

RE-THINKING
CHRISTIANITY

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O N E W O R L D
O X F O R D

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Introduction

This book is a sequel to *Pascal's Fire*, a book that expounded a specific doctrine of God, but without specific reference to Christianity. Incidentally, that makes the point that it is perfectly possible to talk of God without reference to Jesus or to Christianity, and indeed that Christianity can only be rightly understood against the background of an initial idea of God. We might expect that Christian revelation would modify that idea of God, perhaps to a great degree. But Christian revelation can hardly exist without some initial idea of God.

In this book I address the issue of Christian faith specifically. I seek to articulate and defend a view of Christianity that is coherent and plausible and integrates well with modern scientific and historical knowledge.

The main question is: 'What is Christian faith?' The main argument is that Christian faith has re-invented itself many times. I select six major slices of history to show how this is so:

- The revolution in the first generation from a Jewish Messianic sect to a gentile universal church (chapters 1–3).
- The fourth- to eighth-century development of doctrines of incarnation and Trinity by the adoption of Greek philosophical terminology. This largely occurred in what is now Turkey, and the approach is still characteristic of the Eastern Orthodox churches (chapter 4).
- The twelfth- to fourteenth-century development of doctrines of atonement, Purgatory and papal supremacy by the Roman Catholic Church. These can still be found in very traditional forms of Roman Catholicism (chapters 5 and 6).
- The sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation, rejecting the hierarchical teaching authority of the church, and re-interpreting faith as personal trust in God rather than acceptance of authoritative dogma (chapter 7). This is characteristic of many mainstream Protestant churches.

- The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century liberal response to the European Enlightenment, stressing the importance of informed critical enquiry, and the acceptance of scientific and historical study of the Bible (chapters 8–10). Liberal views exist within most Christian churches, to varying degrees.
- The twentieth-century re-thinking of Christianity in a global context, as one faith among many, with a specific vocation in history (chapters 11 and 12).

These case studies show that Christianity is essentially a diverse and developing faith. There is no one unchanging ‘correct’ teaching handed down from Jesus himself and preserved by some group. Different Christian groups find themselves comfortable with different ‘stages’ of this development. But all of them are different from what we can recover of the ‘original’ faith in Jesus, and all of them require modification at various points to take account of expanding human knowledge.

My argument is that Christian faith has developed throughout its history and that it must continue to do so. The general direction of development is clear – towards a more pluralistic and critical faith, committed to the cause of human flourishing and centred on liberating apprehensions of Transcendence.

In the course of the book, I develop a positive Christian theology that is both liberal and orthodox. So the book can be seen as a modern defence of liberal Christianity, and a systematic presentation of my own views as a Christian theologian.

Chapter 1

Strange Messiah

The foundation of the Christian faith is that in Jesus God personally encountered human beings. Jesus showed the nature of God's love as he healed, liberated, forgave and reconciled, as he mixed with social undesirables and was critical of religious status and hypocrisy. His disciples believed that he gave his life for them, that he was raised from death to live with God, and that through him God had acted to deliver them from evil and unite them to God for ever.

THE MANY VARIETIES OF CHRISTIANITY

I have begun with this positive statement to make it clear that I think the gospel of Jesus still has the power to speak to humans and to change their lives today. Christians now, two thousand years later, can share with the first generation of Christian disciples this faith that God encounters humans in and through Jesus, and unites them to the divine life.

In view of this, it may seem unnecessary and even presumptuous to speak of 're-thinking Christianity'. Is the Christian faith not something clear and unchangeable, which might need to be re-stated again and again, but which certainly does not need to be re-thought?

However, Christians have hardly ever been content to stay with the basic faith that I have just expressed. They cannot resist providing additional beliefs and interpretations. And these further beliefs turn out to differ from one another enormously. If you look around the world at the varieties of Christian faith that exist, from traditional Roman Catholicism

to the Society of Friends (Quakers), from Coptic Christians swinging censors in Egypt to Pentecostalists speaking in tongues in Brazil, it soon becomes very obvious that there are many different sorts of Christian faith – hundreds of them, in fact.

It is a peculiar fact that many of these varieties think that theirs is the only real or true Christianity, and that all the others are mistaken in some way. But it is an evident fact that there exist hundreds of different varieties of Christian faith.

Not only that, but most of them have changed considerably over the years. The Roman Catholic Church, whose leader, the Pope, in the fourteenth century claimed absolute authority to crown and depose all earthly kings (in the Papal Bull *Unam Sanctam*, of 1302), would be much more likely now to insist on a separation of church and state. The Church of England, which forbade the wearing of vestments in the years after the Reformation, now has many ministers splendidly arrayed in full High Mass dress every Sunday. These are just two small examples, but it would be easy to find examples from almost any Christian church. Beliefs and practices change over time. It would be very odd if they did not.

So there are many forms of Christian faith, and they change in many ways. There is not just one Christian faith, which has remained unchanged ever since it started.

SEARCHING FOR JESUS

But is there perhaps an unchanging core underlying all these differences? That is one question that lies at the basis of these reflections. To answer it, I will need to go back to the beginning of Christian faith, and at least we know where and when that was. It was north of Galilee, near Caesarea Philippi, when Jesus of Nazareth was first explicitly said to be ‘the Christ’, the Greek word for the Messiah, by his disciples. The event is recorded in the Gospels, when Peter, in response to Jesus’ question, ‘Who do you say that I am?’ is recorded to have said, ‘The Messiah of God’ (Matt. 16:16; Mark 8:29; Luke 9:20). Strangely, the Gospels record that Jesus then sternly commanded the disciples not to tell anyone. But there, surely, we have the origin of Christian faith, belief that Jesus is the Messiah, God’s anointed.

That seems clear enough. Unfortunately, it is not clear at all. A critical historian, looking at these texts, might suspect that the writers, or their sources, had just made up this episode. There are plenty of critical historians who doubt whether Jesus made, or was aware of, any claim to be the Messiah. Since the Gospels were probably written at least forty years after the death of Jesus, though they no doubt depend on sources that are earlier, there was plenty of time for early Christians to have invented all sorts of stories about Jesus that were only loosely related to the facts. We know that the Gospel writers thought Jesus was the Messiah. But might this not have been a belief that grew up after the death of Jesus, or perhaps one with which Jesus was rather uncomfortable (thus his command to the disciples to keep quiet)?

And this is the problem. There have been at least three main ‘quests for the historical Jesus’, the first culminating in the work of Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer. These were attempts to say what Jesus was really like, underneath what most historians would say were the probably embroidered and partly conflicting accounts in the Gospels. Albert Schweitzer thought that Jesus was a prophet who preached that the world would end very soon, within one generation. But Jesus was wrong, and so we certainly cannot today take Jesus’ beliefs as a reliable guide to truth. The later ‘quests’, from Ernst Kasermann to Gezer Vermes and John Dominic Crossan, do not entirely accept Schweitzer’s view, though they admit its importance. They focus on different aspects of the possible life and teaching of Jesus. Crossan, for instance, contends that Jesus was a cynic philosopher, teaching renunciation of possessions and family and living a peripatetic life, who was largely misunderstood by his later followers.¹

The fact is that there are still as many different theories about what Jesus was really like as there are varieties of Christianity. Indeed, there are more, if you include all the non-Christian views. Of course all these theories agree that the Gospels – our only real source of information about Jesus – cannot be assumed to be completely accurate without a good deal of further argument. And we must agree that, if we are looking at the Gospels as historical documents, any historian would be justified in treating them with the critical suspicion that is appropriate for any ancient document.

FOUR GOSPEL ACCOUNTS COMPARED

The best way to approach the Gospels is to possess a ‘synopsis’ of the Gospels, a text that places different Gospel passages alongside one another. Then you can read all the Gospels in parallel, side by side, note similarities and differences between them and try to account for the sometimes quite large differences of emphasis and presentation between them.

