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JAROSLAV PELIKAN

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# JESUS THROUGH THE CENTURIES

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*His Place in the History of Culture*

Yale University Press  
New Haven and London

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Printed in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 99-64259  
ISBN 0-300-07987-7

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British  
Library.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and  
durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book  
Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To the Benedictines  
of Saint John's Abbey  
Collegeville, Minnesota

*nihil amori Christi praeponere*

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#### 1 The Benedictines

The Benedictines were a monastic order founded by Saint Benedict of Nursia in the 6th century. They were known for their strict adherence to the Rule of Saint Benedict, which emphasized the importance of prayer, work, and community. The Benedictines played a central role in the development of the medieval monastic system and were instrumental in the preservation and transmission of knowledge.

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## Introduction

### The Good, the True, and the Beautiful

*From his fulness have we all received, grace upon grace.*



Regardless of what anyone may personally think or believe about him, Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in the history of Western culture for almost twenty centuries. If it were possible, with some sort of supermagnet, to pull up out of that history every scrap of metal bearing at least a trace of his name, how much would be left? It is from his birth that most of the human race dates its calendars, it is by his name that millions curse and in his name that millions pray.

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever. Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings" (Heb. 13:8-9). With these words the anonymous (and still unknown) author of the first-century document that has come to be called the Epistle to the Hebrews admonished his readers, who were probably recent converts from Judaism to Christianity, to remain loyal to the deposit of the authentic and authoritative tradition of Christ, as this had come down to them through the apostles of the first Christian generation, some of whom were still living.

"The same yesterday and today and for ever" eventually came to have a metaphysical and theological significance, as "the same" was taken to mean that Jesus Christ was, in his eternal being, "the image of the unchangeable God, and therefore likewise unchangeable."<sup>1</sup> But

for the purposes of this book, it is the historical, not the metaphysical or theological, import of this phrase that must chiefly engage our attention. For, as will become evident in great and perhaps even confusing detail before this history of images of Jesus through the centuries is finished, it is not sameness but kaleidoscopic variety that is its most conspicuous feature. Would we not find it more accurate to substitute for the first-century formula "the same yesterday and today and for ever" the twentieth-century words of Albert Schweitzer? "Each successive epoch," Schweitzer said, "found its own thoughts in Jesus, which was, indeed, the only way in which it could make him live"; for, typically, one "created him in accordance with one's own character." "There is," he concluded, "no historical task which so reveals someone's true self as the writing of a *Life of Jesus*."<sup>2</sup>

This book presents a history of such images of Jesus, as these have appeared from the first century to the twentieth. Precisely because, in Schweitzer's words, it has been characteristic of each age of history to depict Jesus in accordance with its own character, it will be an important part of our task to set these images into their historical contexts. We shall want to see what it was that each age brought to its portrayal of him. For each age, the life and teachings of Jesus represented an answer (or, more often, *the* answer) to the most fundamental questions of human existence and of human destiny, and it was to the figure of Jesus as set forth in the Gospels that those questions were addressed. If we want to comprehend the answers these previous centuries found there, we must penetrate to their questions, which in most instances will not be our own questions and in many instances will not even be explicitly their own questions. For, in the provocative formula of Alfred North Whitehead,

When you are criticizing [or, one may add, interpreting] the philosophy of an epoch, do not chiefly direct your attention to those intellectual positions which its exponents feel it necessary explicitly to defend. There will be some fundamental assumptions which adherents of all the variant systems within the epoch unconsciously presuppose. Such assumptions appear so obvious that people do not know what they are assuming because no other way of putting things has ever occurred to them. With these assumptions a certain limited number of types of philosophic systems are possible.<sup>3</sup>

During the past two thousand years, few issues if any have so persistently brought out these "fundamental assumptions" of each epoch

as has the attempt to come to terms with the meaning of the figure of Jesus of Nazareth.

For that very reason, however, the converse of the relation between what Whitehead calls "the philosophy of an epoch" and its picture of Jesus will also hold true: the way any particular age has depicted Jesus is often a key to the genius of that age. We who seek, whether as professional or as amateur students of history, to understand and appreciate any segment of the past are continually frustrated not only by the inaccessibility of many of the most revealing monuments of that experience (since only small fragments, and not necessarily the most representative ones, have come down to us), but also by our lack of a proper antenna for picking up the signals of another time and place. We cannot, and we must not, trust our own common sense to give us the right translation of the foreign languages of the past—all of whose languages are by definition foreign, even when the past speaks in English. A sensitivity to that frustration is the necessary prerequisite, but it may also become the occupational disease, of the historian, who can end up despairing of the effort and becoming a victim of what has been called "the paralysis of analysis."

One element of any method for coping with such frustration must be to inquire after instances of continuity within the change and variety, and if possible to find issues or themes that document both the change and the continuity at the same time. The point can be illustrated by reference to a field of historical research far removed from the concerns of this book. Without interruption since the days of the Hebrew Bible and of Homer, olive oil has been a major constituent of the diet, the pharmacopoeia, and the trade of the peoples surrounding the Mediterranean Sea, so that one of the most distinguished of contemporary social and economic historians, Fernand Braudel, is able to define the Mediterranean geographically as the "region [that] stretches from the northern limit of the olive tree to the northern limit of the palm tree. The first olive tree on the way south marks the beginning of the Mediterranean region and the first compact palm grove the end."<sup>4</sup> But even a comparison of Homer and the Hebrew Bible will show some of the variety in both the literal and the metaphorical use of olive oil. If, therefore, one were to study its history as condiment and cosmetic, culture and commodity, one would probably be able to discover many of the continuities—and many of



the discontinuities—in the past three millennia of the Mediterranean world.

Similarly, the history of the images of Jesus illustrates the continuities and the discontinuities of the past two millennia simultaneously. Arthur O. Lovejoy, founder of the history of ideas as a distinct discipline in modern American scholarship, used it to illustrate only the discontinuities. "The term 'Christianity,'" he wrote in *The Great Chain of Being*, "is not the name for any single unit of the type for which the historian of specific ideas looks." For Lovejoy saw the history of Christianity as not such a single unit at all, but rather as "a series of facts which, taken as a whole, have almost nothing in common except the name." Although he was willing to acknowledge, as that series of facts obliged him to acknowledge, that the one thing they did hold in common was "the reverence for a certain person," the person of Jesus Christ, he went on to add that his "nature and teaching . . . have been most variously conceived, so that the unity here too is largely a unity of name."<sup>5</sup> Yet Lovejoy would also have been obliged to acknowledge that each of the almost infinite—and infinitely different—ways of construing that name has been able to claim some warrant or other somewhere within the original portrait (or portraits) of Jesus in the Gospels. And so there is continuity in this history, yes; but no less prominent a characteristic of the ways of describing the meaning of Jesus Christ has been their discontinuity.

