

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

crucified criminals on the busiest thoroughfares, in order that the maximum deterrent effect might be achieved.

Crucifixion was a punishment reserved for the lowest criminals, which clearly implied that Jesus belonged to this category of people in Roman eyes. For a Jew, anyone hanged upon a tree was cursed by God (Deuteronomy 21: 23), which would hardly commend the Christian claim that Jesus was indeed the long-awaited Messiah. Indeed, one of the Dead Sea scrolls suggests that crucifixion was regarded as the proper form of execution for a Jew suspected of high treason.

The New Testament makes two statements about the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, which are integral to its understanding of his identity and significance. First, the crucifixion really happened – specifically, during the time when Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor of Judaea. And, second, this event needed to be interpreted correctly. It did not signify shame, guilt, or rejection by God. When rightly understood, it was about the forgiveness of sins and the dawn of new hope.

Before we reflect further on the interpretation of the crucifixion, we need to outline the basic structure of the gospel narratives of this event. The background to the crucifixion is the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, mounted on a donkey, in fulfillment of a great messianic prophecy of the Old Testament (Zechariah 9: 9). Jesus enters Jerusalem as its king, an event recalled and celebrated by Christians on Palm Sunday. Yet this final week in the life of Jesus is marked by increasing controversy, culminating in his betrayal, arrest, and execution. Luke relates how Jesus and his disciples gather together “in an upper room” to celebrate Passover (Luke 22: 14–23).

The Jewish feast of Passover commemorates the events leading up to the exodus and the establishment of the people of Israel. The Passover lamb, slaughtered shortly before and eaten at the feast, symbolizes this great act of divine redemption. It is thus very significant that the Last Supper and the crucifixion of Jesus took place at the feast of Passover. The Synoptic Gospels clearly treat the Last Supper as a Passover meal where Jesus initiates a new version of the meal. While Jews celebrated their deliverance by God from Egypt by eating a lamb, Christians would henceforth celebrate their deliverance by God from sin by eating bread and drinking wine.

John’s gospel suggests that Jesus is crucified at exactly the same moment as the slaughter of the Passover lambs, so that Jesus is to be seen as the true Passover lamb, who died for the sins of the world. In the light of this, the full meaning of the words of John the Baptist, as presented in John’s gospel, becomes clearer: “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1: 29). The point being made is that the death of Christ is understood to take away sin and to cleanse believers from its guilt and stain.

The coincidence of the Last Supper and of the crucifixion with the Passover feast makes it clear that there is a connection between the exodus and the death of Christ. Both are to be seen as acts of divine deliverance from oppression. However, while Moses led Israel from a specific captivity in Egypt, Jesus of Nazareth is seen as delivering his people from a universal bondage to sin and death. While there are parallels between the exodus and the cross, there are also differences. Perhaps the most important difference relates to the New Testament’s affirmation of the universality of the redemption accomplished by Christ. For the New Testament, the work of Christ benefits all who put their trust in him, irrespective of their ethnic identity or their historical or geographical location.

The Last Supper – famously depicted by Michelangelo in 1498 – is of particular importance to Christians, in that it is remembered in Christian worship. The use of bread and wine as a remembrance of Jesus – which focuses on the sacrament usually referred to as “Holy Communion,” “the Lord’s Supper,” “the eucharist,” or “the mass” – has its origins here. We shall return to consider this “remembrance” in greater detail later (pp. 116–117). The Last Supper is followed by the betrayal of Jesus to the Jewish authorities for 30 pieces of silver (Matthew 27: 1–10).

After a theological interrogation, Jesus is handed over to the Roman authorities. He is brought before Pontius Pilate, who was the Roman governor of Judaea from AD 26 to AD 36. Pilate’s inclination would probably have been to order some token punishment, but to take things no further. However, the crowd demands that Jesus be crucified. Washing his hands of the whole affair, Pilate sends Jesus off to be flogged and crucified. Jesus is then humiliated by the Roman soldiers, who dress him up in a caricature of royal costume, including a crown of thorns.

