

The Puzzle of Christianity

peoples but the identity of the people of Israel remained intact. The latest empire to control Palestine was that of Rome and it was, therefore, under the control of the Roman imperial power when Jesus was growing up.

In the time of Jesus there were Zealots who dreamed of freedom from Rome and establishing a new, independent kingdom of Israel. They looked back to the great glory days of King David and believed that God would be on their side in an attempt to drive out the Roman occupying power. It was a foolish dream but similar foolish dreams had come to fruition before and many Jews, either secretly or not, thought back to the old days. They resented the presence of the Romans as a heathen occupying power and thought that a great leader might emerge, a new Messiah, a 'son of David' (their greatest king and military leader) or saviour of the people who would be a mighty warrior and would lead the people of Israel to independence in their own country.

Jesus, then, grew up with all these folk memories, with knowledge of the history of Israel, within a society confident in its superiority as a people chosen by God but also oppressed and powerless on the periphery of a great empire. It may seem strange to start a book on understanding Christianity with so much attention to the history of the Jewish people, but Jesus was a Jew and all Jesus' initial followers were Jews. The Hebrew Scriptures and the story of 'salvation history' – God working God's purposes out throughout the history of the Jewish people, culminating in the incarnation of Jesus – are central to any real understanding of the nature of Christianity. Jesus is held to be the hinge of history, the fulcrum point on which world history turns, since Christians believe that it is in Jesus that God fully reveals God's self to human beings, it is in Jesus that all people are opened to the love and forgiveness of God, and it is in Jesus that God becomes incarnate and comes to earth in human form.

THREE

The Life of Jesus

Recounting the 'Life of Jesus' is far from straightforward and takes us to the heart of the difficulty in trying to give an account of 'What is Christianity?' today. There are four Gospels in the Christian New Testament (the word 'gospel' means good news). They are named Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and for more than 1,500 years Christians believed that these were the names of the authors of the different Gospels. Today, as we shall discover, this is seen to be highly problematic.

The Gospels include various accounts; there are accounts of Jesus' birth; a few stories of events immediately following His birth; records of His ministry and death; and one description of an event when He would have been about twelve years old. However, Christians are divided as to the status to give to these narratives. Some would insist that they are literally true (even though there are differences between them) and others would see them as conveying central truths about Jesus but also making significant theological points, whilst still others maintain that there is very little that we can know for certain about Jesus' life. There is a wide diversity of views.

Whilst there may be disagreement among Christians about the details of Jesus' life, there is almost no doubt at all among historians that He existed. The evidence in favour of the life of Jesus of Nazareth is actually much stronger than for most historical figures. The evidence of His message is also very strong – but the details of His life are subject to more disagreement.

Christians used to see the four Gospel books as written by four separate figures but, as will become clear later (see Chapter 10), the Gospels of Matthew and Luke contain all of Mark's Gospel and also have other material in common. Matthew, Mark and Luke are referred to as the 'Synoptic Gospels'. The Gospel of John is rather different and is generally considered to have been written later (see pp. 130–2). The Synoptic Gospels were written as historical accounts of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Events are described, sayings are recorded and Jesus' teachings are shared with the world. The authors of the Synoptic Gospels wanted to show that Jesus was the Messiah of Jewish expectation and to show how He lived among people on earth. They wanted to show that Jesus fulfilled all the prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures. The nature of these prophecies is disputed among scholars but there is no doubt that the people of Israel expected a deliverer to be sent. The general expectation was of a great warrior who would drive out the occupying power and restore the independence of Israel as well as the Davidic kingdom. The Messiah that the Gospels portray was very different indeed from this and they show that Jesus challenged Jewish expectations. The Messiah was not to be a great warrior but God Himself who came from heaven to show human beings how to live, to deliver them from sin and to establish a new 'kingdom of God' in the world that was not based on military might or an independent Jewish state but was instead a kingdom of love and commitment to God founded in the hearts and minds of Jesus' followers.

