

Christ and the Spirit: Catholic Perspectives through the Ages,  
by John J. Markey (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2018).  
Copyright © 2018 by John J. Markey. All rights reserved.  
www.anselmacademic.org.

*Christ and the Spirit* presents an accessible entry to the study of Christology, using examples from contemporary culture to demonstrate the action of the Spirit of God in the world. The book's concise explanations of theological principles and their applications complement its detailed rendition of the way Jesus Christ is presented in Scripture and received through the ages.

—Phyllis Zagano  
Hofstra University

*Christ and the Spirit* provides a well-researched and accessible overview of Catholic perspectives on Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit from a Western, Catholic, Christian understanding as they have emerged and developed over the past two millennia. What is innovative about Markey's approach is his exploration of these traditions through story and film. Using the films *Beauty and the Beast* and *Star Wars*, and with input by colleague Greg Zuschlag, Markey explores the meaning and significance of the Christ and the Holy Spirit through the lens, particularly, of Belle (Beauty) as a "Christ-figure," one who saves as Christ does humanity from sin and death. This approach forces readers to rethink their understanding of Jesus for today.

The book is well written, engaging, and thought provoking. I highly recommend it as especially appealing for use in undergraduate and graduate theology and religious studies courses. This small book (students will appreciate the brevity), opens up new ways of thinking about and understanding Jesus Christ for the twenty-first century.

—Diana L. Hayes  
Georgetown University

*Christ and the Spirit* offers a remarkably thorough survey of major historical developments in the understanding of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. It is both a compelling tour of the theological concerns and questions that gave rise to those developments and a creative exploration of how the Christian community's insights might continue to make a claim on us today. John Markey has provided a book that will delight teachers and students alike. He and his colleague, Greg Zuschlag, are master teachers, inviting their readers to think with depth and precision about the transformative work of Jesus Christ and the Spirit in our world.

—Steve Rodenborn  
St. Edward's University

"Imagining the world or one's life differently is the first step in changing it." So states John Markey in his introduction to *Christ and the Spirit: Catholic Perspectives through the Ages*. Convinced that people must access God through their own experience if they are to authentically connect to the God of Christianity, and equally convinced of the epistemological power of story, Markey, along with contributor Greg Zuschlag, lace a lucid outline of Western Christianity's theologies of Christ and the Spirit with illustrations from the film narratives of *Beauty and the Beast*, *Superman*, and *Star Wars*. In the case of *Beauty and the Beast*, he illuminates the ways in which the story's heroine, Belle, functions as a Christ figure, returning to her again and again in reflection question boxes that challenge readers to make their own connections and draw their own conclusions on the basis of his elaboration of the developments of the Christian Tradition. In evoking *Superman* and *Star Wars*, he acknowledges popular parallels, respectively, to Christ and the Spirit, but

counsels caution and invites critical analysis vis-à-vis an authentic understanding of the paschal mystery. Both his boxed reflections and discussion questions lead the reader to recognize the truth-in-contrast between the redemptive power of Belle's vulnerable love and the myth of redemptive violence perpetuated by Superman and the Force. Recurring references to Jean Vanier's L'Arche communities reinforce the vision of the world through the lens of the Christian story that Markey so successfully conveys.

This book is a rich resource for undergraduate introductory courses as well as for continuing formation for adults. It provides excellent pedagogical tools for the classroom and for popular pastoral education.

—Kathleen McManus, OP  
University of Portland

What a well-informed, concise, and imaginative book this is! John Markey's *Christ and the Spirit* signals a promising direction in response to Jesus' enduring question: Who do you say that I am? Markey recognizes that a genuine answer to this question requires the active presence of the Spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit. Well-chosen films with prominent Christ-figures invite readers to consider God's wondrous and surprising presence among us and the ways in which the Spirit transforms and empowers us. Throughout, this book remains faithful to the best biblical and theological work of our time.

—Nancy Pineda-Madrid  
Boston College

This refreshing and highly accessible work purports to offer a logical and creative analysis of the testimony of the Christian Scriptures as well as two millennia of Christian thinking about Jesus Christ, the visible image of the invisible God and the Spirit who reveals him.

Because of its faithfulness to the sources of Christianity as well as a creative use of familiar images from contemporary literature and film, *Christ and the Spirit* invites its readers to think more clearly about their experience and interpretation of God's presence in their lives and history, and how that experience might (or might not) connect with the Christian experience of God acting in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. After presenting the saving mystery, the book has the courage to ask "so what?"—hoping to help the reader come to know something new and significant about the Christian understanding of God's love made present to human beings through Jesus Christ and the Spirit.

This book has valuable insights for college students and participants in programs of adult faith formation. I highly recommend it.

—Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin, C.Ss.R.  
Archbishop of Newark

# Christ and the Spirit

Catholic Perspectives through the Ages

John J. Markey



## Author Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge and thank Greg Zuschlag for his friendship, advice, and invaluable contributions to this small book. I would like to acknowledge the outstanding and dedicated work of my research assistant, Joseph August Higgins, and his contributions developing the content of this book. I am deeply grateful for the hospitality, generosity, and love of Cyd Crouse and Niels Caminada, Rob and Charlie Streit, and my mother, Sharron Markey. I am grateful for the encouragement, insights, and support of my friends Rose Chalifoux, Jake Hebbert, Theresa Galan-Bruce, Lynn Streit, my colleagues at Oblate School of the Theology, and my Dominican brothers of the Province of St. Martin De Porres. Finally, I am indebted to Brad Harmon, Paul Peterson, and especially Maura Thompson Hagarty at Anselm Academic for their support, advice, companionship, and trust.

## Publisher Acknowledgments

Thank you to the following individuals who reviewed this work in progress:

Brian Doyle, *Marymount University, Arlington, VA*

Elena Procaro-Foley, *Iona College, New Rochelle, NY*

Shannon Schrein, OSF, *Lourdes University, Sylvania, OH*

Created by the publishing team of Anselm Academic.

The scriptural quotations in this book are from the *New American Bible, revised edition* © 2010, 1991, 1986, and 1970 by the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Inc., Washington, DC. Used by permission of the copyright owner. All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

Cover image: Image in Public Domain

Copyright © 2018 by John J. Markey. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced by any means without the written permission of the publisher, Anselm Academic, Christian Brothers Publications, 702 Terrace Heights, Winona, Minnesota 55987-1320, [www.anselmacademic.org](http://www.anselmacademic.org).

Printed in the United States of America

7085

ISBN 978-1-59982-952-4

**Dedication**

Patricia Bruno, OP

Jude Siciliano, OP

*Friends and mentors*



# Contents

---

Introduction .....	9
<b>1. Jesus Christ: New Testament Perspectives .....</b>	<b>13</b>
The Identity of Jesus Christ in the Christian Scriptures / 14	
The Four Gospels / 16	
<b>CHRIST-FIGURES IN FILM</b> <i>EXPLORING BEAUTY AND THE BEAST</i> , Greg Zuschlag / 17	
The Epistles of Paul / 33	
<b>CHRIST-FIGURES IN FILM</b> <i>REEL TO REAL</i> , Greg Zuschlag / 38	
Review Questions / 42	
Discussion Questions / 42	
Additional Resources / 42	
<b>2. Jesus Christ: Ancient to Contemporary Perspectives .....</b>	<b>44</b>
Hellenism / 45	
How Can God Become Human? / 46	
<b>CHRIST-FIGURES IN FILM</b> <i>SUPERMAN AND THE MYTH OF REDEMPTIVE VIOLENCE</i> , Greg Zuschlag / 48	
How Can the Divine and Human Coexist in One Person? / 51	
After Chalcedon: Why Does God Become Human? / 53	
Neglecting Chalcedon: From the Enlightenment to Modernity / 62	
Recovering and Reformulating Chalcedon in the Twentieth Century / 65	
Two Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Christology / 69	
Review Questions / 72	
Discussion Questions / 72	
Additional Resources / 73	

<b>3. The Holy Spirit: The Giver of Life</b> .....	75
The Holy Spirit in the Hebrew Scriptures /	75
The Holy Spirit in the New Testament /	77
Pneumatology in the Theological Tradition /	87
What Difference Does It Make? /	96
Review Questions /	97
Discussion Questions /	98
Additional Resources /	98
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	101
<b>Index</b> .....	109



## Introduction

While religious practice and affiliation has decreased drastically over the last twenty years, interest in spirituality and God has increased. The US cultural context is one of the most religiously engaged on earth. But basic questions remain about God, the meaning and purpose of life, and the possibilities of hope and love and of changing the world for the better. The Catholic Christian tradition offers thoughtful, complex, and compelling responses to such questions, but its message is often obscured by negative images, limited and even false explanations, and the hypocritical divide between the life and action of some Catholics.

This book attempts to set out clearly the Catholic tradition regarding Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. It also attempts to address readers' questions: "So what?" "What difference does this make?" "How can I imagine these realities working in the lives of individuals and communities today?" "How does the tradition help illuminate and clarify contemporary experiences of God? What is the relationship between this tradition and my own spiritual journey?" It is hoped that readers will gain a good understanding of the Catholic tradition and an awareness that there are many strands in that tradition. It is also hoped that readers will come to appreciate how some of those strands might contribute to their personal religious perspectives.

### **A Theology of Jesus Christ**

In one sense, this book is not really about Jesus of Nazareth. It does not offer a new perspective on his life or historical context nor does it analyze his sayings or message in any detail. This book does not attempt a Christology "from below," that is, developing a theological interpretation of the Jesus of history primarily through interpreting Jesus' life, actions, and teachings as described in the Gospels. Nor is it merely a Christology from above, that is, an abstract theology of the "Christ of faith" as relayed in certain New Testament texts and the Western theological tradition. In fact, this account finds both approaches inadequate.

