

I

Beginnings

AD 1–325

Summary

Christianity rapidly spread beyond its original geographical region of Roman-occupied Palestine into the entire Mediterranean area. Something of this process of expansion is described in the Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament. It is clear that a Christian presence was already established in Rome itself within fifteen years of the resurrection of Christ. The imperial trade routes made possible the rapid traffic of ideas, as much as merchandise.

Three centres of the Christian church rapidly emerged in the eastern Mediterranean region. The church became a significant presence in its own original heartlands, with Jerusalem emerging as a leading centre of thought and activity. Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) was already an important area of Christian expansion, as can be seen from the destinations of some of the apostle Paul's letters, and the references to the 'seven churches of Asia' in the book of Revelation. The process of expansion in this region continued, with the great imperial city of Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul) becoming a particularly influential centre of mission and political consolidation.

Yet further growth took place to the south, with the important Egyptian city of Alexandria emerging as a stronghold of Christian faith. With this expansion, new debates opened up. While the New Testament deals with the issue of the relationship of Christianity and Judaism, the expansion of Christianity into Greek-speaking regions led to the exploration of the way in which Christianity related to Greek philosophy. Many Christian writers sought to demonstrate, for example, that Christianity brought to fulfilment the great themes of the philosophy of Plato.

Yet this early Christian expansion was far from unproblematic. The 'imperial cult', which regarded worship of the Roman emperor as a test of loyalty to the empire, was prominent in the eastern Mediterranean region. Many Christians found themselves penalized as a result of their insistence on worshipping only Christ. The expansion of Christianity regularly triggered persecutions. These were often local – for example, the Decian persecution of 249–51, which was particularly vicious in North Africa.

CHAPTER I

JESUS

His life, ministry, death, and its consequences

‘Christianity’ without ‘Christ’ is a meaningless word; and without Jesus Christ, there would be no Christianity about which we could write a history. ‘Christ’ is a Greek word, translating the Hebrew participle, ‘Messiah’, both of which simply mean ‘someone who has been anointed’. The very first Christians applied this title to Jesus of Nazareth so quickly that, by the time of the letters of the apostle Paul a generation later, it functioned almost like a surname, Jesus Christ; thus it is hardly surprising that the early disciples were soon given the nickname, ‘Christians’, for those who belong to Christ (see Acts II:27). It is a curious quirk of history that, while Jesus himself seems never to have had a proper education, was not formally trained or ordained, never held any rank or high office or earned much money, probably never walked further than a hundred miles from his home, during a brief period of wandering and preaching, and finally suffered a humiliating execution at a relatively young age, yet arguably his brief life, ministry, death, and its consequences have had a greater effect on human history than anyone else.

DID JESUS OF NAZARETH EXIST?

No serious historian really doubts that Jesus actually lived and died in the first-century Roman Empire, as evidenced by the major ancient historians. Tacitus (Annals I5.44.3) tells us that the early Christians, who were wrongly blamed by Nero for the fire in Rome in AD 64, took their name from Christ who was executed under Pontius Pilate in Judaea, while Suetonius says that debates about Christ led to such unrest that the Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome in AD 49 (Claudius, 25.4). Pliny writes to



THE THOUGHT-WORLD OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY

Twenty-first century students are familiar with terms such as cultural diversity and globalization. Christianity was born in a cultural setting that experienced its own forms of intellectual and religious diversity, brought into conversation with each other thanks to the global expansion of the Roman Empire. The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles display the three distinctive threads in this tapestry: Jewish, Greek, and Roman. Jesus was born into a world of pious Jews, devoted to their traditions and to the Jerusalem Temple. At the same time, many first-century Jews imagined a day when God would raise up a new anointed one (messiah) to right the wrongs of injustice and liberate Israel from foreign rule. They found the religious vocabulary for these hopes in passages from the Hebrew prophets, especially Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. So Luke's Gospel has the adult Jesus begin his public career by announcing that God's Spirit now rests on him. The time of fulfilment is at hand (Luke 4:14–21).

