

A Short World History of Christianity

Revised Edition

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Introduction

“Fire upon the Earth”

*I*n the twelfth chapter of the writing that Christians refer to as the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is recorded as saying, “I came to cast fire upon the earth.” It is an uncomfortable image. Fire is usually associated with destruction. Commentators believe that the fire spoken of in this text was the fire of judgment through which a new world would be brought about. But fire is a multivalent metaphor. It both destroys and refines; its light illuminates while its smoke conceals.

The same multivalence can be seen in the story of Christianity in world history. For those within the Christian community, the image of fire has another connotation. For them it symbolizes the presence of the Holy Spirit. When the day of Pentecost (often viewed as the birth of the Christian church) is pictured, tongues of fire represent the Spirit. Thus do Christians view their history. Whatever its failures and limitations, they persist in believing that God is doing something in that history: the Christian story is not a series of random events; it has a great purpose.

In taking “fire upon the earth” as the guiding metaphor for the story of Christianity in world history, this book attempts to do justice to the image’s multifaceted implications. Friends, enemies, and neutral observers have judged the story of Christianity to be one of amazing creativity and terrible destruction, of fearless accomplishments and grim failures, of highs and lows. Whatever else there is to be said, Christianity has left its mark on the world as surely as any fire. And the story and the mark form the subject of this book.

Indeed, telling this story has become an urgent task in the present age. As the world has grown smaller and as the influence of religion in human affairs has increased (replacing, together with other social forces, the great ideological movements of the past century), a knowledge of Christianity in world history takes on new importance. But these sociological shifts also make telling

Christian history more complex and nuanced. Paradoxically, as more and more details of the story are filled in, people are increasingly without a grasp of its basic outline. Knowledge of the history of Christianity is probably slighter today than ever before. The present volume addresses this lacuna. In this sense it attempts to do for the twenty-first century what the religious historian Martin Marty accomplished in

This book argues that “global Christianity” is one phase in the evolving history of Christianity.

his *Short History of Christianity* fifty-five years ago—to provide a workable overview for both students and general readers that scholars and teachers might also find helpful.

Such a volume must look very different today, however. Marty’s *Short History* was written at a time when the Western preeminence in the story of Christianity could still be assumed. Trajectories such as from Paul through Augustine to Luther could still be confidently made in order to link the various stages of Christian history. For the contemporary chronicler, both the world and the Christian community have become far more complex. Older histories gloss over the non-Western world as well as factions within the church that were deemed unworthy of note. To counteract these blind spots, several volumes published in the past decade have billed themselves as “global histories,” attempting to recast the story of Christianity in worldwide perspective.

For better or worse, this volume does not claim to be a global history, though I hope it is sensitive to the issues raised by that genre. Rather, it argues that “global Christianity” is one phase (albeit a crucial one) in the evolving history of Christianity. The thesis of the book can be stated simply: Christianity has passed through a series of interconnected phases. Christianity was born in “globalization.” It took root in various environments, each of which left its mark on local Christian life and practice. These distinct regional Christianities were the norm for the first thousand years of the Christian era. But starting in the eleventh century, the dynamic of the Christian world began to change. One regional Christianity, that of the Latin West, began to grow more and more vital while the other geographic centers, for a variety of reasons, weakened. If the first thousand years of the story of Christianity is a tale of competing regional Christianities, the next nine hundred years must be understood as the “Latin era,” during which the churches of western Europe uniquely shaped the course of the Christian world. But what has made the past fifty years so turbulent and confusing is the ending of Christianity’s Latin era and the

return to globalism and competing regional Christianities. This volume is not so much a global history as a study of why globalism has emerged and triumphed in the story of Christianity, and of the impact this has had on both Christianity and the world. Students of history may recognize this book's indebtedness to the structure of the late Sydney Ahlstrom's *Religious History of the American People*, where it was argued that a "Puritan era" shaped the central period of American religious history. When that era collapsed in the 1960s, we entered a new age of pluralism. The idea of a "Latin era" implies that we can speak of history as having a center. Yet centers are both artificial and real at the same time. They are artificial because they are merely constructs of a given time and place; they have no ultimate reality. They are real because when they do function, they help to define a community in a given time and place. Western dominance during the Latin era was accidental—and critics may rightfully say that it was an unfortunate accident—but it was real and must be acknowledged.

