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Introduction: From Sin to Perfection

> So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner."
>
> – John 9:24

> For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.
>
> – Hebrews 4:15

"We know that this man is a sinner." Such was the conclusion of some Jewish leaders about Jesus as they sought to make sense of the healing of the man born blind in John 9. Yes, Jesus had healed the man, but Jesus had also violated the Sabbath law in the process. Was he from God, or was he a sinner? How could someone claiming to be from God violate God's own law? He must be a sinner. This narrative from John 9 fits with other passages in the New Testament where Jesus is viewed as sinful in one way or another. Was he not born in sin out of wedlock? Did he not receive baptism from John, a baptism of repentance for sin? Did he not violate the Jewish law repeatedly during his public ministry? And was he not put to death in the most shameful, sinful, and cursed fashion imaginable? From birth to death, Jesus arguably transgressed into the realm of sin. His opponents could understandably accuse Jesus of leading people astray, of blasphemy, of violating God's law, of denigrating the Temple, of challenging the teachings of the duly appointed religious authorities, of causing trouble with Rome. A sinner indeed. A sinner in word and deed.

And yet. "We have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin." Such was the conclusion of many early Jewish

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Christians[1] reflecting on the life of Jesus as they sought to make sense of one whom they had come to believe was God's messiah, and yet one who had been put to death only to be raised again by God to new life. This was not the kind of messiah they had expected. He was, admittedly, at times a scandalous figure who had challenged the religious leaders. But he taught and healed with authority. And if God had raised him from the dead, then surely he must be the Christ of God, the Son of God, the Son of David, the Son of Man, the Lamb of God, the Word made flesh, the . . . words failed to grasp all that he must be for those who believed that Jesus had come from God and had returned to God. He suffered and died like a man, but God raised him up. He was tested and tempted like us, but he was perfectly righteous to the end, even as he died a sacrificial death on a cross. Therefore God has exalted him. He must be perfectly sinless, like God, for how else could he be raised to sit at the right hand of God in triumph? How else could one account for his powerful words and actions? Why else would God

[1] A brief word about nomenclature and terminology is important here. It has become relatively commonplace, especially in more popular discourse, to speak of "Judaism" and "early Christianity" as if these terms were and are relatively clear. We must avoid the danger of anachronism in presuming that there was a clear distinction between "Judaism" and "Christianity" much before the second or third century CE, namely, any time before Gentile Christianity became the dominant expression of Christian faith. If the correspondence between the Pliny and the emperor Trajan is any indication (Pliny, *Letters* 10.96-97; c. 112 CE), the Roman authorities began to see Christians as a non-Jewish religious sect only near the beginning of the second century CE. During the first couple of generations of Jewish Christians (or Christian Jews) the attitude attributed to Gallio, the Roman governor of the province of Achaia from 51 to 52 CE, was perhaps more typical, as Luke records Gallio's response to non-Christian Jews seeking to charge the Jewish-Christian Paul of violating the Jewish law: "Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to the Jews, 'If it were a matter of crime or serious villainy, I would be justified in accepting the complaint of you Jews; but since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves; I do not wish to be a judge of these matters'" (Acts 18:14–15). This process, this "parting of the ways," took place in different ways at different times in different places. See especially J.D.G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways: Between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1991); S. Wilson, *Related Strangers: Jews and Christians, 70–170 C.E* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2004); D. Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); and A.H. Becker and A.Y. Reed, eds., *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007). Dunn locates the basic parting after the Jewish War of 66–70 CE, while Wilson sees the Bar Kochba revolt of 132–135 CE as marking a fundamental break, and both Boyarin and Becker and Reed emphasize ongoing interaction and blurred boundaries between Jews and Christians, especially in late antiquity. See also the extensive discussions in O. Skarsaune and R. Hvalvik, eds., *Jewish Believers in Jesus: The Early Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), and M. Jackson-McCabe, ed., *Jewish Christianity Reconsidered: Rethinking Ancient Groups and Texts* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007).

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redeem him in so dramatic a fashion? Surely he must have divine origins. Sinless indeed. Perfect in deed and word.