The floggings administered by the Romans were vicious; they had been known to cause the death of victims before they were crucified. Under Jewish law, victims were only allowed to be flogged with 40 strokes; this was invariably reduced to 39, as an act of leniency. But under Roman law there were no limits to the extent of the suffering to be inflicted. The whips used for this purpose generally consisted of several strands of leather with small pieces of metal or broken bones at the end; these tore apart the skin of those being whipped, with the result that many did not survive the ordeal.

Clearly Jesus was severely weakened by his beating and proved unable to carry his own cross. Simon of Cyrene was forced to carry it for him. Finally they reached Golgotha, the place of execution (Matthew 27: 32–43). This place is also often referred to as “Calvary,” from the Latin word *calvaria*, which means “skullcap, top of the skull” – the literal meaning of the Aramaic word of “Golgotha.” As Jesus hangs on the cross, he is mocked by those watching him die, while the Roman soldiers cast lots for his clothes. After being taken down from the cross, Jesus is buried in a borrowed tomb (Matthew 27: 57–61). That is not, however, the end of the story, according to the New Testament.

The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth

The gospels now turn to narrate a series of events traditionally referred to as “the resurrection.” This phrase is used to refer to both an historical event – the “empty tomb” – and a specific interpretation of the significance of this event. The discovery of the empty tomb was not in itself the resurrection; other interpretations were possible, such as the body’s having been stolen. The idea of “resurrection” is a specific interpretation of the discovery of the empty tomb.

The gospels’ resurrection narratives have three main elements:

- 1 The tomb in which the corpse of Jesus was laid late on the Friday afternoon was discovered to be empty on the Sunday morning. Those who discovered the empty tomb were frightened by what they found; their reports were not taken seriously by many of those in Jesus’ close circle of friends.

- 2 The disciples reported experiencing personal encounters with Jesus, in which he appeared to them as a living human.
- 3 The disciples began to preach Jesus as the living Lord rather than as a dead teacher from the past.

The “empty tomb” tradition is of considerable importance here (Matthew 28: 1–10; Mark 16: 1–8; Luke 24: 1–11; John 20: 1–10). The story is told from different angles in each of the gospels and includes divergence on minor points of detail, which is so characteristic of eye witness reports. Interestingly, all four gospels attribute the discovery of the empty tomb to women. The only Easter event to be explicitly related in detail by all four of the gospel writers is the visit of the women to the tomb of Jesus. Yet Judaism dismissed the value of the testimony or witness of women, regarding only men as having significant legal status in this respect. Mark’s gospel even names each of the women three times: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome (Mark 15: 40, 47; 16: 1). It is interesting that Mark does not mention the names of any male disciples who were around at the time.

The resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth appears to have come as a surprise to the disciples. There was, in Jewish thought, no real precedent for a resurrection of this kind. Far from fitting into popular Jewish expectations of the resurrection of the dead, what happened to

