: enjoyed *Christianity: The Biography* enormously! What an original idea. It presents current scholarship in church history in a very engaging way. I hope this book is lely read . . . An absolutely outstanding volume!
Randall, Senior Research Fellow, Spurgeon's College

ristians today have largely lost their historical memory, and it is no surprise that a result many are struggling to agree on the right way ahead for the church. Ian aw's remarkable book, encompassing in one volume the entire chronological and ographical range of Christian history, will prove invaluable in helping Christians recover their historical memory and hence to find wisdom for the future.
ian Stanley, Professor of World Christianity, University of Edinburgh

lievers need to know the story of their own faith, and *Christianity: The Biography* a great place to start. It covers fascinating figures, movements and trends across o millennia without ever getting bogged down or side-tracked. It is not only clear d accessible, but also inspiring and wise.
nothy Larsen, McManis Professor of Christian Thought, Wheaton College

ıe more we learn about Christianity's global reach, the more urgent is the need re-frame how we understand Christian history. This book gets it right. It offers scinating accounts of Christianity entering the ancient civilizations of Persia, India d China and its transformation of Ethiopia, Egypt and the Sudan – even while it ıs reaching the wild tribes of the remote British Isles. We learn too about the rise Islam, the modern missions movement and the rapid worldwide spread of ntecostalism. In sum, this text is a lively treatment of a truly global faith.
ofessor Joel Carpenter, Nagel Institute for the Study of World Christianity, Calvin College, rand Rapids

)-called 'histories of the church' are often essentially histories only of the church the West. It is a joy to meet one that recognizes that 'world Christianity' began in e early centuries, and that the story of the Christian faith is a six-continent one. is a joy also to find it so helpful and well written.
ofessor Andrew F. Walls, University of Edinburgh, Liverpool Hope University and krofi-Christaller Institute, Ghana

CHRISTIANITY
THE BIOGRAPHY

TWO THOUSAND YEARS OF THE GLOBAL CHURCH

IAN J. SHAW

ZONDERVAN®

vas about to graduate, he sat in the same chair and said church history had been iis most enjoyable subject.

To many, history is just events. 'Stuff happens, period.' Attempts to construct . coherent narrative or discern meaning in those events have been considered .s fruitless as trying to make sense of the tracks made by a drunken fly, its feet vet with ink, staggering across a piece of white paper. The theologian Rudolph 3ultmann commented, 'The question of meaning in history has become mean-ngless.' Postmodern thinkers like the French philosopher Michel Foucault .rgued that history was capable only of brilliant redescriptions of the past, while varning against looking for any sense of development across the unfolding :enturies or extrapolating any meaningful conclusions. Foucault emphasized he distance between the past and the present, asserting that statements can)nly be truly understood in the historical context in which they were written. -lis cautions have some value, but the danger is that history is left frozen in ime with little connectedness to today.

That approach is also a very Western reading of history, which has become ntolerant and suspicious of the old. Technology becomes outmoded within nonths. Supreme confidence is placed only in the new, which by definition has o be better. Rolling news channels beam 'current affairs' across the world without iistorical perspective or analysis; immediacy is what has impact. Tradition is leemed institutionalism and resistance to inevitable progress. However, in many ion-Western cultures the division between the past and present, the living and he dead, is much less sharply demarcated. There is deep respect for the wisdom)f old people and their traditions and forebears; these exist in close continuity vith the present. Immediacy breeds myopic vision. When Lot and Abram :eparated in Genesis 13, Lot looked down and chose life with a limited horizon n the plain of the Jordan. The Lord instead told Abram, 'Lift up your eyes from vhere you are and look north and south, east and west.' *Christianity: The Biography* nvites the reader to look up and take a bigger perspective.

The Roman writer Cicero argued that the person without any knowledge of :vents from before he or she was born would forever remain an infant. The oss of community memory in some parts of the Christian world is deeply :oncerning. Those who have cared for a loved one suffering from Alzheimer's lisease will know how debilitating the loss of memory is. Alzheimer's sufferers)ften cannot remember where they are, where they have come from or even vho they are. Their sense of 'lost-ness' is frightening. It is very important that Christians do not lose the faculty of memory but understand the story of which hey are a part, the historical journey in which they participate. For Christians he biography of Christianity is the history of their family and an exploration)f their heritage. It should be an exciting adventure of self-discovery.

