

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

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

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

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

The Birth of Jesus of Nazareth

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

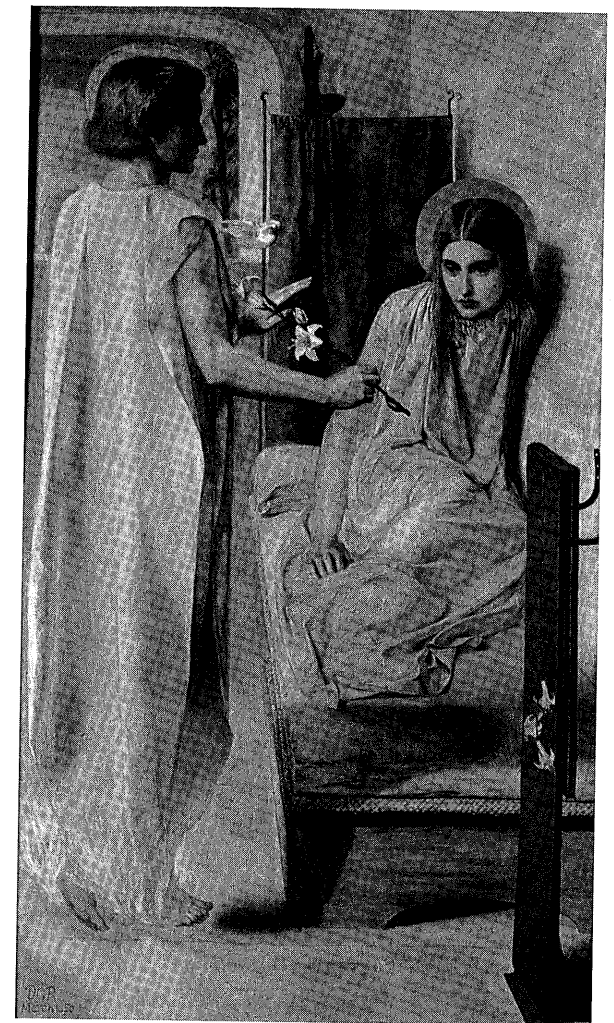


Figure 1.1 The angel Gabriel declaring to Mary that she is to bear the savior of the world, by Dante Gabriel Rossetti; this incident is related early in Luke's gospel. Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882), *Ecce Ancilla Domini (The Annunciation)*, 1850. Oil on canvas, mounted on wood, 72 × 42 cm. Source: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