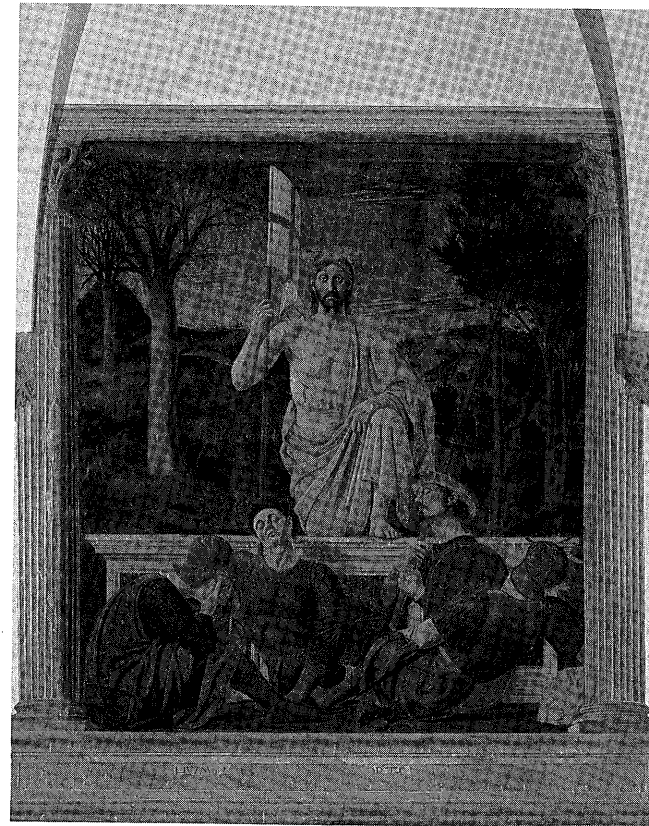


Figure 1.5 Piero della Francesca’s depiction of the resurrection of Christ, c. 1460–1464. Piero della Francesca (c.1410/20–1492), *The Resurrection of Christ* (c. 1460–1464). Fresco (removed), 225 × 200 cm. Sansepolcro, Pinacoteca Comunale. Source: Rabatti-Domingie/AKG Images.

Jesus actually contradicted them. Most Jews at the time seem to have believed in the resurrection of the dead at the end of time itself. The Pharisees, for example, believed in a future resurrection, and held that men and women would be rewarded or punished after death according to their actions. The Sadducees, however, insisted that there was no resurrection of any kind. No future existence awaited men and women after death. (Paul was able to exploit the differences between Pharisees and Sadducees on this point: see Acts 26: 6–8.)

Thus the Christian claim about the resurrection of Christ in history – rather than at the end of history – does not fit any known Jewish pattern at all. The resurrection of Jesus is not declared to be a future event, but something that had already happened in the world of time and space, in front of witnesses.

In addition to reporting the basic events that underlie the Christian gospel, the New Testament includes extensive reflection on the identity and significance of Jesus. The present chapter provides an analysis of the main lines of reflection we find in the New Testament, as well as exploring how Jesus has been understood as a result of the church’s long reflections on how best to represent and describe him. This process of reflection and development is often likened to the growth of a plant.

But, before we can begin to explore Christian understandings of the meaning of Jesus, we need to consider the all-important distinction between events and meanings. In what way can something that happened in history be said to possess a meaning over and above the event itself?

Events and Meanings: The Interpretation of the History of Jesus

In thinking about the significance of Jesus, we need to explore the relation between the events of his life and their deeper meaning. Christianity does not merely recite the history of Jesus; it affirms a specific way of making sense of that history, particularly his death on the cross and resurrection. The Christian faith certainly presupposes that Jesus existed as a real historical figure, and that he was crucified. Christianity is not, however, simply about the mere facts that Jesus existed and was crucified. Some words of the Apostle Paul, probably written 15 years after the resurrection, will help make this point clear.

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved ... For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve [Apostles]. (1 Corinthians 15: 1–5)

Paul here seems to be using (and passing on to his readers) an accepted formula or form of words, which was in general use in the early church and which he transmits to Corinthian Christians. This formula makes a clear distinction between the *event* of the death of Christ and the *significance* of this event. That Christ died is a simple matter of history; that Christ died *for our sins* is an insight that lies right at the heart of the Christian faith itself.

This important distinction between an *event* and its *meaning* can be illustrated with the help of an event that took place in 49 BC, when the great Roman commander Julius Caesar crossed a small river with a legion of soldiers. The name of the river was Rubicon, and it marked an important frontier within the Roman empire. It was the boundary between Italy and Cisalpine Gaul, a colonized region to the northwest of Italy, in modern-day France.