## 10 Christ and the Spirit

Rather, the goal of this short book is to lay out in a clear, comprehensive, and accessible manner the central ideas and key developments in the understanding of Jesus Christ (Christology) in the Western Christian theological tradition. Although this study comes out of the Catholic perspective, it remains open to other perspectives and divergent interpretations within the Catholic tradition. For this reason, it focuses on the theological interpretation of the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ by both the writers of the New Testament<sup>1</sup> and the Christian theological tradition. The New Testament serves primarily as theological interpretation of the action of God in Jesus and the Holy Spirit and as such is the foundation of all subsequent theology in the Christian tradition. *Tradition* refers to an ongoing process of interpretation and renewal as theologians have reinterpreted and reappropriated the New Testament witness in ways that made sense to the people of their cultural and historical contexts. In each generation and each cultural location, Christians must respond anew to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" (Matt. 16:15). That is, they must attempt to answer their own questions about the identity, meaning, and purpose of Jesus Christ. This book attempts to relay the major movements in this Christological tradition and demonstrate how they both develop and retain the truth about God and Jesus as revealed in the New Testament.

### A Theology of the Holy Spirit

The New Testament narrates and reflects upon the story of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Both act in integral and interconnected ways throughout the Gospels and the early Christian community's interpretation of the presence of God in their lives and history. Furthermore, the whole of Scripture (both the Old and New Testaments) depicts God as fundamentally present and active in the world. In the New Testament, God is particularly portrayed as transforming individuals and communities through the action of the Spirit. It is important, therefore, to look carefully at the role, function, and understanding of the Spirit in order to understand Jesus Christ, and vice versa. This book attempts to offer a basic analysis of the Spirit as presented in the New Testament. This analysis necessarily includes both the Spirit's relationship to Jesus and the Spirit's identity as the presence of God in human lives. This study also explores the emergence of

---

1. Christians view the Bible as a two-volume work consisting of the Old and New Testaments. In conveying their interpretation of Jesus, the writers of the New Testament tend to use images, characters, stories, and texts from the Old Testament, a collection of sacred texts of the Jewish faith. The writers of the New Testament transformed the meaning and purpose of these texts. They also created their own, new Scripture, the New Testament, which does not replace or reject the Old Testament but elaborates on it and brings it to fulfillment from a Christian point of view. See further Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 129–33.

a distinctive theology of the Holy Spirit (pneumatology) in the early theological tradition, the challenges and shortcomings of this tradition in the history of Western theology, and the renewed interest in and development of pneumatology in the modern and contemporary periods. In conclusion, it offers some fundamental insights on the person and action of the Spirit and the foundational role of pneumatology for all aspects of theological reflection.

## **Exploring Christ and the Spirit through Story and Film**

This book attempts to set out a Western, Catholic, Christian understanding of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. As such, its goal is to do theology through a variety of modes, employing both rational and intuitive or pre-rational means to explore a Christian interpretation of God's actions in human lives. This study is synthetic in that it tries to bring together traditional Christian theology with some creative and artistic attempts to make sense of the meaning and purpose of human life and the ways that humans can be changed and transformed by love and hope. By combining rational theology with a famous fairy-tale or fable (and now a movie) and other iconic images, the authors seek to offer an exploration of some of the major themes that emerge out of Christology and pneumatology. Chapter 1 includes analysis of the famous fairy-tale "Beauty and the Beast" as it has been told in story, stage, and film over hundreds of years. The author of this section, Greg Zuschlag, explores the meaning of the story and the ways in which its heroine, Belle (the "beauty"), can help deepen an investigation of the person and mission of Jesus Christ. The author contends that Belle represents a remarkable example of a "Christ-figure" in literature and one of the best examples of the Christian understanding of how Christ saves or redeems human beings from sin and death. Each chapter invites the reader to consider the ways in which this fable can shed light on the theology of Jesus Christ. In chapter 2, contributing author Greg Zuschlag, contrasts Belle as heroine and savior with another iconic cultural hero: Superman. In the third chapter, the role of Belle is similarly compared to that of another important cultural icon: the idea of "the force" from the Star Wars movies.

This study does not investigate every possible interpretation of God's activity offered in Scripture or the Western Catholic Christian tradition. Rather, it aims to help students to think about and interpret more clearly their experience of God's presence in their lives and history and how that experience might or might not connect with the Christian experience of God acting in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Understanding often comes when people connect their experience with some wider human experience told as a story. Making sense of the world requires both rational knowledge and creative insights that enable

## 12 Christ and the Spirit

people to grasp truth and meaning for themselves. Imagining the world or one's life differently is the first step toward effecting change. What follows is thus a logical and creative analysis aimed at helping the reader come to know something new and significant about the Christian understanding of God's love made present to human beings through Jesus Christ and the Spirit.

# Jesus Christ: New Testament Perspectives

Like all of Christian theology, the theology of Jesus Christ (Christology) is rooted in the Scriptures. It is said that Jesus came to talk about the reign of God and the first Christians were primarily interested in talking about Jesus;<sup>1</sup> the New Testament talks about both. The New Testament texts all agree that in some way Jesus of Nazareth embodies his fundamental message and revelation that God is love. But the texts each also offer something unique about Jesus, both in their method of interpreting him and in the themes they develop. This chapter examines what the Christian Scriptures reveal about Jesus Christ as the Second Person of the Trinity, his relationship and identification with the Father and the Spirit, the purpose for which he comes to participate in human history, and how his identity affects the lives and destiny of all human beings.

---

1. The reign of God, also called the “kingdom of God” or the “dominion of God” (from the Greek *basileia tou Theou*), is a central theme in the Gospels and shaped the earliest Christian community’s understanding of the significance and identity of Jesus as the Son of God. For a textual analysis of the theme of the reign of God in the Gospels, see N. T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 2, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 1st North American ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 443–51; Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 60–70; and Ben Witherington III, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 191–206. For an attempt at a systematic analysis of the meaning of the reign of God in the New Testament, see Edward Schillebeeckx, trans. Hubert Hoskins, *Jesus and Experiment in Christology* (New York: Crossroad, 1989). For an analysis of the significance of the message of the reign of God from the earliest Christian communities after Jesus’ death and subsequent Resurrection and its continued significance today, see Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); Jurgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004); Edward Schillebeeckx, trans. Hubert Hoskins, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Crossroads, 1989); and Edward Schillebeeckx, trans. John Bowden, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

## The Identity of Jesus Christ in the Christian Scriptures

The sections of the New Testament offering the most significant contribution to Christology are the four Gospels and the letters (or epistles) attributed to Paul. For brevity's sake, the following discussion is limited to these works.

The four Gospels all tell the story of the life, teachings, and significant events of the historical person Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>2</sup> The Gospels agree that Jesus and his followers were faithful Jews who understood their whole lives in terms Jewish religious life and the Jewish Scriptures. The Gospels also agree that the story of Jesus' life and ministry culminates in his betrayal, trial, torture, and death at the hands of both the Jewish and Roman authorities. Likewise, the Gospels all attest to his Resurrection from the dead and his promise that he will come again to redeem and restore all of creation according God's plan. Specific Gospels also discuss Jesus' gift of his Spirit upon his followers and his return (Ascension) to his place in God's own life. The paschal mystery—Jesus' suffering, death, Resurrection, and giving of his Spirit to the community—comprise the central event for the Gospel authors and the Apostle Paul. For Catholic Christians, Jesus Christ revealed the inner mystery and ultimate plan of God. In this chapter, it should become clear that for the early Christians (and the subsequent tradition) this mystery reveals the identity of Jesus Christ and through him the true mystery and destiny of every human life.

The paschal mystery serves as the starting point and the central theme for the whole of the New Testament. The texts of the New Testament, therefore, primarily attempt to shed light on this mystery and to understand its implications for diverse communities of Christians who held it as their foundation and common point of reference. The Gospels, in particular, attempt to interpret the paschal mystery in terms of the life and preaching of Jesus of Nazareth. In telling the story of Jesus, they try to tell the story of God's action in and through him and to make sense of his death and Resurrection, which they see as the culmination and vindication of his life and mission. The epistles, on the other hand (especially the letters of Paul), often focus upon the practical implications of following Jesus through faith for ordinary Christians and their communities. They also often reflect theologically on the Christian understanding of Jesus himself and his unique revelation about the inner life and remarkable nature of God.

The New Testament authors wrote for those who believed they had already encountered the risen Christ and embraced the mystery of God that this encounter entailed. Both the Gospels and the epistles challenge converted Christians

---

2. See further Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 129–33.

to deepen their faith in the God that is revealed by Jesus Christ. The epistles are primarily intended to help these early communities develop into the image of Christ (Col. 3:9–11) and to take on “the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5). The Gospels are intended to help Christians to grow in the task of genuine discipleship: following Jesus. Faith in Jesus implies there will be critical moments in the lives of believers when they should reaffirm, deepen, and act upon their fundamental confidence that Jesus Christ represented God in a unique and authoritative way. Christians therefore are the primary audience that the texts of the New Testament seek to inform, enable, and inspire.

### The Gospels

The four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, provide four distinct yet interrelated accounts of the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth as well as a collection of his spiritual and moral teachings. Like the rest of the New Testament, the Gospels were written in Greek toward the end of the first century CE. Mark was most likely written first (ca. 60–75), probably deriving from a combination of oral and written traditions from the earliest Christian communities in Rome. Matthew was likely written next (ca. 70–100), probably in Syria or northern Palestine, to a largely Gentile audience that would have been familiar with Jewish history and traditions. Third to be written was likely Luke (ca. 75–95), which probably originated in Palestine with a Gentile audience in mind, similar to Matthew’s Gospel. As the first part of a two-volume work (the Acts of the Apostles is the second part), Luke attempts to take the received oral and written traditions available to him and provide an “orderly” account (Luke 1:2–3). Last of all was the Gospel of John (ca. 80–110). Like Mark, and unlike Matthew and Luke, the Gospel of John was likely written outside of Palestine. It may have originated in either Ephesus or Antioch (in modern-day Turkey), or in Alexandria, Egypt. In either case, John was written in a Greco-Roman context for a largely Greek audience.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke, commonly referred to as the “Synoptic” Gospels (meaning “seeing together” in Greek) share a great deal of material. For example, as much as 95 percent of the verses in Mark also appear in either Matthew or Luke. In contrast, only about 10 percent of the Gospel of John is shared with the other three Gospels.<sup>3</sup>

3. The issues of the date and composition of the four Gospels and their relation to each other are complicated and continue to be debated. As David L. Dungan helpfully suggests, ultimately what is at stake here are four interrelated issues that face contemporary readers of the

## The Four Gospels

The word “gospel” derives from the Old English words *god* (meaning “God” or “good”) and *spell* (meaning “news” or “story”). “Gospel” translates the Greek word *euangelion*, which means “good news.” In the Gospels, Jesus announces that his fundamental mission is to bring humanity “good news” by proclaiming and offering an example of the reign of God: “He has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor . . . to proclaim liberty to the captives” (Luke 4:18; see also Isa. 61:1). In many ways, Jesus follows in the line of the Old Testament prophets by proclaiming the love and mercy of God and urging people to turn away from a life of sin and selfishness and toward a new life of salvation marked by love toward God and selflessness toward others. What is new is that Jesus claims to have a unique relationship to the reign of God in that he is already living in God’s reign and is bringing it into people’s lives. The willingness of those who encounter Jesus to follow his example and accept his teaching is a sign of the presence of the reign of God. In other words, Jesus’ life and ministry embody the power of God’s presence and the living reality of God’s salvation. More about Jesus’ personal identification with the reign of God in each Gospel is discussed below.

