

Jesus the Christ

A New Testament
Portrait

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Contents

1	Who Is Jesus? Searching in the New Testament and Beyond	7
2	The Gospels: Central Sources for Understanding Jesus	29
3	The World of Jesus: History and Politics	50
4	Daily Life in Jesus' Time: Culture and Religion	77
5	The Mission Begins: Preparing the Way of the Lord	102
6	The Kingdom of God: Proclaiming the Dream of Jesus	122
7	Jesus Speaks: Sayings and Stories of the Kingdom	138
8	Jesus Heals: Signs of the Kingdom	154
9	The Cross: The End or a Beginning?	169
10	The Resurrection: God Is Victorious! Jesus Is Lord!	186
11	Paul: Apostle to the Gentiles	205
12	The Letters of Paul: Proclaiming Christ Crucified and Risen	229
13	Good News from Age to Age: The Church's Understanding of Jesus Christ	252
	Index	272

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Who Is Jesus? Searching in the New Testament and Beyond

Once when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him, he asked them, “Who do the crowds say that I am?” They answered, “John the Baptist; but others, Elijah; and still others, that one of the ancient prophets has arisen.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered, “The Messiah of God.”

[Jesus] sternly ordered and commanded them not to tell anyone.

(Luke 9:18–21)

“Who Do You Say That I Am?”

It Begins with the Cross

Jesus hung there, nailed to a cross, dying the death of a common criminal. As life slipped from his body and his last breath left his mouth, some witnesses no doubt cheered. It was the end of him, they thought, and the end as well of the dangerous message he had proclaimed. No more of this subversive challenge to established rules, or this talk of sinners and outcasts being accepted by God, or this call to love even one’s enemies. It was also the end of his claim of a unique relationship with God, a relationship that gave him a special kind of authority. If taken seriously, such a claim could lead to a breakdown of the social order, a loss of respect for proper authority. Common people, even from the lowest classes, would begin to think they could make demands of those in power. But there was no need to worry about all of that now. He is dead, they gloated, and we are finally rid of him.

Others gathered at the foot of that same cross. They, too, watched Jesus cling to the last thread of life. But there was no joy for them, no cheering. For his death spelled not only the end of his life but the end

as well of all their dreams. They had loved this man; they had walked with him, sat spellbound by his stories, had their imaginations fired and their hearts freed by his message of hope and love. When he spoke of God and of the meaning of life, he was so convincing, so sure of himself, that they had become sure of their faith in him. They had staked their future on him, convinced that he would lead them to victory over their enemies and return them to a long-lost glory as a people. Now, as the blood drained from his body, it was all over. The end brought only bitter tears and, for some, the fear that they might meet the same brutal end if they did not deny their belief in him.

It Does Not End There

Nearly two thousand years later, people still talk about that man and the meaning of his life. Many claim that Jesus' story did indeed end with his brutal death on that small hill outside Jerusalem. He was clearly a good man, they may claim, maybe even one of the greatest religious leaders of all time—like the Buddha, perhaps, or Moses, or Muhammad. He was admittedly a teacher of great wisdom, and parts of his message are worth pondering and even practicing. But he was nothing more than that, certainly not what others claim him to have been—the Messiah, the Son of God, the Lord of the universe. Such claims, they say, are sheer nonsense, illusions, mere superstition.

Others have come to a radically different conclusion about that man and his message. Today they call themselves Christians—"followers of the Christ"—to express their convictions about him. This was no ordinary man, they say. He was not just a great teacher or prophet, not just one more great religious leader. He was much more. He was, Christians claim, the Messiah, one with God. In fact, they boldly state, he was the Son of God and the Lord of the universe. Shocking claims, indeed. If true, those claims not only boggle the mind of the individual but change the entire course of human history.

Who Is This Man?

Nearly two thousand years have passed since the days when "the carpenter's son," the one called Jesus of Nazareth, walked the roads of Palestine, and still we must ask, Who is this man? In his own time he was most often regarded as simply a teacher, yet his "classroom" varied from the formal setting of Jewish houses of prayer and worship to crowded and dusty streets, from peaceful lakeshores to rolling hill-

sides. His basic message as he delivered it might well fill only a small pamphlet. Yet library shelves today groan under the weight of thousands of books that have attempted to explain that message. He felt his message was so simple that even children—perhaps *only* children—could quickly understand it. It was a message about a good God and a proclamation of unlimited love, of generosity, of a world of peace, of brotherhood and sisterhood. It was a message of hope amid despair, of joy beneath the tears and hunger, of freedom from the chains of oppression, of life in the face of death.

The man who preached that message of unbounded hope, of unquenchable joy, of profound liberation and abundant life, was savagely executed on a cross by people he had somehow frightened. His words of love and joy and peace had become for some a threat, even a curse. How could this happen?