The present and future of the church is closely connected to its past. Just before his execution in 1896 José Rizal, the leader of the independence movement in the Philippines, said, 'To foretell the destiny of a nation it is necessary to open the book that tells of her past.' Understanding and preparing for the future of the church requires opening the book of its past. The biography of Christianity has not been one of constant advance and progress. In times of growth Christians should not exult overmuch; in times of decline they should not despair.

Christians today should realize that they too are making history. The individual life of faith, the endeavours of their churches, the decisions of Christian leaders, denominations and organizations – all leave footprints on the sands of time. The task of the historian is to trace those out. As with any faithful biographer the problematic and less savoury parts of a life story should be included alongside those that encourage and excite. Some have cynically used the name of God for their own personal and political ends; others have stumbled into difficulties despite their best efforts. To look at such failures should not just provoke lament but also prompt the question 'How can Christians today avoid making such a mess of things again?' This book affirms the value of the all-too-easily rejected axiom that 'those who do not learn from the mistakes of the past are destined to repeat them'.

The command to remember is strong throughout Scripture. In Joshua 4 the Israelites were told to build a monument from stones that had been in the middle of the River Jordan to provoke the question from passers-by, 'What do these stones mean?' Then the history of the miraculous crossing of the Jordan would be retold. The words 'Do this in remembrance of me' are spoken every time Christians partake of the Lord's Supper together. Remembrance is designed to feed faith: 'We have heard with our ears, O God; our fathers have told us what you did in their days, in days long ago' (Ps. 44:1).

Yet time, and therefore history, is not static. It involves change, and Christians must keep up with it: Christians should not live in the past. Jesus taught that looking back once the hand has been put to the plough can make a person unfit for the kingdom of God. Resisting change and development, and clinging tenaciously to how things used to be, or how people think they used to be, is problematic. Biography implies growth, movement and development. Far from letting the past impede progress, Christians should humbly respect and build on its positive achievements and critically discern the not so good. Recalling the past should build capacity to live faithfully in the present and to be prepared for the future.

The study of the history of Christianity brings maturity by rooting understanding in the reality of what actually happened, as opposed to misconceptions

what might have happened or what people wish had happened. The Israelites pleased God when they looked back to the fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, ions and garlic they had eaten in Egypt, forgetting the fact that they had also en enslaved (Num. 11:4–11). Authoritarian regimes have learned that those 10 control the past control the present and therefore they carefully oversee e writing and study of history. The Nazis of Hitler's Germany built their eology on falsehoods about the past. The leaders of some new religious ovements deny their adherents access to the movement's history, fearing it ll provoke unwanted questioning and undermine confidence in its authority d teaching. The Christian historian should not fall into the trap of airbrushing ay mistakes and ugly episodes. Biblical history refuses to do this. The errors d misdeeds of Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, and the apostles in the ew Testament, are all depicted in technicolour detail. As one nineteenth-ntury scholar wrote, 'It does not answer to call whitey-brown white.' The hristian church has often failed to live up to its calling, and many of the 'greats' the past had significant flaws. Hagiography is historically dishonest. It also ndermines the confidence of Christian believers. Instead they need to know at God can use ordinary people in extraordinary ways.

Christian believers who make Scripture the authoritative basis for belief and ractice need to develop a biblically informed Christian philosophy of history. he Bible offers a rich pattern in Old and New Testaments, freely making use f historical narrative and biography. Christians believe that the God of the ible is the God of history. He uses historical reference in describing him-lf as 'the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob'. The birth of the founder of hristianity is given a specific historical locus – when Augustus was emperor f Rome and Quirinius was governor of Syria (Luke 2:1–12). So too his death 'he suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried'. The ible presents 'salvation history' – salvation being accomplished through istorical events.

