it induced in Jesus's audience through the selfish behavior of the "good" characters and the compassionate behavior of the "bad" character. It is hard to forget such a story; the mind mulls it over and over. And it reminds the listener that the Kingdom of God will not be what you expect. Jesus's message was also conveyed through

his actions, particularly his healings, exorcisms, and miracles (what the Gospels refer to as "signs" and "powerful acts"). The story of the wedding celebration at Cana, for example, contains many inversions and paradoxes: Jesus seems to refuse his mother's request for help but helps out anyway; the best wine is served last, when it ought to come first; even the atmosphere of joy and celebration is far removed from everyday life in that time and place.



As an adult, Jesus preached in largely rural areas of Galilee.

Jesus's fame in his lifetime depended mainly on his reputation as a healer and exorcist. The healing stories have been variously interpreted throughout Christian history. Ordinarily, they were taken as indicative of Jesus's divine power. But stories of healings, exorcisms, powerful acts, and miracles are not unique to Jesus. Even stories of resurrections are not so unusual in the Bible and in literature worldwide. (That is not to say he was not divine, only that the miracle stories do not suffice to prove it.) What the miracles do suggest is that Jesus was foreshadowing life in the coming kingdom, where human suffering would be banished and the division of pure and impure would be obliterated, along with the categories of rich and poor, powerful and weak, sick and healthy. Jesus acted as if he were abolishing these distinctions by his very words and deeds. ■

Important Terms

Basileia tōn Ouranōn: A Greek phrase from the Gospel of Matthew usually translated as "Kingdom of Heaven."

Basileia tou Theou: A Greek phrase from the Gospels of Mark and Luke usually translated as "Kingdom of God."

Beatitudes: A passage found in similar forms in the Gospels of Matthew (5:3–12) and Luke (6:20–23) wherein Jesus describes how people will live in the Kingdom of Heaven, each line beginning with the phrase "Blessed are... ."

Questions to Consider

1. Jesus's concept of the Kingdom of Heaven can be interpreted as highly political, especially in the context of the early Roman Empire. To what political uses has his message been put, historically and to the present day? Do these uses seem to correspond to Jesus's intent as presented in the Bible and other ancient texts?
2. What parallels do you see between Jesus's teaching by paradox and techniques used by our other sages?

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Back to the Future

Lecture 22

The ultimate reality for Jesus was, of course, the god of ancient Judaism, the same deity worshiped by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. There is little, if anything, in Jesus's teaching to suggest that he departed in any way from the Jewish traditions in his thinking about God.

The first part of Jesus's message was to announce that the reign of God is near. The second part was an admonition to live our lives accordingly. In fact, Jesus wanted his followers to live as subjects of God's reign even before it arrived in its complete manifestation.

Jesus believed that the god of the Jews was the world's creator and king, that he was profoundly moral and interested in the welfare of his people, that he often intervened in the affairs of human beings, and that he formed relationships with persons. It is evident that Jesus understood his own relationship with God as an intimate one; calling God his father, or *Abba*, is one thing that scholars are virtually certain was an authentic practice of the historical Jesus. Although using the metaphor of a father for God is hardly unique in the history of the world's religions, it is relatively uncommon in ancient Judaism. Such a sense of God's nearness was likely based on profound experiences that Jesus identified as holy.

Some might argue that Jesus, as God incarnate, came into the world with a vivid god-consciousness. But the synoptic Gospels suggest quite the opposite. Whatever the case, Jesus invited his followers to regard the divine in the same intimate way that he did.

Jesus's convictions about human nature and the problems besetting humanity were not out of the ordinary for someone shaped by ancient Judaism, particularly by its prophetic tradition. Jesus seemed to think that people had gotten absorbed by trivialities and an inordinate concern for themselves, which led to the tremendous suffering he saw all around. The world's anguish was self-inflicted, because human beings had departed from God's way. For Jesus, life in God was more important than anything. If it meant giving up

Lecture 22: Back to the Future

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everything else—including one's life—to participate in that reality, it would be worth it.

Reorienting one's life was not a one-time event. Jesus himself regularly practiced disciplines of spirituality, prayer in particular, which was not an opportunity to request God's assistance but a discipline for subordinating human desires to divine wisdom. Although Jesus prayed publicly, his preference was to do so in solitude, with an economy of words, and perhaps even silence—what some Christians today call **contemplative prayer**.