The Gospels are written as stories that narrate the message of and the critical events in the life of Jesus as well as help interpret the meaning of those teachings and events for the author’s community or communities. The narrative method is extremely effective in helping Christian communities imagine and identify with Jesus as a human person like themselves and to put themselves into the story so they can better see how to incorporate his story into their own lives. The Gospel writers act as theologians who are engaged in theological reflection through a narrative method. These theologians are not historians or journalists, but neither are they artists writing fiction to entertain. Telling stories is an effective and ancient form of communication for passing on the accumulated wisdom of the community, especially in cultures in which most people cannot read or write. So it is important to treat the Gospels as theology and their writers as theologians. It is also important to remember that in the Christian view even today believers write gospels, in the sense that each community narrates its own Spirit-inspired accounts of Jesus’ life, death, and Resurrection in the light of its new and unique situation. These accounts will necessarily be selective, biased, and partial, based on the needs and challenges

---

Gospels: (1) Which Gospel should I consult? (2) Which text(s) of that Gospel should I use? (3) What should I know about the creation of this Gospel? (4) How can I faithfully interpret the text’s meaning for today? By situating questions about the interrelations of the Synoptic Gospels in relation to questions about how to interpret the Bible faithfully, biblical scholars highlight the value of having four different yet related accounts of Jesus’ earthly ministry. See David L. Dungan, *A History of the Synoptic Problem: The Canon, the Text, the Composition, and the Interpretation of the Gospels*, 1st ed., Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 349–67.



facing a community at a particular time. The twentieth-century Catholic theologian Edward Schillebeeckx claimed that all Christian communities are called to create a “fifth gospel”—indeed, to become a “fifth gospel”—to reinterpret and enliven the basic story in their shared life.<sup>4</sup>

## CHRIST-FIGURES IN FILM

### Exploring *Beauty and the Beast*

Greg Zuschlag<sup>5</sup>

Most people are familiar with the story *Beauty and the Beast*. It has been told and retold endlessly in children’s books and films. It has also been analyzed by psychologists, sociologists, and feminist literary critics. The tale admits to as many interpretations as there are versions of the story. Thus, while the story is well known, what exactly it is about and what it means is open to interpretation. It is considered a great work of literature in that, like a “never-ending artichoke,” it contains “the possibility of being able to continue to unpeel, discovering more and more new dimensions.”<sup>6</sup>

This brief study considers this beloved fairy tale from a Christological point of view. Admittedly, there is nothing intentionally or explicitly Christian about the story. When viewed through a Christological lens, however, *Beauty and the Beast* can shed light on the story of Jesus Christ as presented in the New Testament, a story that demonstrates how the



Belle and the Beast from *Beauty and the Beast*

*Continued*

4. See further Robert J. Schreiter and Mary Catherine Hilbert, eds., *The Praxis of Christian Experience: An Introduction to the Theology of Edward Schillebeeckx* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 51; Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1990) 154–57.

5. Greg Zuschlag is Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Oblate School of Theology, San Antonio, Texas.

6. Jerry Griswold, quoting Italo Calvino in *The Meaning of “Beauty and the Beast”: A Handbook* (Ontario, Canada: Broadview, 2004).

CHRIST-FIGURES IN FILM: EXPLORING *BEAUTY AND THE BEAST* *Continued*

power of love redeems a sinful humanity. In this analysis, Belle (French for “Beauty”) functions as a Christ-figure whose love restores the humanity of the ugly beast and creates a life-giving and mutually loving relationship between the two. In the Incarnation, as discussed in chapter 2, Jesus Christ embodies God’s love for human beings, and that love saves them. That idea is echoed in the oft-quoted phrase by the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky, “Beauty will save the world,” for, as Saint Augustine observed, “Beauty rouses our love; we love what is beautiful.”<sup>7</sup>

### Plot Summary

Though the “template” for the many adaptations and retellings of the story come from Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont’s 1756 version for nursery-age children in England, this discussion focuses on the way the story is presented in two Disney movies: the 1991 animated musical version (the first animated film ever to receive a nomination for Best Picture from the Academy Awards) and the 2017 live action remake.<sup>8</sup>

The Disney version opens in the castle of a spoiled and heartless young prince. The prince turns away an old beggar, scorning her paltry offer of a rose in exchange for shelter. The beggar then reveals herself as a beautiful enchantress, who turns the prince into a hideous beast. She also turns all the castle’s servants into household objects, and enchants the nearby villagers, causing them to forget all about the castle and its inhabitants. The curse could be broken if the prince could learn to love another and earn the love of another before the last petal of the enchantress’s rose falls. If he should fail, he and the others would be doomed to remain under the curse forever.

In the nearby village lives Belle, an attractive young woman with an eccentric inventor father. The villagers admire her beauty but consider her odd because she loves books and rejects the advances of Gaston, the handsome but narcissistic young hunter. One day, Belle’s dotty father prepares to travel to a distant market. When he asks Belle if he can bring her anything back, she asks for a rose, an expression of her love of simple things. When the father loses his way in the woods, he seeks refuge in the

*Continued*

7. Both quotes are paraphrases by Gerald O’Collins in his book *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

8. The plot summary provided here blends the 1991 and 2017 versions for the sake of simplicity.

CHRIST-FIGURES IN FILM: EXPLORING *BEAUTY AND THE BEAST* *Continued*

beast's mysterious castle and is captured by the beast. Belle goes in search of her father and finds him imprisoned in the castle. She asks the beast to allow her to take his place. The beast, somewhat taken aback by this selfless act, agrees: he releases the father and keeps Belle. Belle and the beast gradually begin to see each other in a positive light, and even begin to fall in love.

Then Belle learns that her father is in trouble; Gaston plans to have him locked up in an asylum for the wild story he has been telling the villagers about the beast who is holding his daughter captive in an enchanted castle. The beast, moved by a newfound sense of selflessness, frees Belle so that she may go to the aid her father. On her return, Belle manages to convince the villagers that her father is not crazy and that the beast is real. Gaston, however, whips the villagers into a frenzy of fear and hate, and leads them to the castle to destroy the beast.

The climax of the film finds the beast and Gaston locked in mortal combat on the parapets of the castle. The beast overpowers Gaston, but refuses to kill him, declaring, "I am not a beast!" But as he turns away, Gaston mortally wounds him, though Gaston falls to his death in the process. Belle comes to the beast as he lies dying and declares her love for him. At that moment, as the last rose petal falls, the curse is lifted: the beast is transformed back into a prince and brought back to life, the servants are transformed from being objects to being humans, the castle is restored to its glory, and the townspeople's memory returns. In the end all are reunited at the castle in a joyous scene of dancing in the grand ballroom, the place where the curse began and the place where Belle and the beast's love for one another first flowered, thus bringing a true "happily ever after" ending to this beloved fairy tale.

### Beneath the Surface: Theological Analysis

Belle, in *Beauty and the Beast*, can be seen as a Christ-figure. A Christ-figure should not be confused with a "Jesus figure," a person whose words or actions correspond directly to that of Jesus of Nazareth as understood historically or presented in the New Testament. Lloyd Baugh, a Jesuit priest and professor of Theology and Film Studies, explains,

The Christ-figure is neither Jesus nor the Christ, but rather a shadow, a faint glimmer of reflection of him. As a fully human being, the Christ-figure may be weak, uncertain, even a sinner,

*Continued*

CHRIST-FIGURES IN FILM: EXPLORING *BEAUTY AND THE BEAST* *Continued*

that may have all the limitations of any human being in the situation at hand. The Christ-figure is a foil to Jesus Christ, and between the two figures there is a reciprocal relationship. On the one hand, the reference to Christ clarifies the situation of the Christ-figure and adds depth to the significance of his [sic] action; on the other hand, the person and situation of the Christ-figure can provide new understanding of who and how Christ is: Jesus himself is revealed anew in the Christ-figure.<sup>9</sup>

How is Belle a Christ-figure? How does she “reveal anew” how we understand who Jesus is? In particular, what role does beauty play in this analogy?

Several prominent Christian theologians over the centuries have asserted that God is not just truth and goodness but beauty. Saint Augustine actually addresses God as such: “Late have I loved Thee, O Beauty so ancient and so new; late have I loved Thee!”<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Edwards, the American Puritan theologian, focuses on beauty as the principle attribute of God: “God is God, and distinguished from all other beings, and exalted above ‘em, chiefly by his divine beauty, which is infinitely diverse from all other beauty.”<sup>11</sup>

As Augustine observes, Jesus Christ is not only “beautiful in the hands of his parents” and “beautiful in his miracles” but he is also “beautiful in his flagellation, beautiful giving up his spirit, beautiful carrying the cross, beautiful on the cross, [and] beautiful in heaven.”<sup>12</sup> Thus Jesus is paradoxically yet preeminently beautiful in his Crucifixion. Drawing upon the ideas of two twentieth-century theologians, Karl Barth and Hans Urs Von Balthasar, T. Chris Cain comments that “the cross [is] a serendipitous manifestation of the beauty of Christ. The cross, isolated in and of itself, may be viewed as an ugly murder of an innocent man, but when seen in its cosmic scope and in all of its ramifications it is a

*Continued*

9. Lloyd Baugh, *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1997), 112.

10. Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. F. J. Sheed (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1943), 10.27.