In Christian thinking, history has two perspectives: a divine and a human. he human side is extremely complex and confused, filled with problems and rievous errors, as well as examples of faithfulness, courage, heroism, wisdom nd loving commitment. The church has often taken two steps back for every ne forward. In the detailed morass of events it can be difficult to discern exactly vhat is going on. The other side of history is the unfolding plan of God 'who vorks out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will' (Eph. 1:11). Because of this Christians believe history has a purpose and meaning, and it is going somewhere. God's work in and through history did not end with Acts 28: he Bible gives an outline template for events thereafter. The kingdom of God will spread: Jesus said, 'I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not

overcome it' (Matt. 16:18). The gospel will be 'preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations' (Matt. 24:14). The Bible depicts the biography of Christianity ending on a day, known only to God, when 'a great multitude that no-one [can] count, from every nation, tribe, people and language' will stand before God (Rev. 7:9). Then, as Jesus Christ returns in glory, history as we know it will end and he will begin his eternal reign.

This book accepts the premise of Edward Plumptre's hymn 'Thy hand, O God, has guided thy flock from age to age'. As Christian believers have read, preached and interpreted the Bible, and sought to live out their faith, God has been at work in what has been called the longest ever lesson in practical theology. Yet, between the two great events of the ascension and the return of Christ, understanding from the human side the exact meaning and place of each event within the divine plan is difficult. As the psalmist put it, 'Your path led through the sea, your way through the mighty waters, though your footprints were not seen' (Ps. 77:19). The challenge for Christian historians is to faithfully read, understand and interpret events within the biography of Christianity with the evidence and tools at their disposal. This interpretative task is done through 'a glass darkly', and any interpretation of a specific historical event can never be final or infallible. Yet this process of discerning is part of Christian maturing, fully deploying the skills of critical reflection. It poses the ever deeper question of 'Why?', which opens up issues of causation and consequence. It is hoped that with the long perspective of time, and accumulated wisdom, further clarity and understanding can be gained.

From the earliest years Christians have sought to create historical records of events and offer interpretations of them. The book of Acts is presented in terms of an historical account of early Christianity. Numerous writers from Eusebius, to Bede, John Foxe, Philip Schaff and A. M. Renwick in his *Story of the Church* have sought to continue the story. Yet Justo González claimed that the person who attempts to tell the whole history of the church 'must either be ambitious to the point of hubris or naïve to the point of folly'. That the author of this book is guilty of either fault is simply because he was asked by IVP to make the attempt – probably no-one else was willing to attempt such a huge enterprise and cover 2,000 years of momentous events in so few words!

Rather than presenting a recitation of dates, names and key events, some loose structure has been given to the story of Christianity by using the biographical format, while recognizing it is a far from adequate tool. Christianity's infancy and early years were a time of significant growth, despite opposition, and proved highly formative in the development of ideas and patterns of behaviour. If the medieval period (c. 600–1500) is judged as a time of youth, it was one of promise but also uncertainty and conflict. Early adulthood

sees patterns and identities firmly established or questioned, and the 'early modern' era (1500–1650) was dominated by the profound social, political and theological change of the Reformation. Full adulthood can be marked by consolidation but also by crisis and change, and the period from around 1650 to the twentieth century, usually referred to as the 'modern' period, saw all these characteristics. After mature adulthood comes old age and decline but also the vigorous growth of children and grandchildren. So, while the postmodern era has increasingly looked like a post-Christian era in the West, such decline has happened surrounded by rapidly growing non-Western churches, just as parents age surrounded by children or grandchildren.

Christianity: The Biography seeks to avoid the tendency to draw a distinction between matters of faith or theology, and history. Indeed, J. I. Packer called church history the glue that binds Christian theology together. Opening up Christianity's biography should deepen theological understanding and build faith, and inspire a longing to meet the One behind the story.