I will take one quite important passage and compare the treatment of it in the four Gospels, in order to assess what historical value we can give the Gospels. I will take the account of the women visiting the tomb of Jesus. I will divide the accounts into sections, to make comparison easier. It will be seen that there are marked disagreements, which reflect in part the different interests of the Gospel editors. The conclusion will be that the differences are marked enough to render the exact original history uncertain. So the critical historian is justified in thinking that the historical Jesus might not be just like the Jesus of the Gospels. However, it will also become clear that the Gospels were not meant to be literally exact historical records. So I will argue that it is reasonable to take them as generally reliable records of a person who had a unique unity with God, and who understood his life as realising a Messianic vocation. And that, I suggest, is all that Christian faith requires of our knowledge of the historical Jesus.

The accounts go as follows:

- In Mark 16:1–8, A. Three women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome went to the tomb with spices, B. when the sun had risen. C. They saw that the stone had been rolled back. D. Then they saw a young man in white E. who told them to tell the disciples that he would go before them to Galilee. F. But they said nothing to anyone.
- In Matthew 28:1–8, A. Two women, Mary Magdalene and ‘the other Mary’ went to the tomb B. before dawn. C. They saw an earthquake and an angel rolling away the stone, and the guards trembled at the sight. D. The angel sat on the stone, and E. invited them into the tomb, and told them to tell the disciples he would be seen in Galilee. F. They ran and did so.

Matthew’s account differs in almost every detail from Mark’s, though both agree that some women visited the tomb and found it empty, and were

told by someone to expect appearances of Jesus in Galilee. Matthew has heightened the miraculous elements in the story. The angel is definitely not just a young man, but descends from heaven with an earthquake. The women tell the disciples at once, and Matthew says that they are joyful as well as fearful. The story in his hands is less cryptic and puzzling than in Mark.

- Luke 24:1–12 records that A. A number of women, including Mary Magdalene and the mother of James, went with spices to the tomb B. at dawn. C. They saw the stone had been rolled back (as in Mark). D. They entered the tomb, and two men in white appeared. E. They do not say that Jesus will appear in Galilee (in Luke’s Gospel Jesus appears only in or near Jerusalem). F. The women told this to the disciples, who did not believe them.

Luke agrees with Matthew and Mark that Mary Magdalene and James’s mother were there, that the tomb was empty and that there was some sort of apparition, communicating that Jesus had been raised from death. But Luke puts a longer speech into the mouths of the ‘two men’, and does not speak of Jesus appearing in Galilee. This reflects his general tendency to write poetic literary pieces (it is Luke who gives us the songs of Mary, Zechariah and Simeon). He also makes Jerusalem a more important focal point in his telling of the story of Jesus.

- John 20:1–13 has A. Mary Magdalene come to the tomb alone B. while it was still dark. C. The stone was already rolled away. F. There is no angelic appearance at that point, but she ran back to tell Peter and the ‘beloved disciple’. Later, back at the tomb, D. she saw two angels in white, and then she saw Jesus, whom she took to be a gardener.

John has Mary Magdalene, an empty tomb and angelic appearances. Otherwise, his account is quite different from that of the other three Gospels. It concentrates on an appearance of Jesus himself to Mary Magdalene, not recorded elsewhere.

The main point here is to see that the Gospel accounts of the same event are different. So they are not all literally accurate in detail, but more like different memories collected from different sources, and worked into a larger narrative, the shape of which partly dictates the account that is given. Mark

is abrupt and puzzling (Mark's original Gospel, or the original text we have of it, ends here). Matthew is concerned with supernatural wonders. Luke gives a literary flourish, and does not hesitate to omit mention of Galilee, though presumably he had heard of such appearances. John comes from a quite different angle, and is mainly interested in Mary Magdalene as the first person to see the risen Lord.

This short example shows how the Gospels present differing perspectives on a core of events, accounts of which have been passed on in different oral traditions. The events as we have them have already been interpreted twice, first by oral re-telling, and then by the Gospel writers. So what we have is not how things actually happened, but how different people interpreted the disclosure of God that came to them, or their teachers, through events of Jesus' life, accounts of which had been passed on orally for a number of years.

The emphasis is on diversity (there are four different accounts), interpretation (each account is from a distinctive perspective) and disclosure (each is meant to evoke a disclosure of the presence and purpose of God). There is no concern for unanimity, matter-of-fact dispassionate recounting and strict literal historical accuracy. This is enormously important for considering the character of Christian revelation in the Gospels. It is not one coherent literal account of the life of Jesus. Gospel revelation lies in a number of different interpretations of or reflective responses to disclosures of God that occurred in and through Jesus' life and teachings, accounts of which were treasured because they continued to evoke such disclosures.

JESUS AS MESSIAH

Recognising that we are really investigating what the different Gospel writers thought Jesus was like, or how they wanted to present Jesus to others, what then can we say about the historical Jesus? To help in this task, we need to analyse the Gospel records in detail, noting the differences and similarities between them. This has, of course, been done by many biblical commentaries, and there is no point in doing again here what has been done so often. So what I shall do is to take one standard commentary on the Bible – the *Oxford Bible Commentary* (ed. John Barton and John Muddiman, Oxford University Press, 2001) – as a reliable guide to what most contemporary biblical scholars would say about the biblical writings.

The contributors to this commentary include Baptists, Anglicans, Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics, so they are not biased in one direction. The wide degree of consensus among them is testimony to the real gains that have been made in biblical scholarship over the last 150 years, despite the many divergent interpretations that remain possible.

This reflects the great amount of historical and literary analysis and research that has been carried out, bringing out much more clearly the original contexts and complex layers of meaning in the biblical texts. No theological assessment of Christian faith can be made intelligently without taking the findings of this biblical scholarship into account. I would go so far as to say that any exposition of biblical teaching that fails to refer to and use the conclusions of the scholarly community cannot be taken seriously as an account of the 'true meaning' of the texts.

Bearing that in mind, and given that the Gospels are the only evidence we have for the life and teachings of Jesus, what sort of picture of Jesus might we come up with? That is, what picture of Jesus is presented by the synoptic Gospels, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke?

I am sure there is more than one picture that we might have. But we would certainly have to say that Jesus was believed to be the Messiah, so that is a relief! But what does that mean? There might be a dozen different meanings of the term 'Messiah', and in modern Judaism there are.

One place to begin is to look at the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke (there are none in Mark and John), to see what they say about Jesus. He is said to be the 'Son of God' (Luke 1:35), to save people from sin (Matt. 1:21), to be King of the Jews (Matt. 2:2), to be the glory of Israel and light of the gentiles (Luke 2:32).

His job, according to the Song of Zechariah, is to deliver Israel from her enemies (Luke 1:78, 79). People are depicted as looking for the liberation of Jerusalem (Luke 2:38) and Israel from their enemies, for a King of the royal house of David, who will be the ruler of a free Israel, a righteous and peaceful people, with a Temple to which all the people of the earth will go.

So the Messiah is King, or ruler, of Israel, able to forgive sin, to punish the enemies of Israel and to bring peace and freedom to the nation. But there is something odd about his rule. He will 'rule over the house of Jacob for ever' (Luke 1:33), and his rule will never end. This is to be more than a political revolution. It will transform the conditions of human existence.

GOSPEL CONCEPTIONS OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Other parts of the synoptic Gospels spell this out in more detail. In the transformation of existence that the Messiah brings, all wickedness and evil will be destroyed – ‘unless you repent, you will all perish’ (Luke 12:40). On a cataclysmic day of divine judgment, the righteous will shine like the sun, but the wicked will be cast into a furnace of fire (Matt. 13:40–43). The Son of man will come in glory with his angels, and the twelve apostles will rule over the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt. 19:28). When will this be? Jesus, according to Matthew, says that some of those who hear him speak will ‘see the Son of man coming with power in the Kingdom’ (Matt. 16:28).