The goal of this volume is fourfold. The first goal is to offer a new narrative that will make the two thousand years of Christianity comprehensible and interesting to the general reader. There are many ways to shape a historical study, but to cast it as a story is perhaps the oldest. Despite the complications, a common story still holds together the infinite particularity of Christian experience. The second goal is to bring back into the narrative many of the churches that were rejected by the dominant tradition and that consequently have not found a place in general histories. Thus, for example, Nestorians all too often drop out of sight after the Council of Ephesus, and Monophysites (or Copts) disappear after the Council of Chalcedon, yet, as will be seen in these pages, both continued for centuries to play a significant part in Christian history. The third goal is to incorporate into the narrative the great flowering of recent scholarship that has restored women, the laity, blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and many others to Christian history. A short history can only touch on these concerns, but they account for the tripartite shape of the Christian narrative as understood by this book. Finally, the book attempts to balance internal issues, such as prayer and sacrament, with larger questions of Christianity's relationship to its changing political and intellectual world. It looks at Christian history from both inside and outside.

A narrative history allows readers to experience history as a story, but as a genre it suffers from key limitations. To write history as a story is to be an author in search of one plot. Stories are not encyclopedias. Rather, details are rigorously selected to move the narrative forward. So it is with this volume. Important figures from the Christian past have been ruthlessly excluded in the interest of producing a true "short history." If readers finish this book

hungering for more in-depth knowledge, it will be the author's dream come true. There are many fine encyclopedic histories they can consult.

The writing of history is a moral act. The lives and reputations of thousands of persons are in the author's hands. This book strives to be as fair and charitable as possible to all. Judgment is at times necessary, but so, too, is humility.

SECTION 1

Shaping a Christian Tradition

“Who Is This Man?”

*T*he story of Christianity is a vast and complicated tale with thousands of actors—both heroes and villains—but at its heart it is about one man, Jesus of Nazareth. The earliest Christian Gospel posed the question most bluntly, “Who is this man?” and the subsequent story of Christianity has been the attempt to render an answer to this question. People in different times and locations have offered their own interpretations—in theology, in art, in humble devotion—but the question remains. The poet and sage Ralph Waldo Emerson perhaps said it best: the name of Jesus “is not so much written as plowed into the world.”

But if the story is about a man, it is also about what people thought about him, what he said and did, and how they responded to his life. This, too, was as true in the first century as it is in the twenty-first. For centuries some have attempted to separate the man from the testimonies and get back to the true “historical Jesus.” In the past century alone this Jesus has been seen as a moral prophet, social revolutionary, philosopher, and Cynic teacher of wisdom, as well as in countless other ways. Indeed, in the long history of Christianity people have tended to read into this Jesus the hopes and fears of their age. Although this task has never ultimately been successful, all of these pictures present some important insight. But what is here attempted is to provide a broad historical sketch to begin this study.

Divisions and Conflicts

There are but a few, brief references to Jesus in what has come down to us in the writings of antiquity, apart from Christian sources. There is a fleeting reference to him by the Jewish historian Josephus and an even sketchier reference by the Roman historian Tacitus, but a historical picture ultimately

rests on the texts preserved by the Christian community itself. From these we soon learn that the world of the historical Jesus was one where great forces were clashing. There was, to begin with, the world of Judaism. Judaism had grown more complex since the return from captivity in Babylon in 538 BCE. New ideas began to find a place among believers. The notion of an after-life and a day of judgment (both largely absent in the religion of David and Solomon) took on a prominence in some Jewish groups. The interest in judgment brought forth a new type of literature, the apocalyptic. Apocalypticism pictured the world as a battleground between God and Satan, in which the oppressing power of Satan would be overthrown by God, who would usher in a new and perfect age. In this age God would rule directly. The instrument of God in this action would be the messiah. He would restore the kingship of David and, with it, Jewish power. The apocalyptic hope led pious individuals to watch for signs to see if the day of judgment was at hand.

