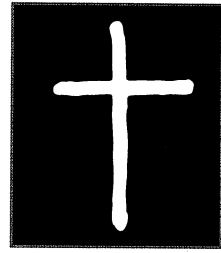


CHAPTER 9

CHRISTIANITY

"Jesus Christ is Lord"



KEY TOPICS

- **The Christian Bible** 295
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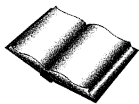
Christianity is a faith based on the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus. He was born as a Jew about two thousand years ago in Roman-occupied Palestine. He taught for fewer than three years and was executed by the Roman government on charges of sedition. Nothing was written about him at the time, although, some years after his death, attempts were made to record what he had said and done. Yet his birth is now celebrated around the world and since the sixth century has been used as the major point from which public time is measured, even by non-Christians. The religion centered around him has more followers than any other.

In studying Christianity we will first examine what can be said about the life and teachings of Jesus, based on accounts in the Bible and on historians' knowledge of the period. We will then follow the evolution of the religion as it spread to all continents and became theologically and liturgically more complex. This process continues in the present, in which there are not one but many different versions of Christianity.

The Christian Bible

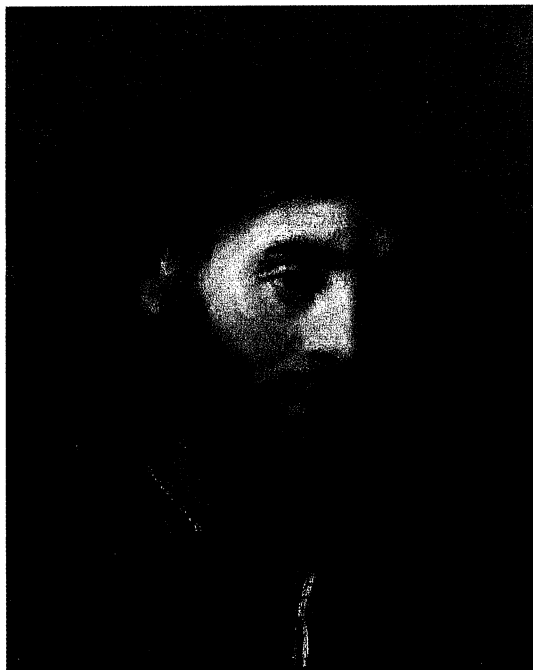
The Bibles used by various Christian churches consist of the Hebrew Bible (called the "Old Testament"), and in some cases non-canonical Jewish texts called the Apocrypha, and what Orthodox Christians call the Deuterocanonical books, plus the twenty-seven books of the "New Testament" written after Jesus's earthly mission.

Traditionally, the holy scriptures have been reverently regarded as the divinely inspired Word of God. Furthermore, in Eastern Orthodox Christianity, "the



How to Interpret
Scripture, p. 236
ORIGEN

We do not know what Jesus, the founder of the world's largest religion, looked like. Rembrandt used a young European Jewish man as his model for this sensitive "portrait" of Jesus.



Gospel is not just Holy Scripture but also a symbol of Divine Wisdom and an image of Christ Himself."¹ Given the textual complexity of the Bible, some Christians have attempted to clarify what Jesus taught and how he lived, so that people might truly follow him.

The field of theological study that attempts to interpret scripture is called **hermeneutics**. In Jewish tradition, rabbis developed rules for interpretation. In the late second and early third centuries CE, Christian thinkers developed two highly different approaches to biblical hermeneutics. One of these stressed the literal meanings of the texts; the other looked for allegorical rather than literal meanings. Origen, an Egyptian theologian (c. 185–254 CE) who was a major proponent of the allegorical method, wrote:

Since there are certain passages of scripture which . . . have no bodily [literal] sense at all, there are occasions when we must seek only for the soul and the spirit, as it were, of the passage. Who is so silly as to believe that God, after the manner of a farmer, "planted a paradise eastward in Eden," and set in it a visible and palpable "tree of life," of such a sort that anyone who tasted its fruit with his bodily teeth would gain life; and again that one could partake of "good and evil" by masticating the fruit taken from the tree of that name (Gen. 2:8, 9)? And when God is said to "walk in the paradise in the cool of the day" and Adam to hide himself behind a tree, I do not think anyone will doubt that these are figurative expressions which indicate certain mysteries through a semblance of history and not through actual events (Gen. 3:8).²