Though Jesus, himself, would have known those scriptures in Hebrew, and their translations into the Aramaic spoken in Palestine, Luke and the other New Testament authors employ the Greek translations used by diaspora Jews since the third century BC. Called 'the Septuagint' (LXX), these Greek versions sometimes create new meanings for Greek words to translate Hebrew concepts, or substitute a familiar Greek concept for the Hebrew. For example, the Greek word *diathēkē* ordinarily means a will or testament, but in the LXX it translates the Hebrew *berîth*, 'covenant'. Alexander the Great's Eastern conquests in the fourth century BC had spread Greek language, civic organization, and culture throughout the region. Attempts by his successors to create a thoroughly 'Greek city-state' and religious culture in Jerusalem resulted in persecution and rebellion in the mid-first century BC (1 Maccabees 1:1–15).

Important religious concepts emerge among Jews opposed to the world being created by Alexander's successors, illustrated in Daniel 7–12. The

present world belongs to a predestined series of 'evil empires', hostile to God's righteous ones. A series of symbolic visions reveals the truth about history to the seer, including its eventual termination (7:15–18). Instead of the human series of flawed or pious leaders, cosmic powers, demonic or angelic, determine the apocalyptic story of empires, each more evil than its predecessor. God's righteous people felt themselves to be living in the last days, (Daniel 10:18–11:45). Finally, the angelic powers, represented by Michael, will end the situation. Divine judgment will be enacted punishing the wicked and rewarding the faithful (Daniel 12:1–12). The Lord's prayer asks God to protect believers from the



The limestone cliffs, above the Qumran archaeological site, in which many of the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered. Around three-quarters of the scrolls from the immediate area were found in 1952 in Cave 40, in the middle of the photograph.

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perils of living in the evil days at the end of the world: 'do not lead us into [the time of] testing, and deliver us from the evil one' (Matthew 6:13).

EVIDENCE FROM THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS

Evidence for the importance of this apocalyptic view of the world was provided by discovery of a major collection of biblical manuscripts, liturgical books, community rule books, and other writings belonging to a sect of Jews claiming to be the righteous remnant, a community of the new covenant (Dead Sea Scrolls). A sharp dualism divided its members, 'children of light', from other Jews, 'sons of darkness'. The former were sustained in their strict adherence to the Mosaic Torah as interpreted by the sect by a Spirit of Holiness, or angel of light. The rest of humanity was deceived by the Prince of Darkness. As Christians would do later (Luke 24:25–27), the 'new covenanters' (Essenes) discovered predictions of their founder, the 'Teacher of Righteousness', of his opponent, the 'Wicked Priest', and of the eventual coming of priestly and royal messiah figures in words of the Hebrew prophets. These messianic agents are frequently depicted as heavenly figures. For example, a priestly figure claims, 'who shall be like (me) in my judgment [...] for my position is with the gods' (4Q491) and an exalted royal figure 'will be called son of God, and they will call him son of the Most High' (4Q246).

With the advent of Roman power in the region, the final evil empire shifts from Alexander's successors, as in Daniel, to Rome. A work from the first century BC, the 'War Scroll,' provides elaborate descriptions of the final battles between the Sons of Light and the forces of evil, the 'Kittim', whose tactics reflect Roman military practice. The earthly struggle which engulfs the nations of the world mirrors a heavenly conflict that ends with the defeat of Evil. The New Testament

concludes with a comparable apocalyptic overthrow of Rome, the nations under her sway, and the Satanic forces, but leaves 'the saints' out of the battle. It calls upon the righteous to endure suffering and reject any collusion or cultural accommodation with 'the beast' (Revelation 13:5–9).

PAX ROMANA

As Rome emerged from the civil wars that marked the end of the Republic into its own position as a global power, its divine right to rule nations was embodied in mythic tales and monuments. Virgil's *Aeneid* transformed the minor character who survived the Greek destruction of Troy into 'pious Aeneas', semi-divine founder of the Julio-Claudian line and of Roman military glory. Roman conquests made her the heir of Alexander's empire. Roman authors make extensive use of legends about Alexander, the Great. He can illustrate the moralist's cautionary tale against abandoning the simplicity of traditional Roman values for corruption by the wealth and luxury of the east. Or he can celebrate the overthrow of capricious, tyrannical regimes by a ruler who establishes a new order of peace based on justice.