No Time to Mourn

Like so many great leaders throughout history, Jesus was fully appreciated only after his brutal death. That in itself is not unusual. We humans often appreciate wonderful gifts only after they have been taken from us; we experience deep love when the ones we love are absent; we recognize great people only when death snatches them from us. Our human inclination in such cases is not only to mourn the loss of what once was but also to ache for what might have been—the promise that might have been fulfilled, the wisdom that might have been shared, the talent that could have been tapped, the songs that could have been sung.

But with *this* young person, this man from Nazareth nearly two thousand years ago, the response was strangely, mysteriously different. Following his death there was barely time for grief and no time to write an obituary. All the talk of what might have been had just begun when the shocking message rang out across the land: "The one whom you have crucified has been raised by God and is now alive!" That proclamation changed the course of history, shook the foundation of the world at its roots.

What Do We Call Him?

Jesus of Nazareth was given many titles during his earthly life—*teacher*, *rabbi*, *prophet*. But all references to him changed dramatically in light of what his followers claimed *after* his death: that he was raised from the dead!

The titles Jesus then received—*Lord, Redeemer, Savior, the Christ, Son of God*—come so easily to believers now that many have lost touch with what they mean. We fail to realize how haltingly these titles must have been uttered by those who first spoke them. We forget that many throughout history have endured torture and execution with these words on their lips and joy in their hearts. Many throughout history have fallen to their knees with the overwhelming realization, “My God . . . he’s God!” Yet others remain indifferent, even hostile, to the claims Christians make about that man of long ago.

Jesus of History, Christ of Faith

This is a book about that man, the son of a carpenter from Nazareth, the one called simply Jesus in his own time but who is now recognized by more than a third of all the people in the world as *the Christ*, the anointed one sent by God to redeem the world from sin. Each of the titles applied to Jesus throughout Christian history reflects a different insight into him and his meaning. Later in this book we will explore some of those titles and their significance for believers.

In contemporary discussions of Jesus and his meaning, many find it helpful to speak of him in three related but different ways: as *the historical Jesus*, then with the significantly different term, *the Jesus of History*, and finally as *the Christ of Faith*. It is clear that Jesus of Nazareth was a genuine historical figure, a Palestinian Jew of two thousand years ago whose life and message profoundly influenced the people of his day. Historical records verify not only that he existed but that he was executed by Roman authorities because of the message he proclaimed and the effect it had on those who followed him. Even those who choose not to believe in Jesus’ divinity—that is, in his identity as the Son of God—would generally not deny that he existed. They may even claim that his life and message are worth studying, as are those of other great religious leaders. When spoken of in this context, Jesus is being referred to as *the historical Jesus*.

When believers speak of Jesus, however, they start with a very different conviction about the one who walked the roads of Palestine two thousand years ago. Christians do not believe that Jesus in some mysterious way *became* divine through his Resurrection from the dead. They believe, rather, that he was divine, that he was one with God, *from the very beginning of time*. They believe that in the person of Jesus, God took on the flesh of humanity and became one with us in

order to redeem us from our sin. Christians, therefore, do not simply believe in “the historical Jesus” in a conventional sense; to them he was and is much, much more than that. To express that reality, believers use the term *Jesus of History*. By this term they refer to the divine Son of God *as he walked the earth in the person of Jesus*.

With their use of a third term for Jesus, *Christ of Faith*, believers recognize and proclaim the startling Christian conviction that the Jesus of History was raised from the dead by God and that he truly was and is forever Lord and Savior. Here is the key point to grasp in this discussion of terminology: We want to avoid any suggestion that the Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith are in some way different or distinct persons. According to believers, they are instead one and the same person understood and experienced in two different ways. When viewing him one way—as the Jesus of History—our focus is on the encounter with Jesus Christ in his earthly ministry up to and including his death. When viewing Jesus the second way—as the Christ of Faith—our focus is on the encounter with Jesus Christ after the Resurrection, especially as that encounter has been experienced, proclaimed, and explained by the community of Christians, the church. But both the titles *Jesus of History* and *Christ of Faith* include the understanding that for believers Jesus was, and is, both human and divine.

The struggle to find language for the realities discussed in this book can seem confusing and, for some, even silly. However, countless people throughout history have staked their life—indeed, in many cases, *given* their life—in defense of the realities that such terms attempt to express. As our discussion of Jesus unfolds, it will become increasingly clear why these terms carry such power and meaning.

A Dramatic Shift in Our Understanding of Jesus

The church’s basic understanding of the life, message, and meaning of Jesus has undergone a dramatic shift in recent decades. The causes and effects of that shift are complex, of course, and a full discussion of them is beyond the scope of this book. However, as we begin this exploration of Jesus, we want to offer a brief explanation of the fundamental shifts in Christology in recent decades, particularly as that has been reflected in Roman Catholicism.