11. Jonathan Edwards, *Treatise on the Religious Affections* (1764), in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2, *Religious Affections*, ed. John Smith (New Haven: Yale University, 2009), 298.

12. Augustine, *Ennarations on the Psalms*, Psalm 45, as quoted by Richard Villadesau in “Theosis and Beauty,” *Theology Today* 65 (2008): 187.

CHRIST-FIGURES IN FILM: EXPLORING *BEAUTY AND THE BEAST* *Continued*

beautiful act. God's hidden beauty is revealed as Christ overcomes the ugliness of sin on the cross."<sup>13</sup>

These observations about the beauty of God and the beauty of Jesus Christ and his Crucifixion help explain how Belle serves as a Christ-figure by loving the ugly beast with a genuine beauty that elicits love, thus lifting the curse of sin in the fairy tale. Belle's beauty appears in multiple ways throughout the film: her deep love for learning and invention; the simplicity of her desire for a rose and not more lavish material goods; her willingness to take her father's place as the prisoner of the beast (an act that confounds the beast); her willingness to look past not just the beast's physical appearance but his spiritual ugliness (his self-centeredness, ill temper, and melancholy) and love him for the prince he could be; and finally, her return after being set free to try to save the beast from the murderous Gaston and villagers even though she is putting herself in harm's way.

All of these selfless and generous acts in turn ignite a spark in the beast that ultimately leads to his and everybody else's transformation; they become whole and good—resurrected in a sense—to new life. In the final ballroom dance scene of the film, Belle, the beast, the castle servants, and the villagers are gathered together as one in a restored castle, a scene that calls to mind Jesus' image of the kingdom of God as a banquet; it could serve as a vision of the resurrection. Does not the story of *Beauty and the Beast* shed new light on the story of Jesus Christ's Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection, redeeming human beings from the sin that mars their humanity and restoring them to new life? Does not the story of Jesus Christ shed light on this fairy tale?

The actor who plays Belle in the 2017 remake, Emma Watson, without any reference to Christ, captures the essence of this and even puts a name to it as she explains in an interview:

What's so beautiful about this story as a whole is the idea that Belle is able to see past these extraneous, external, superficial qualities of the Beast. . . . I think she can see in the Beast that there's someone that's fundamentally good that has been damaged and just needs rehabilitation. He is just in need of

*Continued*

13. T. Chris Cain, "Turning the Beast into a Beauty: Toward an Evangelical Theological Aesthetics," *Presbyterion* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 36.

CHRIST-FIGURES IN FILM: EXPLORING *BEAUTY AND THE BEAST* *Continued*

love. . . . She is able to see deeper, and that's one of her special powers. It is her superpower: empathy.<sup>14</sup>

Empathy has been defined as “the capacity to understand or feel what another person is experiencing from within the other person’s frame of reference, i.e., the capacity to place oneself in another’s position.”<sup>15</sup> The New Testament asserts that “God is Love” (1 John 4:8). Does not God, in becoming one with humanity in the Incarnation and embracing human ugliness in the cross, embody divine empathy, which is truly beautiful? As suggested earlier by the quotes from Dostoevsky and Augustine, is not beauty what ultimately moves human beings, makes them whole, “resurrects” them? For Christians, Jesus, as God Incarnate, the “Face of God” and the supreme expression of God in the world, embodies divine beauty.

Consider these questions as you read this book:

- How is Jesus, like Belle, treated as an outsider by the people in his society? Why are both misunderstood and treated with suspicion?
- How does Jesus show empathy and compassion? How does Jesus respond to those who are considered ugly and unlovable by his society? How does this compassion affect not only those he heals but also those around him, including his disciples, ordinary people, and religious authorities?
- What makes both Belle and Jesus truly beautiful? Is it their physical appearance or something else?

Many contemporary scholars believe the Gospels were written in the period thirty to sixty years after Jesus’ death, as the generation of disciples who knew and followed him during his lifetime, witnessed the risen Jesus, and were first to proclaim his message and found Christian communities had begun to pass away.<sup>16</sup> The Gospels were most likely written to address particular situations and issues in the communities to which they were addressed. In this sense, the story of Jesus answered the questions or needs of a given community at a specific moment in time. The Gospel authors brought the story of the life and teachings of Jesus to bear upon their respective Christian communities.<sup>17</sup>

14. Anthony Brezican, “Beyond Beautiful,” *Entertainment Weekly*, February 24/March 3, 2017, 28–29.

15. Paul S. Bellet and Michael J. Maloney, “The Importance of Empathy as an Interviewing Skill in Medicine,” *JAMA* 266, no. 13 (October 2, 1991): 1831–32.

16. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament*, 139–40.

17. *Ibid.*, 140.

The Gospels are all organized around two fundamental issues facing every disciple and every community of believers:

- How should one answer Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?"<sup>18</sup>
- What is demanded or required of Jesus' disciples?

The second question is examined later in this book. The first question derives directly from the community's shared faith in the Resurrection and is the central organizing question for the Synoptic Gospels.<sup>19</sup> When Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do people say that I am?," they give various answers: John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the great prophets of the Old Testament, a new prophet. But Jesus then turns to them and asks, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter responds, "You are the Messiah," but the Gospels clearly intend that this question be posed of every disciple, and that all answer that he is the Messiah, the Christ. But what does this mean?

The word "Messiah," from the Hebrew word *Messiah*, means "the anointed one;" the word "Christ," from the Greek word *Christos*, means the same thing. The concept of "anointed one" is closely tied to the Jewish understanding of prophets, kings, and other significant figures who were anointed with oil as a sign of their having the gift of the divine Spirit.<sup>20</sup> Some Jews at the time of Jesus expected a Christ or Messiah, a specially sent and anointed leader who would come and revive the ancient glory of Jerusalem and restore the Israelites to their rightful place in the political order of things. For Christian disciples living after the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, who had received the Holy Spirit through initiation into the Christian community, the title "Christ" carried a deeper connotation. These Christians believed Jesus had come to save not only Israel, but the whole world. Furthermore, they believed Jesus in some way embodied the presence of the God he proclaimed. The early Christians concluded Jesus was not another holy man or prophet or theologian, but was divine, from God and like God: the human face of God. They would attempt to articulate and express this belief in different ways and language in each Gospel, but all agreed on the central response to the question posed by Jesus. Below is a short synopsis of how each Gospel portrays Jesus' life, identity, and mission.

---

18. Matt. 16:13–20; Mark 8:27–29; Luke 9:18–20. In various forms this question is asked repeatedly throughout the Gospel of John. See especially John 4:29; 6:14, 68; 7:26, 40–44; 8:25; 10:24.

19. Donald L. Gelpi, *Encountering Jesus Christ: Rethinking Christological Faith and Commitment*, Marquette Studies in Theology 65 (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2009), 328–37; and Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 74–75.

20. Christopher McMahon, *Understanding Jesus: Christology from Emmaus to Today* (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2007), 96–108; Gelpi, *Encountering Jesus Christ*, 100–102.

### Reflect and Discuss

In light of the description of Belle in *Beauty and the Beast* above, what are your expectations for a hero or “savior”? Are you sympathetic with those who expect a Messiah that is powerful and strong in a more traditional way? Can you see some correlation between Belle and her “superpower” and what the early Christians experienced in Jesus Christ?

## Mark: The Son of God

The Gospel of Mark begins by proclaiming Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (Mark 1:1).<sup>21</sup> It goes on to identify Jesus with the good news that Jesus came to preach. The question of who Jesus is serves as an organizing issue for this Gospel. Throughout Mark’s Gospel, different groups of people try to figure out who Jesus is and what he is trying to accomplish. When Jesus encounters demons, they always identify him correctly, and therefore Jesus silences them.<sup>22</sup> In Mark’s Gospel, Herod, the king of the Jewish people, wonders who Jesus is (6:13–18) and the scribes and Pharisees continually ask this question of him and one another. Jesus’ question to the disciples is at the literal center of the text (8:27–30). For Mark, Jesus is the presence of the divine life and power in human history. Jesus is sent by God to heal those who are sick in body and soul. Jesus is identified as the one who has power over the seas, winds, and other forces of nature (4:35–41; 6:45–52). These powers explicitly identify him with the divine, as God alone has power over the earth and sky, over body and soul. Mark constantly portrays Jesus as having the power to subdue the forces of chaos. The author of Mark suggests that Christ’s presence in the Christian community still has that power to bring about healing and peace.

Mark’s Gospel opens with the preaching of John the Baptist and his baptism of Jesus (Mark 1:2–11). Before Jesus arrives on the scene, John proclaims that someone greater than himself is coming to Israel and that although John baptizes with water, the one who is coming “will baptize . . . with the holy Spirit” (v. 8). Upon being baptized by John, Jesus has a vision of the skies opening and the “Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him” (v. 10). Jesus then hears a voice proclaim from the heavens, “You are my beloved son; with you I am well pleased” (v. 11). After this the Spirit leads Jesus out into the desert for forty days where he is “tempted by Satan” (v. 13).

21. There is some question as to whether this phrase was present in the original text of Mark (some early manuscripts lack it), but most scholars believe it is original.

22. See Mark 1:24; 3:11; and especially 5:1–20.



This episode conveys several important elements of Mark's understanding of Jesus' identity. First, Jesus comes as a Jewish prophet, but as one who is greater than all those who have preceded him including John the Baptist. Second, the descent of the Spirit establishes his unique relationship with God, and that he is indeed the "beloved" of God. This term signifies something like a family or filial relationship with God. Third, Jesus' baptismal experience confirms John's prediction that Jesus is indeed the Spirit baptizer and therefore he has a power that comes from God alone. Finally, for Mark, Jesus' unique status does not diminish his humanness nor does it free Jesus from the trials, difficulties, and sufferings that human beings experience in this world. On the contrary, the scene ends with Jesus being led into the "desert" by the Spirit to be tempted and tested by Satan himself (vv. 12–13).