Considered simply as an event, Caesar's crossing was not especially important. The Rubicon was not a major river, and there was no particular difficulty about crossing it. People had crossed wider and deeper rivers before and since. As a simple event, it was not remarkable. But that is not why the crossing of that river was important. It is the meaning of the event that guarantees its place in history books, in that its political significance was enormous. Crossing this national frontier with an army was a deliberate act of rebellion against Rome. It marked a declaration of war on the part of Caesar against Pompey and the Roman senate. The *event* was the crossing of a river; the *meaning* of that event was a declaration of war.

In many ways, the death of Christ may be said to parallel Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon. The event itself appears unexceptional, except to those who know its significance. On the basis of contemporary records, we know that an incalculable number of people died like that at the time. Jesus would not have been alone in being executed in this way. Indeed the gospels' accounts of the crucifixion make it absolutely clear that two other criminals were crucified with Jesus on that day, one on either side of him. As an event, the crucifixion hardly seems important or noteworthy. It is one more witness to the cruel and repressive measures used by the Romans to enforce conformity throughout their empire.

Yet the New Testament makes it clear that behind the external event of the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth lay what this event *signified*; and this is the reason why it was *important*. Pompey and the Roman senate were not especially interested in the mechanics of how Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon: for them, the bottom line was crystal clear – it meant war. Similarly, Paul was not particularly interested in the historical details of the crucifixion of Jesus. The historicity of the crucifixion is assumed; what really matters is its theological significance as the ground of salvation, forgiveness, and victory over death. The Christian proclamation was about far more than the simple historical fact that Jesus was crucified. It was about the significance of this event for humanity: Jesus was numbered among sinners, so that sinners might be forgiven.

Thus far we have focused on the distinction between "event" and "meaning." Once the importance of this distinction has been appreciated, we are in a position to move on and look at some of the interpretations of Jesus that we find in the New Testament.

The New Testament Understandings of the Significance of Jesus

Who is Jesus of Nazareth? What does he *mean*? One of the easiest ways to begin to reflect on these questions is to look at the terms used to refer to Jesus in the New Testament, especially in the gospels. These terms are often referred to as the "Christological titles" of the New Testament. Each of them must be considered as the outcome of a process of reflection on what Jesus said and did and on the impact that he had upon people. In what follows we

shall explore three of these titles – "Messiah," "Lord," and "Son of God" – which have found their way into the creeds of the churches, and we shall consider their implications for the Christian understanding of the identity of Jesus.

1 *Messiah* It is very easy for a modern western reader to assume that "Christ" was Jesus' surname and to fail to appreciate that it is actually a title – "Jesus the Christ," or "Jesus the Messiah." The Hebrew word "Messiah" means "the anointed one" – someone who has been ritually anointed with oil, as a mark of having been singled out by God as having special powers and functions. Some of Israel's greatest kings were referred to as "the Lord's anointed" (1 Samuel 24: 6). As time passed, the term gradually came to refer to a deliverer, himself a descendant of David, who would restore Israel to the golden age it enjoyed under the rule of David.

During the period of Jesus' ministry, Palestine was occupied and administered by Rome. There was fierce nationalist feeling at the time, fueled by intense resentment at the presence of a foreign occupying power, and this appears to have given a new force to the traditional expectation of the coming of the Messiah. For many, the Messiah would be the deliverer who expelled the Romans from Israel and restored the line of the greatest king of Israel, David.

Jesus does not appear to have been prepared to accept the title "Messiah" in the course of his ministry. For example, when Peter acclaims him as Messiah – "You are the Christ!" – Jesus immediately tells Peter to keep quiet about it (Mark 8: 29–30). It is not clear what the full significance of the "Messianic secret" is. Why should Mark emphasize that Jesus did not make an explicit claim to be the Messiah, when he was so clearly regarded as such by so many?

Perhaps the answer may be found later, in Mark's gospel, when Mark recounts the only point at which Jesus explicitly acknowledges his identity as the Messiah. When Jesus is led, as a prisoner, before the High Priest, he admits to being the Messiah (Mark 14: 61–62). Once violent or political action of any sort is no longer possible, Jesus reveals his identity. He was indeed the deliverer of the people of God – but not, it would seem, in any political sense of the term. The misunderstandings associated with the title "Messiah," particularly in Zealot circles, appear to have caused Jesus to play down the messianic side of his mission.