The hope for a restoration of national glory was made intensely practical by the political situation Judaism found itself in. Since their return from exile the Jewish people had been under the dominion of one foreign power after another. First there were the Persians. Their rule, though distant, was real. Then came the Greeks, or Hellenists. In his subduing of Persia, Alexander the Great brought the eastern Mediterranean area (including Judea) under the sway of Greek power. After his death (as we will see) the land was contested by various different satraps, successors to Alexander's control. Finally, in 63 BCE, the land came under the control of Rome, and it was under Roman rule that Jesus was born.

These political changes created divisions within the Jewish world. How one should respond to the challenge of Hellenism became a question of great urgency for those Jews living in the larger world. The Christian writer Tertullian was to ask the famous question "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" and it was a pressing question for Jews confronting Hellenism. Hellenism introduced the Greek language, a culture that was cosmopolitan, and an educational ideal that rested on philosophy. All were challenges. Language was perhaps most basic. Since the time of captivity many Jews had taken residency throughout the Mediterranean world. They were the Jews of the Diaspora. To live and work in the cities of the Mediterranean was to be in a world that spoke Greek. As Greek increasingly became the language of the Jewish Diaspora, Jews recognized that the Hebrew Scriptures needed to be translated. The Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures became known as the Septuagint (for the seventy scholars who, according to legend, translated it), and it later would become the first Bible of the young Christian community. But the question of Hellenism ran deeper. According to Greek philosophy,

the spiritual was superior to the material, and the universal was superior to the particular. What sense, then, could be made of sacred Scriptures given to a single people and filled with earthy images? Must there not be a greater reality behind the literal words of the text? The search for such a meaning was called allegory. The first-century Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, for example, saw the story of the garden of Eden as symbolizing the development of the soul’s moral virtues. Greek wisdom and Hebrew revelation, he believed, could work together.

Others were not so sure. The gymnasium, symbol of the Hellenistic world, where naked young men exercised their bodies, and the Jewish Temple, where pious men in long robes prayed to the God of Israel, seemed like different worlds. The question of Hellenism would become particularly sharp in the second century BCE. Judea had become a point of contention between competing parts of the old Alexandrian empire. Both the Ptolemies of Egypt and the Seleucids of Syria coveted the land. In the 160s the Seleucids under Antiochus Epiphanes triumphed, and they attempted to push hellenization to a further degree. Not only was a gymnasium established in the sacred city of Jerusalem, but the Temple itself was dedicated to Zeus. The result was the revolt of the Maccabees, a fight against assimilation. The Jewish holiday of Hanukkah commemorates the cleansing of the Jewish Temple.

The complicated world of Judaism also contributed to the emergence of many competing parties. There were those who saw the center of Judaism to be its Temple. There priests continued to serve and offer sacrifice to God as in the past. The party associated with the Temple was known as the Sadducees. If the Temple was their place, the books of Moses (the first five books of the present Hebrew Scriptures/Old Testament, also known as Torah or Law) were their Bible. They refused to put other works—such as the Prophets or the “Writings” such as Psalms and Proverbs—on the level of the Law of Moses. Sadducees rejected new beliefs such as the resurrection of the dead because they were not to be found in Moses. Opposing the Sadducees were the Pharisees. They had three distinctive teachings. First, they believed that the Scriptures included the Prophets and the Writings as well as the Law of Moses. Second, they put great emphasis on the interpretation of the law. In a complicated world the law needed to be applied to situations for which it had never been intended. The rabbi (or teacher) interpreted the law for the community, and the rabbi was the great figure among the Pharisees. Finally they believed that much of the thrust of the law was to achieve a moral and ritual purity in everyday life. One needed to be pure not merely to be in the Temple but in all aspects of the world.

In addition to Pharisees and Sadducees there existed another group, the Essenes. The Essenes had withdrawn from a world that had become polluted.

In their isolated communities they focused on their communal life and saw their communal body as the temple of the Lord. In their communities the apocalyptic hope burned bright. Their purity within a world of corruption was like Israel of old, a time in the wilderness in preparation for entering the promised land. The Dead Sea Scrolls were most likely part of a library of an Essene community.