Mark's Gospel is also strongly Eucharistic. That is, the narrative foci of the story are the two accounts of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes (6:41 and 8:6) and the account of the Last Supper—the institution of what becomes known as the Eucharist in the Christian community (14:22–25). The centrality of this story makes the paschal mystery the organizing motif of the entire narrative.<sup>23</sup> The Eucharist represents the radical and gratuitous sharing of Jesus' own life: his earthly life, his risen life, and his Spirit. The story of the multiplication of loaves reveals Jesus as the one who offers genuine salvation—the abundance of God's providence—to all those who are willing to receive it. Eucharistic faith also affirms the power of God to raise people from the dead and it is already a participation in the glory of Christ's risen life. The Eucharist also reminds believers they are practically assimilated to Jesus if they live as he lived.<sup>24</sup>

### Reflect and Discuss

Describe some correlations between Mark's understanding of Jesus and Belle as described in this chapter. How are their experiences similar, especially, how they are perceived by their society? What makes them different from others? How do they respond to being different in their society?

## Matthew: The Living Torah

The Gospel of Matthew is less interested than Mark in the newness or uniqueness of Jesus' identity. The author of Matthew tends to view Jesus as the fulfillment of the Torah and the prophets of the Jewish faith. In Matthew, Jesus

23. Gelpi, *Encountering Jesus Christ*, 205–7.

24. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament*, 160–61.

relates to disciples and crowds primarily as a teacher and a giver of the new law. In this Gospel, Jesus gives five major discourses (teachings)<sup>25</sup> on the nature of the reign of God, the requirements for disciples, and the mission of Christian communities. These five discourses are reminiscent of the five books of the Torah; in a sense, in Matthew Jesus promulgates the Christian Torah and therefore acts as the new Moses. These discourses teach disciples what it means to follow Jesus. The story of Jesus' life, ministry, and destiny, particularly the paschal mystery, demonstrate the possibilities and problems of discipleship. So Jesus does not just proclaim a new Torah, but is himself a Torah, a human embodiment of the law. The author of Matthew paints a realistic portrait of what working for the kingdom practically entails: thinking, feeling, and acting with Jesus according to the plan of the Father through the power of the Spirit.

Three key parts of Matthew's Gospel demonstrate its viewpoint about who Jesus is and distinguish it from the other Gospels.

1. **The Genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1:1–17).** This text portrays Jesus as truly human and truly Jewish by putting him in a direct line of descent from Abraham. It also connects Jesus with the story of God's saving relationship with Israel as narrated in the Old Testament. Finally, it introduces the theme of fulfillment because Jesus brings to completion and breaks the succession in a dramatic, new way. Jesus is the Messiah, a miraculous fulfillment and new beginning for the salvation history that began with Abraham.
2. **The Infancy Narrative (1:18–2:23).** This story not only introduces the primary themes of the Gospel—Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham—but also Jesus' birth and early life mirror the life of Israel itself. Jesus himself undergoes a journey into exile in Egypt, then back home to the Promised Land. This journey implies that Jesus himself is metaphorically the New Moses and the new Israel.
3. **Jesus' Conception by the Holy Spirit (1:22–25).** This text corrects the perceived ambiguity in Mark's Gospel about Jesus' relationship with the Spirit by insisting the Spirit relates to Jesus in a special way from the beginning. In Matthew, the baptism by John only reveals this relationship; it does not initiate it. This text also emphasizes Jesus' transcendent origins and divine Sonship by explaining Jesus' unique title in Matthew. In Matthew, Jesus is called "Emmanuel," which means "God is with us" (Matt. 1:23). This revelation will in turn come to its fulfillment in the Resurrection when Jesus promises to be with the disciples to the end (Matt. 28:20).

---

25. The five major teaching passages in the Gospel of Matthew are the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7), the Missionary Discourse (Matt. 10), the Parables of the Kingdom of God (Matt. 13), the Discourse on Living in Community (Matt. 18), and the Eschatological Discourse (Matt. 24–25). See Mark Allan Powell, *Fortress Introduction to the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 61–84.



The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Robert Lehman Collection, 1975

Sandro Botticelli's *The Annunciation* (Florence, ca. 1485-92) captures the moment in which the angel Gabriel proclaims to Mary in Nazareth that she will give birth to a son and name him Jesus (Luke 1:26–38). Though extremely confused and even frightened by this announcement, Mary accepts the word of God.

## Luke–Acts: The Good News of Salvation

The author of Luke produced a two-volume narrative of the origins of Christianity: the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. The first volume recounts Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom, and the second volume recounts the Christian community's proclamation of the risen Christ. The first volume is about the life, message, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, while the second volume is about the coming of the Spirit and its life and activity through the Christian community. Luke is remarkable because he presents an account of the origins of the Christian community that clearly links it with the historical person and work of Jesus of Nazareth.

Throughout these two volumes, Luke also invokes the theme of "fulfillment." For the author of these narratives, however, this implies not just that Jesus is the fulfillment of salvation history as it is revealed in the sacred texts of ancient Israel but also that the fulfillment of Jesus' work and mission is the Christian community, which is commissioned to bring the good news of salvation to the Gentiles and to the ends of the earth. There is a parallel between the movement of Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem in the first volume and the movement of the proclamation from Jerusalem to Rome in the second volume. The collapse of Jerusalem (and with it many people's hopes for the future of Israel) signals the birth and expansion of the gospel throughout the world with the Resurrection and the sending of the Spirit. This theme of parallel movements appears throughout the two texts.

The innovative dimension of Luke's account of the identity of Jesus is most evident in the so-called infancy narrative (Luke 1:5–2:52), which also traces parallel movements. The infancy narrative tells the story of two births: Jesus and John the Baptist. This story sets up a prolonged theological reflection on the relationship between the two and between the two visions of God's judgment on the world that they represent. This parallelism serves two points: first, it shows how both have divinely ordained missions, and, second, it shows Jesus' superiority at every point; John is Elijah, returned to prepare Israel for the Messiah, whereas Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior and Son of God.

The infancy narrative has within it two remarkable hymns or poems that focus on Jesus and seek to interpret his birth and divine mission. These two hymns are known as the "Magnificat" (Luke 1:46–55) and the "Benedictus" (1:68–79).<sup>26</sup> The Magnificat, or the "Canticle (Song) of Mary," consists of Mary singing the praises of God. This song is organized around two major themes. In the first motif, Mary blesses God for what God has done for her (1:47–49). Here Mary draws a parallel between what God has done for her and God's merciful vindication of all the lowly ones who place their confidence in God. This introduces one of the primary themes of Luke's Gospel: God's special care for the lowly and dispossessed as demonstrated by Jesus' preferential care for them. Virtually every verse of the Magnificat has a parallel in the Old Testament. This in turn implies that what God is about to accomplish in Jesus fulfills every promise God has ever made to Israel.

The second major theme in the Magnificat is the juxtaposition of the power of God with those that are powerless and through whom the power of God is displayed. Through Jesus, the powerless ones, literally the "little ones" (Hebrew, *anawim*; Greek, *tapeinoi*), are exalted and favored by God. Mary herself is one such example.<sup>27</sup> For Luke, the God who raises the lowly, and brings down the mighty has now become present in history in the person of Mary's newborn child Jesus. Jesus, as the promised Messiah, is the one who will permanently alter the judgment of the principalities and powers of this world. This Messiah will bring a genuine peace to the world and will inaugurate the rule of justice and a time of prosperity for all people. This message of justice and concern for the poor and outcasts resonates throughout the Gospel in Jesus' words and actions. Luke places the social justice vision of Old Testament prophets and psalmists at the heart of Jesus' proclamation, ministry, and personal life.

The second hymn, the Benedictus, is sung by John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, and builds upon the Magnificat by proclaiming that Jesus comes to fulfill the covenant originally made with Abraham. This text interprets the whole covenant as a sign of divine liberation; Jesus' coming will now allow Israel to serve God in

26. Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, new updated ed., Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 346–55.

27. *Ibid.*, 350–55.

holiness without fear of any enemies. Here Luke puts Jesus' messianic presence in stark contrast to the political and military vision of a number of Jewish groups at the time, whose members expected a messiah figure to liberate the Jewish people and bring peace to the world.<sup>28</sup> Jesus contradicts any expectations that God's peace will be established by coercion or violence. In Jesus, God comes into this world as weak, poor, and homeless, and therefore God utterly identifies with the poor. For Luke, God's power will work through this seeming weakness to transform history. Jesus is announced with traditional images of power and might, but then Luke immediately reverses these images by putting them in the context of a newborn infant lying in a feeding trough. God's power is revealed in a very unexpected and surprising way, a way that, to human beings, looks like weakness. For Luke, this ultimately implies that God's ways are not human ways, and believers must attune themselves to God's ways rather than try to force God into narrow human understandings of reality. What God has in store for the world is different from what the world expects. The best example of this in Luke's Gospel is Jesus' mother, Mary. Mary embodies the kind of disciple needed in the kingdom: she is willing to open herself totally to the power and plan of God, willing to identify with the poor and outcast, willing to accept the mystery of God's plan obediently and without testing it, and continually willing to ponder the person of Jesus Christ in her heart.

The rest of the infancy narrative develops these themes. The story claims that Jesus is conceived not by normal human means but by "the power of the Most High" (Luke 1:35). This remarkable claim immediately reveals his divine origin and mission. The rest of the Gospel employs both discourses and parables to lay out the plan of God for this world (called the reign of God). For Luke, Jesus embodies this plan. To be a follower of Jesus means accepting this plan and accepting the person of Jesus Christ. To be a follower of Jesus Christ means imitating him by thinking, seeing, and feeling as he did. It also implies working directly and practically for the reign of God that he inaugurates.

### Reflect and Discuss

Belle's beauty is described as possessing various dimensions. In Luke's Gospel, which of these traits apply to Jesus? How do the Magnificat and the Benedictus portray God? Can you see similarities between Belle's and Luke's depictions of God?

28. Among the major religious and political factions of the Jews during this period—the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots—the latter two were the most convinced of an imminent messiah. The Essenes believed in the return of a powerful prophetic-type messiah who would usher in the final judgment of the righteous and the wicked, which would result in the end of the world. On the other hand, the Zealots expected the return of a Davidic-type warrior king to liberate Israel and reestablish an Israelite kingdom free from Roman rule. See Mark Allen Powell, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 18–25.

## John: The Word Made Flesh

The Gospel of John is unique in many ways. Presumably written later than the other Gospels, the author's primary theological intent is evident throughout. In John's account, Jesus' unique, divine identity serves as the organizing vision. For the author of John, Jesus' humanity reveals his divinity. Throughout his life and ministry, Jesus displays his divine identity and his awareness of his unique personal relationship with the Father and Spirit. Throughout this story, Jesus seeks to reveal and share this relationship with his followers.