2 *Lord* A second title used to refer to Jesus of Nazareth in the New Testament is "Lord" (Greek *kurios*). The word is used in two main senses in the New Testament. It is used as a polite title of respect, particularly when addressing someone. When Martha addresses Jesus as "Lord" (John 11: 21), she is probably, although not necessarily, merely treating him with proper respect. However, the word is also used in another sense.

The confession that "Jesus is Lord" (Romans 10: 9; 1 Corinthians 12: 3) was clearly regarded by Paul as a statement at the heart of the Christian gospel. Christians are described as those who "call upon the name of the Lord" (Romans 10: 13; 1 Corinthians 1: 2). But what does this imply? It is clear that there was a tendency in first-century Palestinianism to use the word "Lord" (Greek *kurios*; Aramaic *mare*) to designate a divine being, or at the very least a figure who is decidedly more than just human – in addition to this word's function as a polite or honorific title. But of particular importance is the use of this Greek word *kurios* to translate the special cypher of four letters used to refer to God in the Old Testament.

This cipher was often referred to as the "Tetragrammaton" (a Greek word meaning "the four letters"), and written as "Yahweh."

When the Old Testament was translated from Hebrew into Greek, the word *kurios* ("Lord") was generally used to render this special sacred name of God. Of the 6,823 instances in which the sacred name is used in the Hebrew, the Greek word *kurios* is used to translate it on 6,156 occasions. This Greek word thus came to be an accepted way of referring, directly and specifically, to the God who had revealed himself to Israel at Sinai and had entered into a covenant with his people on that occasion. Jews would not use this term to refer to anyone or anything else. To do so would be to imply that this person or thing was of divine status. The historian Josephus tells us that the Jews refused to call the Roman emperor *kurios*, because they regarded this name as reserved for God alone.

The writers of the New Testament had no hesitation in using this sacred name to refer to Jesus, with all that this implied. A name that was used exclusively to refer to God was regarded as referring equally to Jesus. In fact, on several occasions the New Testament takes an Old Testament text that refers to "the Lord" – in other words, to "the Lord God of Israel" – and deliberately applies or transfers the reference to "the Lord Jesus." Perhaps the most striking example of this tendency may be found by comparing Joel 2: 32 with Acts 2: 21. The passage in Joel refers to a coming period in the history of the people of God, in which the Spirit of God will be poured out upon all people (Joel 2: 28). On this "great and dreadful day of the Lord" (that is, God) "everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved" (Joel 2: 31–32) – in other words, all who call upon the name of *God* will be saved.

This prophecy is alluded to in Peter's great sermon on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2: 17–21), which ends with the declaration that "everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2: 21). Yet the "Lord" in question here is none other than "Jesus of Nazareth," whom, Peter declares, God has made "both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2: 36).

3 *Son of God* A third title used by the New Testament to refer to Jesus is "Son of God." In the Old Testament the term is occasionally used to refer to angelic or supernatural persons (see Job 38: 7; Daniel 3: 25). Messianic texts in the Old Testament refer to the coming Messiah as a "Son of God" (2 Samuel 7: 12–14; Psalm 2: 7). The New Testament use of the term seems to mark an intensification of its Old Testament meaning, with an increased emphasis upon its exclusiveness.

The belief that Jesus was the "son of God" arose partly from reflection on the resurrection. Paul opens his letter to the Christians at Rome by stating that Jesus "was descended from David at the human level, and was designated as the Son of God ... by his resurrection from the dead" (Romans 1: 3–4). This brief statement picks out two reasons why Jesus was understood to be the Son of God. First, on the physical level, he was a descendant of David, the great king of Israel to whom God had promised a future successor as king. A similar point is made by Matthew as he opens his gospel (Matthew 1: 1). Second, Jesus' resurrection established his identity as the Son of God. We see here how an appeal to the resurrection clinches the argument as to the true identity of Jesus as the "son of God."