The imposition of new ideas and forces changed Judaism, and these changes would have an immense impact on the shaping of Christianity. But the new milieu also involved Judea in an international community, and this international community would have a role in the shaping of Christianity. The emergence of a common linguistic world as a result of Alexander's conquests meant that the Christian Scriptures, written in Greek, could be comprehended throughout the Mediterranean world. The apostle Paul, in one of the earliest of Christian writings, proclaimed, "In Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek," and in this he meant that the message was for both Jews and Greeks. One practical reason this could be so was that Greeks and (most) Jews shared a common language.

If Alexander provided a common language, Rome created a common society. The birth and rise of Christianity took place in the two centuries when Roman power was at its peak. Rome created what was called the Pax Romana, the Roman peace. Rome's governance was certainly brutal at times. The famous phrase of the historian Tacitus, "They created a desert and called it peace," reflected the negative side of the Pax Romana. But Rome also provided an unprecedented communication network linking the known world from Britain to Baghdad. The Mediterranean Sea, once a haven for pirates, was now a Roman lake, filled with communication and commerce. The Roman peace was the backdrop for the rise of Christianity. Indeed, one of the Gospel writers, Luke, claimed it was more. In his account of the birth of Jesus, Luke was to write, "A decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered," and it was for that reason that the parents of Jesus traveled to Bethlehem. There Jesus was born in the city of David. For Luke, prophecy was fulfilled through the action of a Roman emperor. The early Christian community would have an ambiguous relationship with the Roman Empire.

The Story of a Life

Such was the world, but what do we "know" about this man Jesus, born in the Roman-occupied province of Judea more than two thousand years ago? As we saw, virtually the only source of information is Christian sources, and

even that is surprisingly spotty. The Gospels record scant information about his early life. He is associated with the town of Nazareth in the region of Galilee, a place far from the religious center of Judaism or the political center of anything. There Jews and non-Jews lived together. His father is recorded as being a carpenter, and in one place Jesus himself is called a carpenter. From the accounts we also learn that at about age thirty his life radically changed. He underwent baptism at the hands of a fiery wandering preacher, John the Baptist. John was a preacher of righteousness, a bearer of the message of the prophets. The relationship between John and Jesus has generated much speculation. Luke states that they were relatives, and the Gospel writers picture John as the one who prepared the way for Jesus, but many modern scholars believe they may have had competing ministries. We also learn that after the baptism Jesus began acquiring a group of followers or disciples and began a public ministry. Luke has this ministry beginning when Jesus went to the synagogue in Nazareth and read from the scrolls. The scene and the passage chosen, if not historical, do capture the spirit of the ministry of Jesus as recorded by the Gospel writers. From Isaiah, he read,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Good news, healing, and the inauguration of a new age in God's relationship with the world (the acceptable year of the Lord) aptly summarize the ministry that was to follow.

The good news he offered was in an arresting style and focused on a central subject. He made use of parables, or simple stories that used everyday imagery: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho”; “A sower was out sowing the field.” Each parable, though, had a pungent point. And the point of many was the kingdom of God. Mark, whose Gospel is the earliest, has Jesus beginning his public ministry by announcing, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” The idea of a kingdom of God would have been familiar to those steeped in the apocalyptic hope of the age. Many sought God's intervention in the world and the restoration of Israel's glory. But Jesus' preaching concerning the kingdom presented a paradox. At times he spoke of the kingdom of God as already present. Through his own ministry, he declared, the relationship between God and the world had been altered. God had become closer. The Gospel writers make this point by recording Jesus' name for God: “Abba,” or “Father.” The use of the word *Father* to describe God was not unique to Jesus—it is found

in some of the Jewish literature of the time—yet the standard Jewish term for God was not *Father* but *Lord*. For Jesus the term *Father* suggested a new and closer parental relationship between God and the faithful.