One consequence of the discontinuity is the great variety and unevenness in the concepts and terms that have been used to describe this meaning, from the most naive and unsophisticated to the most profound and complex. According to the Gospels, Jesus prayed, "I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes" (Luke 10:21). These words have served to remind theologians and philosophers that "man's discernment is so overwhelmed that it is hindered from attaining the mysteries of God, which have been 'revealed to babes alone.'"<sup>6</sup> But the words of Jesus in the very next verse make the declaration "All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Luke 10:22). It took centuries of speculation and controversy by some of the most "wise and understanding" minds in the history of thought to probe the implications of that declaration.<sup>7</sup>

The outcome was a metaphysical tradition that, from Augustine to Hegel, interpreted the Trinity as the most profound of all the mysteries of being. Some of the images to be described here, therefore, will be quite clear and simple, others rather subtle and difficult to grasp; but chapters about both must be part of the history. In a favorite metaphor of the church fathers, the Gospels are a river in which an elephant can drown and a gnat can swim. For some of the same reasons, moreover, the images in later chapters of the book will often be considerably more diffuse than earlier ones; for the second millennium of this history is the period during which the prestige of institutional Christianity gradually declined in Western society. But it was, paradoxically, a period in which, far beyond the borders of the organized church, the stature of Jesus as an individual increased and his reputation spread.

Whatever blurring of his image the welter of portraits of Jesus may create for the eyes of a faith that wants to affirm him as "the same yesterday and today and for ever," that very variety is a treasure trove for the history of culture, because of the way it combines continuity and discontinuity. Nor is the portrait of Jesus in any epoch confined to the history of faith, central though it is for that history. It is, of course, appropriate (or, in the familiar terminology of the *Book of Common Prayer*, "meet, right, and salutary") that the history of faith, and specifically the history of the faith in Jesus Christ, should form the subject matter for scholarly research and exposition in its own right. The rise of the history of Christian doctrine at the beginning of the nineteenth century as a historical discipline in its own right—distinct from the history of philosophy, from the history of the Christian church, and from doctrinal theology, though continually related to all three of these fields—forms an important chapter in the history of modern scholarship.<sup>8</sup> But a narrative of the complex evolution of the doctrine of Christ, defined as "what the church of Jesus Christ believes, teaches, and confesses on the basis of the word of God,"<sup>9</sup> does not even begin to exhaust the history of the meaning that Jesus has had for the development of human culture. For, in the words of the Gospel of John, "from his fulness [*plērōma*] have we all received, grace upon grace" (John 1:16)—a fulness that has proved to be inexhaustible as well as irreducible to formulas, whether dogmatic or antidogmatic. To borrow the distinction of Werner Elert, alongside the "dogma of Christ" there has always been the "image of Christ."<sup>10</sup>

*Jesus through the Centuries* is a history of the "image [or images] of Christ."

This is, then, neither a life of Jesus nor a history of Christianity as a movement or an institution. The invention of a genre of biographical literature known as the *Life of Jesus* is, strictly speaking, a phenomenon of the modern period, when scholars came to believe that by applying the methodology of a critical historiography to the source materials in the Gospels they would be able to reconstruct the story of his life; Albert Schweitzer's *Quest of the Historical Jesus* remains the standard account of the growth of that literature from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. Naturally, the reconstructions of the life of Jesus in any period, beginning with the reconstructions in the Gospels themselves, will serve as indispensable artifacts of this history of Jesus through the centuries. But we shall be concerned here with more than the history of ideas, whether theological ideas or nontheological ideas—or, for that matter, antitheological ideas. For example, the efforts to portray the person of Jesus in visual form are likewise "artifacts" for our story. They will perform that function not only when, as in the Byzantine empire of the eighth and ninth centuries and again in the Reformation of the sixteenth century, the legitimacy of such efforts became a subject of intense discussion, with far-reaching implications for the history of art and aesthetics as well as for the history of European politics East and West. But in each chapter the portrayals of Christ in such works of art as roadside crosses in Anglo-Saxon Northumbria or Carolingian miniatures or Renaissance paintings will also provide us with the raw material for a cultural history of Jesus, and we shall usually concentrate on one example of such portrayals. Similarly, we shall throughout the book be drawing over and over upon works of literature, from the Old English *Dream of the Rood* through the *Divine Comedy* to Dostoevsky's tale of the Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov*, in order to assess the impact of Jesus on culture.

Yet the term *culture* in the subtitle "His Place in the History of Culture" does not refer here exclusively to what has now come to be called "high culture," seen as what poets, philosophers, and artists create. Would it not be ironic if the one who was attacked by his contemporaries for associating with the outcasts of polite and respectable society were to be interpreted solely on the basis of his contribution to the enhancement and beautification of the life and

thought of the rich and educated classes? As *culture* is used here, however, it has almost the significance it has in anthropology, including as it does the life of society and of the state no less than literature, philosophy, and the fine arts. For we shall also be paying attention to the political, social, and economic history of the interpretation of Jesus, and we must incorporate into our recital instances of the ongoing practice of invoking the name of Jesus to legitimate political activity, as this practice becomes visible in the history of both radical and reactionary movements.

The most inclusive conceptual framework for this range of images is provided by the classical triad of the Beautiful, the True, and the Good, which has itself played a significant role in the history of Christian thought.<sup>11</sup> Corresponding to that classical triad, though by no means identical with it, is the biblical triad of Jesus Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life, as he is described as having identified himself in the Gospel of John (John 14:6). This formula from the Gospel of John became the motif for a striking image of Jesus in the Archbishopial Chapel at Ravenna: "EGO SUM VIA VERITAS ET VITA."<sup>12</sup> As one ancient Christian writer had put it in an earlier century, "He who said 'I am the Way' . . . shapes us anew to his own image," expressed, as another early author had said, in "the quality of beauty";<sup>13</sup> Christ as the Truth came to be regarded as the fulfillment and the embodiment of all the True, "the true light that enlightens every man" (John 1:9); and Christ as the Life was "the source" for all authentic goodness.<sup>14</sup> The Ravenna mosaic, therefore, summarized Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and at the same time it epitomized Christ as the Beautiful, the True, and the Good.

In a set of public lectures delivered at the University of Berlin in the academic year 1899–1900, that university's most renowned scholar, Adolf von Harnack, undertook to answer the question "What is Christianity?" The book that came out of his lectures has achieved a circulation of well over one hundred thousand copies in the original version, has been translated into more than a dozen languages, and is still in print both in German and in English.<sup>15</sup> Harnack's introduction opens with words that can well form the conclusion of this introduction:

The great English philosopher, John Stuart Mill, once commented that "mankind can hardly be too often reminded that there was once a man

named Socrates." That is correct; but it is even more important to remind mankind that a man named Jesus Christ once stood in their midst.<sup>16</sup>

The images in this book represent a series of such reminders "through the centuries."

# 1

## The Rabbi

*A light for glory to  
thy people Israel.*

**T**he study of the place of Jesus in the history of human culture must begin with the New Testament. This is not simply for the self-evident reason that all representations of him since the first century have been based—or, at any rate, have claimed to be based—on the New Testament, although of course they have. But we shall not understand the history of those subsequent representations unless we begin by considering the nature and literary form of the sources that have come down to us in the four Gospels. For the presentation of Jesus in the New Testament is in fact itself a representation: it resembles a set of paintings more closely than it does a photograph.