Catholic Christians have experienced the reality of their faith in new and sometimes startling ways as a result of the changes brought about

by Vatican Council II. The council concerned itself primarily with ecclesiology, that is, with the nature of the church, its mission in the world, the understanding of sacrament, and so on. Yet no doubt a major source of all the dramatic changes brought about by the council was a new, enriched (though not necessarily clearly defined) understanding of Jesus, his message, and his meaning for the contemporary world.

In recent decades that new understanding of Jesus has been given greater clarity. The number of books on Christology seems to have multiplied exponentially, and these are not just popular books intended to inspire us but also highly academic and scholarly works representing the most intensive and disciplined research. Thanks largely to remarkable advances in scriptural study, we today—perhaps more so than Christians at any time in history—are capable of getting in touch with the central meaning of Jesus, a meaning free from many of the historical and cultural embellishments that have often clouded our understanding of him.

Christology from Above

For hundreds of years in the church, beginning as far back as the second century, the church's understanding of Jesus had been highly doctrinal and theological rather than biblical, gradually developing into what scholars today frequently term a "Christology from above." This means that Catholic Christians tended to concentrate relatively little on the Jesus who walked the dusty roads of Palestine nearly two thousand years ago. Instead they focused on his pre-existence as the Son of God and the meaning of his life and message as interpreted by theologians and scholars and as officially defined by the church through the centuries.

Following is a summary of the major theological characteristics of a Christology from above, with which many middle-aged and older Catholics have been raised. Later in this discussion, this Christology will be compared with what scholars call a "Christology from below."

The Scriptures as God's exact words. The first point to note about a Christology from above is the understanding of the Scriptures that undergirds it. Many of us were raised to view the Gospels, for example, as historical documents almost literally dictated by God. Paintings and wood carvings through the centuries often pictured the Evangelists seated at a desk with a quill in hand, an angel hovering over their shoulder and at times actually touching their hand as they wrote. As

will be seen in a moment, a new understanding of the Gospels' development has been a fundamental reason for the change in the understanding of Jesus.

An emphasis on the fall from grace and the need for redemption. The second theological characteristic of a Christology from above is the understanding that the plan of God rests on the alienation of humanity from God through sin (the fall from grace due to original sin) and our consequent need for redemption. This is perhaps most clearly reflected in the great emphasis that may have been placed on the Adam and Eve story in our education as children.

A distant God. Another common characteristic of a Christology from above is the concept of God as one who is "out there," removed from humanity—in a sense, beyond us. Jesus is recognized as a kind of intermediary between humanity and a God who is too distant to be accessible to us. One image of God familiar to older Catholics that might reflect this transcendent God is the "eye in a triangle," an image far removed from that of the loving Parent so strongly advocated today.

Jesus as the pre-existent Word. A fourth theological characteristic of this approach to Christology is an emphasis on Jesus as the pre-existent Word of God and the second person of the Blessed Trinity, who was sent by God to be our Savior by ransoming us from our slavery to sin. This doctrinal understanding of Jesus is not false, nor is it ignored in a Christology from below. But contemporary theologians recognize that when we *begin* our understanding of Jesus with the concept of him as the pre-existent Word, our total understanding of Jesus' humanity is affected. For instance, with this concept of Jesus as our starting point, it seems only reasonable to believe that Jesus, from birth, would have been fully conscious of his identity as God and fully conscious as well of his role in the plan of God. This has dramatic implications for our understanding of his ministry, his miracles, and the meaning of his death.

The perfect sacrifice. Finally, a Christology from above recognizes that Jesus saved us by "dying for our sins," thereby satisfying God with an act of perfect sacrifice, one beyond the reach of people. This death won God's favor, and the gates of heaven were reopened. To put it another way—the way we may well have learned it as children—Jesus died for our sins as a kind of payment to God for Adam and Eve's offense, for which we inherited the guilt.

We can say that a Christology from above emphasizes the following dimensions of Jesus' life and message:

- his divinity as the pre-existent Word of God and the second person of the Trinity
- his Incarnation as a man, with his birth recognized as the central Christian mystery (leading to an emphasis on Christmas as the central Christian feast)
- his sacrificial and salvific death
- salvation of the individual as being accomplished through baptism (which “unites us with Jesus’ death”) and adherence to the will of God, particularly as it is discerned by the leaders of the Mystical Body, the church

This theological understanding of Jesus has been with the church for hundreds of years. Many Catholics have been raised with this basic approach, and may still have it as their underlying theology. Why did things change so much? What caused the shift in the church’s perspective on Jesus?

The Shift in Christologies

When trying to identify the causes of the change that has occurred in the church over recent decades, there is an understandable tendency to claim that Vatican Council II was responsible for all of it. But actually the council itself was preceded by, and at least partially the result of, great strides in liturgical renewal and—particularly important for our purposes—a dramatic and renewed openness to biblical scholarship among Catholics.