1. THE CRADLE

Lifeline

753 BC – traditional date for the foundation of Rome
587 BC – Jerusalem captured by Babylonians, start of exile
364 BC – Aristotle begins studies with Plato
323 BC – death of Alexander the Great
192–188 BC – war between Roman and Greek armies
44 BC – assassination of Julius Caesar
c. 6–4 BC – birth of Jesus Christ
AD 14 – death of Caesar Augustus

Every biography begins with a birth, but the exact date when Christianity was 'born' is open to debate. Does Christianity begin with the birth of its founder, Jesus Christ, in squalid and obscure surroundings in Bethlehem? Or was it when the first disciples were called and became followers of Jesus Christ? A case could be made for Pentecost, when the book of Acts records that the Holy Spirit came upon those present, transforming the disciples of Jesus from a fearful, uncertain group into an empowered body of messengers witnessing to the good news of Jesus Christ. Some have stressed the importance of seeing Christianity as a movement, seeing its beginning as the time when the followers of Jesus were first referred to as 'Christians' in Acts 11:26. Most historians of Christianity consider the end of the Jewish–Roman War in Palestine in AD 70, towards the

close of the lives of most of the apostles, as a vital moment. This roughly marks the transition from the era of the apostles, which is towards the end of the New Testament period, and certainly represents a new phase in the development of Christianity.

All this illustrates the challenge of pinpointing the 'birth' or 'foundation' of Christianity to a specific moment. Jesus did not call his followers Christians and he did not start individual churches. Founded on a commitment by individuals to the person and teachings of Jesus Christ, what became known as Christianity emerged over a period. It was a movement of those who found salvation through faith in him and sought to follow his example and teachings.

Every birth takes place in a geographical, historical and social context which has a role in shaping subsequent development. The cradle of Christianity was the intersection of differing worlds, both geographically and culturally. The Roman province of Palestine, historically the land of Israel, where this birth took place, lies at the junction of three continents, Africa, Asia and Europe, and if anything pointed to Christianity becoming a global religion this did. In its early years Christianity belonged more to the Middle East, Africa and the Orient than the West. It was originated at the crossroads of a series of major trade routes along which flowed the materials by which cultures are forged and changed – people, goods and ideas. Through this narrow strip of land marched armies bent on conquest, some heading east, some heading west. In the centuries before Christianity emerged, those armies redrew the political map of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa several times.

Ancient Greece

Christianity also developed at an intersection in political and cultural history. Palestine had been fought over and conquered successively by Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians and Greeks. By 1400 BC a group of people speaking an early form of Greek were scattered across parts of what is now modern Greece and the Mediterranean. They built cities and palace fortresses like that at Mycenae. Their unity was not political but came through language and culture, such as the oral traditions of the Homeric legends which looked back to the great days of the Mycenaeans. Such culture became known as Hellenistic, after the term *hellas*, which embraced these scattered groups. The religious ceremonies such as those associated with the god Apollo at Delphi, or the games in honour of the god Zeus on Mount Olympus, gave a further sense of unity. The *hellenes* were convinced of the superiority of their culture: all others were *barbaroi*, from which the term 'barbarian' comes. Between 800 and 500 BC Greek society demonstrated more order, with settlements developing round the temples dedicated to Greek gods. A series of small city-states emerged, each surrounded by a rural hinterland. It was the work of Philip of Macedon, who ruled from 360 to 336 BC, to bring unity to Greece. Under the rule of his son Alexander, a Greek empire rapidly appeared through a series of speedy and brilliant military campaigns. He came to be known as Alexander the Great, ruling from 336 to 323 BC. He swept all before him – conquering Syria, Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia and Persia – dreaming of a real union between the areas he conquered. Alexander sought administrative and cultural unity among the people he conquered, promising greatness as a ruler to match his military greatness. His tutor had been Aristotle, and Alexander sought to spread Greek ideas and culture throughout his territories, seeking peace and prosperity through his policies. Seventy cities claim Alexander as their founder, the best known being Alexandria, which was named after him, with a world-renowned university and library. Principles of systematic and scientific town-planning emerged, with significant advances in architecture. Cities were rapidly colonized by Greek traders and artisans, creating a vast single market.

When Alexander met his demise in mysterious circumstances aged just thirty-two, his empire was divided up by his generals, who ruled as semi-divine monarchs over territories which stretched from the Adriatic to Afghanistan. Beset by bitter rivalry, before long these territories had divided into a series of smaller kingdoms.