Yet at other times Jesus speaks of the kingdom as coming in the future. In the prayer he taught his followers, known as the “Our Father” or the Lord’s Prayer, he stated, “Thy Kingdom come.” It is imminent, and the faithful need to prepare for it, because no one knows when it will actually come. The paradox is reflected in the differing ways in which the parables speak of the kingdom. Some parables urged watchfulness: if you are asleep at the time, you will miss the opportunity. Other parables speak of the present existence of the kingdom and of its being like leaven or yeast—tiny yet transforming—or like a mustard seed that over time will become the greatest of trees. Later, scholars would speak of this paradox as “realized/realizing eschatology” or the belief that the kingdom is both present and future. The tension between present and future would become an important part of the dynamics of later Christianity.

The kingdom entailed a radical ethic. The new relationship between God and humanity demanded a distinctive relationship among people. This ethic is most powerfully set forth in the Gospel of Matthew, in a series of sayings known as the Sermon on the Mount. Although the structure of the sermon may be later, the sentiment reflects the vision of Jesus. The world has been turned upside down: the meek are blessed, and not the powerful; the poor are blessed, but not the rich; and blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake. Jesus emphasizes the internal spirit of a person over form and show, and he teaches the connectedness of humanity. Old divisions are overturned, and he calls for a wider fellowship. Nor did Jesus merely teach these things. The Gospel writers record Jesus in his ministry overcoming and transcending traditional social barriers, and thus incurring the wrath of those who kept the laws of purity. A regular charge made by his opponents was that he associated with “sinners and tax collectors” and all manner of social and religious outcasts.

A second focus of Jesus’ ministry was his healings. At first glance some modern readers might assume that all such stories are to be dismissed as legend or accretion, but his contemporaries, even his enemies, all acknowledged that he—like many others—healed. Spiritual healing was something that was expected in the ancient world, as it is still in large parts of the world today. What made the healing stories recorded about Jesus different was that they seemed not to be mere wonders but were linked to the new relationship between God and the world. Matthew records a visit to Jesus from the disciples of John the Baptist in which they pointedly asked him if he were

the one sent from God. And Jesus replied, “The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the good news preached to them.” To be able to heal and cast out demons was a sign of divine authority in the ancient world. The world was viewed as a spiritual battleground, and the holy man showed his power by being able to overcome the demonic powers that sapped mind and spirit. The Gospels, however, record a second type of miracle in which Jesus showed authority over the physical world as well. He fed large crowds with but a few fish and loaves, he stilled storms, and he cursed a fig tree such that it withered and died. These nature miracles would prove to be a problem for many by the nineteenth century.

In some accounts, more words are spent describing Jesus’ last week than are used to report his entire earlier ministry.

The teaching and healings led people to ask who this Jesus was. The question appears again and again in the Gospel stories. Was he a prophet? Was he the coming again of John the Baptist (who had been executed)? Finally, could he be the messiah? The Gospels record Jesus asking his disciples who they thought he was. One of them, Simon Bar Jonah, later known as Peter, announced that he believed that Jesus was the messiah, or Christ. Peter’s confession would be an important event in the later Christian story. Jesus then gave him a new name, Peter, or “the rock,” and said that upon that rock the church would be built. But it is important that even here the Gospel writers record the confusion of the disciples. The messiah was supposed to bring triumph, but Jesus instead talked of suffering and death. There seemed to be a conflict between the belief that Jesus was the messiah, and his warning that he would soon be put to death.

Of all the parts of Jesus’ life, we know most about his death. All the accounts—Christian, Jewish, and Roman—agree that he was executed by crucifixion, that is, nailed to a cross. The death of a peasant preacher such as Jesus was not extraordinary. The Pax Romana rested on crushing all threats to order, and in an unstable province such as Judea, anyone who went around publicly challenging the social order was a prime candidate for elimination. The task of governors such as Pontius Pilate was precisely to keep the peace. Nor did Jesus’ treatment of the Temple and the purity laws endear him to the Pharisees and Sadducees. He had many enemies.