The Gospel of John is in a different category. It shows the divinity of Jesus and, in particular, that Jesus represented the coming of God as a human being into the world (God becoming incarnate). Jesus is shown as the culmination of a divine plan for the whole of creation. The Gospel of John is regarded by most scholars as much more theological and possibly, therefore, less historical. Almost all scholars agree that it was written much later than the other three Gospels, perhaps around AD 90–120 (Jesus died about AD 33). However, there are dissenting voices to this view and some, such as the late J. A. T. Robinson, argued for a much earlier dating. The general

assumption is that a more theological gospel would be dated later, but this is not necessarily the case. Some of the earliest Christian documents are letters or epistles written by the apostle Paul, and these are also highly theological. However, the general academic consensus is for a later dating.

Because of disagreements about the historicity of the accounts of Jesus' life, giving a summary of it is not at all easy. There is no single view in Christianity about Jesus' life. All we have are the accounts in the Gospels and the stories passed down and accepted by Christians over the centuries. How historically accurate they are is almost impossible to determine. This might seem to imply that nothing can be known with any degree of confidence about Jesus, but this is not the case. In the next chapter, when Jesus' message is outlined, this will become clear. For the moment, however, some account needs to be given of Jesus' life and this will be done by reference to the stories in the Gospels.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, Isaiah 9:6–7 records that God will send someone who would reign on the throne of David and would be a 'Mighty God' and 'Everlasting Father'. Christians see this as pointing to the life of Jesus.

The Gospels record Jesus as being born of a young girl called Mary who was engaged to a man named Joseph. Joseph was of the tribe of Benjamin and could trace his descent back to King David (something that Matthew's Gospel spells out in detail). However, Joseph is not recorded in the Gospels as the natural father of Jesus. Luke's Gospel records an angel telling Mary that God had chosen her to bear a son even though she had not slept with a man (this event is called the Annunciation). This



Figure 1: This picture by Henry Tanner (1898) is of the Annunciation. Mary is shown sitting on a bed and the angel appears not as a human form but as a pillar of light.

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was before she and Joseph had got married, while Mary was still a virgin. The father of Jesus is seen not to be a human being but God. Jesus, Christians believe, is the Son of God. (Although this phrase was also used of the great kings of Israel such as David, for Christians it means much more than this: that God became human in Jesus.) Christians tend to praise Mary because of her faithful obedience to the command of God and see her as the crucial female example of obedience and loving service to God as well as the ideal mother. It is significant that in Islam Mary is also revered as the mother of Jesus and that Mary was also a virgin. God, in Islam, is held to have conceived Jesus in Mary's womb rather like God created Adam at the beginning of the creation story. There is much in common between Christians and Muslims in the reverence they accord to Mary, but Muslims would claim that Jesus is one of the leading prophets and not, as Christians claim, the incarnation of God's Word.

The engaged couple, Mary and Joseph, were travelling to Bethlehem in response to a requirement by the Roman governor that everyone should return to their ancestral town to complete a census, when Mary went into labour. The inns were all full and, according to Luke, the birth took place in a stable (although in the Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition the birth is held to have taken place in a cave). This is portrayed as an extraordinary and pivotal event, with shepherds in the hills being visited by an angel to tell them of the birth, while Matthew's Gospel has wise philosophers or astrologers from the East following an extraordinary star which led them to the house where the infant Jesus lay. Even King Herod, the vassal king who governed Israel under the Romans, was recorded as having a dream that 'the king of the Jews' had been born. Fearing for his crown, Herod sent out an order that all babies under two years old should be killed to ensure that no future king survived. Matthew's Gospel records Jesus' parents, having been warned in a dream about the danger, fleeing to Egypt and then coming back out of Egypt. This enabled Christians to argue that Jesus should be seen as the new Moses who had been prophesied to come out of Egypt to deliver his people from slavery (Deuteronomy 18:15-18).

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There is no record of Jesus' childhood except for one short scene (Luke 2:41-51) when His parents took Him to the Temple in Jerusalem. Surrounded by the huge crowds, He became lost and Mary and Joseph searched for Him. They eventually found Him talking to the wisest rabbis and impressing them with His depth of understanding. The young boy Jesus, when confronted by His concerned parents, expressed surprise and asked them why they did not expect Him to be about His Father's business (clearly indicating that His father was not Joseph but God).

A tradition grew up among the early Christian Church that Mary remained a virgin and never slept with Joseph even after the birth of Jesus. There is no textual evidence for this and it was a belief intended to show Mary's purity. The Gospels record Jesus having brothers but mainstream Christians who support the perpetual virginity of Mary say that this refers to spiritual brothers, or else they were children of Joseph from a former marriage, and that Mary had no children apart from Jesus.