If the basic problem with human beings was their failure to care about the things God cared about, then the obvious solution was for them to reorient their lives to God.

Such departure from daily routine can bring a deeper awareness of one's own life and the world surrounding it.

Jesus also promoted the communal practice of taking meals. Like Confucius and the Buddha, Jesus regarded eating as an activity with profound spiritual significance. The banquet was the symbol

par excellence of God's reign. Jesus refused to discriminate among his mealtime companions, deliberately flouting Jewish purity laws, which he saw as a human contrivance. Meals also symbolized and fostered the sense of community that was a hallmark of the kingdom. Sharing common food represented common dependence on the same earthly elements for sustenance.

Jesus's teachings and spiritual disciplines were oriented to sharpening persons' awareness of the divine reality and galvanizing the will to care about the things God cared about. And what God cared about, Jesus thought, was human fulfillment and happiness, abundant life for every human being, and justice. Life in the kingdom therefore meant acting in some extraordinary ways, ways that were unconventional and dangerous. Three principles stand out as especially important: nonviolence, antimaterialism, and forgiveness, which ironically seem to go against the grain of much of Western social and religious convention. ■

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Important Terms

Abba: An Aramaic word translated as "father"; one of the few Aramaic words that the Greek New Testament preserves in its original form.

contemplative prayer: The Christian practice of prayer in solitude and silence, not unlike the Buddhist practice of meditation.

Questions to Consider

1. What sort of selfish trivialities occupied the people of Jesus's world? Were these similar to the issues in the cultures of the other sages? In our culture today?
2. Eating (or a similar way to obtain energy) is a basic biological need of all life forms. Why do you think this everyday occurrence has taken on such religious and ethical importance in so many cultures?

Jesus's Christology

Lecture 23

We have observed that Jesus's teaching and actions centered on the coming of God's reign; our first approach to Jesus's christology, then, is to consider how he understood his role in this new order. Did he think of himself as simply a messenger warning others of the approaching new age or did he believe he was playing—or would play—a role in making it an actuality?

Christology is the branch of Christian thought that seeks to understand the nature and deeds of Jesus, which began shortly after his death and resurrection and continues to this day. We will attempt to answer what might seem to be an odd question: What was Jesus's christology? How did he understand his role in the new order of God's reign?

One of the most hotly debated areas of modern Jesus scholarship is when and how Jesus thought the kingdom would come. Since the last century, most critical scholars have thought that Jesus believed God's rule would be established within a few years of his lifetime, based on evidence from the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke and Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. This idea helps explain certain beliefs and practices of the earliest Christians, such as the urgency of spreading Jesus's message and the practice of celibacy. This is called the **impending model**. Because the kingdom did not appear on time, the church had to revise its understanding of Jesus and his teachings. Another interpretation suggests that Jesus believed the kingdom was a present reality, already available to anyone willing to be a part of it. In this perspective, Jesus's mission was to teach others how to see and live in the kingdom because the full manifestation of God's reign on earth depends on the human willingness to accept it. This is called the **involvement model**.

The title by which Jesus has been most commonly known throughout history is the Christ, or the messiah, meaning "anointed one"—someone divinely appointed to a sacred task. Throughout Jewish scripture, numerous individuals are called messiahs, including King David and King Cyrus of

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Persia. But by the time of Jesus, "messiah" had come to refer to a hero—not a divine being—who would restore the kingdom of Israel to its former greatness, and a slew of persons were claiming to be the Christ. Did Jesus make this claim for himself? In the Gospel of John, he makes this claim several times, but critical biblical scholars have doubts about the historicity of that book. In the synoptic Gospels, *others* assert that Jesus is the messiah, but Jesus seems hesitant to accept the title. Perhaps he was concerned that his followers might misunderstand what messiahship truly meant, or



More than a prophet figure, Jesus was a healer, exorcist, and wonder worker. In his presence, people sensed a sacred, restorative power.

what Jesus considered true messiahship could not be revealed until his death and resurrection. Or perhaps he did not consider himself the messiah.