So begins our exploration of how Jesus came to be viewed as perfectly sinless in early Christianity. Why did opponents of Jesus accuse him of being a sinner? What did they mean with this charge? How did the early followers of Jesus come to believe that in fact Jesus was sinless, a perfect embodiment of God in the flesh? What did they mean by their claims that Jesus was like us in every way, yet without sin? The purpose of this book is to examine and to answer these questions, questions that quite simply have not been addressed before in any in-depth manner.[2] Simply put, how did Jesus come to be viewed as sinless? Put more complexly, can we trace the process by which Jesus went from sinful transgressor to perfectly divine sacrifice for human sin? To describe this progression is to show how Jesus went from scandalous human prophet to perfect divine envoy. As this book unfolds, we will see the various ways in which Jesus the transgressor yields to Jesus the sinless, how Jesus as the friend of sinners becomes the perfect expression of the link between human and divine, and how Jesus the lawbreaker becomes the embodiment of righteous obedience on the path to God. This is paradoxically both a unique path and yet an exemplary path. But paradox certainly defines how Christians came to speak of Jesus in the formative period of Christian faith, fully human and fully divine, a paradoxical mystery that remains with us to the present day.

[2] Surprisingly scant literature exists on the sinlessness of Jesus in early Christianity. Most of what has been written addresses the topic from the stance of dogmatic theology, typically presuming the sinlessness of Jesus as a theological given. Scholars have perhaps understandably been reluctant to discuss how Jesus came to be viewed as sinless, since even to pose the question might be seen as implying that Jesus was less than perfect and hence less than divine. The only major work on the sinlessness of Jesus is the nineteenth-century apologetic study by C. Ullmann (d. 1865), *Die sündlosigkeit Jesu. Eine apologetische betrachtung,* published originally in a shorter form in the series *Studien und Kritiken* in 1828, then as a book in 1846 (Friedrich Perthes). It went on to become a popular book, going through seven editions (the final edition in 1863), and was translated into English in 1870 as *The Sinlessness of Jesus: An Evidence for Christianity* (trans. S. Taylor, Edinburgh: T&T Clark). Much more recently, G. Carey offers a brief "Interlude" on "The Sinless Jesus?" in his book *Sinners: Jesus and His Earliest Followers* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 97–105, where he raises the problem of discussing moral growth in the human Jesus. There are also several shorter articles that will enter into our discussion along the way. G. Anderson's book, *Sin: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), provides an important discussion of shifts in the development of metaphors for sin from that of burden to that of debt, but does not directly address the question of the sinlessness of Jesus. P. Fredricksen's *Sin: The Early History of an Idea* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012) traces early Christian understandings of sin and atonement primarily from the second through the fifth centuries, including attention to the attitudes of Jesus and Paul toward sin.

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In the chapters that follow we will undertake a journey into the emerging worlds of early Christianity in its Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts. These worlds were anything but neat and orderly. Like life today, these worlds were messy and complicated, full of tensions and compromises amid firm convictions about God. The Jewish world was characterized by a dynamic and vigorous conversation among competing religious groups and leaders, all of them passionate about the will of God for God's people. It was onto this stage that Jesus emerged as a small-town Galilean prophet who aligned himself first with the fiery and charismatic John the Baptist, a preacher of repentance. But did this include repentance also for Jesus? It was in this setting that Jesus launched his own public ministry, gathering followers, associating with figures of scandal and sin – tax collectors, prostitutes, the mentally ill, criminals, and poor uneducated fishermen. If he had come to seek out the lost, he had certainly found the right people, even if it offended the religious authorities of the status quo. Was Jesus also offending God? As Jesus pressed on in his ministry, criticizing not only the religious leaders but the operation of the Jerusalem Temple itself, he became a pesky threat in the eyes of the Romans charged with maintaining civic order, and it grew clearer that the most expedient way to deal with this wayward prophet was to arrest him and make an example of him. Execute him. And so they did. Had God actually forsaken him?