Monuments such as temples, statues, and altars, represented imperial power as the source of justice and world peace. For example, Augustus' temple to *Mars Ultor* (the Avenger), meeting place for the senate when considering military affairs, included a monumental statue of the divinized Julius Caesar, as well as panels by Alexander the Great's court painter. Claudius even had his Alexander repainted as Augustus. An inscription from Ephesus (c. 49 BC) acclaims the living Julius Caesar, 'the god who has appeared visibly and universal saviour of human life'. Acclaiming Roman emperors as though their benefits to humanity entitled them to divine honours could spark conflict between Jews and Romans, as it did when Caligula

in their deeds and words, culminating in their death. It is important to recognize that even ancient history writing is not like what we call history today, and nor are the Gospels like video-diaries, simply recording what was done or said. Like other ancient 'lives', they seek to interpret eyewitness and other material to explain the importance of their subject –

ordered a monumental statue of himself erected in the Jerusalem temple (Philo, Leg. 203). Though Luke–Acts depicts Roman governors as more just than enraged local authorities who drag Christians before them, Luke cannot accept Augustus as the ‘saviour’ who brought peace to the world (Luke 2:1–14).

Alexander’s conquests established Greek as the *lingua franca* of the region and the Greek style city-state as the dominant political organization. Alexandria in Egypt, with its great library, emerged as the centre of textual, literary, and scientific learning. Greek medicine, rhetoric, and philosophy also spread throughout the region providing a common cultural language for the educated elite. Even the isolationist ‘new covenanters’ employed common patterns of civic associations in their community rules and of Greco-Roman military manuals in the War Scroll.

GREEK PHILOSOPHY

Religious activities might assure the safety of one’s household, the prosperity of a local community, or the continued peace of the empire, but it was philosophy which taught individuals to take rational control of their lives. Schools founded in fourth century BC Athens by Plato, Aristotle, Zeno (Stoics), and Epicurus pursued technical debates and developed further teaching. For larger audiences, the interest of the Greek philosophical schools lay in their therapies for disordered souls. What is the best way for human beings to attain happiness? How can passions such as anger, greed, and self-centredness be checked or overcome? What responsibilities do human beings have to the larger community?

Stoics understood human reason as part of a rational spirit which pervaded the entire universe and was responsible for its complex order. At the end of each cosmological cycle everything collapsed into the primordial fire from which it had devolved. Therefore

bringing one’s passions under control by self-control and self-examination could be described as living according to nature’s law. Much unhappiness, the Stoic argued, flows from attachments to things not under our control. Hence Stoics were celebrated for a calculated indifference, and willingness to commit suicide, rather than suffer dishonour or public torture.

Epicureans countered that everything has emerged from the interactions of various types of atoms in an infinite universe. Death is nothing more than the atoms untangling. Gods have no interest in human affairs. They agree that many human passions are irrational sources of misery. But the solution is to live life as pleasantly as possible, without fear among like-minded friends. Unlike the Stoics, Epicureans advocated withdrawal from public affairs. Hence opponents accused Epicureans with atheism and hatred of humanity. The ‘wicked’ who think there is no afterlife in Wisdom 2:1–11 seem to be Epicureans. God’s wisdom is vindicated when they are shown the immortal happiness of the righteous (*Wisdom* 3:1–4; 5:1–8).

Itinerant Christian missionaries might be confused with another philosophical type, the Cynic with rough cloak, leather bag, and staff. Cynics appealed to the figure of Socrates. They eschewed all social conventions, castigating audiences for their preoccupations with family, property, honour, and other things unnecessary to sustain life. Cynics also mocked other philosophers, who depended upon wealthy patrons for support. Paul’s insistence on his own independence of external support would have sounded comparable (1 Corinthians 9:1–18). But as Paul insists, the Christian gospel of salvation through faith in a crucified messiah shatters the conceptual world of both Jew and Greek (1 Corinthians 1:18–25).

PHEME PERKINS

Jesus – after years of prayer and meditation through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit – to bring out the truth about Jesus’ deeds and words, life and ministry, death, and resurrection. Most New Testament scholars think that Mark was written first, and his account is followed by Matthew and Luke, who also have access to collections of Jesus’ teachings;

these three Gospels are often called the ‘Synoptics’, because they can be ‘looked at’ together, while John is probably composed independently of them, although he too includes some very early traditions.