The title of son of God is much better attested in the synoptic Gospels, but discerning Jesus's understanding of this title is not easy. Throughout biblical literature, this phrase could refer to angels, humanity as a whole, or particular noble individuals. Notably, outside Jewish tradition, Augustus Caesar was called a son of god as well. There is little definitive evidence about whether Jesus thought of his sonship as a unique relationship to God.

One of the most frequently used expressions for Jesus in the synoptic Gospels is the son of man. Many Christians today believe this phrase indicates Jesus's humanity versus his divinity. Historian Geza Vermes believes it was not really a title but just a polite way in which people referred to themselves.

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But according to the book of Daniel, at the end of the world, a figure known as the Son of Man would descend from heaven to rule the earth. It is quite possible that this was Jesus's meaning. ■

Important Terms

Christology: The branch of Christian thought that seeks to understand the nature and deeds of Jesus.

impending model: The belief of early Christians (and possibly Jesus himself) that the coming of the Kingdom of God was imminent, within their own generation.

involvement model: The belief of later generations of Christians that the coming of the Kingdom of God was not a scheduled event but depended on human action to bring it about.

Question to Consider

1. Which of the titles used by or given to Jesus are complementary, and which are contradictory? Which of them seems to best harmonize with his stated message?

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The Last Days in Jerusalem

Lecture 24

The apostle Paul ... based his entire theology on Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection without ever mentioning his teachings. ... Although other Christians have certainly given far more attention to Jesus's life and teachings than Paul did, on the whole they have still concurred with Paul's belief in the centrality of the death and resurrection.

Jesus's death and resurrection were without doubt the most important events of his life according to the New Testament. All four Gospels relate detailed stories of these occurrences. The apostle Paul based his entire theology on these events, and for two millennia, Christianity has followed his lead. But rather than view these events as a divinely planned transaction conferring the forgiveness of humanity's sins, let's consider them in relation to the central message of Jesus's life.

When Jesus journeyed to Jerusalem during the Passover festival, he may have intended to dramatize his message of the coming kingdom and to bring it to its final fullness. Jerusalem was the symbolic center of ancient Judaism and the home of the priests and elders who collaborated with Rome, and Passover was the time when the Jews celebrated their freedom from Egypt. As Pontius Pilate and his Roman troops paraded into the city at the start of the holiday to remind the Jews of Roman presence and power, Jesus entered the opposite end of the city alone, on a donkey, a humble king founding a peaceable kingdom.

During the days following his entry into the city, Jesus continued to speak of the Kingdom of God and perform acts to symbolize it. When Jesus declares that the Temple has become a "den of robbers," a phrase from the book of Jeremiah, he seems to be referencing not the money changers but the priests and Temple authorities who benefited from the Roman occupation. Jesus also instituted the ritual meal that would become the Christian sacrament of the Eucharist, the meaning of which would become the subject of fierce debate among Christians for centuries to come. It was during this meal that Judas Iscariot left to inform the Temple authorities of

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Jesus's whereabouts, an act the Gospels all struggle to explain. But he was hardly the cause of Jesus's death. The stories suggest that Jesus was fully aware of what might happen to him by taking his message to Jerusalem during the Passover.

Because it was excruciating and public, crucifixion was reserved for those convicted of sedition against the state.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus struggles to accept what he believes is God's will but offers no resistance to the Temple police who come to arrest him. Jesus was taken

to Caiaphas, the high priest, and asked point-blank, "Are you the messiah?" Jesus gives an ambiguous answer but seems to accept the alternate title son of man. It was enough for the high priest to declare Jesus a blasphemer and for the council to judge him deserving of death. But executing such a sentence was the sole prerogative of Rome.

The priests brought Jesus before Pilate, where he again evaded the question of whether or not he was the messiah, a silence that could be seen as contempt for Roman authority. Pilate thus ordered Jesus's crucifixion on a charge of insurrection. Crucifixion was a slow, painful, humiliating death reserved for enemies of the state. According to Mark, Jesus's death was accompanied by celestial darkness and a Roman centurion's declaration that "Truly this man was God's Son!" The historicity of these events is doubtful, but they reinforce the importance of Jesus's death to his message.