During medieval times, allowance was made for interpreting scriptural passages in at least four ways: literal, allegorical, moral (teaching ethical principles); and heavenly (divinely inspired and mystical, perhaps unintelligible to ordinary thinking). This fourfold approach was later followed by considerable debate on whether the Bible should be understood on the basis of its own internal evidence or whether it should be seen through the lens of Church tradition. During the eighteenth century, critical study of the Bible from a strictly historical point of view began in western Europe. This approach, now accepted by many Roman Catholics, Protestants, and some Orthodox, is based on the literary method of interpreting ancient writings in their historical context, with their intended audience and desired effect taken into account. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, emphasis shifted to questions about the process of hermeneutics, such as how to understand ancient texts that came from other cultures, how individual passages relate to the whole text, how the biblical message is conveyed through the medium of language, and how it is grasped by people in modern contexts.

There is very little historical proof of the life of Jesus outside of the Bible, but extensive scholarly research has turned up some shreds of evidence. The Jewish historian Josephus (born in approximately 37 CE), who was

captured by the Romans and then defected to their side, wrote extensively about other details of Jewish history that have been confirmed by archaeological discoveries. He made two brief references to Jesus that may have been given a positive slant by Christian copyists, but are nonetheless now regarded as proof that Jesus did exist. In the *Baraita* and *Tosefta*, supplements to the Jewish Mishnah, there are a few references to "Yeshu the Nazarene" who was said to practice "sorcery" (healings) and was "hanged."

What Christians believe about Jesus's life and teachings is based largely on biblical texts, particularly the first four books of the New Testament, which are called the **gospels** (good news). On the whole, they seem to have been originally written about forty to sixty years after Jesus's death. They are based on the oral transmission of the stories and discourses, which may have been influenced by the growing split between Christians and Jews. The documents, thought to be pseudonymous, are given the names of Jesus's followers Matthew and John, and of the apostle Paul's companions Mark and Luke. The gospels were first written down in Greek and perhaps Aramaic, the everyday language that Jesus spoke, and then copied and translated in many different ways over the centuries. They offer a composite picture of Jesus as seen through the eyes of the Christian community.

Three of the gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, are so similar that they are called the **synoptic** gospels, referring to the fact that they can be "seen together" as presenting rather similar views of Jesus's career, though they are organized somewhat differently. Most historians think that Matthew and Luke are largely based on Mark and another source called "Q." This hypothesized source would probably be a compilation of oral and written traditions. It is now thought that the author of Mark put together many fragments of oral tradition in order to develop a connected narrative about Jesus's life and ministry, for the sake of propagating the faith.

The other two synoptic gospels often parallel Mark quite closely but include additional material. The gospel according to Matthew (named after one of Jesus's original disciples, a tax collector) is sometimes called a Jewish Christian gospel. It represents Jesus as a second Moses as well as the Messiah ushering in the Kingdom of Heaven, with frequent references to the Old Testament. Matthew's stories emphasize that the Gentiles (non-Jews) accept Jesus, whereas the Jews reject him as savior.

Luke, to whom the third gospel is attributed, is traditionally thought to have been a physician who sometimes accompanied Paul the apostle. The gospel seems to have been written with a **Gentile** Christian audience in mind. Luke presents Jesus's mission in universal rather than exclusively Jewish terms and accentuates the importance of his ministry to the underprivileged and lower classes.

The Gospel of John, traditionally attributed to "the disciple Jesus loved," is of a very different nature from the other three. It concerns itself less with following the life of Jesus than with seeing Jesus as the eternal Son of God, the word of God made flesh. It is seen by many scholars as being later in origin than the synoptic gospels, perhaps having been written around the end of the first century CE. By this time, there was apparently a more critical conflict between Jews who believed in Jesus as the Messiah, and the majority of Jews, who did not recognize him as

the Messiah they were awaiting. The Gospel of John seems to concentrate on confirming Jesus's Messiahship, and also to reflect Greek influences, such as a dualistic distinction between light and darkness. It is also more mystical and devotional in nature than the synoptic gospels.

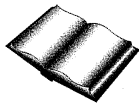
The light shines on in the dark, and the darkness has never mastered it.