It is important to note that when these words were written down Jesus had been dead for some years. What was expected was that he would return in glory with angels, punish the wicked and call the righteous into his kingdom, centred on a new Jerusalem Temple. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the prophets will return to earth, and under the rule of the twelve apostles Israel will be the ruler of a new world. Its members will be the righteous and those who have repented and been forgiven by God.

The picture is very much centred on Israel, and it seems to be much more concerned with moral righteousness than with faith in Jesus. Not much is said about gentiles, and the main emphasis is on the liberation and cleansing of Israel, though it seems that righteous and penitent gentiles will be admitted to the renewed Jewish community, and the wicked expelled, because of their good or bad deeds, however much faith or belief they claim to have (Matt. 25).

The good news that Jesus proclaimed was that God is coming soon to establish the liberation of Israel and to execute judgment on all hypocrites and oppressors. Now, before that ‘day of wrath’, he offers forgiveness to all who repent, and he promises a restoration of a renewed and purified Jewish faith, when Torah will be kept to the letter (Matt. 5:18, 19) and in its deepest spiritual sense.

Jesus heals, liberates (exorcises demons) and forgives sins. By these acts, and by his amazing and total power over material nature, the wind and the waves, he shows that the kingdom is already near (‘If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you’: Luke 11:20).

The kingdom comes near in the person of Jesus. It will grow rapidly until the harvest, when good and bad will be separated for ever. For Jesus did not come to bring peace, but to bring 'division' (Luke 12:51), to divide good from bad, the penitent, humble, poor observers of Torah from the hypocritical legalists and the rich. Jesus' concern is not primarily with the righteous, for the righteous will enter the kingdom in any case. Jesus' vocation is to call sinners to repent (Luke 5:31), and his mission is only to Israel (Matt. 15:24).

It is hard to miss the note of urgency in this message. 'The time is fulfilled' (Mark 1:15). 'The kingdom is among you' (Luke 17:21). 'Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees' (Matt. 3:10). So the writers of the synoptic Gospels wait for the coming of the Son of man in glory very soon – the day or hour is not known (Matt. 25:13), and he will come unexpectedly (Matt. 24:50), but it will be in their own generation ('This generation will not pass away before all these things take place': Mark 13:30). They expect a restoration of Jerusalem, a kingdom of those who are righteous and of the penitent who are forgiven, and the expulsion and torment of all the unjust (the vast majority, it seems – 'the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few': Matt. 7:14). In the new Jerusalem, the twelve apostles will rule the twelve tribes, the prophets and patriarchs will be raised to eat and drink in the kingdom, and, though many gentiles will be present, it will basically be a Jewish monarchy under the rule of a transfigured and glorified Jesus, who is the 'Son of man'.

THE FIRST REVOLUTION – REVISIONS TO EARLY IDEAS OF THE KINGDOM

This seems to be the faith, or one form of the faith, that is expressed in the synoptic Gospels. I do not think it is possible for anyone to hold this faith today in the exact form in which it is written. To put it bluntly, in that generation Jerusalem was destroyed and the Jews scattered throughout the earth. These Messianic hopes were confounded by history.

The extraordinary thing is that this did not destroy Christian faith, faith in Jesus as Messiah. But – and here is the vital point – it did change the nature of that faith in major ways. At the very start of Christian history, there was a radical change in Christian beliefs and expectations. Far from

being a changeless faith – ‘once delivered to the saints’ – it changed sharply and unexpectedly in its earliest years, in the very first generation.

There may have been changes in faith before the Gospels were written. Some biblical scholars think there were, and that the synoptic Gospels are themselves re-writings of earlier beliefs, which may have been both more varied and quite different in their Messianic views. The non-canonical writings give some hints of this, but we are limited to guesswork, since there is no hard evidence of earlier beliefs. But we are on firm ground in saying that the Messianic beliefs of the synoptic writers – an immanent restoration of the twelve tribes and of true Torah in Jerusalem, under the kingship of Jesus – were rapidly adjusted in quite basic ways, as generations came and went, and Israel was wiped off the political map.

There are five main ways in which this strand of belief in the synoptic Gospels was adjusted. First, when the first generation of disciples had all died, it was clear that the return of the Son of man in glory was not something that was going to happen before the apostles had died. The apostles all died, and that belief had to be revised.

Second, the kingdom would not be the return of the twelve tribes to Jerusalem under the rule of the twelve apostles, and the liberation of Jerusalem from Roman occupation. The Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple, and the Jews were scattered throughout the world.

Third, the kingdom would not consist in the restoration of Torah in all its fullness for all those who were truly righteous or at least truly penitent. In fact quite soon (mostly owing to the arguments of Paul), Torah was abandoned by Christians, and emphasis came to be placed on faith in Jesus rather than in rigorous moral commitment to justice and the love of God.

Fourth, Jesus was probably not going to return to earth with angels and be a political ruler to whom the whole world would pay homage. History was going to continue perhaps for a few thousand years, or even longer.

And fifth, there was probably not going to be a sudden cataclysmic ending of history, an actual day when the dead would be raised and judgment would be executed on living and dead. There would hardly be room on earth for all the dead.

Christians now, two thousand years later as I write, have no option but to give up the first of these beliefs, that Jesus would come before all his hearers died. Some Christians claim to believe that the coming in glory may still happen at any moment. But in doing so they are giving up the whole

synoptic stress that the time of Jesus was virtually the end of historical time. They are revising the synoptic belief in a major way. They are certainly not preserving unchanged the synoptic belief that Jesus would return before the death of the last disciple. They do not believe what the apostles believed.

The second belief, about the rule of the apostles in Jerusalem, is also historically obsolete, and Christianity has long since abandoned any thought of being a movement for the renewal of Judaism. It has become a totally separate religion, often regrettably and shamefully hostile to its parent faith.

The third belief, in the universal acceptance of Torah, was discarded as an almost wholly gentile church came into existence, based on faith in the redeeming death of Jesus and not primarily on moral renewal. It can be a shock to modern Christians to discover that the theme of moral renewal is more prominent in the synoptic Gospels than the theme of redemption through the death of Jesus – though of course the synoptic Gospels do stress that following Jesus by renouncing all possessions and family ties (not something that the modern churches usually emphasise) is of primary importance.

The fourth and fifth beliefs, in the return of Jesus to rule in Jerusalem and in a decisive Day of Judgment, have not been definitively rendered obsolete as the first three have been. But the churches have on the whole come to make a distinction between political and spiritual rule, and to accept that political life will continue in accordance with its own principles, while the task of the churches is to preach a ‘spiritual kingdom’ that will leave politics mostly untouched. They do not expect Jesus to be an actual king in Jerusalem.

The notion of Judgment Day has also been displaced from a precise time in history. Considering the vast number of the dead, who could not be accommodated on the earth, the Judgment is now normally taken by theologians not to describe a future historical event, but to symbolise some state beyond history in which humans will be faced with what they have made of their lives and with how they really stand before God.

A SPIRITUAL INTERPRETATION OF THE KINGDOM

What the churches have done to these fourth and fifth beliefs suggests a possibility for re-interpreting the teaching of the synoptic Gospels. Jesus is not

a political king, it may be said. He is a spiritual king, the ruler of human hearts. His kingdom is not part of the world; it is a fellowship of the spirit. It is hidden from the world, growing secretly within human lives and bearing fruit in lives of active love. This spiritual reality is real, but it is not physical. The king is not a physical person in a physical court. Those are images for the subordination of the human spirit to the divine Spirit, as it was embodied in Jesus. The images are of physical things. But they symbolise realities of inner experience, of the relation of the soul to God, and of the actions of God in relation to the soul.