WHERE DID JESUS COME FROM?

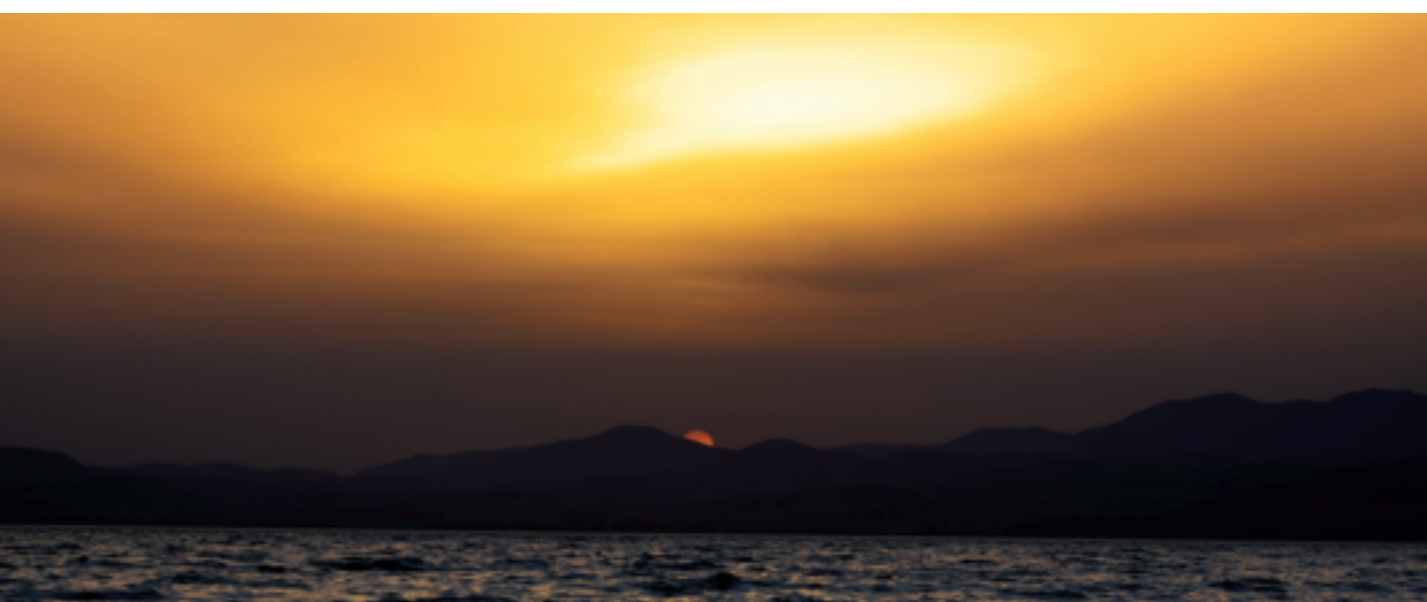
Ancient biographies usually begin with the person’s public debut, with perhaps a brief story about their birth or childhood, and sometimes a note about the family history, genealogy, or ancestral city. Mark begins with the adult Jesus arriving to be baptized by John (Mark I:2–11). Matthew takes it back to the story of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, told from Joseph’s viewpoint, with wise men coming to pay homage, and a genealogy that goes back to David and Abraham (Matthew I–2). Luke begins with the birth of the fore-runner, John the Baptist, the journey of Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and Jesus’ birth in an inn, narrated from perspective of Mary and the women, with humble poor shepherds coming to the manger; there is a brief story of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple, and his baptism concludes with a more universal genealogy going right back to Adam (Luke I–3). On the other hand, rather than human stories, John is clear that Jesus’ origin is truly cosmic: ‘in the beginning was the Word’, who not only was ‘with God’, but who is also God, yet who took on human flesh and dwelt among us to reveal what God is like (John I:I–18).

Sunset view across the Sea of Galilee – also known as Lake Tiberias, Gennesaret, and Kinneret – the setting of much of Jesus’ ministry: see, for example, Matthew 4:18–22, 15:29; Mark 1:14–20, 7:31; Luke 5:1–11; John 6:1.

DREAMSTIME

WHERE DID IT ALL TAKE PLACE?