But the Gospel writers take great pains to rehearse the events of the last week of his life, later known as the passion. In some accounts, more words are spent describing this last week than are used to report his entire earlier

ministry. The Gospels carefully record Jesus' triumphal entrance into Jerusalem before an adoring crowd, which laid palms before him. They write of his intensifying conflicts with the Jewish authorities and of his overturning a table in the Temple where money was changed. They speak of how one of his closest followers, Judas Iscariot, decided to betray him. But more important for the later story of Christianity, they tell of his meeting with his disciples in an upper room, perhaps to celebrate the Jewish Passover meal, and there taking bread and announcing that it was his body, and the cup of wine, his blood. When this event was first recorded, the author (the apostle Paul) added to Jesus' words the phrase "Do this in remembrance of me." The memorial of bread and wine—the Lord's Supper or Eucharist—would become one of the most important rituals for the Christian community, and Jesus' words "This is my body" one of the most debated passages in the Christian Bible. What did he mean, and how literally was the claim to be interpreted? The later Christian community, particularly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, would have bloody wars over the meaning of this meal of bread and wine. Much ink and even more blood would be poured out fighting over these words.

After the meal Jesus retired to a garden to pray, and there he was arrested. His trial has been a source of controversy. His death was at the hands of the Roman authorities, but Jewish leaders, according to all the Gospel writers, had a role. This assertion would be reexamined at length in the twentieth century, since the claim of Jewish culpability would long poison Jewish-Christian relations. At the time of his arrest his male disciples scattered, abandoning him. Simon Peter, who had earlier confessed him to be the Christ, denied ever having known him. But at the cross, faithful women stood by him. In particular two Marys—the mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene—are mentioned by the writers. The radical nature of Jesus' teaching also included a new role for women, and both Marys and other women are mentioned in a number of places in the Gospels. Indeed, in all of the Gospel accounts, Mary Magdalene is the first person either to see the risen Jesus or to hear of his resurrection. After his death the body is laid in a tomb and sealed.

The Interpretations of Faith

All of the above can be attested by historians to be at least probably true. That Jesus lived, had a ministry, and died on a cross is almost certain. What comes next is where the world of history gives way to the world of faith. All scholars can agree that the death on the cross was not the end of the story, that something happened that turned defeat and desolation into victory and confidence.

The message began to be proclaimed that Jesus’ life had not ended in death but that he had been raised from the dead, and that this event was not just an isolated incident but the consummation of Jesus’ ministry. The resurrection was the final sign that a new relationship existed now between God and humanity. This was the *euangelion*, the good news, or as the word became known in English, the gospel. History can tell only so much, and the life and death of Jesus became quickly shaped by the faith of the community striving further to answer the question, who is this man?

Mark, the earliest Gospel, spends no time on the early life of Jesus, but Matthew and Luke tell a little. Both tell of his lineage and birth. But their accounts of Jesus’ ancestry differ, and their differences reflect different answers to the question “Who is this man?” Matthew carefully traces the family line of Jesus from the patriarch Abraham down

What was the relationship between Jesus and the God he called Father? Why did Jesus have to die? What was next?

through Joseph. For Matthew, Jesus was the culmination of God’s promise to Israel. He was the descendant of Abraham, father of the Jewish nation. When Matthew has Jesus offering the Sermon on the Mount, he is likened to Moses, giving now a higher law and a new set of commandments. His birth is predicted by the stars in the heavens, and magi from the east seek him to offer him gifts—events that suggest he is a true messiah. Luke, in contrast, follows the lineage from Jesus back to Adam. Jesus, for Luke, was the new Adam, offering a new beginning. He records Mary saying, “God has put down the mighty from their seat and has exalted the humble and meek.” The old world has passed; humble shepherds and not magi attend his birth. Women play an important part in Luke’s narrative, and Gentiles as well as Jews flock to hear the message of Jesus.

These two Gospels add one more important dimension to the question of who this man is. Both speak of his birth as being extraordinary. Although differing in details, both claim that Jesus was not conceived through the natural conjugal actions of Mary and Joseph but rather through the direct action of God, “by the power of the holy spirit.” His birth of the Virgin Mary was a miracle, still another sign that God was connected to this Jesus in a new way.

But three overarching questions emerged from the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of this Jesus. What was the relationship between Jesus and the God he called Father? Why did Jesus have to die, and what was the point of his death? Finally, what was next? The accounts speak of the resurrected Jesus being with his followers for a time (traditionally forty days), after

which he departed from them and ascended into heaven. But there was a belief that he would return.