The Gospel of John, 1:5

Other gospels circulating in the early Christian Church were not included in the canon of the New Testament. They include magical stories of Jesus's infancy, such as an account of his making clay birds and then bringing them to life. The Gospel of Thomas, one of the long-hidden manuscripts discovered in 1945 by a peasant in a cave near Nag Hammadi, Egypt, is of particular interest. Some scholars feel that its core may have been written even earlier than the canonical gospels. It contains many sayings in common with the other gospels but places the accent on mystical concepts of Jesus:

*Jesus said: I am the Light that is above
them all. I am the All,
the All came forth from me and the All
attained to me. Cleave a (piece of) wood,
I am there; lift up the stone and you will
find Me there.³*

*Jesus is often pictured
as a divine child, born
in a humble stable,
and forced to flee on
a donkey with his
parents. (Monastère
Bénédictin de Keur
Moussa, Senegal,
Fuite en Egypte.)*



The Annunciation,
p. 224
LUKE

The life and teachings of Jesus

It is not possible to reconstruct from the gospels a single chronology of Jesus's life nor to account for much of what happened before he began his ministry. Nevertheless, the stories of the New Testament are important to Christians as the foundation of their faith. And after extensive analysis most scholars have concluded on grounds of linguistics and regional history that many of the sayings attributed to Jesus by the gospels may be authentic.

Birth

According to the Christian doctrine of the **incarnation**, Jesus is the divine Son of God who "became flesh" by being conceived and born as a human being. The biblical book of Colossians states, "In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Colossians 2:9).

Most historians think Jesus was probably born a few years before the first year of what is now called the **Common Era**. When sixth-century Christian monks began figuring time in relationship to the life of Jesus, they may have miscalculated slightly. Traditionally, Christians have believed that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. This detail fulfills the rabbinic interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, the home of David the

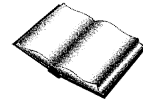
great king, and in the lineage of David. The Gospel of Matthew offers a genealogy tracing Jesus through David back to Abraham; the gospel of Luke traces his lineage all the way back to Adam, the son of God. Some scholars suggest that Jesus was actually born in or near Nazareth, his own home town in Galilee. This region, whose name meant "Ring of the Gentiles" (non-Jews), was not fully Jewish; it was also scorned as somewhat countrified by the rabbinic orthodoxy of Judaea. Both Judaea and Galilee were ruled by Rome at the time.

According to the gospels, Jesus's mother was Mary, who was a virgin when she conceived him by the Holy Spirit; her husband was Joseph, a carpenter from Bethlehem. Luke states that they had to go to Bethlehem to satisfy a Roman ruling that everyone should travel to their ancestral cities for a census. When they had made the difficult journey, there was no room for them in the inn, so the baby was born in a stable among the animals. He was named Jesus, which means "God saves." This well-loved birth legend exemplifies the humility that Jesus taught. According to Luke, those who came to pay their respects were poor shepherds to whom angels had appeared with the glad tidings that a Savior had been born to the people. Matthew tells instead of Magi, sages from "the east," who may have been Zoroastrians and who brought the Christ child symbolic gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh, confirming his divine kingship and his adoration by Gentiles.

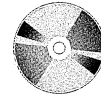
Preparation

No other stories are told about Jesus's childhood in Nazareth until he was twelve years old, when, according to the Gospel of Luke, he accompanied his parents on their yearly trip to Jerusalem for Passover. Left behind by mistake, he was said to have been discovered by his parents in the Temple discussing the Torah with the rabbis; "all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers." When scolded, he reportedly replied, "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"⁴ This story is used to demonstrate his sense of mission even as a boy, his knowledge of Jewish tradition, and the close personal connection between Jesus and God. In later accounts of his prayers, he spoke to God as "Abba," a very familiar Aramaic and Hebrew word for father.

The New Testament is also silent about the years of Jesus's young manhood. What is described, however, is the ministry of John the Baptist, a prophet citing Isaiah's prophecies of the coming Kingdom of God. He was conducting baptism in the Jordan River in preparation for the Kingdom of God. **Apocalyptic** expectations were running high at the time, with Israel chafing under Roman taxation and rule.