The four Gospels all offer different accounts of what happened on the Sunday morning after Jesus's death. Mark, the earliest Gospel, ends abruptly with an open tomb and a message that the disciples would see Jesus again in Galilee. (The stories of Jesus's appearances that follow are later additions to the text.) Matthew ends his Gospel with Jesus appearing and commanding his disciples to spread his message. Luke tells the story of Jesus revealing himself during a meal with two of his followers and disappearing. Common Christianity has long taken these episodes to indicate Jesus's divinity, but was this really the Gospel writers' meaning, or is there another significance? ■

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Important Terms

crucifixion: Execution on a cross; in the Roman Empire, this form of punishment was reserved for crimes of sedition and insurrection.

Eucharist: The Christian sacrament that commemorates the Passover meal Jesus shared with his followers in the Gospels (Matthew 26:17-29; Mark 14:12-25; Luke 22:7-38) shortly before his execution.

Passover: The Jewish festival commemorating the escape from Egyptian domination. At the time of Jesus, parallels between the Egyptian and Roman domination of the Jews raised Romans' fears of riot and revolt during the festival.

Question to Consider

1. Consider the stories of the release of Barabbas and the two criminals executed alongside Jesus. What are the theological implications of these incidents? What are the political implications? Do these two views complement or contrast with each other?

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How Jesus Became Christ

Lecture 25

There is little agreement among the sources as to what occurred and to whom. But that *something* happened seems hard to deny. It is difficult to account for the fervent movement that began to coalesce among Jesus's followers without positing some powerful experience that convinced them that their teacher had been vindicated by God and lived on, in some fashion, despite his death.

The extraordinary and varied stories of Jesus's empty tomb and his appearances to his disciples that end each of the canonical Gospels invite us to inquire into their historical basis and their significance for those who accepted them as true. The simplest and most plausible explanation of this experience is that some of the disciples saw Jesus or perceived his presence after his death, but the exact nature of these perceptions cannot be determined. Nor can we assume they believed that the selfsame individual who died on Good Friday was *physically* brought back to life the following Sunday morning. The Gospels themselves indicate that the post-Easter Jesus was different from the Jesus they had known as their teacher and mentor.

Whether or not human beings collectively would be raised from the dead at the end of time was a matter of considerable debate during Jesus's time. Neither the Pharisees nor the Sadducees seemed to think that "resurrection" was an individual, historical phenomenon. The fact that the early Christians used the term resurrection suggests they considered what happened to Jesus as an eschatological, end-of-days event. Paul called the resurrection of Jesus the "first fruits of those who have died," consistent with the early Christian belief that Jesus would return from heaven shortly. Paul's experience of the post-Easter Jesus—a spiritual encounter, not a physical one—appears to have shaped his theology, which as it spread transformed Jesus of Nazareth into Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and eventually God incarnate.

The substance of the message of the historical Jesus was the coming of God's kingdom and the necessity to live life in light of this new reality. Paul's message, as expressed in his letter to the Romans, was that "Christ died

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for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures." The messages are not necessarily incompatible, but they are not the same.

The final answers to the questions of Jesus's identity and self-understanding are not now—and may never be—available to us, but we can build a "theory of Jesus."

We know Jesus was a Galilean Jew born of peasant parents in Roman-occupied Palestine near the beginning of the 1st century C.E. He grew into adulthood with a keen sensitivity to the presence of the God of the Jews as well as matters of social justice and human suffering. Jesus found a teacher and role model in John the Baptist, although

Jesus's skills and spiritual acumen probably transcended those of John, and he used those skills to help others see the truth for themselves. Jesus was also a healer, exorcist, and wonder worker. In the most historically reliable accounts, Jesus tends to resist the title Christ, or messiah, but almost certainly thought of himself as *a*—if not *the*—Son of God. Jesus also likely thought of himself as the Son of Man, viewing his own impending death not as a human sacrifice to effect the forgiveness of sins but as preparation to return to earth at the end of time. Jesus died a martyr's death, bearing witness to the failings of the kingdom of man in contrast to the Kingdom of God. Did Jesus think he was God? Almost certainly not. The idea that Jesus was a



After his conversion to Christianity, Paul became the faith's best-known missionary.

Lecture 25: How Jesus Became Christ

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divine incarnation appeared many decades after his death, probably under the influence of Greek and Roman religious beliefs.