Even without settling all the thorny problems of authorship and of dating, we must recognize that in the several decades between the time of the ministry of Jesus and the composition of the various Gospels, the memory of what he had said and done was circulating among the various Christian congregations, and probably beyond them, in the form of an oral tradition. Thus the apostle Paul, writing to one such congregation at Corinth in about the year 55 C.E. (hence about twenty years or so after the life of Jesus), was able to remind them that during his visit to Corinth a few years before, probably in the early fifties, he had orally "delivered to you as of first importance what I also received" still earlier, thus perhaps in the forties, con-



cerning the death and resurrection of Jesus (1 Cor. 15:1-7) and the institution of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:23-26). But it is noteworthy that, except for the words of the institution of the Lord's Supper themselves, Paul does not in any of his epistles quote the exact words of any of the sayings of Jesus as we now have them in the Gospels. Nor does he mention a single event in the life of Jesus—again except for the institution of the Lord's Supper—between his birth and his death on the cross. From the writings of Paul we would not be able to know that Jesus ever taught in parables and proverbs or that he performed miracles or that he was born of a virgin. For that information we are dependent on the oral tradition of the early Christian communities as this was eventually deposited in the Gospels, all of which, in their present form at any rate, probably appeared later than most or all of the epistles of Paul.

Everyone must acknowledge, therefore, that Christian tradition had precedence, chronologically and even logically, over Christian Scripture; for there was a tradition of the church before there was ever a New Testament, or any individual book of the New Testament. By the time the materials of the oral tradition found their way into written form, they had passed through the life and experience of the church, which laid claim to the presence of the Holy Spirit of God, the selfsame Spirit that the disciples had seen descending upon Jesus at his baptism and upon the earliest believers on the fiftieth day after Easter, in the miracle of Pentecost. It was to the action of that Spirit that Christians attributed the composition of the books of the "new testament," as they began to call it, and before that of the "old testament," as they referred to the Hebrew Bible. Because the narrative of the sayings of Jesus and of the events of his life and ministry had come down to the evangelists and compilers in this context, anyone who seeks to interpret one or another saying or story from the narrative must always ask not only about its place in the life and teachings of Jesus, but also about its function within the remembering community. Although there is no warrant for the extreme skepticism of those who maintain that the historical figure of Jesus, if indeed there even was one, is irretrievably lost behind the smoke screen of the preaching of the early Christian church, it is necessary nevertheless to begin with the caution that every later picture of Jesus is in fact not a picture based on an unretouched Gospel original, but a picture of what in the New Testament is already a picture.

It is obvious—and yet, to judge by much of the history of later centuries, including and especially the twentieth century, it is anything but obvious—that according to the earliest portrayals Jesus was a Jew. Therefore the first attempts to understand and interpret his message took place within the context of Judaism, and it is likewise there that any attempt to understand his place in the history of human culture must begin. Although the New Testament was written in Greek, the language that Jesus and his disciples spoke was Aramaic, a Semitic tongue related to Hebrew but by no means identical with it.<sup>1</sup> For the use of Hebrew was by this time largely restricted to worship and scholarship, while the spoken tongue among Palestinian Jews was Aramaic, and in many instances Greek in addition. Meanwhile, many of the Jews of the Diaspora, in places like Alexandria, apparently could not even speak Aramaic, much less Hebrew, but only Greek, and are therefore sometimes called Hellenists.<sup>2</sup> There are Aramaic words and phrases, transliterated into Greek, scattered throughout the Gospels and the other books of the early Christian community, reflecting the language in which various sayings and liturgical formulas had presumably been repeated before the transition to Greek became complete in Christian teaching and worship. These include such familiar words as Hosanna, as well as the cry of dereliction of Jesus on the cross, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" which in the original Hebrew of Psalm 22 would have been "Eli, Eli, lama azavtani?"<sup>3</sup>

There are, among these Aramaic words that appear in the New Testament, at least four titles for Jesus, which can provide a convenient set of labels for our consideration of the Jewish idiom and Jewish framework of reference in which the earliest followers of Jesus spoke about him: Jesus as *rabbi* or teacher; Jesus as *amen* or prophet; Jesus as *messias* or Christ; and Jesus as *mar* or Lord.

The most neutral and least controversial of these titles is probably *rabbi*, together with the related *rabbouni*.<sup>4</sup> Except for two passages, the Gospels apply the Aramaic word only to Jesus;<sup>5</sup> and if we conclude, as we seem to be justified in concluding, that the title "teacher" or "master" (*didaskalos* in the Greek New Testament) was intended as a translation of that Aramaic name, it seems safe to say that it was as a *rabbi* that Jesus was known and addressed by his immediate followers and by others. Yet the Gospels, by a superficial reading at any rate, usually seem to be accentuating the differences, rather than the



similarities, between Jesus and the other rabbis as teachers. As the scholarly study of the Judaism contemporary or nearly contemporary to Jesus has progressed, however, both the similarities and the differences have become clearer. On the one hand, scholars of the relation between the Gospels and rabbinic sources have, as their "first basic observation," come to the conclusion that "Jewish material has been taken over by the Christian tradition and ascribed to Jesus"; on the other hand, the comparison has shown that many passages that sound like borrowings from the rabbis are in fact "something new in distinction from Judaism."<sup>6</sup> A good illustration of both characteristics is the anecdote with which, in the story line of the Gospel of Luke, the preaching ministry of Jesus as rabbi is reported to have been launched (Luke 4:16-30).

Luke tells us that after the baptism of Jesus and his temptation by the devil, which taken together are an inauguration into his ministry according to Matthew and Mark as well, he "came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the sabbath day. And he stood up to read." Following the customary rabbinical pattern, he took up a scroll of the Hebrew Bible, read it, presumably provided an Aramaic translation-paraphrase of the text, and then commented on it. The words he read were from the sixty-first chapter of the Book of Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovering of sight to the blind,  
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,  
to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.

But instead of doing what a rabbi was normally expected to do, which was to provide an exposition of the text that compared and contrasted earlier interpretations and then applied the text to the hearers, he proceeded to declare: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Although the initial reaction even to this audacious declaration was said to be wonderment "at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth," his further explanation produced the opposite reaction, and everyone was "filled with wrath."

Behind the many such scenes of confrontation between Jesus as rabbi and the representatives of the rabbinical tradition, the affinities are nevertheless clearly discernible in the very forms in which his

teachings appear in the Gospels. One of the most familiar forms is that of question and answer, with the question often phrased as a teaser. A woman had seven husbands (in series, not in parallel); whose wife will she be in the life to come? Is it lawful for a devout Jew to pay taxes to the Roman authorities? What must I do to inherit eternal life? Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? In the Gospel narratives the one who puts each of these questions acts as a kind of straight man. Sometimes, in the so-called controversy dialogues, it is an opponent of Jesus who is the straight man; at other times it is one of his followers. This sets up the opportunity for Rabbi Jesus to drive home the point, often by standing the question on its head. There is an old story about a rabbi who was asked by one of his pupils: "Why is it that you rabbis so often put your teaching in the form of a question?" To which the rabbi answered: "So what's wrong with a question?" A striking illustration of such rabbinic pedagogy in the Gospels, and one that is pertinent to several of the issues of affinity and difference with which we are dealing here, is the following story:

And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus answered them, "I also will ask you a question; and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John [the Baptist], whence was it? From heaven or from men?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'From men,' we are afraid of the multitude; for all hold that John was a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things." (Matt. 21:23-27)

To the writers of the New Testament, however, the most typical form of the teachings of Jesus was the parable: "All this," Matthew tells us, "Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed he said nothing to them without a parable" (Matt. 13:34). But this word "parable" (*parabolē* in Greek) was taken from the Septuagint, where it had been used by the Jewish scholars who translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek to render the Hebrew word *mashal*. Thus here, too, the evangelists' accounts of Jesus as a teller of parables make sense only in the setting of his Jewish background. Recent interpretations of his parables on the basis of that setting have fundamentally altered conventional explanations of the point being made in many of these

comparisons between the kingdom of God and some incident from human life, often rather homely in its outward appearance.<sup>8</sup> One example is the familiar parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32), which in some ways might better be called the parable of the elder brother. For the point of the parable as a whole—a point frequently overlooked by Christian interpreters, in their eagerness to stress the uniqueness and particularity of the church as the prodigal younger son who has been restored to the father's favor—is in the closing words of the father to the elder brother, who stands for the people of Israel: "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found." The historic covenant between God and Israel was permanent, and it was into this covenant that other peoples, too, were now being introduced. This parable of Jesus affirmed both the tradition of God's continuing relation with Israel and the innovation of God's new relation with the church—a twofold covenant.