At the end of history, which will surely come, though perhaps in thousands or even millions of years, all human deeds will be made clear before God. Then, not on earth but in a spiritual realm, love will at last rule purely and solely in the community of those who have loved God truly. And those who have continued to reject God, if there are any, will be excluded from the divine life by their own choice. That is the great division, the 'harvest', of which Jesus speaks. But when it will be, what exactly it will be like, or who will be accepted in and who excluded from it, are things we cannot know.

Again, the images are of physical things. But what they symbolise is a reality that is not part of this physical universe. In that spiritual realm, there are real individuals, communities and relationships. It is not after all just a matter of what goes on in individual minds. But it is a realm beyond this physical spacetime, a world in which the presence of God is clear, and inner feelings and attitudes are made clear. It is a realm of clarity, of transparency, when 'the secrets of all hearts will be revealed'. On this account, Christian belief is about the reality of a spiritual world, beyond this physical cosmos, with different forms and structures, yet touching this world through personal experiences and responses.

Can we apply a similar process of spiritualisation to the first three beliefs I listed? We could say that the imminence of the kingdom will not be a temporal imminence, but a spiritual one. The return of Jesus in glory will not be at a specific time in this cosmos. Just as Jesus is not, and will not ever be, a physical king in Jerusalem, so Jesus will not return tomorrow or the next day. He comes to us imminent in every time, taking us into that glory which is the very life of God. The kingdom comes as Christ comes to the soul, taking each moment of time into the presence of the eternal God. It does not come externally and physically, for the kingdom is within.

It comes in every moment, with the promise of final glory and the life-giving, healing, liberating touch of the presence of Christ.

What of the return of the twelve tribes to Jerusalem and the rule of the apostles, and the liberation of Israel from her enemies? These too can be seen as images of things in the physical world that represent realities of the spiritual world. The return of the tribes represents the unity of God's people in 'the city of peace', the heavenly Jerusalem, a renewed community of the Spirit, living, as the apostles did, by the presence and power of Christ. The 'enemies' are not political powers, but spiritual forces from which we are liberated. We live, not necessarily in a historical time without wars, but in the peace of God, by which the heart is never separated from the source of its life.

Finally, the restoration of Torah and the triumph of justice is not something that will happen in history. The external rules of Torah represent the spiritual reality that was always the true heart of Torah, the rule of the Spirit. The churches have been right when they have made faith in Christ central. For faith is not just acceptance of a set of intellectual beliefs. It is the willing submission of the heart to the rule of the Spirit of Christ. And that is the only way to live justly, not out of obedience to rules, but from a life transformed by the power of love.

So the main beliefs of the synoptic Gospels can be given a spiritual interpretation as a set of symbols that speak overtly of physical things, but speak more deeply of the realities of the spiritual world in which God interacts with human souls, and calls them into union with the divine life.

Spiritual interpretation is familiar to Christians in other contexts. The notoriously difficult final verse of Psalm 137 reads like this: 'Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock.' The reference is to the children of the Babylonians, in whose cruel deaths the Psalmist apparently rejoices. Those who pray the Psalms today would not associate themselves with such vengeful feelings. When they say that verse they often identify the 'little ones', the Babylonian children, with their sins, and identify 'the rock' with Christ. Thus they can honestly bless those who dash their sins against the rock of Christ, so that sins are destroyed and their power broken. That is almost certainly not what the original Psalm-writer had in mind, but it expresses a deeper insight into the universality of sin and the mercy of God. So it uses a wider reflection on the Bible as a whole and on Christian life to give a spiritual interpretation to the text.

Another obvious case from the New Testament is the hymn of Zechariah: 'He has raised up a mighty saviour for us ... that we would be saved from our enemies' (Luke 1:69–71). Israel was not physically saved from her enemies. It was destroyed completely by Rome. Again, the enemies must be regarded as spiritual enemies, and salvation must be regarded, not as political liberation, but as spiritual fulfilment and liberation from sin. So we see that spiritualisation is not foreign to Christian interpretation. It is central to it.

The 'spiritualisation' of the synoptic symbols is indeed already carried out in a radical transformation of the idea of Messiah. Jesus is not an earthly king, liberating Israel by armed insurrection. He is the suffering servant of God who redeems his people by the self-sacrifice of love. That much is clear in the Gospels. But did they not, nevertheless, hope for an imminent return of the Messiah in glory with the angels of God, who would liberate Israel politically and nationally? It seems to me, and it seems to most scholarly readers of the synoptic Gospels, that they did. And that suggests that the writers had as yet an incomplete understanding of the relation of God to human history.

That is not surprising. They believed the earth was the centre of the universe and had only existed for four thousand years – they could count and name the generations of humans since the creation. They believed Israel was the centre of God's purposes for the earth, and that the 'whole world' had its boundaries not too far from Israel – the gospel of the kingdom could be proclaimed in all of it within a generation. They believed the world, their entire universe, would end fairly soon, and that there was very little human history lying ahead in the future. So, seeing Jesus as the fulfilment of the history of this small universe, they saw him also as its end and culminating point. They were living in 'the last days', and in their generation the whole of human history had reached its apogee, its culmination and climax. There was nothing still to come, no new knowledge, no discoveries to make or major social changes to occur, no new art or music or literature. For them, God's historical purpose for the earth was ended, and the divine creative Spirit had little left to do, except to bring the news of the kingdom to the hearing of the remaining, rather small population of earth, before the whole created universe – basically, the earth – was brought to an end.

THE NECESSITY FOR RE-THINKING BELIEFS

For most modern people who accept a scientific view of the universe, all these beliefs have to change. We know that we live on a small planet circling around a rather small star, in a galaxy of a hundred thousand million stars. We know that there are a hundred thousand million galaxies in the known universe, and that there may be other universes, other spacetimes, beyond this one.

So when the Gospels say that ‘the stars will fall from heaven’ (Matt. 24:29) just before the Son of man returns, we know that we cannot take that literally. The destruction of this planet would have negligible effects on most of the universe, and would certainly not bring it to an end. The apostles may have taken the statement literally, because they thought the stars were just lights in the sky.

So we only have two choices. Either they were simply wrong. Or, though they were mistaken about the physical facts, there was a truth that was symbolised by talking of stars falling from the sky. As a matter of fact, that truth is spelled out for us in the Old Testament passage that is quoted – Isaiah 13:10, which is part of a prophecy of the destruction of Babylon by the Persians. The symbol of falling stars is a symbol of the destruction of politically oppressive powers at a particular time in history, not of the end of the world.

So we might plausibly think that what the Gospel symbols are referring to is the destruction of the politically oppressive power of Rome. Such a historical interpretation makes good sense of many of the symbols of the ‘end of the age’ in the synoptic Gospels, and enables us to say, without dissimulation, that these prophecies were realised within a generation.

Yet most biblical scholars agree that such an interpretation, which is basically that of the British theologian C.H. Dodd, and is often called ‘realised eschatology’, does not give the full spiritual sense of the text.² The writers were still looking for the coming of the Son of man with glory in the future, and still thought that it would be soon. Our vastly expanded view of the cosmos renders that belief obsolete, in a literal sense. Yet it can still have a future, if symbolic, content. It can be saying two main things. First, that history will not end with complete extinction and emptiness. At the end of history, whenever it comes, humans will be raised to the presence of God, the God who was seen in the person of Jesus, and reap the rewards of their

lives. Second, this is not just an event that can be ignored in practice because it will happen only in the far future. On the contrary, it confronts each one of us as an imminent possibility. Each moment of our lives is under God's judgment, and we cannot tell when our earthly lives will end. We will be wise, then, to be ready for 'the coming of the Son of man', the fully manifest presence of Christ, as though it might occur at any time. I think that is an intelligible interpretation of Jesus' teaching about the Day of the Lord that comes 'like a thief in the night'.