Like other ancient biographies, all four Gospels begin their main narrative with the subject’s public debut, as Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist; he then undertakes an itinerant ministry of teaching, preaching, and healing. This was not at all uncommon in first-century Israel-Palestine, where such wandering prophets would gather groups of followers. So Jesus calls his first disciples, who were fishermen and workers in Galilee. Most of his ministry takes place in the towns and ports around this large inland lake. Mark devotes the first half of his Gospel to this period, which could all happen in the space of only a few months; after discussing his identity with his disciples, Jesus decides to go down to Jerusalem (Mark 8.27–38), where he is then arrested and dies. Following Mark, Matthew organizes his Gospel similarly, although he structures it around five



major discourses of Jesus' sayings and teachings. Luke prefers to arrange it geographically, as the Galilean ministry leads into a long journey section from Galilee to Jerusalem (9:51–19:26), before Jesus' final week and Passion. Once again, John is different, as he describes various visits of Jesus up and down to Jerusalem over two to three years before his final Passover there. Again, like ancient lives, the bulk of the Gospels' narrative is taken up with their accounts of the subject's deeds and words, his teaching and his mighty acts, culminating in his final days and death.

WHAT DID JESUS DO?

Jesus' primary activity was to proclaim the 'kingdom of God' breaking into our world, which was accompanied by various healings and miracles. Once again, such preaching would be expected of such wandering prophet teachers and healers. Most of Jesus' miracles are healings, performed to help those crippled by sickness or disease, at their own request or that of their loved ones (for example, Jairus' daughter and the woman with the flow of blood, Mark 5:21–43); like some Old Testament prophets, Jesus sometimes even raised people from the dead (see for example Luke 7:11–17; John 11:1–44). Jesus' other miracles demonstrated his control over nature, such as the feeding of the 5,000 or the storm on the lake (Mark 6:30–52). Some people say we cannot be expected to believe this in our rational world; actually, such stories are very common in all forms of ancient literature, including their history books, as well as in other cultures. It really depends on our prior assumptions: if we rule such things out as impossible in advance, then they have no place in an historical account today. On the other hand, if we accept and believe in Jesus as the Son of God who was raised from the dead, then it should not be surprising that he could do extraordinary things. For the evangelists, the much more important question is what the purpose of these miracles was: often they remind us of, or even fulfil, Old Testament stories, and they point to who Jesus is, and what he is doing. Thus John calls miracles 'signs', as he links them to discourses and teachings which explain the significance of Jesus; see, for example, how his account of the feeding of the 5,000 leads into the debate about Jesus as the 'bread of life' (John 6:1–59).

WHAT DID JESUS SAY?

After his baptism and temptation in the wilderness, Jesus comes back into Galilee preaching that 'the kingdom of God is at hand' (Mark 1:15). The English word 'kingdom' sounds very masculine, concrete, and powerful, while both the Hebrew, *malkuth*, and Greek, *basileia*, are feminine abstract nouns, meaning 'rule' or 'sovereignty'. Jesus never defines the 'kingdom', preferring to tell short stories, or parables, about what it is 'like' – and they are very strange, full of seeds growing secretly, good and bad fish caught in the same net, wheat and weeds growing together until the harvest, managers rendering accounts to their superiors, lost coins, lost sheep, and lost children (see the collections of parables in Mark 4, Matthew 13, and Luke 15). It is all about what happens in the topsy-turvy world when we let God actually be God, rather than doing it our way. Interestingly, although Mark regularly calls Jesus 'rabbi', or describes him teaching (see Mark 1:21–22; 4:1–2; 4:38; 5:35, etc.), he records surprisingly little actual teaching. On the other hand, both Matthew and Luke include a lot of Jesus' teaching, which they probably derive from a shared source

of his sayings, though scholars are divided about whether it was oral or written down. Matthew collects this teaching material together into five great sermons or ‘discourses’ (chapters 7–9, 10, 13, 18, 22–23), while Luke prefers to give it a narrative setting, often on the journey from Galilee to Jerusalem (9:51–19:26).