Two significant documents influenced this development in biblical scholarship:

Divino Afflante Spiritu. The change began in earnest with a 1943 encyclical by Pope Pius XII titled *Divino Afflante Spiritu (On Promoting Biblical Studies)*. That encyclical is often referred to as the Magna Charta of Catholic biblical scholarship. Essentially it stated that Catholic scholars could begin to use modern biblical critical methods in their research, the kind of approaches that had been used by Protestant scholars for decades. We began to acknowledge, for instance, that the Scriptures in many cases were not to be taken literally, and we started to take a new look at biblical stories such as those of Adam and Eve, the parting of the Sea of Reeds by Moses, the Creation, and Jonah and the whale. This was a vital shift for the church that would affect its understanding of Jesus.

“Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels.” The second significant document to note, one having direct implications for the Christology in this book, was issued by the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 1964 under the title “Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels.” This document officially recognized that the Gospels were written by believing Christians as post-Resurrection testimonies of faith about their experiences with and beliefs about Jesus. They were not intended to be *historical* documents in our traditional sense of that term. The commission’s document noted that the Gospels actually developed over an extended period of time through three basic stages:

1. Jesus, speaking and acting as a first-century Jewish teacher, shared his message with his disciples as they traveled Palestine with him.
2. After Jesus’ death and Resurrection—and in light of those events—the disciples recognized Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, the One who had been promised. But rather than sitting down to write about their experience of Jesus, the disciples began an intensive missionary campaign throughout the Roman Empire to share the Good News with others.
3. After thirty-five to seventy years of this missionary activity, the Gospels as we know them were finally developed by the Evangelists, men who served as editors more than authors by collecting oral traditions, liturgical prayers developed in community, sayings of Jesus, and so on. Each Evangelist organized this material into accounts that responded to the specific needs of the community for whom he wrote.

The questions arising from the shift in our understanding of the Gospels are important. For instance:

- Who did the disciples think Jesus was *before* they recognized him as the Christ of Faith, the Messiah, the Son of God—a recognition that fully came to them only *after* the Resurrection?
- Was Jesus fully conscious of his identity and role before experiencing his Resurrection?
- How did the disciples grow in their awareness of Jesus’ identity as he lived and taught among them? Is it not possible that contemporary Christians are to discover the Jesus of History as the Christ of Faith in a similar way? In other words, may not today’s Christians also begin with reflection on Jesus’ humanity—as the disciples did—rather than begin with reflection on his divinity?

Ultimately, questions like these, and the answers that biblical scholars and theologians have arrived at to this point, have led to the development of a Christology from below, one that moves from the human to the divine rather than the other way around.

Where We Are: A Christology from Below

The following is a summary of the major theological characteristics of a Christology from below. Note that a chart summarizing the comparison between the two positions can be found at the end of this discussion.

The human experience as a starting point. In a Christology from below, we begin with the human experience of Sacred Mystery and humanity's search for God in everyday life and in the religious history of humanity. Rather than starting with a fall from grace, for example, we begin with our present human experience of sin and alienation in our relationships with one another, with God, and within ourselves as individuals. The conviction is that if God does not speak to the felt needs and yearnings of people today, then their belief in God can be neither relevant nor influential in their lives.

Jesus as a Jew. Another major theological characteristic of a Christology from below is that Jesus is first recognized as precisely who he was as he walked the roads and hiked the hills of Palestine—a Jewish teacher and prophet. He was thoroughly Jewish in his religious background, his mentality, his social and family relationships, and so on. He was a man whose vision was firmly rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures, and he was a monotheist committed to Yahweh—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He, like all Jews of Palestine, experienced the domination of the Romans, and he, along with his people, thirsted for freedom from oppression.

A universal call to a relationship with the Father. At age thirty or so, Jesus of Nazareth went out among his people, proclaiming his vision of the Kingdom of God, the Reign of God over all creation. During his development Jesus had arrived at a sense of God's nature that was profoundly new, so new that he used a startling name for Yahweh, calling God *Abba*, which is similar to our word *Daddy*. Jesus recognized that God is not “out there” but is closer to us than we are to ourselves. And out of this intense awareness of the closeness and unconditional love of God, Jesus arrived at an awareness that all people are related to one another as brothers and sisters. In other words, “The Kingdom of

God is among you!” Jesus came to proclaim not himself but Yahweh, and he lived and died to call all people to a relationship not just with himself but with the Father.

No avoidance of the human condition. A fourth insight into a Christology from below addresses Jesus' consciousness of himself and his role in the world. In this view Jesus confronted the world and all its evil just as we do, from the perspective of humanity. Jesus did not escape the trials and torments of life. He experienced loneliness, frustration, fear, anxiety, hunger, exhaustion—just as we do.

Jesus' death as the consequence of his loving commitment. In a Christology from below, the understanding of Jesus' death also shifts. Rather than beginning with a theological conviction that Jesus died for the sins of humanity to ransom people by satisfying God's anger, we see Jesus' death as a consequence of a life lived in total love of God and others. As Jesus gained recognition and a following, he angered and alienated the political and religious powers of his time, and he became a threat to the established authorities, who eventually had to execute him to preserve their own power.