Moreover, within the synoptic Gospels, we can discern important strands that imply that the judgment will not literally come soon. Though Jesus' mission was only to Israel, he does speak of many people entering the kingdom from east and west, from the corners of the earth. He does pronounce judgment on Jerusalem and the Temple, prophesying that the kingdom will be taken away from them and given to others. He does say that the kingdom is to be preached throughout the world. He does institute a 'new covenant', for what is presumably a new community. And he does, in Mark, speak of a people whom he will ransom by giving up his life (Mark 10:45). All these things seem to point to a future in which a new covenant will be worked out over a fairly long history and expand throughout the known world. As we now know, the extent of the known universe is vastly greater than the disciples could have imagined, and that will force a re-interpretation of the symbols of the kingdom in a more spiritual and a less physical or literal direction.

What seems to follow from all this is that there are many beliefs in the synoptic Gospels which we cannot share – where the kingdom would be, what it would do for Israel, when and how it would arrive. Christian faith has changed in important ways since the days of the apostles. But that does not mean such beliefs are no more than mistakes. We must try to see what the spiritual reality was to which such beliefs may have pointed, and ask how they might be rephrased in the light of new knowledge or in the new contexts of our own day. That is why it is important to re-think Christianity. Christian faith needs to be re-thought in each new place and generation. That is something that may become apparent as a result of a reflective and informed study of the synoptic Gospels and the form of their beliefs about the nature and coming of the kingdom of God. It is part of the essential nature of Christian faith that it should be open to constant change and creative exploration. The history of Christianity is the history of such change,

and I have suggested that a fairly radical change was necessary even in the first generation of Christians, as they had to revise their beliefs about the nature of the Messiah and the kingdom of God. It should be no surprise if we find that we have to undertake a similar task in our own day. It can be an encouragement to realise how very radical the change of beliefs was at the very inception of Christian faith.

Chapter 2

Embodied Wisdom

The eternal Wisdom of God is the pattern on which the universe is formed. It directs the universe towards the emergence of intelligent and responsible forms of life. John's Gospel teaches that this divine Wisdom can itself take finite form. It has done so on earth in Jesus, providing an ideal of human life in relation to God, and mediating through that human life the purpose of God to unite human lives to the divine life. Thus the Wisdom of God, manifest in the person of Jesus, is the way to eternal life with God.

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke have different ways of approaching Jesus and of seeing his work. But they are recognisably similar in seeing Jesus primarily as the Davidic King of Israel, the fulfilment of the ancient Hebrew prophecies, bringing the kingdom of God near in his own person, having absolute authority over nature and over the powers of evil, teaching mysteriously in parables, healing, exorcising and forgiving sins, living in the last times, shamefully put to death, but triumphant over death, seen by the disciples, and soon to return in glory with the angels to usher in God's full rule on earth.

Many things remain unclear in the synoptic Gospels. Was Jesus, as Mark implies, very liberal in his attitude to Torah (Mark 7:19), or was he, as Matthew says, wholly orthodox in teaching that Torah must be kept to the smallest detail (Matt. 5:18)? Was his mission solely to Israel, or did he have

an interest in the wider gentile world also? Did he foresee the existence of a 'church', a continuing sacramental organisation, or was he wholly focused on the imminent coming of the kingdom, in which his inner group of twelve would rule the re-united twelve tribes?

Those are tantalising questions to which there is no clear answer in the Gospels. The absolute authority and divine commission of Jesus to be King of a renewed Israel and the one who brings God's rule near to those who meet him is undoubted. But there is much we would like to know about Jesus that we can never know. And that problem, of what Jesus was really like, is magnified enormously when we turn from the synoptic Gospels to the Gospel of John.

Here we seem to be in a completely different world of thought. The prologue to John's Gospel begins in a way that contrasts strongly with anything in the synoptic Gospels. It does not start with the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, as in Mark. It does not even start with his birth, as in Matthew and Luke. It begins in eternity, with the eternal Word of God, existing before all time.

All the Gospels, of course, were written for groups of believers who already accepted the resurrection faith that Jesus lives, and so their accounts are meant to inspire their present faith, not simply or even primarily to give a factually correct account of Jesus' daily diary. As has often been said, the Gospel accounts of Jesus are written in the light of faith in the resurrection. They are meant to be catalysts to evoke and inspire faith in the risen Lord of the church. They are not the sort of records a neutral historian would write.

Furthermore, each Gospel is written in a way that expresses the main interests and character of the final editor of the text. Mark presents Jesus as a supremely powerful and authoritative, yet strangely secret, Messianic King. Matthew is interested in Jesus as the new Moses – one even greater than Moses, but teaching the inner meaning of Torah, the divine Law. For him, Jesus is the supreme teacher and ruler of the Jews. Luke writes a poetic account of Jesus as the universal Saviour (he is the only synoptic writer to use that term of Jesus), who is especially concerned with the poor and who reaches out to gentiles as well as Jews.

The Gospel of John is quite different from the three synoptic Gospels. In it, Jesus is not presented as a secret Messiah who speaks cryptically in parables about the kingdom of God. Jesus is presented from the first as the eternal Word made flesh, taking human form. He speaks openly about his

identity with God, about being the bread of life, the light of the world and the true vine. He calls for belief in him as the Son of God, not for belief in the coming kingdom (the term 'kingdom' appears only in two passages, John 3:3–5 and 18:36). He speaks, not in parables designed to conceal the truth, but in long discourses that make the truth quite plain, if shocking to his hearers. He speaks, not of the kingdom of God, but of the gift of eternal life, which he himself gives. John's Gospel begins with the eternal Word, and as it comes to an end the apostle Thomas kneels before the risen Jesus and says, 'My Lord and my God', the only explicit confession of the divinity of Jesus in the Gospels.

THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF JOHN

John is not writing about a different Jesus, though he puts many of the events in a different order and context than the synoptic Gospels – for instance, he states that the Last Supper was not a Passover meal, as the synoptic Gospels thought it was. But John is giving a very different picture of Jesus, and it is the one that has become most influential in the Christian churches. Many Christians have even tried to combine the accounts of John and the synoptics into one seamless story. But that cannot be done very convincingly, and it is very important to see the theological implications of this.

The reason it cannot be done is this: the synoptic writers simply did not have the concepts (of *Logos* or Word, for instance) that John used. The idea of Jesus 'coming down from heaven' does not occur to them. For them, Jesus is a human being who is raised up to supreme authority by God, who is indeed designated King in the kingdom of God, and who may therefore be seen as having divine authority. Perhaps the idea of incarnation is implicit in these views. But it never becomes explicit, as it does in John – 'the Word became flesh and lived among us' (1:14).

That is the distinctiveness of John's Gospel. It makes explicit what is only implicit in the synoptics – the divinity of Jesus, and the fact that the kingdom of God is the person of Jesus, or the eternal life that he gives. This is connected with two other distinctive features of John's Gospel. John has begun to speak of those who oppose Jesus as 'the Jews', and so to distance the new Christian church from what was to become Rabbinic Judaism. And

John speaks explicitly of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete or Advocate, as one who is sent by Jesus to continue the work of Jesus in the world. The idea of a Trinitarian God, Father, Son and Spirit, is much more explicit in John than it is in the synoptic Gospels, where, if it is even present, it does not play a major role.