Jesus' actual ministry lasted either one or three years (the Gospels differ). What is clear is that He gathered a disparate group of close friends, followers or disciples around Him. They were outsiders to the world of power and influence - a tax collector, fishermen - ordinary people whom He called to give up everything and to follow Him, which they did willingly. He was clearly a charismatic person and His message of God's love and forgiveness had huge appeal. Jesus' ministry started with His baptism in the River Jordan (which meant immersion in the waters of the river as a symbol of being cleansed from sin and a new beginning) by an extraordinary man who was about the same age as Jesus. John the Baptist had spent years in the desert wilderness fasting and living very simply and calling for a renewal of commitment to God, demanding that people give up their complacent lives and live in a different way. He also prophesied the coming of the Messiah or Saviour. Jesus went to John for baptism and, in one of the most significant moments recorded in the Gospels, John recognises Jesus and declines to baptise Him because he considers that it is Jesus who should baptise him,

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not the other way round. John understands that this is the person about whom he has been prophesying and does not consider himself worthy to carry out the baptism. Jesus insists and, in a key moment, the heavens are recorded as opening; a dove descends on Jesus whilst God's voice proclaims, *'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased'* (Matthew 3:17). The dove would have reminded readers of the Gospels of the dove sent out from the Ark by Noah to find dry land when the whole of the known world was engulfed in flood water. In Christian theology, the dove has come to symbolise both peace and the Holy Spirit which God sent down on Jesus at His baptism, just as believers are later meant to receive the same Spirit at their baptism. The role of the Holy Spirit and its significance will be made clear later.

Baptism was not just a crucial event in Jesus' life; it was also a central command by Jesus recorded in the Gospels. He sent His disciples out to live simply among people, to preach the good news that He came to bring (the word 'gospel', as we have seen, means good news) and also to baptise people. Matthew's Gospel records Jesus as saying: *'Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'* (Matthew 28:19). The practice of baptism therefore became central for all Christians; this is the moment when the Spirit of God is believed to fall on the baptised person and make the individual fully part of the Christian community. The Christian practice of baptism varies. Many churches have infant baptism when the child is baptised as a baby and welcomed into the Church. Vows to renounce evil and to commit to God are taken on behalf of the baby by the parents and 'godparents' (these are two or three people who promise to help take care of the spiritual upbringing of the child, although in many parts of the world this spiritual side of the godparents' role has become peripheral). Some Christians, however, hold that baptism should be delayed until a person can make the promises to renounce evil and to hold fast to Christ for themselves, whilst others practise 'full immersion' baptism; instead of a few drops of water being sprinkled on the person to be baptised,

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they are immersed completely in water in the way that Jesus would probably have been baptised in the River Jordan. For most Christians, baptism is the mark of the formal entry of a person into the Christian community.



Figure 2: This picture is full of symbolism. Jesus stands where the river Jordan ends, symbolising the end of the old covenant and the beginning of the new. He is baptised by John. On the left three figures represent the Trinity, the middle of which (God the Son) looks apprehensively at the scene; He knows it will end in His death (a sepulchre is in the distance). Behind, this man strips off, ready to be baptised. His colouring is the same as Jesus', indicating all Christians share in Jesus' baptism. The overhanging tree represents the love of the Father, the dove represents the Holy Spirit and Jesus Himself represents the Son. The prickly trees in the background represent the Pharisees who pass disapprovingly in the middle distance.

The Gospels record Jesus going into the desert wilderness to be alone and to pray. For instance: *'Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed'* (Mark 1:35).

During one of these times of solitary prayer and contemplation He faced severe temptations and tests. The possibility of taking alternative paths in life was very real and these temptations came to Him with great force and attractiveness. He is shown as being tempted by the devil and, again, Christians differ as to how this is to be understood, some believing the story should be taken literally and others holding that it is a metaphor for Jesus wrestling with real internal temptations. The existence of the devil, an angel who disobeyed God and rose in rebellion against God, is taken for granted in the New Testament and by many Christians who see the world as a battleground between God and the devil. However, all agree that the devil is subject to God and will eventually be defeated by God. Indeed Jesus Himself, in resisting temptation and dying for all human beings, is seen to have defeated the power of

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the devil even though his influence still continues and needs to be resisted. What is clear is that Jesus' commitment to God from the youngest age was overwhelming and He was able to resist temptation and, Christians have traditionally held, was able to remain free from sin.