God's victory in the Resurrection. Finally, and perhaps most critically of all, a Christology from below emphasizes not the sacrificial death of Jesus but the fact that not even death could conquer this man and his vision. For after three days, God raised Jesus from the dead. Note especially the emphasis here on God's activity. Jesus did not raise himself. In the Resurrection it is God who is victorious, and in and through God's victory, Jesus is eventually recognized as Lord, that is, as one with God.

This understanding of Jesus, this Christology from below, leads to an emphasis on the following dimensions of Jesus' life and message:

- his humanity as the Nazarene, the carpenter's son, the Jewish teacher and prophet, the One who is one with us in all things except sin
- his Resurrection (which logically leads to a renewed emphasis on Easter, rather than Christmas, as the central Christian feast)
- his ongoing presence among us and his call to a new way of living in his Spirit
- salvation of the individual as being accomplished not only through ritual baptism but also through mature, personal, and free acceptance of Jesus, and through a commitment to live out Jesus' message and values in daily life

It is clear that the church has experienced a dramatic change in its understanding of what it means to be a Christian. The kind of changes brought about by the Second Vatican Council will not be fully understood and accepted, and will not truly affect the community of faith, if they are perceived to be simply modifications in the structures of the

Who Do We Say Jesus Is?

Christology from Above

- I. Theological foundations:
 - a. the Gospels as historical documents dictated by God
 - b. humanity's fall from grace and the need for redemption
 - c. God as transcendent, "out there"
 - d. Jesus as the pre-existent Word of God, the second person of the Trinity, sent by God
 - e. Jesus, from birth, as fully conscious of his identity and role
 - f. Jesus' saving us by "dying for our sins" in an act of perfect sacrifice, thereby satisfying God and reopening the gates of heaven
 - g. salvation through baptism and adherence to the will of God as it is discerned by church authorities
2. Characteristics of Jesus that are emphasized:
 - a. his divinity as the second person of the Trinity
 - b. his Incarnation as a man (leading to an emphasis on Christmas as the central Christian feast)
 - c. his sacrificial and salvific death on the cross (leading to an emphasis on the Eucharist as a re-enactment of Calvary)

Christology from Below

- I. Theological foundations:
 - a. the Gospels as inspired, post-Resurrection testimonies of faith
 - b. the lived experience of alienation from self, others, God
 - c. God as personal, immanent
 - d. Jesus initially perceived as a Jewish prophet and teacher in first-century Palestine
 - e. Jesus as gradually growing in his consciousness of his identity and role
 - f. Jesus' death on the cross as a direct result of conflicts with Jewish and Roman authorities and as a consequence of his total love
 - g. salvation through personal decision and commitment, as well as through the church community
2. Characteristics of Jesus that are emphasized:
 - a. his humanity as the Nazarene, who experienced life as we do
 - b. his Resurrection by God (leading to an emphasis on Easter as the central Christian feast)
 - c. his ongoing presence and call to life in the Spirit (leading to an emphasis on the Eucharist as a communal banquet)

church, in the way roles in the church are defined, or in the way the sacraments are celebrated. Rather, individual Christians and the church community as a whole will grow and develop only when—or if—they see these changes as a way to get more deeply in touch with Jesus and his Good News. It would seem that a Christology from below helps us to do precisely that.

A Look Ahead

In light of this discussion of contemporary Christology, this book does not begin with the conclusions about Jesus that the Christian church has reached over the process of two thousand years of study, reflection, prayer, and historical experience. Rather, we begin at the beginning, with the earliest sources we have for understanding Jesus: the Christian Scriptures—and more specifically, the four Gospels of the New Testament.

By exploring these basic sources, three main questions can be addressed:

1. Who was the Jesus of History, the man who lived nearly two thousand years ago in a place called Palestine?
2. Why was this man, Jesus, the crucified one, so quickly recognized by the early Christians as the Christ of Faith, the anointed one sent by God to free them from all evil?
3. And perhaps most important of all, how did the church come to the astounding recognition that Jesus not only was the Christ or Messiah awaited by Jews, but was and is the divine Son of God, "one in being with the Father," who offers salvation to all humanity?

Sources for Learning About Jesus

On what solid information can we reasonably build an understanding of Jesus, so that we can make a mature decision about him? There is, it seems, only one real answer: We must turn to the same foundation on which all the popes, bishops, scholars, and other believers through the years have ultimately based their own teachings about Jesus and their faith in him: the Christian Scriptures. Only through the perspective of the Christian Scriptures can we begin to get a clearer, fuller picture of Jesus. Only in this light can we understand the early church's teachings about Jesus the Christ, as well as understand how the church's current teachings about Jesus have developed from the early foundations.