That oscillation between tradition and innovation, between describing the role of Jesus as a rabbi and attributing to him a new and unique authority, made it necessary to find additional titles and categories to describe his ministry. Of these, the next one up on the scale was the title of prophet, as in the acclamation that appears in the story of Palm Sunday, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee" (Matt. 21:11). Probably the most intriguing version of this designation is, once again, in Aramaic: "The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation" (Rev. 3:14). Ever since the Hebrew Bible, the word Amen had been the formula of affirmation to conclude a prayer; for example, in the mighty chorus of the recitation of the law in the closing charge of Moses to the people of Israel, each verse concludes: "And all the people shall say, 'Amen' " (Deut. 27:14–26). Amen continued to perform that function in early Christianity. Thus Justin Martyr, describing the liturgy of the second-century Christian community for his pagan Gentile readers, says that at the end of the prayers, "all the people present express their assent by saying 'Amen.' " "This word 'Amen,' " Justin explains, "corresponds in the Hebrew language to 'So let it be!'"<sup>9</sup>

But a further extension of the meaning of Amen becomes evident for the first time in the New Testament in the best-known message (or compilation of messages) in the Gospels, the so-called Sermon on

the Mount. There it appears as what grammarians call an asseverative particle: "*Amēn legō hymin*, Truly, I say to you." It is used as such some seventy-five times throughout the four Gospels, but exclusively in the sayings of Jesus, to introduce an authoritative pronouncement. As the one who had the authority to make such pronouncements, Jesus was a prophet. Despite our English usage, the word prophet does not mean here only or even chiefly one who foretells, although the sayings of Jesus do contain many predictions, but one who tells forth, one who is authorized to speak on behalf of Another. That is the basis of the title in the Book of Revelation, "the Amen, the faithful and true witness"; and that is also why the Amen-formula begins to make its appearance in the Sermon on the Mount, which is a document of the oscillation, even in the earliest pictures of Jesus, between rabbinic tradition and prophetic innovation.

The comparisons that both Jewish and Christian scholars have made between the method of interpretation at work in the Sermon on the Mount and the literature of rabbinic Judaism have documented that oscillation. For it is in the Sermon on the Mount that, after the introductory pronouncements called the Beatitudes, Jesus is quoted as asserting: "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly [*amēn*], I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (Matt. 5:17–18). That ringing affirmation of the permanent validity of the law of Moses as given to the people of Israel on Mount Sinai is followed by a series of specific quotations from the law. Each of these quotations is introduced with the formula "You have heard that it was said to the men of old"; and each such quotation is then followed by a commentary opening with the magisterial formula "*But I say to you.*"<sup>10</sup> The sense of the commentary is an intensification of the commandment, to include not only its outward observance but the inward spirit and motivation of the heart. All these commentaries are an elaboration of the warning that the righteousness of the followers of Jesus must exceed that of those who followed other doctors of the law (Matt. 5:20).

In confirmation of the special status of Jesus as not only rabbi but also prophet, the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount reads: "And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as



their scribes. When he came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him" (Matt. 7:28-8:1). Then there come several miracle stories. As a recent study has noted, in such stories "Matthew has sought to make an important point that once more recalls the function of miracle in the rabbinic tradition: to lend authority to Jesus' activity, and especially to his interpretation of the Law."<sup>11</sup> The New Testament does not attribute the power of performing miracles only to Jesus and his followers, for Jesus defends himself against the accusation of being in conspiracy with Beelzebul, prince of devils, by retorting: "And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out?" (Matt. 12:27). But it does cite the miracles as substantiation of his standing as rabbi-prophet. (It should be noted, in relation to our examination of Aramaic titles, that there are also Aramaic formulas by which Jesus performs some of the miracles: "Ephphatha, that is, 'Be opened,' " to heal a deaf man; and "Talitha cumi, which means, 'Little girl, I say to you, arise,' " to raise a child from the dead.)<sup>12</sup>

The identification of Jesus as prophet was a means both of affirming his continuity with the prophets of Israel and of asserting his superiority to them as *the* prophet whose coming they had predicted and to whose authority they had been prepared to yield. In the Pentateuch (Deut. 18:15-22) the God of Israel tells Moses, and through him the people, that he "will raise up a prophet from among you," to whom the people are to pay heed. In the context, this is the authorization of Joshua as the legitimate successor of Moses; but already within the New Testament itself, and then at greater length in later Christian writers such as Clement of Alexandria around the year 200, the promise of the prophet to come is taken as a reference to Jesus, who had the same name as Joshua.<sup>13</sup> He is portrayed as the one prophet in whom the teaching of Moses was simultaneously fulfilled and superseded, as the one rabbi who both satisfied the law of Moses and transcended it. For, in the words of the Gospel of John (John 1:17), "The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." To describe such a revelation of grace and truth, the categories of rabbi and prophet, while necessary, were not sufficient. Studies of the descriptions of Jesus in the Jewish tradition after the age of the New Testament have shown that it sought to accommodate him within those categories, but in its disputes with Judaism Christianity insisted that he had broken out of that entire categorial system. And so, by the time Islam came along to identify

him as a great prophet, greater in many ways than Moses but still a prophet who had acted as a forerunner to Mohammed, that was, for such anti-Muslim Christian apologists as John of Damascus in the eighth century, not adequate and therefore not even accurate.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, the potential significance of the figure of Jesus as a meeting ground between Christians and Jews, and between Christians and Muslims, has never materialized.

For the rabbi and the prophet both yielded to two other categories, each of them likewise expressed in an Aramaic word and then in its Greek translation: *Messias*, the Aramaic form of "Messiah," translated into Greek as *ho Christos*, "Christ," the Anointed One;<sup>15</sup> and *Marana*, "our Lord," in the liturgical formula, *Maranatha*, "Our Lord, come!" translated into Greek as *ho Kyrios* and quoted by the apostle Paul and in a very early liturgical prayer.<sup>16</sup> The future belonged to the titles "Christ" and "Lord" as names for Jesus, and to the identification of him as the Son of God and the second person of the Trinity. It was not merely in the name of a great teacher, not even in the name of the greatest teacher who ever lived, that Justinian built Hagia Sophia in Constantinople and Johann Sebastian Bach composed the *Mass in B-Minor*. There are no cathedrals in honor of Socrates. But in the process of establishing themselves, *Christ* and *Lord*, as well as even *Rabbi* and *Prophet*, often lost much of their Semitic content. To the Christian disciples of the first century the conception of Jesus as a rabbi was self-evident, to the Christian disciples of the second century it was embarrassing, to the Christian disciples of the third century and beyond it was obscure.