Jesus is regularly described, especially by those who do not consider themselves to be Christians, as one of the great moral teachers of the human race. However, his direct ethical teaching, often in pithy phrases with teasing word-play, is extraordinarily demanding, while appearing to be impractical or impossible to put into practice in the ‘real world’. Money and possessions are to be given away (Mark 10:23–27; Matthew 6:19–33; Luke 12:22–34); marriage is enhanced, with no divorce permitted and celibacy commended (Mark 10:2–12; Matthew 19:12); non-violence is advocated to the point of ‘turning the other cheek’, praying for enemies, and putting away the sword (Matthew 5:38–44; 26:52; Luke 6:27–30). The Christian church has struggled to follow or obey this teaching in both personal and public affairs over two thousand years; not everyone can become a monk or nun with their vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience!

HOW DID HE DIE?

Like other ancient biographies, all four Gospels devote the largest amount of space – about a quarter to a third of their narrative – to the events of Jesus’ final week in Jerusalem, leading to his death. The three Synoptic Gospels begin their accounts with Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem and his protest about the commercialization in the Temple (although John places this at the very start of his ministry, John 2:13–22). Over the next few days, Jesus continues his ministry as a teacher and healer in and around the Temple courts, which produces challenges to the religious authorities, who respond in turn and question Jesus about his authority (Mark 11:27–33). On the Thursday evening, he gathers his disciples together for a ‘last supper’, in what seems to be a Passover meal in the Synoptics, in which he institutes the holy communion for his followers, although John describes Jesus washing the disciples’ feet, rather than the eucharist (John 13:1–11). After this meal, he goes to a garden, called Gethsemane by Mark and Matthew, to pray; although it is on the way back to safety in Bethany, the delay to struggle in prayer to accept the will of God means he is still there when Judas arrives with soldiers to arrest him. Jesus is then subjected to hearings before the Sanhedrin, the assembly of the Jewish religious leaders, and before Pilate as the Roman authority. After being flogged, he is crucified: the most humiliating and painful execution in the ancient world.

Yet, the extraordinary thing is how each Gospel depicts the crucifixion as the climax of its story: Mark has shown how Jesus was misunderstood throughout his ministry, so now he feels abandoned even by God, while Matthew describes God’s answer in the earthquake which ensues (Mark 15:34–39; Matthew 27:46–54). In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus has been particularly concerned for women, and for bringing ordinary people into the kingdom in prayerful trust in his father, and now he dies as he lived, caring for women, his executioners, and the penitent thief (Luke 23:27–30, 34, 39–43, 46). Meanwhile, John brings to a climax his account of Jesus being divinely in control since ‘in the beginning’, showing how he is concerned for his mother even on the cross, where he fulfils scripture and finally accomplishes everything (John 19:25–26, 28, 30).

ISRAEL/PALESTINE IN THE TIME OF JESUS



Beside the family tomb of Herod the Great, Jerusalem, is a huge disc-like stone that would have sealed the entrance. The tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, in which Jesus was buried, had a similar stone blocking entry; see Matthew 28:57–60.

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WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?

The Romans had long discovered that executing the ringleader was usually the best way to stop such enthusiastic religious renewal movements, and there are plenty of examples of their use of this tactic around the first century. The Christian movement is the only one which is different – in that the leader’s humiliating death on a cross was not the end – and this demands an historical explanation. According to Luke’s second volume, the book of Acts, the same disciples who betrayed and denied Jesus at his arrest and simply fled away, started to turn Jerusalem upside down a couple of days later with the extraordinary claim that God had raised him from the dead. The earliest witness is Paul’s account of Jesus’ appearances, which he had ‘handed on’ to the Corinthians in the early days; the list in I Corinthians 15 reads like a very early tradition that goes back before Paul himself to shortly after Jesus’ death. The Gospels, which were written down some years after Paul, all contain descriptions of the empty tomb, with some accounts of Jesus’ appearances to Mary, Peter, and others.

Modern historical enquiry can be uncomfortable about claims of people rising from the dead, and yet history has to provide some explanation of the change in the disciples, and why the Jesus movement did not die out like the others. If the authorities had the body of Jesus in safekeeping, it would have been easy to produce it to stop the early church in its tracks. However one assesses the historical arguments for the resurrection of Jesus Christ, it remains a fact that this is the constant thread throughout the rest of the New Testament, and in the experience of Christians for the next two thousand years, without which there would be no history of Christianity – and no need for this book!

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