With Jesus crucified, dead, and buried, it seemed that this was the end of the short-lived story of Jesus. Such was certainly the conviction of those who sought his demise. And how could his followers disagree? He was dead and gone. The account from Luke 24 of the disciples on the road to Emmaus shows this attitude clearly enough. Luke 24:13–32 provides us with the only window we have onto the world of the disciples after the death of Jesus, but before they came to believe in his resurrection from the dead. It is a remarkable scene. Two disciples were walking on the road to Emmaus, a village not far from Jerusalem. A stranger joined them and accompanied them on the way. The omniscient reader knows that this is no stranger, but the risen Jesus. The disciples in the story, however, are kept from recognizing him. The hiddenness of the risen Jesus will make his self-revelation all the more astonishing at the end of the story. He asks them what they are discussing, and they express surprise that he seems unaware of the events that have just transpired. "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" (24:18). And when this risen Jesus plays dumb, and asks "What things?," their response is most telling.

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> They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." (Luke 24:19–21)

They dutifully report the tragic crucifixion of Jesus. But they also express what they *had hoped* before he was put to death. They *had hoped* that Jesus was the one to redeem Israel, to restore Israel to its former glory, to usher in the kingdom of God that would reverse the sad state of affairs under Roman occupation. They *had hoped* that this mighty prophet would bring redemption to the people of God. But they no longer hoped for this. He had been put to death. Their hopes had died with him on the cross. The last thing they expected was his being raised from the dead, especially in light of the horrible and definitive way in which the Romans had put him to death. The only sense they could make of his death was in tragic terms. Another prophet had come, and another prophet had died. Another Jewish hope had been dashed.

Out of this somber scene, of course, Luke crafts a dramatic revelation of the risen Jesus to these two disciples. Jesus shifts from playing one who knew nothing about what had taken place to one who now knows everything about these events, including their significance in light of the Jewish scriptures. And so the risen Jesus enlightens them with what the early Christians eventually came to believe. "'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?'" (Luke 24:25–26). This is a remarkable statement that Luke has put on the lips of the risen Jesus. The immediate appeal is to the Jewish scriptures and their interpretation, and not just any interpretation, but a radically new interpretation. Was it not indeed necessary for the messiah to suffer, die, and be raised from the dead? The answer, of course, is "No!" The only thing that made this course of events "necessary" was because these were the events that actually unfolded. All that was truly necessary, from the perspective of the two disciples, was that as the messiah Jesus would redeem Israel. And that did not include his death! But die he did, and so in light of the resurrection the early Christians had to make sense of this promising life and senseless death. They had to find meaning in a death that appeared to be filled only with the meaning of broken hopes and dreams.

Renewed meaning comes for the disciples only in light of resurrection (see John 20:9; 1 Cor. 15:14). When the risen Jesus breaks bread with the

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two disciples, they recognize him, and he vanishes from their sight. Had this been real? Had this actually happened to them? Their experience is self-confirming: "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32). The risen Jesus had now restored their hope and rekindled their faith that the kingdom would not be far off. At the beginning of Luke's second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, the disciples even press the risen Jesus on when all these wonderful things will take place. It is the first thing the disciples ask him about when he appears to them: "Lord, is this the time that you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). Far from a failed prophet, Jesus turns out to be a crucified and risen prophet in whom God has prevailed over death itself. As for the timing of the restoration of the kingdom? – all in God's good time: "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority" (Acts 1:7). Why did Jesus have to die? For Luke, in retrospect Jesus died in order to fulfill scripture. He died so that he could be raised from the dead. Why did he have to die? Because, in fact, he died.

The death of Jesus became the fulcrum for all subsequent Christian theology as people of faith would wrestle and struggle with the meaning and significance of his death in light of his resurrection. This was so for the earliest Christians, and it remains the case today. As we will see in the chapters that follow, one of the most important ways in which the earliest Christians came to understand the death of Jesus was in terms of an atoning sacrificial death for sin and for sinners. This was not the only way to appropriate the meaning of Jesus' death. Luke and Paul, for example, could understand his death in other ways as well.[3] But the notion of Jesus as an unblemished sacrifice to atone for human sinfulness made sense to the earliest Jewish Christians, who were well aware of the sacrificial imagery associated with the Jerusalem Temple. Thus, it is no real surprise to find Paul referring to Jesus as "our Passover sacrifice" (1 Cor. 5:7), the Gospel of John having John the Baptist bear witness to Jesus as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29), or the Epistle to the Hebrews envisioning Jesus as the high priest who offers

[3] Scholarship on the death of Jesus is, of course, immense. For a fundamental orientation to the Gospel accounts of Jesus' death, see R. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave,* 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1994). See also J. Carroll and J. Green, eds., *The Death of Jesus in Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendricksen, 1995); S. Patterson, *Beyond the Passion: Rethinking the Death and Life of Jesus* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2004); and S. McKnight, *Jesus and His Death: Historiography, the Historical Jesus, and Atonement Theory* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005).