The rise of Rome

The traditional date for the foundation of Rome is 753 BC, and until 509 BC it functioned as a city-state with a king. After the overthrow of the monarchy a republic was instituted with power in the hands of a senate controlled by the patrician social elite, who appointed consuls. The ordinary people, the plebeians, had only limited influence on their work. The emergence of an empire based on this city was slow, but as Rome grew in size and influence, war between the Romans and Greeks became inevitable. A series of wars in the 190s and 180s BC saw the Romans victorious and taking control of the Mediterranean area. The Roman Empire was eventually to stretch to Britain, the Rhine and the Danube in the north, along the North African coast and to the borders of Asia in the east – but its trade routes reached much further. Palestine belonged significantly to the eastern half of the Roman Empire.

The political structure of the Roman Republic underwent momentous revolution in which the old rule of oligarchy was transformed into personal

Caesar Augustus

autocracy. This change came through a long and intermittent civil war lasting seventy years. Eventually, after the assassination of the general and dictator Julius Caesar in 44 BC, Octavian manoeuvred his way into power through a series of battles and political stratagems. He ruled as Caesar Augustus from 27 BC onwards, the first of the Roman emperors. Although he died in AD 14, the Roman Empire was to long outlast him, surviving, albeit in changed form, for over a thousand years. Augustus brought peace and stability to territories stretching from the English Channel to Sudan, and after his death he was declared a god. Most of the subsequent emperors, combining astute governance with occasional terror tactics, were also assigned the status of god after their lifetimes. Peoples of widely differing cultural backgrounds were ruled together in one empire.

Jewish history

After the Greek and Roman empires, the third great political, social and religious influence on Palestine was of course Judaism. The emergence of the Jewish people from a group of wandering herders, through slavery and conquest, into a small nation with its own modest empire under the kingships of David and Solomon, is told in the pages of the Old Testament. So too is its subsequent decline into division and defeat, with many of its peoples dragged into exile as a result of conquests by Assyria, Babylon and Persia. The capture of Jerusalem by the Babylonians and the destruction of the temple in 587 BC was a terrible blow which Judaism nevertheless managed to survive, as it did an attempt in the second century BC by the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV, who arrogantly called himself 'Epiphanes' (Manifestation), to Hellenize the cultural and religious life of the Jews. This produced an uprising and a series of wars from 167 to 164 BC. After much blood had been shed, the Jews, led by Judas Maccabeus, secured a

short period of existence free from the rule of a foreign power, which lasted until Roman occupation around 63 BC. Palestine then fell within the political orbit of the ruthless superpower that had superseded the Greek one. Between 37 BC and 4 BC Judea was subjected to the repressive rule of King Herod, from Idumea (Edom), who served as a puppet king of the Romans. After his death the territories he had ruled were divided up among his sons, before direct rule was imposed, exercised through Roman officials such as Pontius Pilate. An independent nation-state was not to exist again in Israel until 1948.

Defeat and exile had left the Jewish peoples scattered across the Middle East and into North Africa and Europe. This meant that some 80% of all Jews lived in the 'diaspora' (dispersion) outside Palestine. The land remained much troubled politically when Jesus was born, and after his death there were major rebellions against Roman rule, in 66–70 and 132–5, attempting to recreate what Judas Maccabeus had done; both of these rebellions were brutally crushed.

Greek and Roman culture

Palestine at the end of the first century BC was not only at a geographical and political intersection; it was also at a cultural one. The march of successive armies across this small but significant land left deep imprints. From the Greeks came their language and a culture deeply shaped by its literature and philosophy. In religion, polytheism (belief in the existence of many gods, such as Zeus, Artemis and Apollo) was the order of the day. The pantheon of Greek gods was large and diverse. The worship of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, could on the one hand be a high-minded celebration of beauty and love, and on the other a degraded form of fertility worship expressed in immoral sexual activity. A team of a thousand female temple slaves served the sexual appetites of the devotees of Aphrodite in Corinth, casting a moral blight on the whole city, reflected in the letters of the apostle Paul to the church there. Religious life in the Greek world was complex – from rituals involving prostitution, to sacrifices to appease gods, or seeking guidance by reading the entrails of slaughtered animals. Dissatisfaction with the ancient public religions led to the emergence of new secret cults, mystery religions, which only the initiated could join.