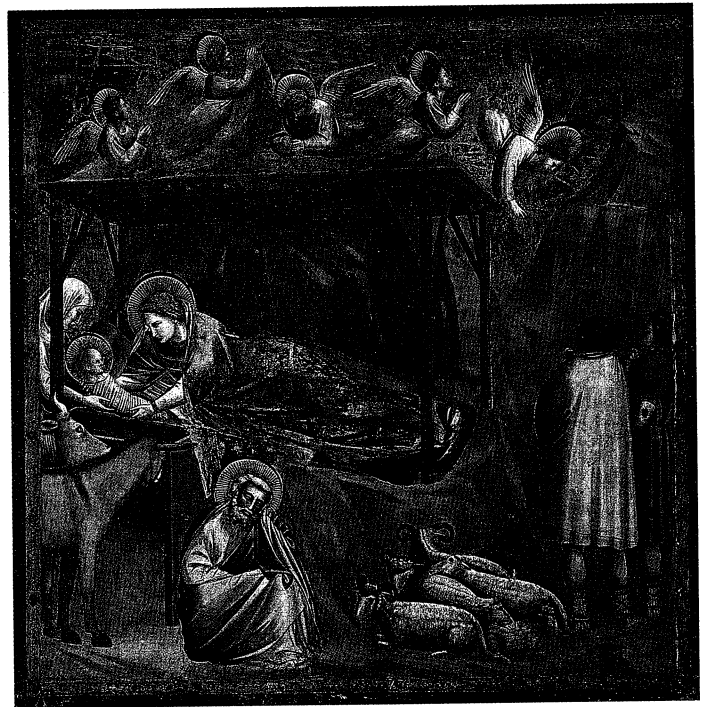


Jesus's Birth, p. 225
LUKE



CHRISTIANITY:
Jesus' Birth

"The Nativity," Jesus's humble birth depicted in a 14th-century fresco by Giotto. (Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, Italy.)



John the Baptist is said to have baptized Jesus only reluctantly, saying that he was unworthy even to fasten Jesus's shoes. When he did so, the Spirit allegedly descended upon Jesus as a dove. (Painting by Esperanza Guevara, Solentiname, Nicaragua.)



According to all four gospels, at the age of about thirty Jesus appeared before John to be baptized. John was calling people to repent of their sins and then be spiritually purified and sanctified by immersion in the river. He felt it improper to perform this ceremony for Jesus, whom Christians consider sinless, but Jesus insisted. How can this be interpreted? One explanation is that, for Jesus, this became a ceremony of his consecration to God as the Messiah. The gospel writer reports,

*When he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; and a voice came from heaven. "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased."*⁵

Another interpretation is that Jesus's baptism was the occasion for John's publicly announcing that the Messiah had arrived, beginning his ministry. A third interpretation is that by requesting baptism, Jesus identified himself with sinful humanity. Even though he had no need for repentance and purification, he accepted baptism on behalf of all humans.

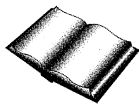
After being baptized, Jesus reportedly undertook a forty-day retreat in the desert wilderness, fasting. During his retreat, the gospel writers say he was tempted by Satan to use his spiritual power for secular ends, but he refused.

Ministry

In John's gospel, Jesus's baptism and wilderness sojourn were followed by his gathering of the first disciples, the fisherman Simon (called Peter), Andrew (Peter's brother), James, and John (brother of James), who recognized him as