Jesus then embarked on His ministry which, as we have seen, lasted one to three years. He had no settled home, did not marry and depended on the generosity of women and others who supported Him and His followers. Women played a vital part in His ministry and were some of His closest friends. Jesus remained all His life within a fairly narrow area of Palestine, teaching and talking to people and showing them, through stories or parables, the nature of God's love and of God's coming kingdom even if, as we shall see, this love and this promised kingdom were very different from those people's expectations.

Initially it appears that Jesus preached only to Jews and saw His message as concerning only them, but He came to realise that the message He had to bring was universal. There is an important point here that divides Christians. Some Christians, influenced particularly by the Gospel of John, see Jesus as always being aware of His divine nature and always preaching both to Jews and Gentiles. However, many mainstream Christians see Jesus' teaching as developing over time and Him coming to realise that God's message was for all human beings and not simply the Jews.

One of the most extraordinary and well attested aspects of Jesus' life was that He mixed with everyone; and for a Jew this was really surprising. Devout, God-fearing Jews kept themselves to themselves. They had nothing to do with the Romans unless this was strictly necessary; they did not mix with Samaritans (the group of Jews descended from those who remained behind in Israel after the Babylonian captivity and who were despised by mainstream Jews); they looked down on those who collected taxes for the Romans; they despised those who did not keep to the strict purity rules laid down in the Hebrew Scriptures; they tended not to talk to or mix with women outside their families and certainly would not be

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touched by them; they considered that women were impure during their periods and should keep to their houses; and they condemned and despised those who committed ethical failings such as adultery. Jesus, by contrast, kept company with all kinds of people; he talked to Romans and Samaritans; women were His constant companions; a devout woman massaged His feet and wiped away her tears from them with her hair (a very intimate thing to do); a former tax collector was one of His closest friends; and He was most critical of all of those who thought themselves holy and 'good'. He seemed to find God more readily in those who were outcasts from respectable society than in the wealthy and those whom others considered to be righteous and good. It was not surprising that He became both exceedingly popular with ordinary people and exceedingly unpopular with the priests and those in power and authority.

In many ways Jesus was a scandalous figure, an outsider who challenged the complacency of the supposedly religious society in which He lived and who had little time for those who were pleased with themselves because they had 'kept the rules' and were convinced that this made them righteous in God's eyes. He was, at one level, a simple person because His message could be understood by everyone, whatever their background, but He was also expressing the most profound theological truths with a simplicity that no one has ever achieved before or since. Nevertheless, many Jews today would see the essential nature of Jesus' teaching as being entirely in accordance with the best rabbinic teaching tradition.

In the next chapter we will look at the message that Jesus came to bring although, in many ways, Jesus' life and message are inseparable. He preached about the love of God and the need for forgiveness and drew huge crowds. He ate in different people's houses, attended weddings and was in the middle of life in first-century Palestine. His reputation and fame grew as well as His ability to perform the most extraordinary miracles: healing people of many diseases including leprosy; restoring sight to people who were blind; enabling people who were paralysed to walk; curing a woman with a permanent period; turning water into wine; walking

on water; and raising someone from the dead. Jesus never performed miracles to prove His power but always out of compassion and, in a number of cases, told the people who had been cured to say nothing about what had been done (Christians hold that the Hebrew Scriptures prophesied that the Messiah would perform miracles; see Isaiah 35:4-6). Nevertheless, as His fame spread He was constantly surrounded by thousands of people who wanted to listen to Him, and He felt physically tired and drained. He also knew that His growing reputation, as well as His message, was unacceptable to the Jewish authorities. His attacks on the priests and those in positions of wealth and influence were popular amongst ordinary people but were unacceptable to those He spoke out against who, it must be said, had a hard task maintaining Jewish religious freedom in the face of the might of the occupying power of Rome.