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himself up as a perfect sacrifice (Heb. 4:14–5:4). From this perspective of a crucified and risen Jesus, his death could be efficacious because he was sinless.

This understanding of Jesus as sinless was retrojected back on Jesus' death, life, baptism, and birth, all in light of belief in the resurrection. In the chapters that follow we will trace this process of "perfecting" Jesus, turning this "sinful" prophet (at least in the eyes of many in his day) into a "sinless" human being, indeed a divine human, the Son of God. We will also explore some questions that arise in our own contemporary appropriations of this conviction so central to Christian theology. Can Jesus be truly fully human if he does not experience human sinfulness himself? Despite what the Gospels tell us, can he, in fact, be like us in every respect if he does not know shame or guilt or forgiveness in his own life? Or to put the question another way, does a truly human Jesus need to be saved from perfection? Might the perfection and sinlessness of Jesus be better understood as metaphors rather than as ontological statements that allow him to be co-eternal with God as the second member of the Trinity? If we want to continue to use the language of perfection, what might the notion of Jesus as a transgressor teach us about his identity as a Son of God?

We will begin our exploration in the next chapter by clearing some ground and discussing how we approach the New Testament traditions, and especially the Gospels, in a way that is open to both faith and critical scholarship. These approaches to the Gospels in terms of historical critique are commonplace among scholars, but remain not widely understood among nonspecialists. My hope in this chapter is to make clear some of my own critical presumptions from the outset.

I will then turn my attention to a discussion of the meanings of "sin" and "perfection" in the early Christian worlds. A taxonomy of these terms involves more than word studies. Rather, it involves "world studies." What kind of moral worlds do terms associated with sin and perfection evoke? How do the Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts of earliest Christianity help to shape our understanding? What ranges of meaning were invoked when someone was called a sinner (as Jesus was in John 9) or when someone claimed to be blameless (as Paul claimed for himself in Philippians 3)? This taxonomy will help to set the context for understanding the claims and counterclaims made about Jesus in regard to sin and perfection.

The heart of the book (Chapters 4–9) examines what, for lack of a better term, I would label as four "moments" in the life of Jesus. We will

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focus on his birth, baptism, ministry, and death. Clearly, the birth, baptism, and death of Jesus are far more "moments" than is the public ministry of Jesus. What stands out for me in each of these moments is how Jesus could be viewed as both sinner and sinless. In the birth story of Jesus we find clear evidence of scandal in connection with his birth. Even Joseph believed Mary had acted immorally, and so he sought to divorce her (Matt. 1:19). Yet in early Christian theology the birth becomes the signal moment of Jesus' divine identity, a virgin birth. Similarly, the baptism story shows Jesus going to be baptized by John the Baptist, who was openly baptizing people for repentance of sins (Mark 1:4). Why, then, was Jesus getting baptized? We will see that while Mark reports the baptism in a fairly straightforward manner, the other Gospels dance around this potentially embarrassing episode. In the end the baptism of Jesus will show him fulfilling all righteousness by the time the evangelists are done with the story.

The public ministry of Jesus will occupy us for three chapters, as we pay attention to scandals of his ministry in relation to family, friends, and faith. Jesus broke social norms in relation to family responsibilities. He associated with the wrong kinds of friends. His understanding of the Jewish faith caused the religious leaders to seek his death. And yet for his earliest followers Jesus in fact redefines family, friends, and faith in radical terms. Indeed, Jesus ends up redefining sin itself in the process. Jesus appears here as sinfully perfect, or as a faithful transgressor.