You could easily read the synoptic Gospels and never think of the idea of the Trinity – the relation of Jesus, the Father and the Spirit is never defined clearly at all. After all, the concepts of God the Father, the Son of God (applied to Solomon, David or the people of Israel) and the Spirit of God are all found in the Old Testament, but never give rise to a doctrine of the Trinity. But in John the mysterious diversity-in-unity of Father, eternal Word of Son, and Spirit whom Jesus ‘sends’ lays the groundwork for the long debates about the Trinity that were to characterise the Christian church of the third and fourth centuries.

These three distinctive emphases of John – the divinity of Jesus, the parting of the ways from the Jews, and the idea of God as Trinity – have been a very ambiguous blessing to the church. The idea of Jesus’ divinity has been used to support the idea that all who reject Jesus are damned, since they are thereby rejecting God. John’s insistence that ‘the Jews’ killed Jesus has encouraged persecution of the Jews in much European history. And arguments about the Trinity have led to mutual accusations of heresy and an orthodox insistence on abstruse points of philosophy that are hardly comprehensible to anyone.

In some ways, we might wish that the churches could have stayed content with the simpler gospel of the synoptics, a message of the lordship of Jesus as the one who mediates the presence and liberating power of God to the community founded in his name. Yet that was not possible, as the churches passed beyond the boundaries of Judaism, where the hope for the Messiah was generally understood, if not always accepted. In the gentile world, unfamiliar with and largely uninterested in Jewish hopes for the coming of a renewed kingdom of David, things had to be put differently. In the Greek-influenced culture of the eastern Mediterranean there was available the concept of the *Logos* or Wisdom of God, on which the known universe was patterned. The idea is found particularly in the *Timaeus* of Plato, for which the visible world is patterned on the invisible archetypes used as a template by the World Architect.³ It was effectively used by the Jewish thinker Philo of Alexandria. John was able to appeal to this concept of the

world archetype, the archetype that contained that of humanity as the culmination of the known world, and state that it had taken visible form in the human life of Jesus. The very word 'Messiah', translated into Greek as *Christos*, lost its Jewish connotations, and 'the Christ' was henceforth understood as the eternal archetypal Wisdom of God, embodied in the person of Jesus.

JOHN'S GOSPEL AS A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON JESUS

This was a brilliant imaginative move, but was it true to the historical Jesus? The vital and essential theological insight here is not the answer you give to that question, but the perception that it is a real question. It is not easy simply to fuse the Jesus of John and of the synoptics into one figure, as though there was no problem. John's Jesus knows he is the eternal Word, he publicly teaches that he is and he goes to his earthly death knowing that it cannot touch his essentially divine being. The synoptic Jesus knows indeed that he has supreme authority and power over nature and forces of suffering and evil, but he does not publicly teach that he is Messiah. He knows he will die, and looks for his return with the angels of God in a glorious Davidic kingdom. But, at least in Matthew and Mark, his life ends with those tragic words from the cross, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' followed only by a loud cry (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34; significantly omitted by Luke, for whom Jesus is more in command of the situation).

How are we to deal with these facts? Once you see there is a problem here, you are bound to accept that there is room for legitimate disagreement. The foundation of Christianity in the person of Jesus is clear – Jesus was seen as the source of the new life of liberation from sin and unity with God through the Spirit that the first Christians experienced. What is not clear, however, is exactly what Jesus himself taught and how he taught it.

Most biblical scholars agree that John's Gospel was the last to be written, and that it reads more like a series of prayerful reflections on the person of Jesus than like a set of verbatim records of what he actually said. In other words, it is the synoptic Jesus who speaks in cryptic parables who is likely to be nearer the real historical figure.

If you agree with that majority view – and I do – it will follow that Jesus did not speak the actual words he speaks in John's Gospel. They are literary

constructions of great sophistication that put into the mouth of Jesus perceptions of the person of Jesus that in fact belong to one group of early believers. So, for instance, Jesus never said, 'I am the bread of life.' This arises out of reflection on the Eucharistic practice of the early church. It may be a God-inspired reflection. But Jesus never said it. It must be seen as a meditation on the person of the risen Christ that arose in the early church.

In other words, Christian faith changed between the teaching of Jesus, which was more like that recorded in the synoptic Gospels, and the writing of John's Gospel. Jesus did not teach these things explicitly to the apostles, who remembered them and saw them written down. Early Christians made them up as they reflected on their own experience of the risen Christ, and on the oral memories that still existed of Jesus' actual life and teachings.

It is important to say two things here. First, John's Gospel is the teaching of some of the earliest Christian believers, not of Jesus himself. Second, that does not mean it is a betrayal of what Jesus actually said, or a misunderstanding of Jesus. It just means that things moved on, even in the first Christian century, so that things got stated in new ways, and implications were seen in the faith which had not been explicit, or even thought of, at an earlier time. Again we see that change is a central feature of Christian faith from the very first. So it is a complete misunderstanding to think of the faith as passed down from Jesus to the church unchanged and perfectly formed, to be protected against all innovation for ever.

But if Jesus never said things like 'I am the bread of life', how can they be accurate insights into the person of Jesus? The simplest way to understand this is just to put all these statements into the third person. Where the text says, 'I am the bread of life', read that as 'Jesus is the bread of life.' And do the same with all Jesus' reported remarks about himself in John's Gospel. Then you will see more clearly that these are expressions of beliefs about Jesus. The beliefs may well be correct, even though Jesus did not utter them.

What Jesus actually said is probably like the statements recorded in the synoptic Gospels. Then John comes along and says, 'Given these statements, and our experience of the presence and power of the risen Christ in the church, we believe the following things about Jesus: he is the bread of life, the true vine, the good shepherd, and the eternal Word of God.' In writing his Gospel, John puts these beliefs into the mouth of the character 'Jesus'. And that is how you can have an accurate insight into the person of Jesus, using terms that Jesus himself would probably never have used. The

problem disappears, unless you insist that the historical Jesus must have said whatever John's Gospel attributes to him. Then, and only then, you do have a major problem. For John's Jesus speaks in a different way, and says quite different things, from the synoptic Jesus.

By the time John's Gospel was written, three beliefs had begun to develop in the Christian community, or at least in parts of it. Jesus was regarded, not so much as a Jewish Messianic King, but as the embodiment of the eternal Word of God. The church saw itself not as a Jewish Messianic movement, but as a distinct Eucharistic community, separate from Judaism. And Jewish monotheism ('Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one,' quoted by Jesus from Deuteronomy 6:4, in Mark 12:29; perhaps it is significant that Matthew and Luke omit this phrase) was beginning to be complicated by the thought that there were eternal relationships between the Father, from whom all things come, the Son who says, 'I am in the Father and the Father in me' (John 14:11), and the Spirit 'who proceeds from the Father' (John 15:26).

These relationships were by no means clearly worked out. In John it looks as though the Son and the Spirit are subordinate to the Father ('the Father is greater than I': John 14:28), and it is not obvious that the Spirit (the Paraclete or Advocate) is fully divine, as opposed to being some sort of emanation from God. It took the church hundreds of years to develop what we now think of as the doctrine of the Trinity. But in John the idea of God's relationship to the world is already more complex than that of Messianic Judaism.

THE MINIMAL CONDITIONS FOR JESUS' AUTHENTICITY

Most scholars think that Mark's was the earliest Gospel (possibly written just after 70 CE), and John's the latest (possibly about 90–100 CE in Ephesus). This is not a huge gap, and given that some of Paul's letters are earlier than any of the Gospels, and are more similar to John than the synoptics in many ways, it is not certain that we can speak of a linear development between the synoptics and John. The sort of thinking found in John could be as early as anything we have in the New Testament. It was probably not, as some scholars used to claim, a late and alien import into Christianity.