The New Testament uses other terms to refer to Jesus of Nazareth – for example, "Son of Man" (traditionally understood to emphasize the humanity and humility of Jesus), and "Savior" (a theme we shall explore in more detail in Chapter 3, when we consider the Christian understanding of the nature and grounds of salvation).

Later in this work we shall be exploring some classic approaches to the identity of Jesus, along with other basic ideas of the Christian faith, when we reflect on the creeds.

Jesus of Nazareth and Women

Much recent discussion within Christian churches in the West has focused on the place of women within the church, particularly in professional ministries. Should women be ordained? The gospels' accounts of the ministry of Jesus are important to such discussions. They show that women were an integral part of the group of people who gathered round him. They were affirmed by him, often to the dismay of the Pharisees and other Jewish religious traditionalists. Not only were women witnesses to the crucifixion; they were also the first witnesses to the resurrection. The only Easter event to be explicitly related in detail by all four of the gospel writers is the visit of the women to the tomb of Jesus. Yet, as stated above, first-century Judaism disparaged women's testimonials and their credibility.

It is interesting to note that the gospels occasionally portray women as being much more spiritually perceptive than men. For example, Mark portrays the male disciples as having little faith (Mark 4: 40, 6: 52), while he commends women: a woman is praised for her faith (Mark 5: 25–34), a foreign woman, for responding to Jesus (Mark 7: 24–30), and a widow is singled out as an example to follow (Mark 12: 41–44). Further, Jesus treated women as human subjects rather than simply as objects or possessions. Throughout his ministry, Jesus can be seen engaging with and affirming women – often women who were treated as outcasts by contemporary Jewish society on account of their origins (e.g., Syro-Phoenicia or Samaria) or their lifestyle (e.g., prostitutes).

Jesus refused to make women scapegoats in sexual matters – for example in adultery. The patriarchal assumption that men are corrupted by fallen women is conspicuously absent from his teaching and attitudes, most notably toward prostitutes and the woman taken in adultery. The Talmud – an important source of Jewish law and teaching – recommended that its readers (who are assumed to be men) should "not converse much with women, as this will eventually lead you to unchastity." Such advice was studiously ignored by Jesus, who made a point of talking to women (the conversation with the Samaritan woman, related in John 4, being an especially celebrated instance). In much the same way, the traditional view that a woman was "unclean" during her period of menstruation was dismissed by Jesus, who taught that it is moral impurity that defiles a person (Mark 7: 1–23).

Luke's gospel is of particular interest in relation to understanding Jesus' attitude to women. Luke brings out clearly how women are among the "oppressed" liberated by the coming of Jesus. Luke also sets out his gospel in a way that emphasizes that both men and women are involved in, and benefit from, the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. The following passages demonstrate this parallelism especially clearly:

Luke 1: 11–20, 26–38	Zacharias and Mary rejoice at God's faithfulness
Luke 2: 25–38	Simeon and Anna praise the infant Jesus
Luke 7: 1–17	A centurion and a widow
Luke 13: 18–21	A man with mustard seed and a woman with yeast
Luke 15: 4–10	A man finds a lost sheep and a woman finds a lost coin

By this arrangement of material, Luke expresses that men and women stand together side by side before God. They are equal in honor and grace; they have the same gifts bestowed upon them and have the same responsibilities.

Luke also draws our attention to the significant role of women in the spreading of the gospel. For example, Luke indicates that "many women" (Luke 8: 2-3) were involved in spreading the news of the coming of the Kingdom of God. Indeed, Luke specifically names some of these women: "Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others." Granting women such a significant role would have seemed incomprehensible to the male-dominated society of contemporary Palestine.