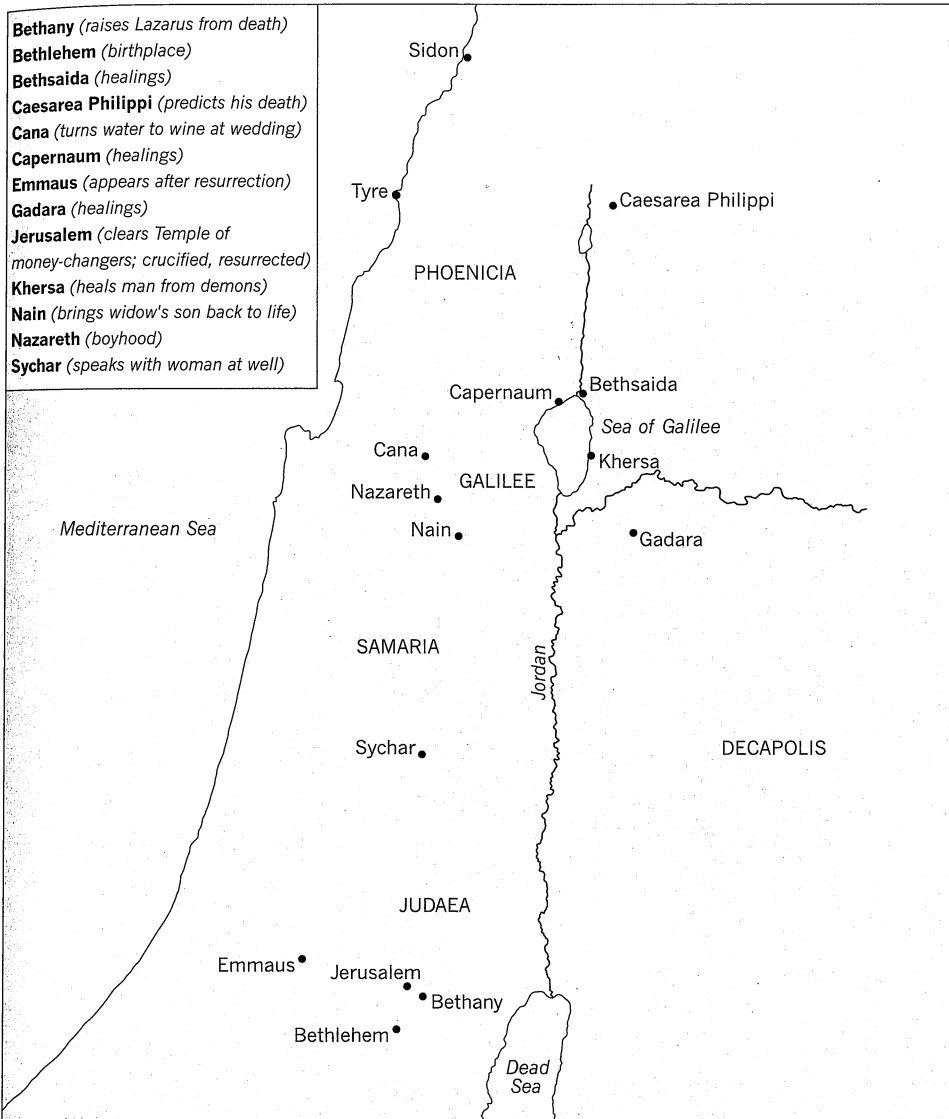
CHRISTIANITY:
Jesus's Life and
Teachings



Jesus's Ministry
Begins, p. 225
MATTHEW

the Messiah. Jesus warned his disciples that they would have to leave all their possessions and human attachments to follow him—to pay more attention to the life of the spirit than to physical comfort and wealth. This call to discipleship continues to be experienced by Christians today, and a person's response makes all the difference. The great German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), who, opposing the Nazis, ultimately gave his life for his beliefs, wrote that to follow Jesus one must leave worldly ties and self-centered ways of thinking behind: "Only the man who is dead to his own will can follow Christ."⁶

Jesus said that it was extremely difficult for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of heaven. God, the Protector, takes care of physical needs, which are relatively unimportant anyway:



From north to south, the area covered by Jesus during his ministry was no more than 100 miles (161 km). Yet his mission is now worldwide, with more followers than any other religion.

Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life?"

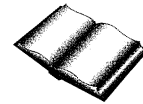
Jesus taught that his followers should concentrate on laying up spiritual treasures in heaven, rather than material treasures on earth, which are short-lived. Because God is like a generous parent, those who love God and want to follow the path of righteousness should pray for help, in private: "Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you."⁸

As Jesus traveled, speaking, he is said to have performed many miracles, such as turning water into wine, healing the sick, restoring the dead to life, walking on water, casting devils out of the possessed, and turning a few loaves and fish into enough food to feed a crowd of thousands, with copious leftovers. Jesus reportedly performed these miracles quietly and compassionately; the gospels interpreted them as signs of the coming Kingdom of God.

The stories of the miracles performed by Jesus have symbolic meanings taken from the entire Jewish and early Christian traditions. In the sharing of the loaves



Jesus is said to have brought Lazarus back to life four days after he died and was laid in a tomb. (Fresco by Giotto, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, Italy.)