John's focus and unique style of theology is evident in each of the four main sections of his Gospel. The prologue (John 1:1–18) introduces the primary themes of the Gospel, and is examined in greater detail below. The Book of Signs (John 1:19–12:50) offers an extended reflection on the mission and ministry of Jesus, his self-identity, and the nature of genuine Christian discipleship. The Book of Glory (John 13:1–20:31) reflects on the passion, death, and Resurrection of Jesus and investigates the direct implications of these events for the disciples. And lastly, the epilogue (John 21) covers the post-Resurrection period and in particular the forgiveness and commissioning of Peter. Of the numerous texts that provide rich theological reflection, the following discussion focuses on just two, texts that would shape the history of Christian theology: the prologue (John 1:1–18) and Jesus' discussion of his sending the Advocate and relationship to the Father (John 14:15–31; 16:5–33).

John's Gospel does not have an infancy narrative or a genealogy, but it does have a prologue that introduces the main themes of the Gospel and addresses the central theme of much of New Testament Christology. The prologue was probably a hymn that emerged from the Johannine community and its life of prayer and worship. It is one of the most famous and influential texts in the whole of the New Testament for the development of subsequent theology. The prologue deals directly with the identity of Jesus. The first stanza of the hymn refers to Jesus as the "Word" (*Logos* in Greek). Nowhere else in the Gospel does the author refer to Jesus as the Word. But here John, perhaps drawing on the Old Testament wisdom tradition most evident in the Psalms and the book of Proverbs,<sup>29</sup> refers to Jesus as the spoken word of God that creates the world "in the beginning," saves human beings through Jesus' death and Resurrection, and reveals the "glory" that is to come. It is important to remember that the term "Word" needs to be interpreted strictly in the context of the hymn of which it is an integral part. The Word was with God and is identified as God. This demonstrates that Jesus exists "in the beginning" and acts as an agent in the creation process rather than merely observing God or acting on God's behalf.

---

29. Gerald O'Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 38–44.

The hymn goes on to state that Jesus acts as the saving light of all of humanity in a battle between light and darkness that seems to encompass all reality. Jesus' personal life exhibited this struggle between dark forces and the light of God's mystery that shines through Jesus.<sup>30</sup> Jesus, therefore, is the revelation of the divine glory, the divine light. John declares that Jesus is the only Son of God, and that he became "flesh" and "dwelt" (*eskēnōsen*, literally "pitched his tent") with human beings. That Jesus became flesh means he took on all aspects of human life including human vulnerability, weakness, and mortality. For John, though, Jesus' human life does not obscure his deeper identity but serves as a fundamental dimension of it. Jesus' humanity reveals God's glory and makes it explicitly visible to humanity, including humanity in its most limited, fragile, and broken condition. The text goes on to state that, although no one has ever seen God, when human beings see Jesus they see the "real" face of God. The life and mission of Jesus reveals God's own intention to participate in human life, to share in the human struggle, and to deliver the truth to human beings that cannot be accessed any other way. Jesus, who is "at the Father's side" (John 1:18), unveils and represents the deep mystery that is at the heart of reality. This hymn offers a preview of the story. In the ongoing life of the church, this hymn will provide the central "Christological motif" of Christian interpretation of God and God's loving intention toward human beings.

Chapters 14 and 16 in John's Gospel fit into two wider contexts: the Book of Glory and Jesus' "Farewell Discourse" to his disciples.<sup>31</sup> In his Last Supper and Farewell Discourse with his disciples, Jesus expands upon the themes of his unique relationship with the Father, his love and concern for his disciples, and his desire that they should continue to share in his life through taking on his relationship with the Father and the Spirit as their own. In the first part of both chapters, Jesus tells his disciples he is going away so that he can send them an Advocate (or "Paraclete," *paraklētos* in Greek) who will defend them against the "world" (John 14:15–17; 16:7–11): the Holy Spirit. The term "Advocate" is unique to John and seems to mean something like "witness" or "defender," someone who speaks on behalf of another in a court of law.<sup>32</sup> The Advocate will tell them even more about God than Jesus can explain or they can understand now. The Advocate will also unite them with God and one another so they can

---

30. It is important to emphasize that the light/dark metaphor is always and only a reference to the relationship between grace and sin and must never be construed to have racial or ethnic overtones or implications. Sadly, there is a history of misinterpretation of these metaphors to infer that any kind of "darkness" is bad, less human, or unequal to those things identified as "light." For more on the history of this false interpretation and its terrible implications for racism, see James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), and Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon, 1996).

31. Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 352–56.

32. See further Gelpi, *Encountering Jesus Christ*, 371.

## 32 Christ and the Spirit

continue Jesus' mission to the world. Jesus' Farewell Discourse brings to clarity the perspective of the author that the world faces a fundamental struggle between darkness and light. In view of this, Jesus' impending Passion and death will seem to many disciples to be the triumph of darkness over light. For John, though, the paschal mystery is essentially the fulfillment of God's plan to bring light to the whole world. The Spirit will explain this to the disciples when the time comes and will aid the disciples in the absence of Jesus himself to proclaim the good news and continue to participate, like him, in the love of the Father. As the one who sends the Advocate (John 16:7), Jesus again demonstrates his divine status as one who can give the Spirit to others.

Theologically, the central theme of John's Gospel revolves around developing insights and expanding the proclamation of the prologue concerning Jesus' unique relationship to the Father and its consequences for believers.<sup>33</sup> The Farewell Discourse offers one more opportunity for Jesus to express this relationship and its consequences. Jesus says, "I have told you this in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures but I will tell you clearly about the Father" (16:25). Jesus goes on to explain how he came from the Father and will now return to the Father (16:28). He then turns to the disciples and asks them whether they believe this to be true (16:30–31). Not unlike the scenes in all the Gospels where Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" here Jesus is also asking his disciples if they understand clearly his identity and if they have faith in him. The faith they have in him and his message should be the same as they have in God. Jesus assures them that if they have this faith they will have the power to continue his mission and their joy "will be complete" (16:24). In all this, Jesus lays out explicitly, in a way that will guide all future Christian theology, the interrelationship between the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Spirit. John's Gospel dramatizes the intimate connection between Jesus Christ and the Christian understanding of God as Trinity.

### Reflect and Discuss

The Gospels tell a story of the triumph of love over injustice, hate, and violence. How does the fairy tale of *Beauty and Beast* shed new light on the story of Jesus? What stands out as central to both stories? In what ways are they similar? Where do they differ? Does the character of Belle help you to better understand the character of Jesus as he is presented in the Gospels?

---

33. Ibid., 362.



## The Epistles of Paul

This section will focus exclusively on the epistles, or letters, of Paul, not because the other letters have no implicit or explicit theology of the identity of Jesus Christ, but because Paul holds a special place among the New Testament authors. Paul asserts he personally saw the risen Christ—probably the only New Testament writer to have done so. In this encounter, Jesus commissioned him to preach the good news to the whole world (Gal. 1:11–12, 16). Although Paul never meets or has any interactions with the earthly Jesus and makes few allusions or references to his personal life or message in the way that the Gospels do, he does directly experience the risen Christ. So, for Paul, there is never any question as to Jesus' real identity: because Jesus died he must be a real human being like everyone else; but because of Paul's extraordinary experience, in which, he says, "God . . . was pleased to reveal his Son to me" (Gal. 1:15–16), Paul understands Jesus as something other than an ordinary human being. Paul argues that the Resurrection revealed God is working in and through Jesus in a unique and powerful way. The paschal mystery (the Passion, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ), therefore, reveals something new about human beings and about the mystery of God. In this sense, the paschal mystery is the central focus of all of Paul's letters.

Paul reflects in considerable detail on the theological significance of Jesus' Resurrection in light of his own experience and in light of the experience of others that was directly communicated to him. That is, Paul developed his theological account in light of the needs and questions of the Christian communities to which he wrote. Paul's theological vision therefore emerged situationally and pastorally rather than narratively as is the case in the Gospels. He consistently interprets the risen Christ as a continually present reality that affects every dimension of human life. The events of Jesus' death and Resurrection always simultaneously reveal something about the meaning and significance of human lives and serve as a guide for how people should interpret reality and react to events.

It is possible to tease out two (always interconnected) themes that run throughout the Pauline Epistles. One strand expresses, as in the Gospels, Jesus' identity and unique relationship to the Father and the Spirit and his unique fulfillment of the divine plan revealed to Israel. The other strand considers how Jesus's life, death, and Resurrection reveal something about God's plan for human beings and even for all creation. These two strands together determine the identity and mission of Jesus for Paul.

Like the Gospel writers, Paul is Jewish and therefore often looks to the Jewish Scriptures for images and references to help him explain the reality of Jesus. Paul also realizes he must make sense of Jesus Christ for those Gentiles in the Christian community who have little or no understanding of Jewish Scriptures or traditions. For this reason, Paul often draws on hymns or prayers that were known and probably regularly sung or recited by the Christian communities to which he

## 34 Christ and the Spirit

writes.<sup>34</sup> These hymns, probably tied to celebrations for baptism and the Eucharist, reflect the shared faith of the Christian communities, whether the members come from Jewish or Gentile backgrounds. By drawing on these hymns, Paul is helping these communities deepen their understanding of Jesus Christ and the saving plan of God that he reveals. Below are four fundamental images or motifs that run throughout Paul's letters and offer basic insight into Paul's understanding of Jesus Christ and his meaning for humanity.