Nevertheless, the consensus of opinion is that Mark is more likely to represent something nearer the historical Jesus than John and Paul (Paul probably never knew Jesus historically). So it seems likely that Jesus was a Jewish Messianic teacher and healer, whose words and acts reflected the Jewish context of an urgent expectation of the kingdom of God, fulfilling Hebrew prophecy and bringing Jewish history to a significant climax.

It is perfectly in accord with such a view to believe that Jesus was a teacher and healer of extraordinary charisma who brought the stern judgment and the unlimited loving-kindness of God near to those who met him. He had a power of releasing people from disease and the power of sin. He communicated the presence of God in his own person. He taught that Israel was at a point of crisis, and had to choose life or destruction within his generation. He went to his unjust death to give his life so that God's rule, God's kingdom, might be realised. Then, amazingly, he appeared after death to many disciples, assuring them that he was alive with God. Soon afterwards, the Spirit of God fell on the disciples with power, transforming them from disappointed nationalists into fervent evangelists for the liberating, self-giving, death-defying love of God, which they had seen in Jesus.

Jesus might not have thought of himself as the eternal *Logos*. If he had, it is almost incomprehensible that the synoptic writers should not have mentioned it. Jesus might not have thought of the church as a largely gentile community with a millennial history ahead of it. If he had, the synoptic writers would not have included teaching about the return of the Son of man in glory within their generation. Jesus might not have thought of God as Trinity. If he had, the synoptic writers would surely have had some record of such teaching, which is in such stark contrast with Jewish orthodoxy.

But the synoptic Jesus could have thought of himself as the Messianic King, destined to rule in the kingdom of God, and thus as having divine authority and power. He could have thought of himself as the ruler of a people of a new and inward covenant with God, primarily for Jews but open to the whole world. And he could have known that his knowledge of and feeling for God was far beyond that of his contemporaries, and that he had a unique power to forgive sin and give the divine Spirit to those who followed him.

In fact these are, in my view, the minimal conditions that Jesus would have to fulfil in order to be thought of, as Christians do think of him, as the Lord and Saviour of the world. If he had not thought of himself as having absolutely supreme power, under God, I do not think he could plausibly be

seen as the human agent of God's act of supreme revelation and liberation. If he had not thought of himself as originating a new and deeper covenant with God through his own self-sacrifice, he could not reasonably be thought of as the Lord of the universal church. And if he had not had a sense of a unique intimacy with the divine, he would not be worthy of the worship that the Christian churches have subsequently accorded him.

There are scholars who disagree with this, and who think it is possible to delve beneath the synoptic testimony, to discern a rather different Jesus – perhaps a cynic philosopher, or perhaps a prophet of imminent divine judgment to be mediated by a coming Son of man, different from himself (Albert Schweitzer's view). We have to accept that such things are possible.

We have seen that John's Gospel is not an actual record of what Jesus said, but the construction of a drama in which Jesus, the main character, expresses an early churches' theological understanding of the historical Jesus. So it is overwhelmingly probable that the other Gospels do the same sort of thing. They do not preserve an exact record of Jesus' teaching. For a start, they are in Greek, not the Aramaic that Jesus probably used for his teaching. The exact wording differs in different Gospels. So, while in my view they probably record memories of Jesus' teaching which are likely to be accurate in many respects, they are placed in the context of a story told to present a particular perspective on Jesus, that of the editor of each Gospel.

That means the historical Jesus could have been different from the figure presented in the synoptic Gospels, as he is different from the figure presented in John. It is almost impossible to say with any certainty in what ways he would be different. Did he call himself the 'Son of man', and think of himself as Messiah? Did he really heal and exorcise quite as effectively as the Gospels record? Did he talk with Satan in the desert, walk on water and turn water into wine? Personal answers to these questions will depend on your view of what you think is likely, in general.

If you do not think Satan and the demons exist, you will regard such episodes as legendary accretions, based on pre-scientific diagnoses of mental illness, perhaps. If you think that lives of holy people usually get exaggerated very quickly, so that miracles are multiplied and magnified over the years, you may think that Jesus' healing ministry may have been real, but not quite as dramatic as depicted in the Gospels. If you doubt whether miracles occur, you will be sceptical about Jesus walking on water, multiplying loaves and fishes and turning water into wine.

What you will not be able to say is that these things must have happened just because the Gospels say they did, and for no other reason. If the Gospels are typical of religious writing in general, they are quite likely to contain hyperbole and a good deal of projection of present beliefs back onto the hero figure of the narrative. So maybe you should just say that Jesus must have been the sort of figure who could unsurprisingly give rise to these accounts, within a few years or decades of his death, and within the lifetimes of many who knew him personally, especially some of his closest disciples.

He was, it seems reasonable to say, a person whose personality and teaching attracted the total loyalty of his disciples. He was a Galilean Jew, teaching with immense wisdom, healing the sick and mentally distressed, calling disciples to give up everything to follow him, choosing an inner group of twelve and going freely to his death with a strong expectation of the coming of God's kingdom. He was a man with a sense of divine calling, and his disciples continued to feel that he had commissioned them to continue that calling, of preaching the coming of the kingdom, the forgiveness of sins and union with God.

But it is not unreasonable to say more than that. The most important point of all is that the Gospels only came to be written because his disciples thought Jesus was the Messiah, the King in the coming kingdom. There is nothing absurd in the thought that he might have accepted such a role, even if in a non-traditional sense. The apostles believed Jesus had appeared to them after his death, confirming their mission. If we take their testimony seriously, those resurrection appearances greatly increase the probability that Jesus' life also manifested the power and wisdom of God in extraordinary ways. While certainty is unobtainable, the element of the miraculous in the Gospels need not be regarded with total scepticism.

However, it is clear that the Gospel editors recorded the life of Jesus in the light of their belief in his resurrection, and depicted the divine glory already shining through the events of his life. That is how the Gospels were written, and that is the sense in which they should be read.

JOHN'S INCARNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

If Jesus did think of himself as having a Messianic role, as the synoptic Gospels say that he had, then the path to John's wider cosmic vision of the

role of Jesus can be seen as a development of themes implicit in Jesus' actual teaching, though not explicitly spelled out there.

What that would imply is that Jesus was a fully human person, with the cognitive limitations that are proper to human beings. Brought up in a rural Galilean setting, his forms of thought would be those of his society. His ideas of God, of the Messiah and of God's kingdom would have originated there. If he had a deep and intimate sense of unity with God, that would shape those ideas in original and unique ways. But it would not place completely new ideas – that of *Logos* for instance – in his mind.

It is intelligible to suppose that he could have come to believe that he was the prophesied Messianic King, and that he could have re-shaped the idea of Messiah in a new way, as a Suffering Servant rather than as a conquering king. That was, after all, part of the tradition, though it had not quite been interpreted in that way before. But it is hardly intelligible to suppose that he could have thought of himself as the eternal Wisdom of God, incarnate in the flesh.

The latter idea, developed in John, can be seen as interpreting Jesus' life as if from the divine point of view. If Jesus was King in the kingdom of God, if God's power was channelled through him to heal and forgive, if he had authority to call people to commit themselves totally to him, and thereby forge a renewed Israel, a new community of the Spirit, then Jesus had a unity with and a transparency to God that was wholly unique in his society. It could be said that the Wisdom of God was working in and through him, or that the divine love was being expressed in him in a paradigmatic way. The anointed King of Israel and the divine Wisdom expressed in a human life are, in Jesus, one and the same.

Thus, though Jesus in all probability never said the things ascribed to him in John's Gospel, that Gospel gives a deep insight into the nature and role of Jesus in the history of God's relations with humanity. It puts Jesus' ministry into a wider context, and permits us to see it in a perspective that is not yet fully global but extends beyond the boundaries of Hebrew prophecy and tradition.