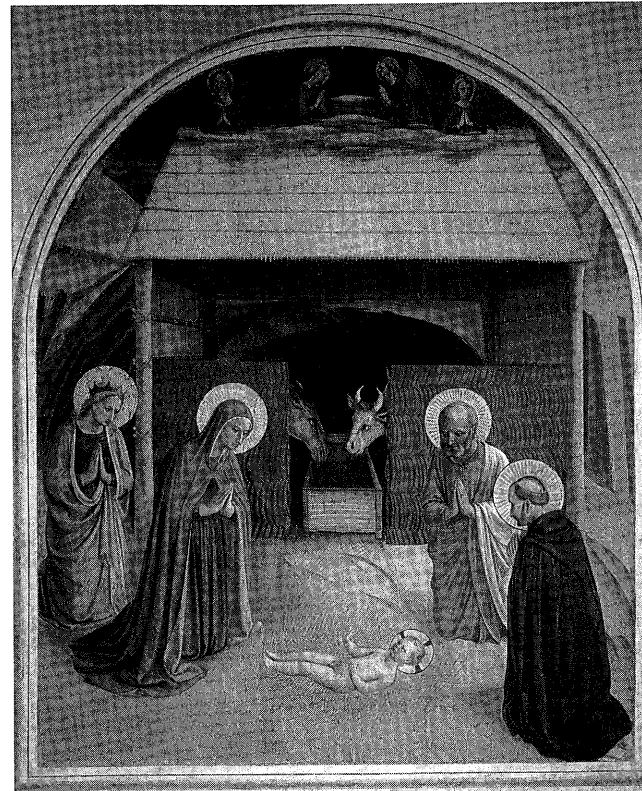


Figure 1.2 The birth of Christ, as depicted by Fra Angelico in a mural in the monastery of San Marco, Florence, between 1437 and 1445. Fra Giovanni da Fiesole (1387–1455) and workshop, *Birth of Christ, with the Saints Catherine of Alexandria and Peter the Martyr* (1437–1445). Fresco, 193 × 164 cm. Florence,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

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

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

The Early Ministry of Jesus of Nazareth

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

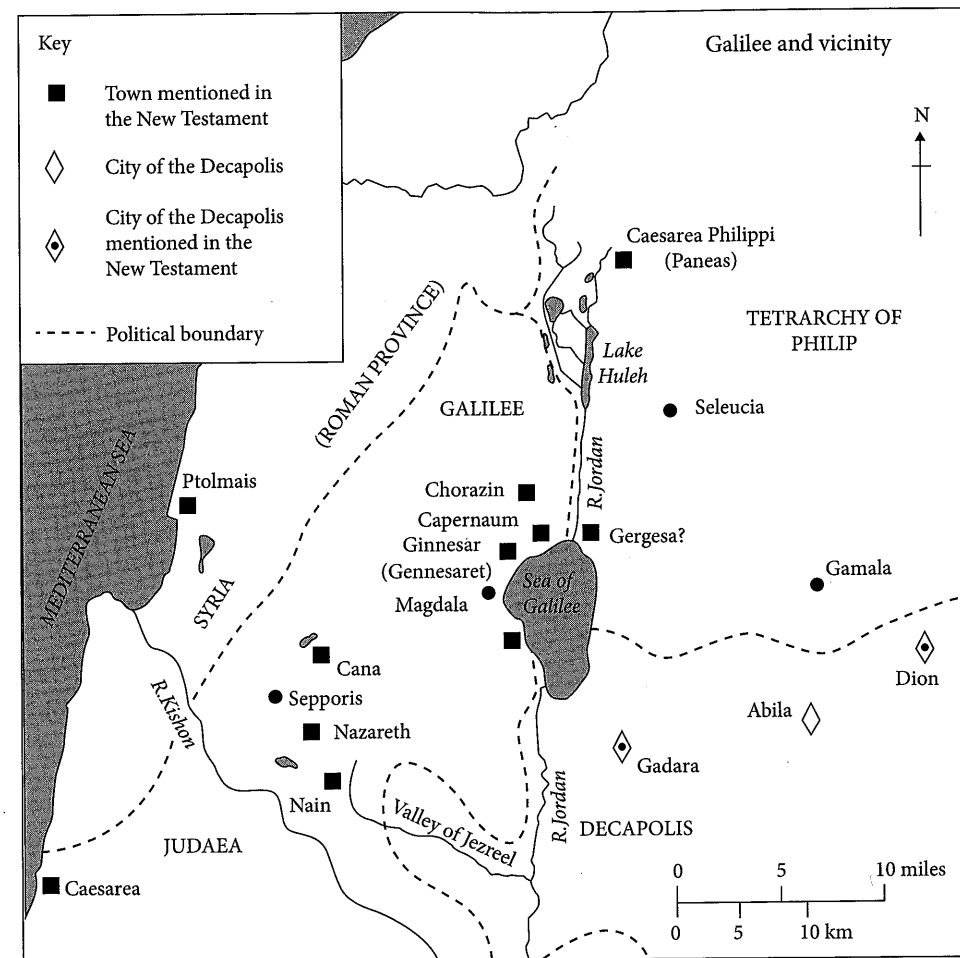


Figure 1.4 The Galilean ministry of Jesus.

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

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

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

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

The Crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth

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

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

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