Shortly before His death, Jesus went to Jerusalem to the Temple with thousands of people around Him shouting His name. It was a triumphal procession with people cutting down palms from the trees along the route to lay in front of Him. He rode on a donkey which, for a pious Jew, had a symbolism drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures (Zechariah 9:9) and was an effective way of proclaiming that He was the promised Messiah, as it had been prophesied that this was what the Messiah would do. Jesus knew what He was doing and knew that He had gone too far and that the Temple authorities had to take action. He had become a major cult figure and this threatened the stability of the relationship that the leading Jews had established with the Romans. Whatever Jesus Himself may have taught, He was now perceived as a dangerous rabble-rouser by those in authority, a threat to the established social order and therefore, potentially, a threat to the very existence of the Jewish Temple and the freedom Jews had to worship. If support for Jesus got out of hand, the Romans might crack down and all the hard-won, albeit limited, freedoms that the Jews possessed might be taken away. Their fears were not groundless. Less than forty years later, in AD 70, the Romans utterly destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple, and there was to be no Jewish state until 1948.

Jesus had a last meal with His twelve closest friends in Jerusalem and performed an extraordinary action in washing the feet of His disciples. This would have been a task that a servant of a wealthy man might perform for an important visitor, yet Jesus, the acclaimed prophet and hero of the hour, did this to His disciples. It was an inversion of every normal expectation and challenged, once again, their perceptions of what it meant to be a leader amongst a people dedicated to the service of God.

The Gospels record that, during the last meal with His disciples, one of these friends, Judas, decided to betray Him. It may have been because Judas was disappointed in Jesus and had expected another sort of leader, perhaps one who would lead the people of Israel to military victory over the Romans, or it may have been self-interest. Judas betrayed Jesus to the Temple authorities in return for thirty pieces of silver. The authorities arrested Jesus and placed Him on trial. He was too much of a threat to civil order to be allowed to live, but the Temple leadership did not have the authority to put him to death; this punishment was reserved for the Romans. The High Priest and his followers, therefore, are recorded as taking Him to the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate, who, after a show trial in which he came to the conclusion that Jesus was innocent, sentenced Him to death. Pilate seems to have acted against his better instincts, but anyone who might purport to be a king would be unacceptable to the Roman Emperor and, therefore, sentencing an insignificant Jew to death probably seemed a politically expedient act. Even then, Pilate tried to let Jesus go free, as it was the custom to allow one prisoner to go free at the time of the main Jewish holiday. Pilate appealed to the crowd, asking them whether they would prefer him to free a robber and thief named Barabbas, or Jesus. Given the popularity of Jesus the week before, and the crowds that surrounded Him, Pilate might well have expected Jesus to be the automatic choice, but the High Priests had got the crowd on their side and their choice fell on Barabbas. Jesus was, therefore, taken off to be crucified.

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Figure 3: The crucifixion was a degrading, agonising and humiliating punishment, but Christians see it as their key symbol, representing Jesus sacrificing Himself out of love for all human beings.

Crucifixion was an appalling punishment used routinely by the Romans. The condemned person had to carry their own cross and was then nailed to it (with nails through the wrists and ankles, although medieval art portrays the nails as going through the hands and feet). The cross was then lifted up and it could take up to twenty-four hours for a person to die. The pain was excruciating. Death usually came from asphyxiation, as the person could no longer breathe. In Jesus' case, however, it was necessary that He should die within three hours as the Jewish holy day, the Sabbath, was about to start, so a soldier put a spear into His side to hasten His death. His mother, Mary, was at the foot of the cross as Jesus died, with one of His closest friends, John. After His death, Jesus' body was taken down from the cross and He was placed in a tomb owned by a wealthy follower of His – Joseph of Arimathea.

There is another crucial claim associated with the crucifixion of Jesus which is made by Christians, and that is that human beings are in a state of sin, whether because of the sin of Adam and Eve,

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which affected the whole of humanity, or by individual sin. This sin distorts and undermines what it means to be a human being and deprives people of the chance to fulfil human potential. What is more, given that God is just, this sin requires punishment. Christians believe that God, through the person of Jesus, takes this sin on Himself; God suffers for every human being and, in so doing, releases