The last "moment" concerns the death of Jesus. The death of Jesus was a tragic event for his followers. The opponents of Jesus no doubt felt some degree of vindication on his execution. This would-be prophet who was leading the people astray had finally been dealt with in the most severe manner possible. God's judgment had finally been meted out through the hands of Roman justice. All that could be done by the followers of Jesus was to wring their hands and wonder at what might have been had he not died. They had hoped he would redeem Israel, but such hopes were now crushed. They viewed him as a righteous martyr, one who was wrongly put to death. But perfect? Sinless? No such language had ever left their lips. He was a man, flesh and blood, like them. But he was a man with a deep and vital connection to God; he was a righteous man. They experienced him as a man who led them to see and experience God in new ways. And now all they had were memories of his dynamic teachings and actions.

All of these "moments" take on a radical new look in light of the resurrection faith that bursts suddenly on the scene a few days after the

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death of Jesus. His followers had thought he was dead and gone, but now they believed him to be raised from the dead by God, vindicated, alive, and now sitting on the right hand of God preparing the heavenly realm for them, preparing to usher in the ultimate kingdom of God. This belief forced a complete reevaluation of his death, his ministry, his baptism, and his birth. And so the followers of Jesus began to tell a new story, a story of one who was born in scandal to save his people from their sins; a story of one who was baptized with water who would in turn baptize with the Spirit; a story of one who violated the beliefs and practices of the religious leaders of the day, one who would challenge notions of sin and perfection; a story of one whose way of life resulted in his sudden death by crucifixion, a life now vindicated by God in the resurrection, at least for those who would come to believe it.

Such are the moments we will explore in the pages that follow. And at the end of this study we will need to consider some difficult questions. Can Jesus be truly human apart from the experience of sin? What does it even mean to talk about Jesus as sinless? Did he have the capacity to sin? If not, then how is his humanity like ours? Must the human Jesus ever be sacrificed anew upon the altar of the divine Jesus? What might it mean to recover the transgressive Jesus for the twenty-first century? Does Jesus need to be saved from perfection in order to be fully human? Or does Jesus exemplify human perfection, and if so, how? Is such perfection attainable in this life?[4] How are people of the twenty-first century to make sense of the ontological claims made about Jesus by Christians from centuries gone by, especially claims that ossified Jesus into a perfect incarnation of the

[4] From the earliest Christian writers onward we find language addressing movement toward perfection and divinization in the Christian life. Already the Apostle Paul can say that "all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor. 3:18), and the celebrated passage from 2 Peter 1:4 states, "Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature." Such language of participating in the divine nature and attaining human perfection can be found especially in the traditions of Eastern Christianity, but also notably in the traditions associated with John Wesley, who taught the doctrine of Christian perfection in this life. See, e.g., N. Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); M. Christensen and J. Wittung, eds., *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007); V. Kharlamov, ed., *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*, 2 vols. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006–2011); J. Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (London: Epworth Press, 1968; originally published in 1777); and S. Tomkins, "Perfection," in *John Wesley: A Biography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 156–164.

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divine? Did Jesus bear the *imago dei* (the image of God) in ways fundamentally different from us? To what degree has Christian tradition sanitized the life of Jesus, so that he ends up being portrayed as devoid of the foibles and faults that make us human? In short, what does it mean for us to understand sin and redemption in the Christian tradition in view of Jesus the perfect sinner?[5]

[5] The nineteenth-century Scottish theologian J.M. Campbell saw Jesus as providing a "perfect repentance" vicariously on behalf of humanity because of his own vicarious humanity on behalf of God. In his view Jesus gave "a perfect confession of our sins" that resulted in atonement for humanity. See his *The Nature of the Atonement* (London: Macmillan, 1867), 136. Similarly, at the beginning of the twentieth century, R.C. Moberly described Jesus as "the perfect penitent," whose vicarious humanity, life of sacrifice, and perfect obedience to God even in death was atoning. See his *Atonement and Personality* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1901), 99, 117. For both theologians Jesus could be a perfect penitent only because he was a sinless sinner. C.S. Lewis borrowed Moberly's language of "The Perfect Penitent" in his *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 56–61. See C.D. Kettler, "The Vicarious Repentance of Christ in the Theology John McLeod Campbell and R.C. Moberly," *SJT* **38**:4 (1985): 529–543.

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