The Last Supper,
p. 228
MARK

and fishes, for instance, it may have been more than physical bread that Luke was talking about when he said, "and all ate and were satisfied."⁹ The people came to Jesus out of spiritual hunger, and he fed them all, profligate with his love. Bread often signified life-giving sustenance. Jesus was later to offer himself as "the bread of life."¹⁰ On another level of interpretation, the story may prefigure the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples, with both stories alluding to the Jewish tradition of the Great Banquet, the heavenly feast of God, as a symbol of the messianic age. The fish were a symbol of Christ to the early Christians; what he fed them was the indiscriminate gift of himself.

Theological interpretations of the biblical stories are based on the evidence of the Bible itself, but people also bring their own experiences to them. To William, a twentieth-century Nicaraguan peasant, the miracle was not the multiplication of the loaves but the sharing: "The miracle was to persuade the owners of the bread to share it, that it was absurd for them to keep it all while the people were going hungry."¹¹

Jesus preached and lived by truly radical ethics. In contrast to the prevailing patriarchal society and extensive proscriptions against impurity, he touched lepers and a bleeding woman to heal them; in his "table fellowship," he ate with people of all classes. In a culture in which the woman's role was strictly circumscribed, he welcomed women as his disciples. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and Joses, Salome the mother of the disciples James and John, Mary of Bethany, Martha, Susanna, and Joanna are among those mentioned in the gospels. Some of them traveled with Jesus and even helped to support him and his disciples financially, a great departure from orthodox Jewish tradition. In addition, wives of some of Jesus's first male disciples who were married apparently accompanied them as they traveled with Jesus (1 Corinthians 9:5). His was a radically egalitarian vision.

He also extended the application of Jewish laws: "You have heard that it was said to the men of old," Jesus began, "You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment. But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment."¹² Not only should a man not commit adultery; it is wrong even to look at a woman lustfully. Rather than taking revenge with an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, respond with love. If a person strikes you on one cheek, turn the other cheek to be struck also. If anyone tries to rob you of your coat, give him your cloak as well. And not only should you love your neighbor, Jesus says:

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.¹³

The extremely high ethical standards of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) may seem impossibly challenging. Who can fully follow them? And Jesus said these things to people who had been brought up with the understanding that to fulfill incompletely even one divine commandment is a violation of the Law. But when people recognize their helplessness to fulfill such commandments, they are ready to turn to the divine for help. Jesus pointed out, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God."¹⁴

The main thing Jesus taught was love. He stated that to love God and to "love your neighbor as yourself"¹⁵ were the two great commandments in Judaism, upon which everything else rested. To love God means placing God first in one's life, rather than concentrating on the things of the earth. To love one's neighbor means selfless service to everyone, even to those despised by the rest of society. Jesus often horrified the religious authorities by talking to prostitutes, tax-collectors, and the poorest and lowliest of people. He set an example of loving service by washing his disciples' feet. This kind of love, he said, should be the mark of his followers, and at the Last Judgment, when the Son of Man judges the people of all time, he will grant eternal life in the kingdom to the humble "sheep" who loved and served him in all:

Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?" And the King will answer them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me."¹⁶

Jesus preached that God is forgiving to those who repent. He told a story likening God to the father who welcomed with gifts and celebration his "prodigal son" who had squandered his inheritance and then humbly returned home. He told story after story suggesting that those who considered themselves superior were more at odds with God than those who were aware of their sins. Those who sincerely repent—even if they are the hated toll-collectors, prostitutes, or ignorant common people—are more likely to receive God's forgiveness than are the learned and self-righteous. Indeed, Jesus said, it was only in childlikeness that



The Beatitudes,
p. 226
MATTHEW

TEACHING STORY

The Good Samaritan

On one occasion a lawyer came forward to put this test question to Jesus: "Master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said, "What is written in the Law? What is your reading of it?" He replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." "That is the right answer," said Jesus; "do that and you will live."

But he wanted to vindicate himself, so he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was on his way from Jerusalem down to Jericho when he fell in with robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went off leaving him half dead. It so happened that a priest was going down by the same road; but when he saw him, he went past on the other side. So too a Levite came to the place,

and when he saw him went past on the other side. But a Samaritan [a person from a region against whom the Jews of Judaea had developed religious and racial prejudice] who was making the journey came upon him, and when he saw him was moved to pity. He went up and bandaged his wounds, bathing them with oil and wine. Then he lifted him on to his own beast, brought him to an inn, and looked after him there. Next day he produced two silver pieces and gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Look after him; and if you spend any more, I will repay you on my way back.' Which of these three do you think was neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He answered, "The one who showed him kindness." Jesus said, "Go and do as he did."¹⁷

people could enter the kingdom of heaven. In a famous series of statements about supreme happiness called the **Beatitudes**, Jesus is quoted as promising blessings for the "poor in spirit,"¹⁸ the mourners, the meek, the seekers of righteousness, the pure in heart, the merciful, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness and of spreading the gospel.