Jesus lived within those boundaries. John writes for a church that has moved beyond them, that regrettably has even separated itself from them, and shows how the kingship of Christ not only brings Hebrew faith to a point of crisis and fulfilment, but discloses the nature of God to the whole known world. That nature is one of compassionate wisdom,

unlimited love, and concern for the welfare of all who are oppressed and enslaved by desire, hatred and indifference. It is embodied, incarnated, in the person of Jesus, now seen not as the king of a small tribal nation, but as a person in human history in whom the eternal love of God is embodied in time.

As John's Gospel inaugurates an incarnational theology, it moves towards stressing the importance of history as the arena of God's embodiment, and thus as having an importance and a potential too great for it to be peremptorily ended by divine fiat. This move is not fully made by John, for in his Gospel 'the world' is still opposed to 'the spirit', as something to be hated and eschewed. It would take further theological reflection before a truly sacramental theology, one that sees matter in general as at least potentially capable of manifesting the divine life, became established.

THE DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES OF THE GOSPELS

There is immense theological importance in the fact that Christian faith has, not one detailed historical account of the life of Jesus, but four different perspectives on his life, all seen through the lens of the resurrection and stamped with the interests and characters of their editors and the different groups for which they wrote. There have been many attempts throughout history to 'harmonise' the Gospels, to make them provide one coherent account of Jesus' life. But this seems to miss the importance of the fact that the Gospels all present Jesus' life in different ways and from different points of view. Perhaps the most helpful way to approach the Gospels is to use a synopsis, and try to find the spiritually important reason for the differences that you will then find in the different Gospel accounts of the same incidents or teachings.

This fact could be used in a negative way, as if to say, 'There, I told you so. The Gospels are not accurate. Christian faith is a fiction.' But the fact of the diversity of the Gospels has a wholly positive message to give. It is a message about the very nature of Christian revelation. The message is this: Christian revelation is not divinely dictated words in a book. It is found in human, partial, historically conditioned and diverse perceptions of Jesus as the person in whom God acted to disclose the divine nature and purpose, to liberate humans from sin and unite them to the divine life by the gift of divine love.

The perceptions are subjective, in the sense that they are governed, as all perceptions are, by the cognitive and psychological limitations of the observers. Yet they are perceptions of an objective act of God, an act of self-disclosure and human liberation. If these perceptions be genuine, they really do apprehend an act of God in Jesus, though the perception is coloured by the nature of the observers.

The person of Jesus, for his disciples, genuinely shows what God is, and it is intended by God to do that. God, through Jesus, genuinely liberates humans from sin and unites them to the divine. God is present and active in Jesus in a historically unique way – unique because of his place in history as a plausible claimant to Messianic status.

A neutral historian, who may be agnostic about divine acts of disclosure and liberation, can only record that Jesus was believed to be Messiah at least within a few years of his death, and that Jesus' life was recorded to express that belief, using materials collected in oral traditions springing from those who had known Jesus personally.

If a historian is sceptical about God, that historian will naturally be sceptical about any claims that someone is God's Messiah. Jesus will be seen as a deluded prophet. But a historian who is open to seeing divine acts in history may well be persuaded that in Jesus there is a distinctive disclosure of God as forgiving, suffering love, and the origin of a distinctive way of achieving unity with God through the inner working of the Spirit that was in Jesus.

What no historian, sceptical or Christian, can say is that we know *for certain* exactly what Jesus said and did. It is not open to us to appeal to the words ascribed to Jesus in the Gospels in order to settle some point of doctrine or church practice now. For those words have already been interpreted by some church group, and perhaps – as in almost all of John's Gospel – changed quite radically from anything that Jesus would have said. The appropriate thing to say, then, is not, 'Jesus said this; so that is binding for all time.' It is, rather, something like, 'John puts these words into the mouth of Jesus, and that shows John's understanding of and response to Jesus. We might revere or admire John. But he is not God. What we must do is make our own response to the living Christ, taking into account John's response, but not making it binding on everyone for all time.'

The Gospels may then be seen as collections of oral traditions about Jesus, presented in the light of subsequent experiences of God's continuing

activity among the disciples, and intended to evoke new disclosures of God through Jesus in those who hear or read them.

THE NATURE OF CHRISTIAN REVELATION

I have suggested that within the synoptic Gospels we can see changes already being made to what seems to be the original form of the expectation of the imminent arrival of God's rule primarily among the Jews in Jerusalem. These changes enabled the early disciples to come to see God's rule in a wider and also more inward perspective, as the rule of the divine within all people. John's Gospel takes this process a step further, changing the perspective again to that of an eternal divine decree for all the earth. But the focus of these diverse perspectives is the same, the life of Jesus as the place where Hebrew prophecies are fulfilled and God ordains a new covenant for a new Israel, through the self-giving passion of a man who was filled with the Spirit of God, and was able to give that Spirit, at least in some way and to some extent, to his disciples.

The common message of the Gospels is this: in Jesus God acts to disclose the divine nature and unite humans to that nature in a new and distinctive way. God really and objectively acts. But that act must be discerned by observers whose own reactions will strongly influence what is seen and recorded. The four Gospels present diverse discernments of God's act in Jesus. Difference is not contradiction. But the lesson to learn is that there is no interpretation-free revelation. The revelation of God in Jesus is from the first both perceived and interpreted by its observers. We have the records of their discernments, and the main point of those records is to evoke further discernments in us, discernments that will express the diversity of our own characters and cultural-historical contexts. In that way, Christian revelation calls for continual re-thinking.

The point can be made quite sharply by contrasting Christian with Muslim revelation. In Islam, the Qur'an is believed to be the actual words of God. Of course, they need to be understood and interpreted, so there is much room for diversity there too. Nevertheless, the words themselves are not interpretations. They are divine speech. In the Gospels, we do not have the actual speech of God – even though some Christians talk as though we do. What we have are four rather different interpretations of what all the

Gospel writers believed to be divine actions in Jesus. What Christians have in writing, therefore, are interpretations of, testimonies to, divine action. But that divine action is believed to be in a living human person who wrote no books and recorded no exact words for posterity.

When Christians respond to divine revelation, what they hear are the interpretations of revelation given by others. There is not a very firm foundation here for any doctrine of verbal inerrancy or for one final closed and absolute interpretation. There is, rather, an invitation to enter into a community of diverse and continuing interpretations.

Any claim to absolute, unrevisable truth in the Gospels is undermined by the foundational and unquestionable fact that we have no means of direct access to the life and teachings of Jesus. We know only what the Gospel writers thought. We know that they did not entirely agree with one another, and that they were themselves probably developing and changing in understanding even as they collected and edited what came to be the Gospels we now have.

Thus it is that the sources of Christian revelation tell us that such revelation, by its foundational nature, is dynamic, personal and pluralist. It is dynamic, for it expresses and calls for changing understandings and perspectives. It is personal, for it is rooted in the life of a person who always retains his otherness and hiddenness, since that person is always described for us at second and third hand. It is pluralist, for it encourages a diversity of interpretations, a diversity that is required if anything like an adequate understanding of the personal mystery of Jesus Christ is to be attained.

Christian revelation is, therefore, never entirely bound by the words of a written text. The written Christian texts are interpretations, perspectives, personal testimonies. They encourage and inspire us. We may believe that they themselves are inspired by the creative Spirit of God. But what they do for us is not ask us just to agree with them, as though that was the end of the matter. They ask us to be creative, to interpret for ourselves, to uncover our own perspectives, to respond to the God who was in Jesus (and who still is in the risen Lord) in our own way and from our own vantage points, while acknowledging all the limitations of those vantage points.

This view of revelation seems to be present in the very form the New Testament takes, and it may have important implications for the way we, in our own age, approach and interpret Christian revelation in the Bible.