The beginnings of the transformation, what Dix has labeled the "de-Judaization of Christianity,"<sup>17</sup> are visible already within the New Testament. For with the decision of the apostle Paul to "turn to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:46) after having begun his preaching in the synagogues of the Mediterranean world, and then with the sack of Jerusalem by the Roman armies under Titus and the destruction of the temple in the year 70 C.E., the Christian movement increasingly became Gentile rather than Jewish in its constituency and in its outlook. In that setting, as we shall have several occasions to note in this and in subsequent chapters, the Jewish elements of the life of Jesus grew increasingly problematical and had to be explained to the Gentile readers of the Gospels. The writer of the Gospel of John, for instance, found himself obliged to account for the jars of water changed by



Jesus into wine at the wedding in Cana by stating that they were intended to be used "for the Jewish rites of purification" (John 2:6), which any Jewish reader would have been expected to know without being told. And the Book of the Acts of the Apostles can be read as a kind of "tale of two cities": its first chapter, with Jesus and his disciples after the resurrection, is set in Jerusalem, for "he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem"; but its last chapter, and thus the book as a whole, reaches its climax with the final voyage of the apostle Paul, in the simple but pulse-quickenning sentence "And so we came to Rome."

The apostle Paul often appears in Christian thought as the one chiefly responsible for the de-Judaization of the gospel and even for the transmutation of the person of Jesus from a rabbi in the Jewish sense to a divine being in the Greek sense. Such an interpretation of Paul became almost canonical in certain schools of biblical criticism during the nineteenth century, especially that of Ferdinand Christian Baur, who saw the controversy between Paul and Peter as a conflict between the party of Peter, with its "Judaizing" distortion of the gospel into a new law, and the party of Paul, with its universal vision of the gospel as a message about Jesus for all humanity.<sup>18</sup> Very often, of course, this description of the opposition between Peter and Paul, and between law and gospel, was cast in the language of the opposition between Roman Catholicism (which traced its succession to Peter as the first pope) and Protestantism (which arose from Luther's interpretation of the epistles of Paul). Luther's favorite among those epistles, the letter to the Romans, became the charter for this supposed declaration of independence from Judaism.

Since then, however, scholars have not only put the picture of Jesus back into the setting of first-century Judaism; they have also rediscovered the Jewishness of the New Testament, and particularly of the apostle Paul, and specifically of his Epistle to the Romans. They have concluded, in the words of Krister Stendahl, that "in this letter Paul's focus really is the relation between Jews and Gentiles, not the notion of justification or predestination and certainly not other proper yet abstract theological topics." For such a reading of the epistle, moreover, "the climax of Romans is actually chapters 9-11, i.e., his reflections on the relation between church and synagogue, the church and the Jewish *people*—not 'Christianity' and 'Judaism,' not the attitudes of the gospel versus the attitudes of the law."<sup>19</sup> Chapters 9-11

of the Epistle to the Romans are Paul's description of his struggle over that relation between church and synagogue, concluding with the prediction and the promise: "And so all Israel will be saved"—not, it should be noted carefully, converted to Christianity, but *saved*, because, in Paul's words, "as regards election they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:26-29).

"It is stunning to note," Stendahl has observed, "that Paul writes this whole section of Romans (10:18-11:36) without using the name of Jesus Christ." Yet if one accepts this reading of the mind of Paul in Romans, his many references to the name of Jesus Christ in the remainder of the epistle acquire a special significance: from "descended from David according to the flesh . . . , Jesus Christ our Lord," in the first chapter to "the preaching of Jesus Christ," which "is now disclosed and through the prophetic writings is made known to all nations," in the final sentence of the final chapter. The Jesus Christ of the Epistle to the Romans is, as Paul says of himself elsewhere, "of the people of Israel . . . , a Hebrew born of Hebrews" (Phil. 3:5). The very issue of universality, which has been taken to be the distinction between the message of Paul and Jewish particularism, was for Paul what made it necessary that Jesus be a Jew. For only through the Jewishness of Jesus could the covenant of God with Israel, the gracious gifts of God and his irrevocable calling, become available to all people in the whole world, also to the Gentiles, who thus "were grafted in their place to share the richness of the olive tree," the people of Israel (Rom. 11:17).

During later centuries it repeatedly became necessary to return to this theme, even as many other ways of portraying Jesus were developed that came to make more sense to those centuries than did the picture of him as Rabbi. But no one can consider the topic of Jesus as Rabbi and ignore the subsequent history of the relation between the synagogue and the church, between the people to whom Jesus belonged and the people who belong to Jesus. It is important, in considering that history, to take to heart the recent reminder that "we have no license to judge the distant past on the basis of our present perception of events of more recent times."<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, the religious, moral, and political relations between Christians and Jews do run like a red line through much of the history of culture. Even as we heed the warning against rashly judging the quick and the dead,

since ultimately there is another Judge who will do so and who will judge us as well, we who live in the twentieth century do have a unique responsibility to be aware of that red line, above all as we study the history of the images of Jesus through the centuries.

One such image from the twentieth century, Marc Chagall's *White Crucifixion*, has made this point forcefully. The crucified figure in Chagall's painting wears not a nondescript loincloth, but the *tallith* of a devout and observant rabbi. His prophecy, "They will put you out of the synagogues; indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God" (John 16:2), is seen as having been fulfilled, in a supreme irony, when some who claimed to be his disciples regarded the persecution of Jews as service to God. And the central figure does indeed belong to the people of Israel, but he belongs no less to the church and to the whole world—precisely because he belongs to the people of Israel.

For the question is easier to ask than it is to answer, and it is easier to avoid than it is to ask in the first place. But ask it we must: Would there have been such anti-Semitism, would there have been so many pogroms, would there have been an Auschwitz, if every Christian church and every Christian home had focused its devotion on icons of Mary not only as Mother of God and Queen of Heaven but as the Jewish maiden and the new Miriam, and on icons of Christ not only as Pantocrator but as *Rabbi Jeshua bar-Joseph*, Rabbi Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of David, in the context of the history of a suffering Israel and a suffering humanity?

## 2

### The Turning Point of History

*When the time had fully come,  
God sent forth his Son, born of  
woman, born under the law.*



The contemporaries of Jesus knew him as a rabbi, but this was a rabbi whose ministry of teaching and preaching had as its central content "the gospel of God: 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel' " (Mark 1:14–15). Many of his early followers found it unavoidable to describe him as a prophet, but further reflection led them to specify what was distinctive about his prophetic mission: "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power" (Heb. 1:1–3).

