

## Chapter 19 Christianity

### Chapter Summary

Our sources of information concerning Jesus come primarily from the New Testament, which provides a complex portrait of him. Christians have traditionally claimed that the New Testament Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) were directly based on the reports of eyewitnesses. It was also generally assumed, although seldom explicitly stated except by members of the Eastern Orthodox community, that Jesus spoke and taught in Greek.

This traditional scheme was challenged in the eighteenth century by various deistic writers such as Thomas Paine, who suggested the Gospels were actually written hundreds of years after the events they identify. Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1893) suggested Jesus probably spoke Aramaic. This idea was widely accepted to the point that the received wisdom is that Jesus taught in Aramaic.

As the new “science” of biblical criticism arose in the nineteenth century, scholars claimed to have identified various sources in the text of the New Testament. The most famous of these is the so-called “Q” document, which is said to lie behind the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke). A major problem with this hypothesis is that no documents or fragments thereof that support the existence of such a source have ever been found. Thus, while biblical scholars may take Q for granted, historians who look at the evidence will be skeptical. Nevertheless, the New Testament is the best attested of all ancient manuscripts. When compared to others, manuscripts of the New Testament are very well preserved and are much closer to the original events.

Although we do not know the exact date when Jesus was born, the dates of his life are fairly discernible, give or take ten years. (By comparison, we can only guess at the date of the Buddha’s birth within a range of about 300 years.) The best estimates for the birth of Jesus place it around 5 BC.

Based on what the New Testament teaches, Christians believe that Jesus was the incarnation of God—not a demigod like the Greek gods (born through the union of gods with humans) but fully God and fully human. Central to traditional teaching, this belief further advances that Jesus was conceived in a supernatural manner and born of the virgin Mary. The New Testament tells very little regarding the early life of Jesus.

Like the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament is written in what some call a minimalist style; that is, it tells a straightforward story without elaboration and is pregnant with meaning and a quest for the truth. Eric Auerbach describes such in his study *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Regarding Jesus, the reader is given a dynamic portrait of a living individual who commands authority among all around him.

Both Christians and academics disagree as to whether or not Jesus intended from the beginning of his ministry to found the Christian church. Joseph Ratzinger, the current pope, argues in his book *Jesus of Nazareth* that this was Christ’s intent. Indeed, Roman Catholic theology teaches that Jesus went further than simply founding a church and appointed one of his disciples, Peter, to be its head. Other Christians dispute that the Roman Catholic Church was directly founded by Jesus in this way. Some even suggest Jesus did not intend to form a church at all but that it simply flourished after his

death, a position taken by most modern scholars. Verses such as Matthew 16:8 and 18:17 are seen to be the result of an editing process that met the needs of a local Christian community or a group of such communities.

The interpretation given to the New Testament accounts of the death and resurrection of Jesus is that they were prophesied in the Hebrew Bible and served as acts to reconcile God and humanity. Through his death, the sacrifices required in the Hebrew Bible were abolished and a new covenant (as predicted in Jeremiah 31:31) was established between God and all people, not only Jews.

For Christians, the only way to understand their religion is to begin in the Old Testament book of Genesis with the story of God's creating the earth, the sin of Adam and Eve ("the fall"), followed by the subsequent revelation of God to the Jewish people. Without a grasp of the Jewish scriptures, it is not possible to truly understand the meaning of Christianity.

According to Christians, God created the universe out of nothing, then proceeded to form the earth and populate it with plants, animals, and the first humans (Adam and Eve). Our original ancestors were tempted by a serpent and disobeyed God by eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (the fall), whereby sin entered the world so that the original couple were banished from Paradise or the garden of Eden.

The whole issue of the fall revolves around the question of whether humans trust and obey their creator or whether they go their own way. Because of this act of disobedience, communication between humans and their creator broke down and the arrival of sin introduced deception, strife, and murder into human relationships. Via the story of Noah and the flood, mention is first made of God's entering into a covenant to save/redeem humans from rebellion. In the story of the call of Abraham, the original man of faith, Christians see their spiritual father.

The next step in the unfolding drama is what Christians call redemption, as visible in the Jewish liberation from Egyptian captivity via the exodus. For Christians, the story of the exodus is a type/analogy of redemption—living in Egypt is a vivid image of life in this world while the salvation of the children of Israel becomes an image of salvation in Jesus. The covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David laid the foundation for the coming of the Messiah who Christians believe is Jesus Christ. Christians depart from the Jewish interpretation of these covenants by insisting on the ultimate importance of faith in establishing their validity.

The earliest Christians saw themselves in a particular tradition of biblical interpretation that gained its fullest expression in the teachings of Jesus. The New Testament interpreted the Old, not vice versa, although the Old is very important for understanding the New. The most important events in the New Testament are the death and resurrection of Jesus, seen as both a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and an act of propitiation for the sins of humanity. Shortly after he rose from the dead, Jesus commissioned the disciples (and the apostle Paul) to take the good news of his provision of salvation to all people on earth.