Jesus's stories were typically presented as **parables**, in which earthly situations familiar to people of his time and place were used to make a spiritual point. He spoke of parents and children, of masters and servants, of sowing seeds, of fishing. For example,

The kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea that brings in a haul of all kinds. When it is full, the fishermen haul it ashore; then, sitting down, they collect the good ones in a basket and throw away those that are no use. This is how it will be at the end of time: the angels will appear and separate the wicked from the just to throw them into the blazing furnace where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth.¹⁹

As we have seen, messianic expectations were running very high among Jews of that time, oppressed as they were by Roman rule. They looked to a time when the people of Israel would be freed and the authority of Israel's God would be recognized throughout the world. Jesus reportedly spoke to them again and again about the fulfillment of these expectations: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel"²⁰; "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God . . . for I was sent for this purpose."²¹ He taught them to pray for the advent of this kingdom: "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."²² However, in contrast to expectations of secular deliverance from the Romans, Jesus seems to refer to the kingdom as manifestation of God's full glory, the consummation of the world.

Every one who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

Jesus, as quoted in the Gospel of John, 4:13-14

Jesus's references to the kingdom, as reported in the gospels, indicate two seemingly different emphases: one that the kingdom is expected in the future, and the other that the kingdom is already here. In his future references, as in the apocalyptic Jewish writings of the time, Jesus said that things would get much worse right before the end. He seemed to foretell the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans that began in 70 CE. But:

then will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory; and he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.²³

It was his mission, he said, to gather together everyone who could be saved.

TIMELINE

Christianity

- c.4 BCE–0 CE** Jesus born
- c.27–33 CE** Jesus crucified
- c.37–100** Josephus
- c.50–60** St. Paul organizes early Christians
- c.70–95** Gospels written down
- c.150** Last of New Testament writings
- c.185–254** Life of Origen, who supports allegorical interpretation of Bible
- 306–337** Constantine emperor of Roman Empire
- 325** Nicene Creed; Council of Nicaea affirms divinity of Jesus
- 354–430** Life of St. Augustine, influential formulator of Christian doctrines
- 379–395** Christianity becomes state religion under rule of Emperor Theodosius
- c.480–542** Life of St. Benedict and creation of his monastic rule
- 800–1300** Middle Ages in Europe; centralization of papal power
- 1054** Split between Western and Eastern Orthodox Church
- 1095–1300** The Crusades
- 1182–1226** Life of St. Francis of Assisi
- 1225–1274** Thomas Aquinas
- 1232** The Inquisitions begin suppressing and punishing heretics
- 1300s** Proliferation of monastic orders
- 1412–1431** Joan of Arc
- 1453** Gutenberg Bible published
- 1478** Spanish Inquisition set up
- 1509–1564** Life of John Calvin
- 1517** Martin Luther posts 95 Theses; Protestantism begins
- 1534** Church of England separates from Rome
- 1545–1563** The Council of Trent; Roman Catholic Reformation
- 1624–1691** Life of George Fox, English founder of Quakers
- 1703–1791** Life of John Wesley, founder of Methodist Church
- c.1720–1780** The Enlightenment in Europe
- 1859** Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* challenges beliefs in creation by God
- 1910–1997** Life of Mother Teresa
- 1945** Discovery of the Nag Hammadi manuscripts
- 1947** First Dead Sea Scrolls discovered
- 1948** World Council of Churches formed
- 1962–1965** The Second Vatican Council
- 1988** Churches reopened in Russian Federation
- 2000** Pope John Paul II asks forgiveness for sins of the Roman Catholic Church
- 2002** Boston's Roman Catholic Bishop resigns in growing scandal over sexual abuse by priests; seven women claim ordination as Roman Catholic priests
- 2005** Pope Benedict XVI's papacy inaugurated