The Christian Scriptures

When Christians refer to the Bible or the Christian Scriptures, they mean a whole collection of sacred writings that includes both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

The word *testament* means “covenant,” which is a solemn promise made between people. The Old Testament is all about the covenant, or special relationship, that God made with the people of Israel long before the birth of Jesus. It includes forty-six different books written by different people over a period of about a thousand years. The stories, prayers, and prophecies contained in those books are central to the Jewish faith, and have always been a vital part of the Christian faith as well.

As will become evident in the next several chapters, a full Christian understanding of Jesus is impossible without the Old Testament as a source. Christians believe that everything God promised the people of Israel was promised to Christians, too, and that through Jesus, God fulfilled or made good on those promises. At the same time, God made a new covenant, through Jesus, with all people. The New Testament is all about that new covenant. Its twenty-seven books pertain specifically to the Christian faith.

Christians believe that the authors of the biblical literature were inspired, or guided, by the Holy Spirit. According to Roman Catholic theology, this does not mean that God spoke to the biblical authors directly, as someone might dictate a letter to a typist. Rather, the Catholic church teaches that inspired texts are writings whose authors, prompted by the Holy Spirit, convey God’s revealed truth using their own abilities, words, and styles. For Christians, then, God is the ultimate author of the Scriptures, and the truth God conveys in and through them is reliable.

Seen together as the Christian Scriptures, the Old Testament and the New Testament provide what can be called faith sources—not historical sources in our usual sense of that term—of information about Jesus. They are faith sources because they were written by believers prompted by the Holy Spirit for the purpose of proclaiming the work of God that they found in all aspects of their life. The New Testament, for example, was written specifically to announce God’s redeeming, transforming love to all the world in Christ.

The scriptural accounts about Jesus and the early church are therefore different from the objective kind of reports we might expect to

find, say, in a newspaper or a history book. As we will see in chapter 2, even though the Scriptures are inspired by the Holy Spirit, understanding their truth requires taking the perspective and intent of their human authors into consideration. In other words, the Scriptures should not be read in the same way we read history books or newspaper accounts.

Ultimately, the Gospels

When it comes to understanding Jesus’ ministry and life, we must rely primarily on four short books included in the New Testament: the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Just about everything the Christian church teaches about Jesus comes through the Gospels. The Gospels, in turn, serve as the scale or test of truth and authenticity for everything the church teaches about Jesus. The Gospels are the link between Jesus of Nazareth and the people of every age throughout history who have claimed to be his followers. However, faith sources such as the Gospels are not the only sources of information about Jesus.

Historical Sources

Several nonbiblical and non-Christian sources are available to help substantiate that Jesus actually did exist as a historical person.

Josephus, a Jewish Historian

Josephus, a Jewish historian, mentioned Jesus in his writings toward the end of the first century C.E., roughly sixty years after Jesus’ death.

Just a Matter of Time

Notice that the dates in this book are identified with the letters B.C.E. and C.E. rather than the more familiar B.C. and A.D. The abbreviations B.C. and A.D. refer to the periods before and after the birth of Jesus (B.C. stands for “before Christ,” and A.D. stands for *anno Domini*, “in the year of our Lord”). Understandably, some non-Christians find that frame of reference offensive. The new abbreviations use the common era—the calendar system used in most parts of the world—as a frame of reference. So dates are referred to as either before the common era (B.C.E.) or during the common era (C.E.). If a date is not accompanied by an abbreviation, one can assume that the year is during the common era.

As a non-Christian, Josephus would have had no reason to accept the historical reality of Jesus unless there was some sound basis for it.

In one of his works, Josephus discusses disturbances that were caused by the Jews during the time Pontius Pilate was governor of the region of Judea (26–36 C.E.). These disturbances centered around a man named Jesus and his followers. Josephus identifies Jesus as “a wise man . . . a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of men who receive the truth with pleasure,” and he notes that Jesus was later condemned by Pilate to crucifixion. While this mention of Jesus does not suggest that Josephus himself accepted Jesus or the claims made about Jesus by his followers, it does seem clear that Josephus recognized Jesus to be a historical person who had a profound impact on the people he encountered.

Roman Writers

Tacitus. The Roman historian Tacitus referred to Jesus in his account of a fire that burned Rome in the year 64 C.E., for which the emperor Nero supposedly blamed the Christians. Tacitus himself obviously had no great love for that strange group of people called Christians:

Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of . . . Pontius Pilate, and the pernicious superstition [that is, Christianity] was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease, but in the capital [Rome] itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue.

Nero’s hideous torture of the Christians, as described below, reflects not only Nero’s sick mind but also the extent to which many early followers of Jesus would go rather than deny their faith:

. . . [Christians] were covered with wild beasts’ skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night.

Some historians doubt Tacitus’s claim that Nero was responsible for the persecution of many Christians.