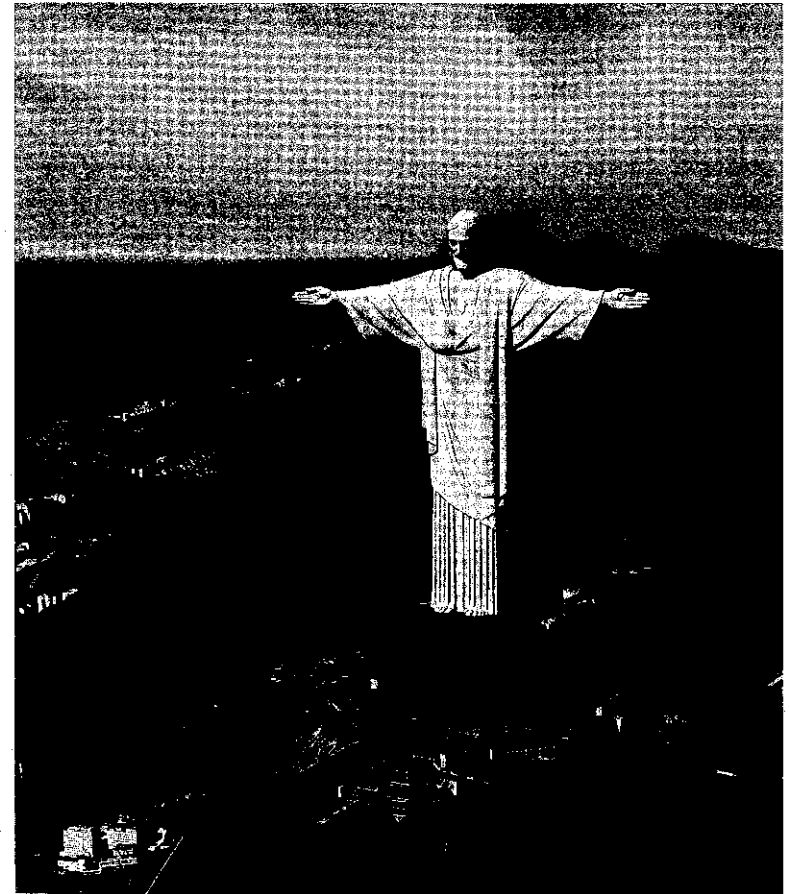


Figure 4: The statue of Christ the Redeemer towers over Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. The outstretched arms represent the redemption of humankind through the crucifixion.

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people from the effects of sin. It is for this reason that Christians call Jesus both their Saviour, because He saves them from the effects of sin, and also their Redeemer, because He redeems people from their sin and atones for the errors both of every individual and also of humankind as a whole. Protestant Christians often refer to Jesus as their personal Saviour, and this is because they see Jesus suffering and dying on the cross out of love for every human being and taking on Himself the effects of their sin. Jesus makes the ultimate sacrifice out of love for His friends (as Christians feel themselves to be).

The symbol of Christianity became the cross, which was extraordinary as, for the Roman world, crucifixion was seen as the ultimate symbol of degradation. Yet for Christians, it is the triumph of good over evil, of forgiveness over sin, of love over hatred, of life over death. The cross is where the power of God's love is shown most clearly.

Three days after being crucified, Jesus rose from the dead. This, of course, is one of the most important Christian claims and is central to Christian belief, so it needs to be dealt with in more detail in the chapter following the next one, which deals with Jesus' teaching.

FOUR

The Message of Jesus

There is something artificial about separating the message of Jesus from the life of Jesus: the two are so closely related. For the people amongst whom Jesus lived, His life and actions were as important an expression of His message as His teachings. Given that Christians consider that Jesus is God's Word made flesh, it follows that Jesus' life and teaching are equally important. This was particularly the case as He often taught in parables. Parables are stories that are intended to be revelatory. They reveal insights and convey truths but they also reveal something about the people who interpret the parables. Parables seldom have a single meaning.

Jesus stands firmly in the Jewish tradition and many Jews today would be happy to see Jesus as a great rabbi or teacher who affirmed what was central in Judaism. However, there are also key differences. Two of the most important are:

- 1) Jesus did not see Himself as just another rabbi or teacher. He was clear that He was in a unique relationship with God, which Jews found very hard to accept. He referred to Himself as 'the Son of Man', but the Gospels indicate that this is a way of emphasising the human side of his nature without in any way undermining His unique status as the incarnate Word of God.
- 2) Jesus was unequivocal in believing in a life after death, and many of His Jewish contemporaries were far less clear about this. In fact, whether there was a life after death was a major point of dispute between two of the most influential groups