All of this might appear to undermine the central claims of the Christian tradition, but that is not necessarily so. Although there was a predominant expectation among Jews as to what this messiah would be, there was no official definition or job description. Christians had as much right to reinterpret the concept as anyone. Jesus may not have regarded himself as the messiah, yet in the way his followers came to judge his significance, the title was warranted. Jesus may not have thought of himself as God, but his followers may have discovered the divine through him to such a degree that it seemed fitting to call him God's incarnation. ■

Important Term

eschatological: Pertaining to the end of days or the ultimate destiny of humankind.

Questions to Consider

1. Paul's preaching to the Roman world outside of Palestine brought early Christianity into direct contact with Greek and Roman religious culture. From what you may know of Greco-Roman myths and religious practices, how do you think they may have affected the early development of Christianity?
2. This lecture presents an argument that Jesus, just like Confucius and the Buddha, was a man, not a god. If this were true, how would it affect the practice of Christian groups you are familiar with? How much does it matter to the practice of the faith?

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- Constantine next decided to achieve consensus on issues. A council of bishops convened in Nicaea (in modern-day Turkey) in 325. The nature of Jesus was a central issue. One of the bishops, Arius, believed that Jesus, as son, was created by God and was inferior to God the Father. This view was condemned as heresy at the council.
- Ultimately, what came out of the council was the foundation of most Christian theology, the Nicene Creed. It proclaims belief in God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit—the Holy Trinity.
- Christians are monotheists who proclaim the oneness of God, and at the same time understand God as being “three-in-one.” Ultimately anything that you can say about God the Father (that God is omnipresent, eternal, loving), can also be said of Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

Divisions in Catholicism

- In 330, Constantine had established a new eastern capital for his empire, calling it Constantinople. After the sack of Rome in 410, Constantinople became a new center of Christianity. The Eastern and Western parts of the empire would grow further apart and would ultimately yield two forms of Christianity—Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox.
- A number of factors contributed to the division. Christians in the East did not recognize the supreme authority of the bishop of Rome, the pope. There was also a division over interpretations of the Trinity and debates over the nature of original sin. They were also divided over language and ritual. Other issues dealt with the priesthood, in particular whether priests must be celibate.
- The differences came to a head in 1054 when the authorities from each church excommunicated each other, a schism that divides Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches to this day.

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Catholic and Orthodox Christianity

Lecture 17

During the 1st century after Jesus's death, Christianity was a small, persecuted religion. Today, it is the largest religion in the world. Given that so many religions come and go, how has Christianity been able to survive, spread, and ultimately flourish? In this lecture, we will trace the development of Christianity and the variety of its forms today—from Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Lutheran, to Baptist, Quaker, and Mormon.

The Apostles and Paul

- After Jesus's death, the apostles began to spread the "good news" about salvation through Christ, but the apostle Paul is most responsible for the understanding of Jesus that would become the foundation of most forms of Christian theology.
- Paul's letters sent to Christian communities provided guidance, explained doctrine, and encouraged fellow believers. They also explained the significance of Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection. For this reason, Paul, more than Jesus, can be seen as the founder of the Christian religion.
- A prominent view presented by Paul is a form of atonement theory, which is based on the concept that we are born in "original sin," inheriting our sinful nature from our fallen ancestors, Adam and Eve. We can only be saved by God's grace through Jesus. To make our salvation possible, Jesus took our sins on himself.

The Nicene Council and Creed

- For the first three centuries after Jesus's death, Christianity spread rapidly, but Christians faced persecution and even death. However, the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in the early 4th century, ultimately leading to Christianity as the empire's religion.