### The Christological Hymn of Philippians 2:6–11

Who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God something to be grasped.  
Rather, he emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
coming in human likeness;  
and found human in appearance,  
he humbled himself,  
becoming obedient to death,  
even death on a cross.  
Because of this, God greatly exalted him  
and bestowed on him the name  
that is above every name,  
that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bend,  
of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue confess that  
Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

## Jesus Christ as the New Adam

Paul often refers to Jesus as the new Adam (see particularly 1 Cor. 15:22; Rom. 5:12–20). Paul is referring here to the first human in the Old Testament creation accounts, in which God fashions a clay doll and then breathes life into it, creating the first human being (Gen. 2:4–7). The second Adam, Jesus, breathes new life

---

34. New Testament hymns include the “Lukan Canticles” (Luke 1:46–55, 67–79; 2:13–14, 28–32) and several “Pauline” hymns (Phil. 2:6–11; Col. 1:15–20; Eph. 1:3–14; 5:14; 1 Tim. 3:16; 2 Tim. 2:11–13). The earliest Christians would have used these hymns in worship, along with a few standard prayers such as the Lord’s Prayer (Matt. 6:8–13; Luke 11:2–4). These hymns come from a variety of Jewish and early Christian sources and probably were already familiar to the first readers of the New Testament texts. See Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 232–33, 286–89, 489–91.

into humanity, offering it salvation from sin and death. Here Paul is contrasting two types of life: on the one hand, the normal physical and psychological life of human beings, which is often confounded by sin and chaos and ultimately ends in death; and on the other, the fullness of life filled by the Holy Spirit that overcomes the chaos of sin and promises the resurrection from the dead for all who believe.<sup>35</sup> As Paul states: “For just as in Adam all die, so too in Christ shall all be brought to life” (1 Cor. 15:22). Furthermore, Paul and the early Christian communities that personally experienced the Resurrection of Christ and this dramatic outpouring of the Spirit were transformed by it and found in it an abundant and overflowing new source of life and hope (Rom. 5:17, 20). They also were commissioned by the risen Christ to share this experience through preaching and the new form of shared communal life that Paul referred to as the church.

Jesus, as the new or final Adam, also has universal overtones in that the salvation offered by God in Jesus is not just for one religion, race, or generation of people, but is for the whole human race. In this sense, Jesus inaugurates a new era in human history and creates fundamentally new conditions under which all people can live their lives. The designation of Jesus as the new Adam not only implies that Jesus existed in God from the beginning, as mentioned in the Gospels (discussed in more detail below), it also confirms that Jesus as a human being overcomes death and thereby uniquely reveals God’s plan to save all people from death. Paul, like the Gospel writers referring to Jesus as the new David and the new Moses, views Jesus as fulfilling the promises God made to the Jewish people. For Paul, Jesus Christ comes to breathe new life into the whole of humanity and all of creation.

## Jesus Christ as the Kenōsis of God

In one of the earliest and most famous hymns in all of Paul’s letters (Phil. 2:6–11),<sup>36</sup> Paul declares that Jesus, “though he was in the form of God” did not consider that his equality with God was something he needed to hold on to; “rather, he emptied himself” and “humbled himself” to become a human being and, even more, a “slave.” The Greek term for “emptying” used here (*kenōsis*) implies that Jesus represents the literal outpouring of Godself into a human, physical, and historical existence with the goal of raising humans back up to a divine level with God.<sup>37</sup> In Jesus, God’s generosity becomes a kind of self-forgetfulness that

---

35. Gelpi, *Encountering Jesus Christ*, 122–23.

36. See the sidebar for the full text of this hymn.

37. The image of the *kenōsis* or “self-emptying” of Jesus through his Crucifixion signals an early theological interpretation of the paschal mystery concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ. This Christological theme has been used consistently throughout the history of the church as a recognition of God as being present with those who suffer and against their oppressors; see, for example, Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), 299–302. See David Noel Power, *Love without Calculation: A Reflection on Divine*

allows God to enter the sheer vulnerability and fragility of human life and experience even the depths of human weakness and suffering. The hymn goes on to say that, because of this self-emptying, God the Father has made a human name—Jesus—a divine name to which “every knee should bend” and “every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.”

The transformation of the human name into a divine name conveys what is accomplished by the life of Jesus and especially the paschal mystery. Because Jesus is the New Adam—truly human—his transformation implies that all humanity and even creation itself is raised up and exalted in and through him. God’s self-emptying affects not just the self-identity of Jesus but the identity and destiny of all humanity. For Paul, one cannot separate the divine/human identity of Jesus from the saving significance this reality represents for humanity in general. By entering so completely into human experience, God transforms it as well, giving it a new meaning and purpose.

### Reflect and Discuss

Paul’s understanding of Christ and his “power” to save human beings has significant connections with Belle and her power in *Beauty and the Beast*. Consider the relationship between Paul’s Christology and beauty. What connections do you see? How is Christ different from Belle? What more does Christ have? How does their beauty affect others?

## Jesus Christ as the Image of the Invisible God (Col. 1:15–20)

The first stanza of the hymn in Paul’s Letter to the Colossians proclaims that Jesus Christ is “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15).<sup>38</sup> The hymn goes on to state that “all things were created through him and for him” (v. 16). Here

*Kenosis*: “He Emptied Himself; Taking the Form of a Slave,” *Philippians 2:7* (New York: Crossroad, 2005), 63–118; Gerald F. Hawthorne, “The Imitation of Christ: Discipleship in Philippians,” in *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker, McMaster New Testament Studies (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 163–80. For a historical analysis of the theme of *kenōsis* see Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), esp. 189–97.

38. There is a large scholarly debate concerning the composition, authorship, and dating of the Letter to the Colossians. The letter is undoubtedly Pauline in its overall message and style, meaning it follows closely enough to the rhetorical and theological style of Paul’s other writings to be viewed at least as having come from one of his disciples, possibly Timothy or a later leader closely connected to the Pauline school. Brown, among other scholars, considers Colossians a “pseudonymous” work, meaning it was likely penned by someone other than Paul though borrowing his name and speaking from the authority of Paul. More recently, other scholars, such as Luke Timothy Johnson, have argued for a more direct influence between Paul and the Letter to the Colossians later

is one of the earliest declarations of the preexistence of Jesus (a theme that is echoed in the opening hymn of the Gospel of John) and that Jesus shared in the act of creation with God. The hymn goes on to explain why this knowledge is important for human beings: Jesus comes “to reconcile” the world to God (v. 20). In other words, God’s divine presence in the human person of Jesus not only reveals God’s saving intentions toward humanity, but accomplishes this reunion. This reiterates the ongoing theme in Paul that the way Jesus is related to God has implications not only for Jesus’ identity but for all human beings as well. The hymn proclaims that God not only desires to dwell with human beings, but that God desires that human beings participate in God’s own life as well—another theme echoed in the prologue to John’s Gospel.

## Jesus Christ and the Spirit

Paul consistently identifies the risen Christ as the one who both gives the Spirit to disciples and in turn is given to believers by the Spirit.<sup>39</sup> The complete interrelationship and mutual giving of the risen Christ and the Spirit finds echoes in the Gospels and completes their accounts. Paul, however, offers an even more startling claim. On two occasions Paul identifies the risen Christ directly with the Spirit. In the aforementioned passage discussing Jesus as the last Adam, Paul concludes with the claim, “The first man, Adam, became a living being, the last Adam a life-giving Spirit” (1 Cor. 15:45). Here Paul seems to be claiming a functional relationship or identity between Jesus and the Spirit in that both give life to humanity. In other words, Jesus has the fullness of the Spirit and mediates or gives it to human beings in a way that transforms and enlivens them analogous to how the “first Adam” mediated physical and psychic life to the rest of humanity.

On another occasion, Paul states that “the Lord is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:17–18). Paul often uses the term “the Lord” to refer to the risen Christ, although on this occasion he is using it to refer to his Spirit. In this context, Paul is comparing the story of Moses in the book of Exodus (34:29–35)—and the covenant that he represents—with the new reality brought about through Jesus Christ. Moses witnessed the glory of God and his face shone in a way that prevented the Israelites from looking directly at him. But that glory eventually faded away. Paul goes on to claim that the glory revealed by Jesus in the Resurrection will

---

in his life, likely during his imprisonment. According to this view, Paul would have been involved in the message and teaching of the letter even if a scribe physically wrote the letter. In either case, as Mark Allan Powell helpfully argues, the theology, or specifically, the Christology presented in this letter conforms to Paul’s understanding of Jesus Christ found throughout his letters. See Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 610–17; Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament*, 347–58; and Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*, 360–63.

39. See further, James D. G. Dunn, *The Christ and the Spirit*, vol. 1, *Christology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 113–67, and Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament*, 103–5.

not fade away, but will in fact grow and develop continually in the hearts of believers until the day that they share directly in the glory of God. As Paul states, “All of us, gazing with unveiled face on the glory of the Lord, are being transformed . . . from glory to glory” (2 Cor. 3:18).

The identification of Jesus here with the Spirit signifies that the Resurrection reveals the true and complete fullness of Jesus’ life. Jesus is and always has been part of the life of God, and this vital shared life is fully revealed in the practical cooperation of Jesus and the Spirit in enabling the saving plan of God. Jesus and the Spirit together not only reveal something radically new about God, but convey this reality by transforming all those who believe; believers are caught up and transformed by this revelation. For Paul, after the Resurrection, the work of the Spirit and the work of Jesus coincide in directing humanity on the same path as Jesus: from life and death to resurrection and glorified life with God. For Paul, Jesus’ identity and its effects on human beings always intersect.

## CHRIST-FIGURES IN FILM

### Reel to Real

*Greg Zuschlag*

Despite their iconic power, Christ-figures are not limited only to characters projected on the big screen or those who fill the pages of fictional narratives but also can be found in real life. In this century, exemplary Christ-figures include Mohandas K. Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day, Cesar Chavez, Mother Theresa, and Oscar Romero and other martyrs of the El Salvador civil war.

But a Christ-figure does not have to be an individual person; communities of people can and often do represent Christ as well. One example of communities functioning as Christ-figures might be the L’Arche movement founded in 1964 by Canadian Catholic philosopher, theologian, and humanitarian, Jean Vanier (1928–).<sup>40</sup> L’Arche (French for “the Ark”) began when Vanier and Father Thomas Philippe invited two men with intellectual disabilities to live in community with them. In 2018, there were 147

*Continued*

40. See [https://www.larche.org/en\\_US](https://www.larche.org/en_US); <https://www.larcheusa.org/>; <http://www.jean-vanier.org/en/home>. For a good, short autobiographical treatment of Vanier, see Michael W. Higgins, “Messy Love: Jean Vanier’s l’Arche,” *Commonweal* 136, no. 9 (2009): 10–14, [http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1031&context=mission\\_pub](http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1031&context=mission_pub). The movement includes 165 ecumenical and interfaith, faith-based communities in thirty-seven countries around the world (eighteen in the United States).