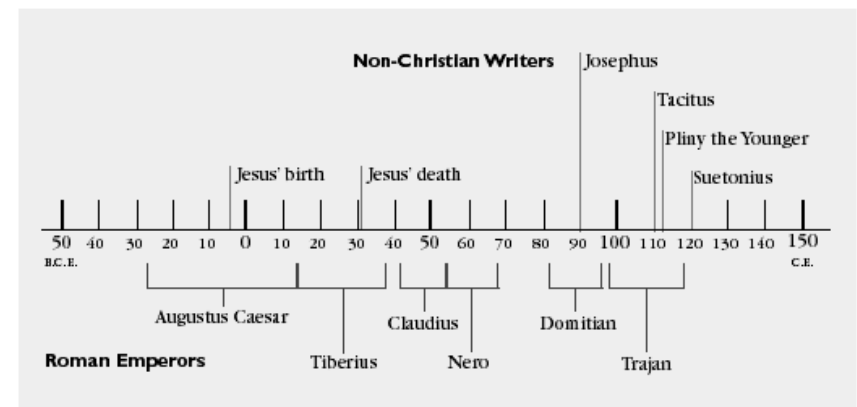
Pliny the Younger. Another Roman source, a man named Pliny the Younger, was governor of one of the Roman provinces in Asia Minor

about the year 110 C.E. He wrote to the emperor Trajan for advice on what to do about the Christians. The Roman officials were always concerned about the growth of any political or religious sect, and the Christian communities baffled them. Although Pliny’s letter mentions Jesus, it offers no new information about him.

Suetonius. Around 120 C.E., the Roman historian and lawyer Suetonius compiled biographies of several Roman emperors. In a discussion of the emperor Claudius, Suetonius says that Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome because of the riots they were constantly causing, “on the instigation of Chrestus.” Though there is some debate over the word *Chrestus*, scholars generally agree that it refers to Christ. (Note that at the time of Suetonius, Christians were still commonly regarded by the Romans as a Jewish sect. That is why Suetonius’s account says that Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome.)

Though these historical sources do not give us more information about Jesus than we find in the biblical sources, they do support the historical existence of Jesus, and they show Christianity—the movement based on Jesus’ life and teachings—as worthy of at least brief mention. The fact remains, however, that if we want to know about Jesus to any reasonable degree, we must turn to the Christian Scriptures and, more specifically, to the Gospels.

THE HISTORICAL SOURCES IN PERSPECTIVE



The New Testament

A Collection of “Books”

The New Testament is composed of twenty-seven separate works, representing not only different authors but also different types of writing. There are personal letters; homilies, or sermons, from early worship services; some highly symbolic and imaginative writings; and of course, the Gospels. Though these various works are often called the *books* of the New Testament, none of them fits the description of a book in the usual sense. The writing of the books of the New Testament began roughly twenty years after the death of Jesus (that is, about 50 C.E.) and continued to about 100 C.E.

One principal theme unifies the writings of the New Testament: they all deal in some way with the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus and the impact he had on the community of those who believed in him—what we now know as the church. Only the four Gospels deal directly with Jesus—his life, his preaching, his wonderful works, and very important, his death and Resurrection. The other writings—the letters of Saint Paul, for example—offer us little information about the historical life of Jesus. They concentrate instead on the happenings within the early community of faith; the meaning of Jesus’ life, death, and Resurrection for the individual believer; various difficulties encountered by the first Christians as they moved out into the world; and so on. In that sense, the writings other than the Gospels are about the lives of the Christian community and the individual Christian more than they are about the life of Jesus himself. In the New Testament, only the Gospels offer us anything like a historical portrait of Jesus.

Writings with Special Authority

As noted earlier, it took some fifty years for the writings of the New Testament to develop. However, it took even longer for the church to officially recognize these writings as having special importance and authority in the life of the Christian community. Prior to the development of the New Testament, the earliest Christians—many of whom were devout Jews—had what we now call the Old Testament as their only sacred writings. The Christians commonly used these writings, for example, during community prayer and worship.

The new writings that emerged from the community of Jesus’ followers initially came about to meet the needs of that growing, worshiping community. These new writings included short sermons, collections of the sayings of Jesus, hymns to be used during worship, collected stories of Jesus’ wondrous works, and so on. Many of these writings were eventually lost, but some were combined into the works we now recognize as the individual books of the New Testament.

By the end of the second century—that is, more than 150 years after the death and Resurrection of Jesus—the church had come to some general agreement about accepting the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as particularly special and authoritative. Debate continued about many of the other writings that had developed within the community. It was not until the end of the fourth century that the church finally and formally approved the collection of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament.

Because the church believes this collection of writings—known as the Christian canon—was inspired by the Holy Spirit, these Scriptures are considered especially authoritative.

The Canon of the New Testament

The New Testament, developed out of the faith experiences of the early Christian community, can be organized in a variety of ways. The books are summarized below according to the way they appear in most Bibles today.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John

The four Gospels include information about the life, works, message, death, and Resurrection of Jesus. Each of the Gospels is organized chronologically, which suggests that they are something like historical records of Jesus’ life, though we will see that they are not as concerned with the details of Jesus’ history as with his message.