- When congregants receive the bread and wine, they are both experiencing communion with Christ and remembering the event of the Last Supper. This ritual is a central feature of Catholic worship services, called masses.
- After his betrayal by Judas, Jesus undergoes trials by both the Jewish authorities, where he is charged with blasphemy, and then by Roman governor Pontius Pilate. Pilate, in response to the demands of a crowd, gives Jesus over to Roman soldiers, who beat him and bring him to the hill of Golgotha to be crucified.
- The event of Jesus's crucifixion is commemorated in the Christian observance of Good Friday, or Holy Friday, the Friday before Easter Sunday. During Lent, the period before Easter Sunday, Christians in some denominations, especially Catholic, stage a Passion play, a dramatic reenactment of the passion of Jesus Christ (the trial, suffering, crucifixion, and death; "Passion" here is connected with the root of "passive," "to suffer").
- The crucifixion provides the most powerful symbol of Christianity—the cross. It evokes Jesus's selfless sacrifice and that reminds Christians that the instrument of death—in fact death itself—along with sin, have been conquered through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.
- After Jesus's death, his body was placed in a sealed and guarded tomb. Many of the disciples were grief-stricken, frightened, and disheartened.
- Women followers of Jesus, including Mary Magdalene, went to the tomb to prepare his body for burial rituals, but they found the tomb was empty. They were visited by angels who told them Jesus rose from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus is celebrated on Easter Sunday, the Sunday following Good Friday.
- After this, Jesus makes a number of appearances to disciples to remove doubt.

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Major Christian Observances

- The second major period of observance, one associated with the end of Jesus's life, begins with Lent, a period of 40 days (from Ash Wednesday to Easter) where Christians repent and renounce as a form of fasting to share in Christ's sacrifice. The period of 40 days evokes that 40 days that Jesus spent fasting in the desert, where he overcame the temptations by Satan.
- The last week of Lent, which culminates in Easter Sunday, is called Holy Week. The Thursday before Easter is known as Maundy Thursday. On the Friday before Easter Sunday, Christians observe Good Friday (or Holy Friday). Catholics see this as a fast day, with only one full meal and abstention from meat.
- Easter celebrates the resurrection of Christ and is thus the most theologically significant holiday in Christianity. This is the holiday in which the promise of triumph over death and the attaining of eternal life through the sacrifice of Christ are celebrated.
- The two most celebrated Christian holidays—Christmas and Easter—are both syncretic, combining pre-Christian pagan elements (such as trees, mistletoe, bunnies, and eggs).
- The Christmas tree, an evergreen that was originally a pagan nature symbol, can be seen as representing the eternal life promised by Jesus. Easter, which occurs in the spring, brings in pagan celebrations of the vernal equinox, which highlights the return of life after the cold of winter.

The Meaning of Jesus

- The story of Jesus has served as an inspiration and an example to Christians for the last 2,000 years. At the same time, there is a deep mystery in the story, and it raises a question with which Christians have grappled ever since: Who—and what—was Jesus?
- To most Christians, Jesus is a savior. Jesus's death and resurrection ushered in a kingdom of God on Earth in which people can

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participate now. At the same time, many Christians believe, Jesus will usher in Judgment Day and the final Kingdom of God at his Second Coming.

- Jesus's identity is represented in a symbol, the fish. One explanation comes from the Greek word for fish, *ichthys*. This word was seen as an acrostic for the phrase—*Iesous Christos Theou yios soter*, which means, "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior."
- In art Jesus is sometimes portrayed as a powerful king. Other images show Jesus as the suffering servant, bleeding on the cross. Jesus is also portrayed as an infant, inviting Christians to see God even in the small and vulnerable. Finally, Jesus is seen as a human embodiment of divine qualities.
- Most Christians have found profound meaning in both his life and death, his teachings, and his sacrifice. The attempt to live a life defined by both of these has been the guiding Christian ideal for two millennia.

Suggested Reading

Coogan, Brettler, Newsom, and Perkins, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*.
Atwood, *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*.
Borg, *Jesus, a New Vision*.
Ehrman, *A Brief Introduction to the New Testament*.
Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ*.
Gomes, *The Good Book*.
Holt, *Thirsty for God*.
Marty, *The Christian World*.
Matlins and Magida, *How to Be a Perfect Stranger*.
McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*.
———, *The Christian Theology Reader*.
Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*.
Pagels, *Beyond Belief*.

——, *The Gnostic Gospels*.

Sharma, *Our Religions*.

Smith, *The World's Religions*.

Van Vorst, *Anthology of World Scriptures*.

Questions to Consider

1. Reflect on the variety of ways that Jesus is represented—as infant, miracle worker, suffering servant, king, et cetera. What does this range of images convey about Jesus? What is the relationship between his life and ministry on the one hand and his death and resurrection on the other?
2. What do you make of pagan elements, such as Easter eggs and the Christmas tree, being incorporated into a Christian holiday?

बिद्य Notes.