"The time is fulfilled . . . in these last days": it is obvious from these and other statements of the early generations of Christian believers that as they carried out the task of finding a language that would not collapse under the weight of what they believed to be the significance of the coming of Jesus, they found it necessary to invent a grammar of history. Categories of the cosmos and of space, and not only categories of history and of time, were pressed into service for this task; and before the task was finished, the followers of Christ had managed

to transfigure the systems of metaphysics that they had inherited from Greek philosophy. "But," as Charles Norris Cochrane, one of the most provocative and profound analysts of this process, has suggested, "the divergence between Christianity and Classicism was in no respect more conspicuously or emphatically displayed than with regard to history." "In a very real sense indeed," he concludes, "it marked the crux of the issue between the two."<sup>1</sup> It likewise marked the crux of the issue between the church and the synagogue. Calling itself the new Israel and the true Israel, the church appropriated the schema of historical meaning that had arisen in the interpretation of the redemption of Israel accomplished by the exodus from Egypt, and adapted this schema to the redemption of humanity accomplished by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Like every other portrait in the history of the depictions of Jesus, then, this one had its origins in Jewish tradition. In language redolent of Ezekiel, Daniel, and later Jewish apocalyptic writings, one of his early followers, who heard Jesus call himself "the first and the last," that is, the Lord of history, declared:

Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden girdle round his breast; his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters; in his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth issued a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. (Rev. 1:12-20)

Except for some details (such as the shoes instead of "feet like burnished bronze"), Albrecht Dürer's *Vision of the Seven Candlesticks*, with its "sense of fantastic unreality," in which "the three-dimensionality of space is stressed and denied at the same time,"<sup>2</sup> looks almost as though it could have served as the basis for these words of the Apocalypse, rather than the other way around. The majestic figure in Dürer's woodcut truly is the Lord of history, sovereign over heaven and earth, over eternity and time, and is both "the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end."<sup>3</sup>

From contemporary Jewish sources we know that the proclamation of Jesus himself about the kingdom of God, as well as such proclamations of his followers about him, resounded with the accents of



Albrecht Dürer, *Vision of the Seven Candlesticks*, woodcut, c. 1498, from the *Apocalypse*.



Jewish apocalypticism, the fervid expectation that the victory of the God of Israel over the enemies of Israel, so long promised and so often delayed, was now at last to break. The generation to which Jesus, and before him John the Baptist, addressed that proclamation was, we are told, a generation standing on tiptoes "in expectation" (Luke 3:15). The Book of Acts describes the disciples of Jesus, even after the events of Good Friday and Easter, as inquiring of him just before he withdrew his visible presence from them, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" to which Jesus replies, "It is not for you to know about times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority" (Acts 1:6-7).

It would, however, be too easy an evasion of the deepest problems connected with the Jewish and the early Christian expectation of the coming kingdom of God to leave it at that. For particularly in the twentieth century, New Testament scholarship has forced consideration of the place that apocalyptic expectation held not only for the hearers of Jesus but in the message of Jesus himself.<sup>4</sup> Repeatedly in the message of Jesus the call for repentance and the summons to ethical change took as its ground the promise of the Parousia: that the coming of the Son of Man in the clouds of glory would soon put an end to human history and would usher in the new order of the kingdom of God. Specifically, the moral teachings of the Sermon on the Mount, such as the command about turning the other cheek, which have so often seemed (except, of course, to Tolstoy) to be an utterly impractical code of ethics for life in the real world, came as the announcement of what his followers were to do in the brief interim between his earthly ministry and the end of history. "You will not have gone through all the towns of Israel," Jesus said to his disciples according to Matthew, "before the Son of man comes"; and all three of the Synoptic Gospels quote him as saying near the end of his ministry, "Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away till all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."<sup>5</sup>

But that generation did not live to see it all: the Son of Man did not come, and heaven and earth did not pass away. It has even been suggested that "the whole history of 'Christianity' down to the present day, that is to say, the real inner history of it, is based on the delay of the Parousia, the non-occurrence of the Parousia, the abandonment of eschatology."<sup>6</sup> What did this disappointment of the apoc-

alyptic hope of the Second Coming mean for the promise "My words will not pass away"? How could, and how did, the person of Jesus retain hold on an authority whose validity had apparently depended on the announcement of the impending end of history? Twentieth-century scholars have sought to identify a crisis brought on by the disappointment as the major trauma of the early Christian centuries and the source for the rise of the institutional church and of the dogma about the person of Jesus. Somewhat surprisingly, however, this hypothesis of a trauma caused by the "delay of the Parousia" finds very little corroboration in the sources of the second and third centuries themselves. What those sources disclose instead is the combination, side by side in the same minds, of an intense apocalyptic expectation that history will end and of a willingness to live with the prospect of a continuance of human history—both of these finding expression in an increasing emphasis on the centrality of Jesus.

The North African thinker Tertullian, the first important Christian writer to use Latin, may serve as an illustration of such a combination at the end of the second century.<sup>7</sup> Warning his fellow believers against attending the degrading shows and spectacles of Roman society, Tertullian urged them to wait for the greater spectacle of the great day coming, when the victorious Christ would return in triumphal procession like a Roman conqueror and would lead in his train, as prisoners, the monarchs and governors who had persecuted his people, the philosophers and poets who had mocked his message, the actors and other "ministers of sin" who had ridiculed his commandments. "And so," he wrote elsewhere, "we never march unarmed. . . . With prayer let us expect the angel's trumpet."<sup>8</sup> Yet this same Tertullian could declare, in response to the charge of treason against the Roman empire: "We also pray for the emperors, for their ministers and for all in authority, for the welfare of the world, for the prevalence of peace, for the delay of the final consummation."<sup>9</sup> Such statements about the Roman emperors were in some sense a preparation for the rise, in the fourth century, of the notion of a Christian Roman emperor, reigning in the name and by the power of Jesus Christ; but in the present context we must address the assertion that Christians were praying for the postponement of the second coming of Jesus Christ.

For that assertion of Tertullian represents nothing less than a new understanding of the meaning of history, an understanding according to which Jesus was not simply going to be the end of history by his

second coming in the future, as a naive and literalistic apocalypticism had viewed him, but already was the Turning Point of History, a history that, even if it were to continue, had been transformed and overturned by his first coming in the past. Tertullian is likewise remembered as a major figure in the history of the development of the dogmas of the Trinity and of the person of Christ, anticipating in his theological formulas much of the ultimate outcome of the debates that were to occupy the third and fourth centuries. During those centuries, however, it was not only the theological and dogmatic significance of Jesus as the Son of God that was worked out in the clarification of the dogma of the Trinity, but also the cultural significance of Jesus as the hinge on which history turned and therefore as the basis both for a new interpretation of the historical process and for a new historiography.

The new interpretation of the historical process began with the history of Israel, whose principal goal was now taken to be the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. That made itself evident in the interpretation—and the manipulation—of the *prophetic* tradition of the Jewish Scriptures. Describing the exodus of the children of Israel from captivity, the prophet Hosea had said, speaking in God's name, "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son" (Hos. 11:1); but in the hands of the Christian evangelist, these words became a prediction of the flight to Egypt by the Holy Family to escape the murderous plot of King Herod (Matt. 2:15). The so-called enthronement psalms identified God as the true king of Israel, even when Israel had earthly kings like David, and Psalm 96 declared, "The Lord reigns!"; but Christian philosophers and poets added to the text an explicit reference to the cross of Christ, so that it now became "The Lord reigns *from the tree*," words which they then accused the Jews of having expunged.<sup>10</sup> Christians ransacked the Hebrew Bible for references to Christ, compiling them in various collections and commentaries.<sup>11</sup> The prophets of Israel had found their aim, and their end, in Jesus.