But Greek culture also produced profound intellectual and philosophical achievements, creating tension with the crude and unsophisticated depictions of the religious life of the gods of Olympus. Scientific discovery advanced in the fields of anatomy, astronomy and mechanics. The foundations of mathematics were laid by philosophers such as Pythagoras (c. 570–c. 495 BC). A user-friendly script emerged with a twenty-two-letter alphabet based on sounds

rather than pictorial symbols, making easier the development of writing forms in which ideas as well as the names of things with physical form could be communicated. The fourth and fifth centuries BC saw the height of Greek philosophy, especially with the work of Socrates (c. 470–399 BC), Plato (c. 429–348 BC) and Aristotle (384–322 BC). Moral philosophy set out notions of right living and high ideals in life.

Plato was Socrates' pupil, and his writings helped to shape European thinking on big issues in life such as immortality, pleasure and politics. Plato also debated the question of the existence of a supreme god, and if one existed, what that god would be like. He concluded that the supreme god would be a unity, incapable of being divided, without moods and passions (unlike the Greek gods), and unchangeable. He struggled with the idea of how such a god could create the current imperfect world and concluded that it was just a poor reflection of ideal Forms which were a truer and higher reality, and had been created by one lower than the Supreme Soul, namely the *demiourgos*. The task of the human soul is to reach beyond the present world to the Forms which lie beyond it.

Plato's abstract, speculative, idealistic philosophy stands in contrast to that of his pupil Aristotle who emphasized that reality was to be understood through a process of critical reasoning based on observed facts. Studying a concept or object did not come by speculating on what its ideal form might look like, but by systematic study and the collection of facts and information, and upon the basis of that research coming to conclusions. To Aristotle this approach held good for all areas of knowledge, from science to the humanities; indeed it influenced Western education for more than 2,000 years after his death. Importantly, there was also a growing sense of the need for a clear connection between religion and morality, and that there was a relation between present conduct and life after death.

Aristotle

Throughout the remaining vestiges of Alexander's empire the educated classes spoke Greek, listened to classical oratory and poetry, and saw the same classical plays. Schools, temples and cities were united by a common cultural identity.

Early Roman religion had focused on the elements of air, water, fire. Natural forces – storms, lightning,

drought – were manifestations of divine personalities. Deities were seen to influence different aspects of life, and so a host of minor deities were reverenced in order to secure protection for various activities. About the nature of these gods there was little reflection or speculation. Religion was in good part instinctive and governed by fear. The Roman military victory over the Greeks did not mean their culture was expunged; rather it was embraced and assimilated. Aphrodite became Venus; Zeus became Jupiter.

Religious life took many forms. Some adopted extreme forms of religiosity, with a profound fear of the supernatural. There were a number of enthusiastic or 'ecstatic' religious expressions, such as the cult of Mithras, which reflected the struggle between light and dark, good and evil, with an initiation ceremony involving passing under the carcase of a newly slaughtered bull and being soaked in its blood. The religious life of most was little more than the formal, nominal adherence that was required in the empire and seen as part of civil duty. Like paying taxes it simply had to be done, whether you were enthusiastic about it or not. This ensured the protection of the person and the State. The Romans accepted a vast range of religions with the proviso that they did not threaten the values or ethos of the State.

Early Christians were liable, when the local authorities demanded it, to be asked to sacrifice to the local gods. Refusing to do this was considered antisocial and dangerous, giving offence to the deities and endangering the fabric of the empire. This caused significant difficulties for Christians who honoured Christ above all, although there was no empire-wide requirement to sacrifice to local deities before AD 250. The scepticism about ancient religions that had characterized Greek thinking also became apparent in Rome: religious life became open to philosophical criticism. This dissatisfaction may also have been a reason for the interest many began to show in the new religion that emerged in the first century – Christianity.