Although these questions were addressed in all the Gospels, it is in the Gospel of John, the Fourth Gospel, that we find some of the most thoughtful discussion. John was the last of the Gospels to be written, and in it one sees an important early reflection on who this Jesus was.

From early on the Christian community sensed that Jesus' relationship to God seemed not to fit into traditional categories. The Jewish world knew of prophets; there had been many in recorded history. Some thought that John the Baptist was a prophet. Prophets were called. A classic example is found in Ezekiel: "On the fifth day of the month (it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin) the word of the Lord came down to Ezekiel the priest . . . in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chabar, and the hand of the Lord was upon him there." One could see something of such a call in the stories about Jesus. Each of the first three Gospels (called the Synoptics because they share a common format and many of the same sayings and events) tells of Jesus' baptism at the hand of John the Baptist. They record that at the time the Spirit of the Lord descended upon Jesus, and a voice from heaven announced, "You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased." Was Jesus' relationship with God like that of a prophet, and was the baptism his prophetic call? The earliest Christians were unsatisfied with such an explanation. Matthew and Luke, one recalls, spoke of a miraculous birth, or that Jesus had been conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit. The special relationship between Jesus and God did not begin at his baptism but at his conception.

John pushed things back even further. In the famous prologue to his Gospel, John speaks of the heavenly preexistence of Jesus: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." This Word (or *Logos* in Greek) was present at creation and was part of the eternal order. It was God in action. John continued, "and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." In Jesus, the eternal word took on human form. The term that would later be used is *incarnation*, God becoming human.

Likewise there was the problem of Christ's death. What was the connection between the message Jesus preached about the kingdom and his death? Here, too, John offered an interpretation. Near the end of his account of Jesus' public ministry, John (alone) records Jesus saying, "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified. Truly, truly I say to you, unless a grain of sand falls into the earth and dies it remains alone; but if it dies it bears much fruit." In the death of Jesus there is the beginning of new life. Speaking of his death Jesus noted, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw men to myself." Christ's death on the cross was an act not of shame but of glory. All the Gospel writers

include words that Jesus was said to have uttered while on the cross. The first two Gospels record Jesus uttering the lament found in Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” further emphasizing the point by including the original Aramaic words. In John’s account of the passion, Jesus is heard saying from the cross what is found in no other Gospel—a triumphant “It is finished!” The cross here is a symbol of victory. One of the distinguishing aspects of later Christianity is that it would take as its supreme symbol the instrument of its founder’s death, because that instrument had been transformed.

But here something more should be noted. The cross would give to Christianity an element that would set it apart from the other great religions: the interconnection of divinity and suffering. In almost all other religions, both ancient and modern, deity tends to be associated with beauty and equanimity. The idea of a God who suffers and dies seemed shocking then, and even in the twenty-first century, many Asian Christians, coming out of traditions such as Buddhism, find this idea perplexing. As one contemporary Asian artist remarked, “Buddha is never seen suffering in our iconography, but as a Christian I have to depict the suffering of Christ, which is the hardest spiritual concept for us to understand.” As we shall see, this linking of suffering and divinity would bear both good and bad fruits in the later history of the Christian movement. It would change the very idea of beauty, and much of the greatest art would focus on the suffering of Jesus.

Finally there was the question of the future. A good deal of Jesus’ teaching was that the kingdom of God was to come in the future, and his followers came to believe he would soon return to finish establishing the kingdom. In some Gospels he is recorded as saying that some of those present would not taste death before he returned. But what was to happen until then? Here as well the Fourth Gospel offers an answer. John’s account of Jesus’ time with his disciples on the evening before his death includes several long discourses. Jesus speaks of his imminent departure but tells his disciples that they should not be afraid because they will not be alone: “The Advocate, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.” Teaching and remembrance were part of this divine power.

The Gospels are not histories. Rather, they are proclamations by the early community of exactly who this Jesus was. He was the one who had come from God to announce a new order of things. He had preached and done miracles. He had suffered, died, and was buried. He had somehow defeated death and established a new relationship between God and the world. There were many more things to be said; there were many more questions to be asked. But it had begun.