So it was as well with the *kingdom* of Israel, which Christians saw as having now become the authentic kingdom of God, over which the Crucified reigned "from the tree." Israel had been changed into a kingdom with the reign of King Saul; but "when he was rejected and laid low in battle, and his line of descent rejected so that no kings should arise out of it, David succeeded to the kingdom, whose son

Christ is chiefly called." King David, who "was made a kind of starting-point and beginning of the advanced youth of the people of God," established Jerusalem as the capital of his kingdom; yet even as king of that "earthly Jerusalem," he was "a son of the heavenly Jerusalem." He received the promise that "his descendants were to reign in Jerusalem in continual succession."<sup>12</sup> But David as king had looked beyond himself and his own kingdom to the kingship of Jesus Christ, declaring in Psalm 45, which, according to the Christian reinterpretation of history, had been addressed to Christ as king:

Your throne, O God, endures for ever and ever.  
Your royal scepter is a scepter of equity;  
You love righteousness and hate wickedness.  
Therefore God, your God, has anointed you  
[in the Greek of the Septuagint, *echrisen se*, has made you Christ]  
with the oil of gladness above your fellows.

(Ps. 45:6-7)

Thus David had called him God in the first line, and then had identified him as both king and Christ, the authentic king anointed to be "much superior to, and differing from, those who in days of old had been symbolically anointed."<sup>13</sup> A review of the entire history of the divided kingdoms of Judah and Israel on the basis of what "the providence of God either ordered or permitted" showed that although the kings beginning with Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, did not "by their enigmatic words or actions prophesy what may pertain to Christ and the church," they did nevertheless point forward to Christ. For when the divided kingdoms were eventually reunited under one prince in Jerusalem, this was intended to anticipate Christ as the one and only king; and yet their kingdom no longer possessed any authority and sovereignty of its own, for "Christ found them as tributaries of the Romans."<sup>14</sup>

The history of the changes and successive forms of the *priesthood* of Israel also made sense, according to the Christian argument, only when viewed from the perspective of Jesus as its turning point. The Levitical priesthood of Aaron had been temporary, nothing more than a shadow, whose substance had now at last appeared in the true high priest, Jesus Christ; for "he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues for ever" (Heb. 7:24). The threat and prophecy addressed to Eli the high priest (1 Sam. 2:27-36), "I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who shall do according to what is in my heart



and in my mind," was not fulfilled in the priesthood and the priests of Israel, all of whom had been temporary, but had "come to pass through Christ Jesus" as the eternal high priest.<sup>15</sup> Although in the New Testament itself the term *priest* does not ever refer explicitly to the ministers of the Christian church, nor even to the apostles of Jesus in their ministry, but only to Christ himself as priest or to the priests of the Old Testament or to all believers as priests, the church soon took over the term for its ordained clergy.<sup>16</sup> The history of priesthood, therefore, was seen as having begun with the shadowy figure of Melchizedek, who "offered bread and wine," and then as acquiring a definite form with Aaron, the brother of Moses; but it all led to Jesus Christ, from whom, in turn, it led to the priesthood of the New Testament church and to the sacrifice of the Mass.<sup>17</sup>

Thus the entire history of Israel had reached its turning point in Jesus as prophet, as priest, and as king.<sup>18</sup> After the same manner, he was identified as the turning point in the entire history of all the nations of the world, as that history was encapsulated in the history of the "mistress of nations," the Roman empire. Although this was in fact a leitmotiv of the third, fourth, and fifth centuries, the most massive and most influential monument of that identification was what the author himself called in his preface his "great and arduous task," Augustine's *City of God*.<sup>19</sup> For this task of locating Jesus within world history, as indeed for the entire enterprise of interpreting the person and the message of Jesus to the Gentile world, the New Testament, as a book written chiefly by Jewish Christians, offered far less explicit guidance than it did for the specification of his locus within the history of Israel. But it did speak of his having come only in the fulness of time.<sup>20</sup>

Echoing this Pauline language, one early Christian writer, in an attempt to explain why God had waited so long, divided the history of the world into two "times" or "epochs," on the basis of the "pattern" that was both disclosed and established in Jesus.<sup>21</sup> Others, too, made an effort to establish some connection between the coming of Jesus and the history of Rome, beginning as early as the first chapters of the Gospel of Luke, with their language about "the decree [that] went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled" and about "the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar."<sup>22</sup> But the catalyst for a thoroughgoing examination of that connection was the accusation that the substitution of Christ for the gods of Rome

had brought their wrath and punishment down upon the city and had caused Rome to fall. For, Augustine contended, "not only before Christ had begun to teach, but even before he was born of the Virgin," the history of Rome was characterized by the "grievous evils of those former times," evils that had, moreover, become "intolerable and dreadful" not when Rome suffered military defeat but when it achieved military victory.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, "when Carthage was destroyed and the Roman republic was delivered from the great reason for its anxiety, then it was that a host of disastrous evils immediately resulted from the prosperous condition of things," above all the concentration of the "lust of rule" in the hands of the "more powerful few," while the "rest, worn and wearied" were subjected to its yoke.<sup>24</sup> It was not defeat and depression that Rome could not handle, but prosperity and victory. Therefore the expansion of the Roman empire, which accusers were blaming Christ for having reversed, was not automatically of any obvious benefit to the human race; for, in an oft-quoted maxim of Augustine, "If justice has been abolished, what is empire but a fancy name for larceny [*grande latrocinium*]?"<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, the many undoubtedly great achievements of Rome could be traced, according to Augustine, to what the Roman historian Sallust had identified as its ambition and its "desire for glory" and prestige, which functioned as a restraint on vice and immorality.<sup>26</sup> The God who had acted and become known in Christ made use also of these qualities in carrying out the purposes of history, which were the result not of luck or fortune or the power of the stars, but of an "order of things and times, which is hidden from us, but thoroughly known to [God, who] . . . rules as lord and appoints as governor."<sup>27</sup> This concept of an "order of things and times," what the Bible called a "series of generations," Augustine vigorously defended against the theory that history repeats itself, that "the same temporal event is reenacted by the same periodic revolutions" and cycles.<sup>28</sup> And the clinching argument against the theory of cycles in history was the life and person of Jesus Christ: Because "Christ died for our sins once and for all, and, rising from the dead, dies no more," it also had to be true that Plato had taught in the Academy at only one point in history, not over and over again "during the countless cycles that are yet to be."<sup>29</sup> It was the consideration of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, as an event that was single and unrepeatable and yet at the same time as a message and "mystery an-



nounced from the very beginning of the human race,"<sup>30</sup> that made it possible for Christopher Dawson to call Augustine, with only slight exaggeration, "not only the founder of the Christian philosophy of history," but "actually the first man in the world to discover the meaning of time."<sup>31</sup>

Time and history were, then, crucial for Augustine—crucial in the literal sense of *crucialis*, as pertaining to the *crux Christi*, the cross of Christ (a usage of the word *crucialis* for which there is not any classical or even patristic precedent, our English word being apparently a coinage of Sir Francis Bacon):<sup>32</sup> the history of the cross of Christ was both his work for redemption and his example for imitation.<sup>33</sup> But the events of the life of Jesus, seen as the turning point of history, did not affect merely the interpretation of that history; they were also responsible for a revitalized and transformed interest in the writing of history. Although Augustine not only composed many different kinds of literature but in his *Confessions* even created a literary genre for which there is no genuine precedent, classical or Christian, he himself never put his hand to narrative history, except perhaps for one or two of his works of controversy which did have marks of such history. But two Greek Christian authors from the century before Augustine, Eusebius of Caesarea and Athanasius of Alexandria, may serve as documentation for this new historiography, inspired by the person of Jesus Christ. That they happened to be on opposing sides of the great debate of the fourth century touching the relation of the person of Jesus Christ to the Godhead makes their common contribution to historiography all the more noteworthy.