Judaism

The other major religious influence on the first-century Palestinian context in which Christianity emerged was Judaism. The Jewish community, and its understanding of the religious life, was also not uniform. Those who returned from exile to Palestine after 537 BC retained their monotheistic belief in the one God who had revealed the Torah through Moses. They rebuilt their temple and restored daily sacrifice, but monotheistic religious life in a country stripped of its political independence was never easy. The elite group of Sadducees ran the temple and developed a working relationship with the Roman authorities to

allow the continuance of religious practice and a limited degree of autonomy. This was not to the liking of the Pharisees, who were deeply uncomfortable coexisting with their pagan Roman rulers. They committed themselves to hard work, shunning power or association with the ruling authorities. They protected themselves from contamination from the pagan world by developing a complex series of legal religious restrictions to prevent them transgressing the law of God, the minutiae of which were observed and enforced. Their interpretation of the Torah was becoming dominant in the New Testament era and was a source of conflict with the first Christians. The Pharisees' work in emphasizing prayer, and devotion to the oral and written Torah, played a vital role in helping Judaism to reformulate itself as a viable religious system in the aftermath of the destruction of the temple in AD 70.

Others, such as the Essenes, saw the approaches of other Jewish groups as corrupt, and chose instead to withdraw from the complexities of such mixed engagement. Some lived in small groups within towns; some withdrew to the desert to live alone or in small communities isolated from wider society, awaiting God's decisive intervention in the world to restore the temple and the true faith of Israel. The Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in caves in 1947, are thought to have been produced by a community of Essenes at Qumran who lived lives of austere self-denial, sharing property together. For other radical groups, like the Zealots, the only solution was a military one, and a form of low-key but persistent guerrilla warfare was conducted against the occupying Romans by some of their supporters. At times Palestine teetered on the brink of an uprising: in 6 BC there was a revolt in Judea over the imposition of the census, and again in AD 40 when the emperor Caligula sought to erect a statue of himself in Jerusalem.

For the diaspora Jews scattered across the ancient world, often in seaports and trading centres, there was the challenge of how to live in a pagan world. Whenever possible they returned to Jerusalem for the major religious festivals of Passover and Shavuot (Pentecost), and sent funds for the support of the temple. They chose not to intermarry with the Gentiles and avoided the amusements of the day – the theatres, the circus, the baths – but as members of a recognized religion under the Romans they were allowed to maintain their own synagogues and be judged according to their own law. However, most became Greek-speaking and this encouraged the translation of the Old Testament into that language – the Septuagint. The Jewish community in Babylon, where many had been exiled in the sixth century BC, was to remain of significant size for over a thousand years. Some estimate the Jewish population of Egypt to have numbered 1 million by the time of Christ. The wealthy, educated and prosperous Jews of Alexandria, who spoke Greek rather than Hebrew, began to express their religious convictions in ways shaped by the Hellenistic culture in which

they lived. The Alexandrian Jew Philo (c. 20 BC–c. AD 40) used allegorical methods to suggest that underneath the stories found in the Hebrew scriptures were to be found deeper layers of truth. This issue of making belief accessible to educated Greeks, and the degree to which Hellenistic thought-forms could be used, was one which was soon to confront the early church.

Nonetheless, the distinctive and clear religious and ethical code of the Jewish faith proved attractive to some, tired of the empty formality or excesses of pagan religion. Around Jewish synagogues in predominantly Gentile cities groups of converts attached themselves to Judaism, adopting Jewish customs. This opened up the possibility that the religion of the followers of Yahweh might become universal, of key significance to later Christian mission. These 'God-fearers' were attracted by its strong monotheism and ethical code. Some accepted baptism and, for men, circumcision, becoming Jewish proselytes. Others held back from such a radical departure from pagan society, but kept the Sabbath and the outline of the law, abstaining from idolatry, sexual immorality and murder.

To such people the message of the radical new expression of the Jewish faith expressed in Christianity proved extremely attractive, with its emphasis on the existence of one true, universal God, a strong counter to the rivalries, competitive claims of supremacy, and divisions of the other religious cults. This may help explain why the message of the apostles met with such a ready response in places such as Philippi (Acts 16), although such changes of religious allegiance attracted hostility from both Jewish sources and local civic and religious leaders.

These huge contrasts in religious and cultural life were reflected in wider society at the time when Christianity was born. It ranged from the heights of the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle to the petty tantrums of the Greek and Roman gods. Roman society could be both incredibly sophisticated and singularly distasteful – from the wonders of civil engineering feats like aqueducts, the road system, water supply and public bath houses, to a population that comprised more than 50% slaves (some subject to regular physical and sexual abuse), and the depths of barbaric popular entertainments which included the spectacle in the 'games' of humans slaughtering animals, and even each other, urged on by a baying crowd. Rome was an attractive place populated by a rather unattractive people.