The Acts of the Apostles

The Acts of the Apostles is Luke’s account of the early days of the Christian community under the leadership of Saint Peter. Though Luke does record the initial development of the church in Jerusalem, his main focus in Acts is the spread of the Good News throughout the Roman Empire after the death and Resurrection of Jesus. Acts focuses especially

on the missionary work of one of the church's most famous personalities: Saint Paul. The Acts of the Apostles is commonly seen as a companion to Luke's Gospel, and many scholars suggest that the two should be read together as one major work.

Thirteen Pauline Epistles

The Acts of the Apostles is followed by a collection of thirteen Pauline epistles, or letters, either written by or attributed to Saint Paul. Most scholars today agree that only seven of these were actually written by Paul. The other six are thought to have been composed by writers who wanted to honor Paul or who sought special authority in the community by claiming Paul as the author of their letters. The primary purpose of all the Pauline letters was to support and further educate either individual Christians or small communities who believed in Jesus because of the missionary work of Paul and others.

The Letter to the Hebrews

The Letter to the Hebrews is another work often attributed to Paul, but scholars generally believe it was written by an unknown author. Though commonly referred to as a letter, Hebrews does not take the form of a normal letter of the time. Rather, it is a kind of extended sermon to a group of Christians who are in danger of falling away from their belief in Jesus.

The Catholic Epistles

After the Letter to the Hebrews comes a collection of seven epistles attributed to other personalities: James, Peter (two letters), John (three letters), and Jude. Some or all of these are often referred to as catholic (meaning "universal") or general epistles, because they are addressed to believing Christians as a general audience rather than to specific individuals or communities.

The Book of Revelation

The New Testament concludes with a strange and complex work: the Book of Revelation. Some Bibles refer to this book as the Apocalypse, based on the Greek word for "revelation." Its highly symbolic and mysterious language reflects a kind of writing that had been popular among the Jews since about two hundred years before Jesus. Most contemporary scholars agree that the Book of Revelation was written

for the late-first-century Christians, who were suffering persecution at the hands of the Romans for their beliefs. The book encourages them to remain faithful to Christ. It also deals with their expectation that Jesus will return again in glory at the end of time to fulfill God's work on earth.

Keep in mind throughout this discussion that the books of the New Testament did not actually develop in the order in which they appear in the Bible. Because the Gospels come first, it might seem that they were written first; however, this was not the case. The fact is that Paul did his missionary work, wrote his profound letters, and likely died before the first Gospel took the form we now recognize. Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians is generally considered the first book of the New Testament to be written, roughly around the year 50 C.E. The Gospels were written approximately between the years 70 and 95. The last book written is generally believed to be the Second Letter of Peter, written about the year 100.

The present organization of the New Testament developed for a variety of reasons: the relative popularity of each of the Gospels within the early community of faith, the length of Paul's letters (they are organized from the longest to the shortest), and so on.

Turning to the Gospels

Our discussion of Jesus will focus primarily on the portraits of him found in the Gospels. Brief consideration will be given to the understanding of Jesus that emerges from Paul's ministry as it is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles and in Paul's letters. Only periodically will a few of the other books, such as the letters of John, be mentioned. And some of the books of the New Testament will be passed over, only because they tell us very little specifically about Jesus and his message. If this were a book on the New Testament itself, the approach would be quite different. However, our constant concern is, Who is Jesus, and what are we to make of his ministry, message, death, and Resurrection?

With a basic background on the whole New Testament now laid out, the discussion can turn to a more thorough treatment of the biblical writings that will serve as the main sources in this study of Jesus—the Gospels.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. On a piece of paper, quickly write your response to each of the following statements:
 - In one sentence, answer Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?"
 - Name five titles or names for Jesus that immediately come to your mind.
 - In one sentence, define what it means to "be saved by Jesus."
2. Now review your responses to the first exercise. Which of your responses seem to reflect a "Christology from above"? Which reflect a "Christology from below"? Do your responses in general suggest a preference for one approach over the other? If so, to what do you attribute that preference? (Note: You may find it helpful as you attempt to answer these questions to review the chart on p. 18.)
3. Many Christians have in recent decades experienced rather dramatic shifts in their perception and understanding of Jesus. If that is the case for you, have the changes been essentially positive and freeing, or confusing, or even disturbing? Can you give a concrete example of an instance when a changed perception was freeing for you? Can you offer an example of when the change was difficult or threatening?
4. The Christian Scriptures are identified as "faith sources of information about Jesus," insofar as they were created by believers for the purpose of proclaiming the work of God revealed in and through Jesus. Using the term more broadly, what other *faith sources* have you experienced in your life, that is, what other sources of information or inspiration have influenced your current understanding of and relationship to Jesus?