Although Eusebius has sometimes been accused of excessive optimism and even of dishonesty,<sup>34</sup> his work as a historian of the first three centuries makes him indispensable to any understanding of the period: if one were to take any modern church history of that period and delete from it the data that come from Eusebius, only bits and pieces would be left. As the author of two books intended to be an apologia for the Christian message, *The Preparation of the Gospel* and *The Demonstration of the Gospel*, and as the principal historian of earlier apologias during those preceding centuries, Eusebius was critical of his predecessors for concentrating on "arguments" rather than on "events."<sup>35</sup> In his *Ecclesiastical History* he set out to rectify that imbalance, and to do so concretely in the way that he would write history in the light of the life of Jesus.

In the preface to the work he stated two objections made by pagan critics of Christ and Christianity: that Christ was "a recent arrival in human history," and that the nation of Christ was "hidden away in some corner of the world somewhere," in short, that Christ was both "novel and outlandish." His answer to these objections was, first and foremost, to describe the history of Jesus himself.<sup>36</sup> According to Eusebius, this history extended all the way to the beginnings of the human experience, for all those to whom God had appeared could be called Christians "in fact if not in name."<sup>37</sup> But the history also extended forward into the author's own time; for like the historians of classical antiquity, Eusebius concentrated on contemporary events. Yet there was this fundamental difference: according to Eusebius the decisive event in the history he was narrating had not been in his own lifetime, but had taken place in the life of Jesus Christ. As one scholar has put it, "his interest was directed toward grasping, on the basis of the plan of God for the world, the universal-historical implications of the entry of Jesus into the world."<sup>38</sup> To set forth these implications, he presented not arguments but events: he wrote a historical account whose turning point was the "principate of Augustus," when Jesus Christ was born.<sup>39</sup>

The contemporary and sometime adversary of Eusebius, Athanasius bishop of Alexandria, is remembered chiefly for his works of dogmatic and polemical theology. Yet in many ways the most influential book he ever wrote dealt with dogmatics and polemics only incidentally. It was *The Life of Antony*, a biography of the founder of Egyptian Christian monasticism, which even the harshest critics of Athanasius are compelled to admire.<sup>40</sup> Apparently the work was written at least partly for a Western readership and was translated during the author's own lifetime from Greek into Latin, in which form it seems to have played a part in Augustine's conversion.<sup>41</sup> For our present purposes *The Life of Antony* stands as a prime example of the new historiography and new biography inspired by the life of Jesus in the Gospels.

To be sure, there are many affinities between it and various pagan Greek biographies. The well-known *Parallel Lives* of Plutarch presents some similarities, although the differences are far more striking. One of the most meticulous studies of the literary form of the Greek *Lives of the Saints*, that of Karl Holl, has pointed especially to the biographies of Posidonius and of Apollonius of Tyana as models.<sup>42</sup> Although the

purpose of the book is to present Antony as the embodiment of an ideal, that does not prevent Athanasius from describing his life in concrete terms as an existential struggle, and a struggle that never ends until death. Throughout, it is an effort to describe Antony's life as "the work of the Savior in Antony."<sup>43</sup> It is clear that Antony chose the monastic life because here he was able to obey the teachings of Jesus the most effectively.<sup>44</sup> *The Life of Antony* is replete with miracle stories, as well as detailed in its recital of the sermons against heresy that Antony delivered. Johannes Quasten, our leading historian of early Christian literature, has accurately summarized the place of Athanasius's *Life of Antony* in the history of biography:

There cannot be any doubt that the ancient classical model of the hero's [Vita] as well as the newer type of the *Vita* of the sage served as inspiration for Athanasius. But it remains his great achievement that he recasted these inherited expressions of popular ideals in the Christian mold and disclosed the same heroism in the imitator of Christ aided by the power of grace. Thus he created a new type of biography that was to serve as a model for all subsequent Greek and Latin hagiography.<sup>45</sup>

Such a medieval biography as Bede's *Life of Cuthbert* is an outstanding example of the tradition established by *The Life of Antony*; as a recent study has observed, "It is commonplace to observe that a holy man like Cuthbert imitated the lives of Christ and the saints, but we tend to forget the reality and the implications of such imitation when we talk about biography."<sup>46</sup> The life of Jesus in the Gospels was a turning point both for the life of Cuthbert (the life that he lived) and for *The Life of Cuthbert* (the life that Bede wrote).

Eventually the very calendar of Europe, which then became the calendar for most of the modern world, evolved into a recognition of this view of the significance of the figure of Jesus as the turning point of history, the turning point both of history as process and of history as narrative. As we have noted, Christian historians from Luke to Eusebius and beyond retained the Roman system of dating events by the reigns of the emperors. The dates of the imperial reigns were in turn cited according to a chronology, computed from the legendary date of the founding of Rome by Romulus and Remus, as A.U.C., *Ab Urbe Condita* (the actual title of the work of Livy which we now call *The History of Rome*). The persecutions of the church under the emperor Diocletian, who ruled from 284 to 305, led some Christian groups to date their calendars from the so-called Age of the Martyrs. For

example, the fourth-century *Index to the Festal Letters of Athanasius* is arranged according to the Egyptian calendar of months and days within each year, but it identifies the year of the first *Festal Letter* as "the forty-fourth year of the Diocletian Era," that is, A.D. 327.<sup>47</sup> This is a calendrical system still retained by the Christian Copts of Athanasius's Egypt and by the Christians of Ethiopia.

But in the sixth century a Scythian monk living in Rome, Dionysius Exiguus ("Little Denis"), proposed a new system of reckoning. It was to be named not for the pagan myth of the founding of Rome by Romulus and Remus, nor for the persecutor Diocletian, but for the incarnation of Jesus Christ, specifically for the day of the annunciation of his birth to the Virgin Mary by the angel Gabriel, 25 March, in the year 753 A.U.C. For reasons that seem still to be somewhat obscure, Dionysius Exiguus miscalculated by four to seven years, producing the anomaly by which it is sometimes said that Jesus was born in 4 B.C. Such trifles aside, however, Dionysius's identification of "the Christian era" gradually established itself, even though the process of establishing it required many centuries, and is now universal.<sup>48</sup> Henceforth the dates of history and biography are marked as A.D. and B.C., according to "the years of Our Lord." Even the life of an Antichrist is dated by the dates of Christ; biographies of his enemies have to be written this way, so that we speak of Nero as having died in A.D. 68 and of Stalin as having died in A.D. 1953. In this sense at any rate, and not only in this sense, everyone is compelled to acknowledge that because of Jesus of Nazareth history will never be the same.