CHRIST-FIGURES IN FILM: REEL TO REAL *Continued*

L'Arche communities in thirty-five countries, supporting about five thousand adults with disabilities.<sup>41</sup> Two types of people form these communities: those with special cognitive disabilities, called "core members," and "those who come to share life with them" in community and accompany them in the "activities of daily life: creating home and supporting core members in sharing their gifts within the house and the larger community." These people, called "assistants," dedicate themselves to building "relationships of mutual care and support with persons with disabilities."<sup>42</sup>

What makes L'Arche a compelling communal Christ-figure? Do not Vanier and his "disciples," the assistants, act like Christ in their care, compassion, and the sacrifice of their "normal" life for those "core members" with whom they live? Do not the "able-bodied" assistants "save" the disabled people who suffer from their physical and cognitive limitations and who have often been rejected, alienated, and abused because of their physical condition by the larger society? According to Vanier and his fellow assistants, such an understanding of the direction of "salvation" is reversed, or in a more complex manner, the community itself as constituted by those with special disabilities and those with "ordinary" disabilities—like the majority of us "wounded" yet highly functional persons—create something like the biblical covenants of old and the covenant remade in Jesus Christ: this is what makes a Christ-like salvation truly manifest. A fundamental principle underlying the model and mission of L'Arche's Charter states, "Weakness and vulnerability in a person, far from being an obstacle to union with God, can foster it. It is often through weakness, recognized and accepted, that the liberating love of God is revealed."<sup>43</sup> This belief, which obviously applies to the core members, when seen with the eyes of Christ, actually applies more to those of us whom society sees as superior, strong, and invulnerable; virtual superheroes in the eyes of all and especially those who are considered (and consequently often consider themselves) weak, needy, and worthless.

Theologian John Swinton describes L'Arche as practicing a form of Christology: "Here we see clearly that the weak become strong and that the foolishness of this world turns out to be the glory of God. In Jesus,

*Continued*

41. See the L'Arche USA website for more information: <https://www.larcheusa.org/who-we-are/larche-international-2/>.

42. <https://www.larcheusa.org/participate/become-an-assistant/>.

43. L'Arche Charter, [http://www.larche.ca/en/members/vision\\_future/larche\\_charter/](http://www.larche.ca/en/members/vision_future/larche_charter/).

CHRIST-FIGURES IN FILM: REEL TO REAL *Continued*

Vanier sees a paradigm of strength in weakness." Swinton quotes Vanier: "Jesus is the starving, the parched, the prisoner, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the dying. Jesus is the oppressed, the poor. To live with Jesus is to live with the poor. To live with the poor is to live with Jesus." Swinton concludes, "In the weakness and vulnerability of the profoundly intellectually disabled Vanier discovers Jesus. If such lives are truly fully human, then 'being human' can no longer be understood in terms of power, strength, intellect and ability. To be with the intellectually disabled is to realize what it means to be human." As Vanier says, "Growth begins when we begin to accept our own weakness."<sup>44</sup>

Such observations open the way to understand L'Arche communities as prototypical Christ-figures in much the same way that Belle is presented in this book's discussion. Vanier describes the work of L'Arche as a deeply personal and relational form of imitating Christ. Vanier acknowledges how difficult it is for the majority of us to be "constantly close to people who are weak and in pain, whose limits and handicaps are irremediable, and to be with them as friends." We resist acknowledging our own "limits, vulnerability, and weakness, the places of violence, of fear and of anguish." Vanier suggests, "Many in our societies reject people with disabilities, unable to see the person and his or her value underneath the handicap."<sup>45</sup> Vanier sees L'Arche as a "place of friendship and of a communion of hearts, where we live in covenant relationships together. It is not just about things *for* people with disabilities, but to be with them, to create a home with them. . . . We transform them but they also transform us."<sup>46</sup>

Vanier's reflections on the L'Arche communities convey the Christian perspective on what constitutes genuine holiness and Christian discipleship. For Christians, the goal of human life is to embody Christ in today's broken yet healable world, making the Incarnation, the Word made flesh, continually present in the here and now, opening the way for all persons to meet the living Christ and be transformed ("saved") by him in new, unexpected, and refreshing ways.

Having read this chapter, consider the following questions:

*Continued*

44. John Swinton, "A Embodied Theology," Jean Vanier: Transforming Hearts, [http://www.jean-vanier.org/en/bis\\_message/a\\_theology/a\\_embodied\\_theology](http://www.jean-vanier.org/en/bis_message/a_theology/a_embodied_theology).

45. Jean Vanier, "Towards a Transformational Reading of Scripture," *Comment Magazine* 30, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 60.

46. *Ibid.*



CHRIST-FIGURES IN FILM: REEL TO REAL *Continued*

- How does Jesus change or even reverse our ordinary understanding of power, strength, intellect, and ability? Why does Jesus seem to be drawn so much to the weak and vulnerable? What does this tell us about his fundamental mission and message? How is Jesus transformed by his interaction with weak and vulnerable people in this society? How are they transformed by him?
- For the New Testament authors, why does Jesus' proclamation of the good news lead to his arrest and execution? What does this say about Jesus' mission and his humanity? What does it say about God if Jesus is truly in a unique relationship with God?

## For Further Exploration

Identify other reel (fictional) and real (nonfictional) Christ-figures. One place to start is the Wikipedia entry on fictional Christ-figures: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christ\\_figure](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christ_figure). Note, however, that this entry contains a warning: "This section may contain indiscriminate, excessive, or irrelevant examples." How would you use this chapter to develop criteria for discerning who counts as an authentic Christ-figure as opposed to a "false" or Antichrist-figure?<sup>47</sup>

For further exploration, consider what criteria are most important in identifying Christ-figures. Try to identify additional individual and communal Christ-figures. Some often overlooked figures worth considering are

- Jaime Escalante, a real person who is the basis for the protagonist of the film, *Stand and Deliver* (1988)
- Susan Burton, coauthor of the autobiography *Becoming Ms. Burton: From Prison to Recovery to Leading the Fight for Incarcerated Women*<sup>48</sup>
- Roy Batty and police officer K in *Blade Runner* (1992) and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017)

47. See the sidebar on Superman in chapter 2 of this book for discussion of the myth of redemptive violence. See also Russell Dalton, "(Un)making Violence through Media Literacy and Theological Reflection: Manichaeism, Redemptive Violence, and Hollywood Films," *Religious Education* 110, no. 4 (July–September 2015): 395–408 and Anton Karl Kozlovic, "The Structural Characteristics of the Cinematic Christ-Figure," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* (2005), <https://web.archive.org/web/20050223221011/http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art8-cinematicchrist.html>.

48. Susan Burton and Cari Lynn, *Becoming Ms. Burton: From Prison to Recovery to Leading the Fight for Incarcerated Women* (New York: New Press, 2017).

### Review Questions

1. What is the meaning of the term *Christology*?
2. What is the paschal mystery and what is its significance for Christology?
3. For whom was the New Testament written?
4. List some of the major themes and images from the Old Testament that the New Testament authors use to interpret Jesus.
5. What are the Gospels and how are they unique in the New Testament?
6. What is the fundamental question at the heart of each Gospel?
7. How do each of the Gospel writers answer that fundamental question?
8. What is unique about Paul's perspective on Jesus Christ?
9. For Paul, what is the relationship between Jesus and Adam?
10. What is *kenōsis* and how does it relate to Paul's understanding of Jesus?
11. How does Paul identify the relationship between Jesus and the Spirit?

### Discussion Questions

1. For the authors of the New Testament, why is it important that Jesus was a fully human person?
2. Why are there four different Gospels rather than one story of the life of Jesus, and what do we learn from their unique perspectives?
3. Given that Jesus came to preach "good news," why, according to the Gospels, was Jesus publicly executed? How does Paul understand the significance of Jesus' death?
4. Compare and contrast the prologue of the Gospel of John with Paul's notion of *kenōsis*.
5. Would Jesus' life still have the same meaning without the Resurrection? Why or why not?

### Additional Resources

#### PRINT

- Brown, Raymond E. *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*. New updated ed. Anchor Bible. New York: Doubleday, 1993.
- . *An Introduction to New Testament Christology*. New York: Paulist, 1994.
- Dungan, David L. *A History of the Synoptic Problem: The Canon, the Text, the Composition, and the Interpretation of the Gospels*. 1st ed. Anchor Bible. New York: Doubleday, 1999.

- Gelpi, Donald L. *Encountering Jesus Christ: Rethinking Christological Faith and Commitment*. Marquette Studies in Theology, no. 65. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2009.
- Gutierrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. Rev. ed. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988.
- Hellwig, Monika. *Jesus the Compassion of God*. Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1983.
- Johnson, Elizabeth A. *Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology*. New York: Crossroad, 1990.
- Johnson, Luke Timothy. *Living Jesus: Learning the Heart of the Gospel*. Reprint ed. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2000.
- . *The Writings of the New Testament*. 3rd ed. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010.
- Longenecker, Richard N., ed. *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament*. McMaster New Testament Studies. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996.
- McMahon, Christopher. *Understanding Jesus: Christology from Emmaus to Today*. Rev. ed. Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2013.
- Powell, Mark Allan. *Fortress Introduction to the Gospels*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998.
- Power, David Noel. *Love without Calculation: A Reflection on Divine Kenosis: "He Emptied Himself, Taking the Form of a Slave," Philippians 2:7*. New York: Crossroad, 2005.
- Reid, Barbara. *Taking up the Cross: New Testament Interpretation through Latina and Feminist Eyes*. Rev. ed. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007.
- Schussler Fiorenza, Elizabeth. *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. New York: Crossroad, 1983.
- . *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet; Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*. 2nd ed. London: T&T Clark, 2015.
- Wright, N. T. *Christian Origins and the Question of God*. 1st North American ed. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992.
- . *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is*. Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015.

#### OTHER MEDIA

- The Early Christians: The Incredible Odyssey of Early Christianity*. DVD video. 2 discs. San Francisco: Ignatius, 2011.
- The Face: Jesus in Art*. DVD video. Written by James Clifton. [United States]: WNET, distributed by PBS, 2001.