It is probably difficult for modern western readers, who are used to thinking of women as having the same rights and status as men, to appreciate how novel and radical these attitudes were at the time. Possibly the most radical aspect of Jesus' approach to women is that he associated freely with them and treated them as responsible human beings, indulging in theological conversation with them, encouraging and expecting a response. It is hardly surprising that early Christianity proved to have a deep appeal for women.

It is entirely possible that Jesus' teachings attracted women partly on account of the new roles and status they were granted in the Christian community. There were many cults in Greece and Rome that limited their membership to men or allowed women to participate only in very limited ways. We shall explore developments in Christian attitudes toward women during the Roman empire in a later section of this work (pp. 127-129).

The Reception of Jesus of Nazareth outside Judaism

Although its historical origins lay in Palestine, Christianity rapidly gained a following in the Greek-speaking world, especially within the cities of the Roman empire. The missionary journeys of Paul of Tarsus, described in the New Testament, played an important role in spreading Christianity in Europe and Asia Minor. Paul was a Jewish religious leader who converted to Christianity, changing his name from "Saul" to "Paul." His missionary expeditions took him to many cities and regions throughout the northeastern Mediterranean area - including Europe. As Christianity began to gain a foothold on the European mainland, the question of how it was to be preached in a non-Jewish context began to be of increasing importance.

Early Christian preaching to Jewish audiences, especially in Palestine, tended to focus on demonstrating that Jesus of Nazareth represented the fulfillment of the hopes of Israel. Peter's sermon to Jews in Jerusalem (Acts 2) follows this pattern. Peter argues there that Jesus represents the culmination of Israel's destiny. God has declared him to be both "Lord and Christ" - highly significant terms (pp. 23-24), which Peter's Jewish audience would have understood and appreciated. But what were Christians to do when preaching to Greek audiences, who knew nothing of the Old Testament and had no connection with the history of Israel?

An approach that came to be particularly significant in the early Christian world can be found in Paul's sermon; it was preached on the Areopagus, the famous hill in the Greek city

of Athens, possibly around AD 55. Since his audience included no Jews, Paul made no reference there to the ideas and hopes of Judaism. Instead he presented Jesus of Nazareth as someone who revealed a god whom the Athenians knew about but had yet to encounter definitively. "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you" (Acts 17: 23). Paul declared that the god who was made known through Jesus of Nazareth was the same god who had created the world and humanity - the god in whom, as the Athenian poet Aratus declared, "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17: 28).

Where early Christian preaching to Jewish audiences presented Jesus as the fulfillment of the hopes of Israel, Paul's preaching to Greek audiences presented the Christian faith as the fulfillment of the deepest longings of the human heart and of the most profound intuitions of human reason. This view was easily adapted so as to incorporate some of the core themes of classic Greek philosophy, such as the idea of the "word" (Greek *logos*) - the fundamental rational principle of the universe, according to popular Platonic philosophy in the first century. This theme is developed in the opening chapter of the gospel of John, which presents Jesus of Nazareth as the "word" by which the universe was originally created and that entered into the world to illuminate and redeem it. "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory" (John 1: 14).

This was not necessarily seen as dismantling or displacing Christianity's historical and theological roots in Judaism. Rather it was seen as a way of affirming Christianity's cultural origins, while at the same time setting out the universal appeal of the Christian faith, which was held to transcend all ethnic, racial, and cultural barriers. The universal validity of the Christian gospel meant that it could be proclaimed in ways that would resonate with every human culture. As we shall see, this approach to the appeal of Christianity would be of immense significance throughout its history, especially in missionary contexts.

The material presented in this chapter clearly leads us into other areas of the Christian faith. One is that of its ideas, particularly those concerning the identity and significance of Jesus of Nazareth. We shall consider these further in Chapter 3. Yet our reflections in the present chapter also lead us to think further about the Christian Bible, the source of our understanding of the context against which Jesus of Nazareth is to be set, of our knowledge of his teaching and deeds, and of our information about how Jesus was understood within the first Christian communities. In the next chapter we shall consider the Christian Bible in more detail.