The life of Christ

Parents want the environment in which children are born to be stable, healthy and growth-inducing. The cradle in which Christianity lay was both the best of

times and the worst of times. When the apostle Paul wrote, 'When the time had fully come, God sent his Son' (Gal. 4:4), he had no doubt that the birth of Jesus of Nazareth came at just the right time in God's plan, but that did not mean, from the human perspective, everything was going to be easy. Indeed, as the following chapters will show, the new faith was going to face considerable difficulties. The apostles spoke of the scandal of the Cross, but the birth of Jesus Christ was little better. He was born in poverty in Palestine, a socially and politically turbulent client state of the Roman Empire. Jesus was born in socially and politically troubled times. News of his birth brought a few visitors, some local, some from afar, and then provoked a horrific, although localized, episode of infanticide at the hands of a possessively jealous local king fearing the emergence of a rival. The exact dating of the birth of Jesus Christ has proved problematic. Because of mistakes in the calculations made by Hippolytus in the third century, and Dionysius Exiguus in around AD 530, it is unlikely to have taken place in the year AD 1. Instead, a date closer to 6 or 4 BC is more likely – Herod the Great died in 3 or 4 BC. Yet questions about the exact date of the birth of Jesus which arise because of mistakes made by later writers should not cast doubt on the historical existence of Jesus. As well as the historical record of the New Testament, written soon after the events it records, both Roman and Jewish historians record the existence of Jesus. The Jewish historian Josephus, writing in the late first century AD, reports that Jesus was a 'wise man . . . who did remarkable deeds and was a teacher'. Christianity was soon noticed even by those from pagan backgrounds. The Roman historian Tacitus, writing in around AD 115, dismisses the faith of the early Christians as a 'deadly superstition' and 'evil', yet he reports the historical existence of Jesus, whom he refers to as Christus, who 'suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hand of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate'.

We know little about the childhood of Jesus, but it seems likely that his adoptive father, Joseph, died before Jesus reached full adulthood. After a life of about thirty years, of which again little is recorded, Jesus began a short public career as a freelance rabbi. There were many other such teachers around in first-century Palestine, but none was to have the lasting impact of Jesus. His ministry is reported as taken up with itinerant preaching and teaching, and performing miracles including healing and exorcism. He attracted around him a small band of disciples, some heroically faithful, others much less so, and an assortment of adherents from a variety of classes. He reached a number from the social margins, including tax collectors, Samaritans and those suffering from debilitating diseases such as leprosy. The large number of women recorded as his followers in the New Testament was surprising for the times, and some of them were the first witnesses to his resurrection. During his short years

of ministry Jesus trained his disciples and sent them out on ministry trips to teach, heal the sick and help the poor. Jesus left behind no handwritten diary, memoir or autobiography; indeed from what we can tell, nothing written in his own hand survives, which is unusual for the founder of one of the main world religions.

For accounts of his life and teachings, and the miracles he was reported as doing, the historian must turn to his followers, or disciples, who in the years after his death collected together oral and early written materials into Gospels and epistles. Because of their apostolic source, and the authority accorded them by the early church, these accounts and writings became the Christian scriptures, the New Testament. Despite the hopes of some, Jesus the Messiah did not lead a victorious military campaign against the enemies of Israel, but instead chose the path of suffering and ultimately death on a cross. The end of this remarkable life came in Jerusalem at Passover time after Jesus was charged as an agitator, blasphemer against the Jewish religion (after claiming publicly he could forgive sins) and false prophet. He suffered horrific execution by crucifixion, a death reserved for the worst criminal offenders under Roman law, although it was not sanctioned by Jewish law. It was a violent death that reflected the social and political tensions of the time, and set a pattern that was to be followed by many of his disciples. The New Testament suggests that Jesus was around thirty-three years old when he was crucified, which would be sometime between AD 27 and 29. At the time it appeared an ignominious and final end to his ministry. But on the third day after his crucifixion his followers reported that everything had radically, and dramatically, changed.