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Jeffrey S. Siker  
Frontmatter  
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JESUS, SIN, AND PERFECTION  
IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

This volume is the first full-length study to trace how early Christians came to perceive Jesus as a sinless human being. Jeffrey S. Siker presents a taxonomy of sin in early Judaism and examines moments in Jesus' life associated with sinfulness: his birth to the unwed Mary, his baptism by John the Baptist, his public ministry – transgressing boundaries of family, friends, and faith – and his cursed death by crucifixion. Although followers viewed his immediate death in tragic terms, with no expectation of his resurrection, they quickly came to believe that God had raised him from the dead. Their resurrection faith produced a new understanding of Jesus' prophetic ministry, in which his death had been a perfect sacrificial death for sin, his ministry perfectly obedient, his baptism a demonstration of perfect righteousness, and his birth a perfect virgin birth. This important study explores the implications of a retrospective faith that elevated Jesus to perfect divinity, redefining sin.

JEFFREY S. SIKER is a professor of New Testament and Early Christian Studies at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, California. His publications include *Homosexuality and Religion: An Encyclopedia, Scripture and Ethics: Twentieth-Century Portraits*, *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate*, and *Disinheriting the Jews: Abraham in Early Christian Controversy*.

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*For Judy*

*ὅσα ἐστὶν ἀληθῆ, ὅσα σεμνά, ὅσα δίκαια,  
ὅσα ἀγνά, ὅσα προσφιλή, ὅσα εὐφημα,  
εἴ τις ἀρετὴ καὶ εἴ τις ἔπαινος, ταῦτα λογίζεσθε*  
*(Philippians 4:8)*

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## Preface

The idea for this book has been with me for many years. Its basic question is relatively simple: How is it that Jesus came to be viewed as sinless within the Christian tradition? Not just how, but when? And not just when, of course, but what did it mean? Initially it came as a surprise to me that this relatively clear question had not been addressed in any dedicated way. Rather, the sinlessness of Jesus has long been a presupposition, and sacrosanct at that. My goal has been to unravel the answers to this question, both within the earliest Christian sources and across the Christian tradition since then. The notion of a sinless Jesus is completely wrapped up in still larger theological questions about the identity of Jesus and his relationship to God, especially in terms of the understanding of the dual natures of Christ that developed early in the Christian tradition – the paradox that Jesus must be understood as both fully God and fully human. About this conviction, of course, there has been no end of discussion and debate from the very beginnings of Christianity to the present day.

As I have engaged in the long process of researching and writing this book, other convictions have weighed in and are evident in my not uncontroversial conclusions, and those from an author who claims to be Christian. First, I have become convinced that all theology is fundamentally a retrospective undertaking. We cannot step out of our current skins and pretend to approach a topic from other than where we stand. And we certainly cannot step out of our human skins and pretend to have the vantage of God.

Second, I have become convinced that the Christian theological enterprise has ever and again chosen to sacrifice the humanity of Jesus upon the altar of belief in his divinity. Even in the desire to maintain some semblance of balance between the human and divine natures of Jesus, the Christian tradition inevitably stumbles upon the scandal of his humanity, reverting time and again to what in my mind are merely different forms of a docetic



Christ, a Jesus who is mostly human, but then not. And in my view this tendency betrays the true scandal of Christian theology, not letting Jesus be fully human, sin and all. Does a fully human Jesus who made mistakes, could be wrong, and sinned have implications for Christian theology? I should hope so. And yet it is essential that we understand how and why this understanding of Jesus as sinless developed, and developed in the way that it did.

Third, I have become convinced that ontological claims are tricky at best, since all ontological claims are proximate and subject to change – for that is our situation as contingent human beings. Thus, it is imperative that we truly understand the significance of changing creedal pronouncements within the life of the Church and the life of faith. Perhaps we should preface all creedal statements with the clause, “The following is what we currently think, but that will doubtless change . . . so stay tuned.” This does not mean that certain patterns of belief do not get repeated over and over again, for example, the centrality of the cross of Jesus as a revelatory event, or even the conviction that Jesus was sinless. But again, perspective remains paramount. This is not to say that all things are relative. Far from it. But it is to say that even fixed convictions are subject to change and new interpretations.

Finally, I can say that my own sense of faith and belief in a God who is gracious beyond measure has grown and deepened in ways I never would have imagined throughout the process of writing this book. In particular, I have become more deeply attuned to the dynamics of sin and forgiveness, and in particular to our changing understandings of what constitutes sin and why in the varied contexts of our relationships one to another. We truly do see through a glass darkly, and yet we are also truly being transformed from one degree of glory to another through God's grace, even when we neither see nor feel it.

It gives me pleasure to acknowledge here the many ways in which I have experienced such grace in the form of friendships and professional relationships that have contributed to the writing of this book. I give thanks to my colleagues in the Department of Theological Studies, and beyond, at Loyola Marymount University for their encouragement and teasing over the years about my book on Jesus the perfect sinner. My thanks to Laura Morris, Alexandra Poreda, and the readers at Cambridge University Press for their helpful comments and guidance on an earlier draft of the manuscript. I would also like to thank Elizabeth Shand of Cambridge and Jeethu Abraham of SPi Global for their expertise in the production of this book. My friend Bart Ehrman, no stranger to writing controversial books himself, has been extremely helpful in pushing and cajoling me to greater clarity and precision

through his comments. Similarly, Greg Carey's own work on sin in early Christianity (*Sinners: Jesus and His Earliest Followers*, 2009) and his insightful comments on this manuscript have been much appreciated. The Rev. Drs. Paul and Sally Sampley, friends and mentors for many years, have continued to be sources of much joy and revelry, as have our friends the Rev. Drs. Lynn Cheyney and Gary Sattler.

I owe the largest debt of gratitude to my wife, Judy Yates Siker, fellow minister (PCUSA), fellow scholar (PhD in Early Christianity), fellow teacher (at Loyola Marymount University, and previously at the GTU), mother and stepmother to our blended family of five adult children and two grandchildren (all of whom amaze and inspire, each in their own way), and partner/traveler/explorer in all things. Her incisive comments on this manuscript have helped me to keep some perspective. Her encouragement and love have been unceasing. She has been the most profound expression of God's grace to this much less than perfect sinner for these many years, and I pray for all the years to come. I dedicate this book to her as but a token of my deepest thanks and love.

Jeffrey S. Siker  
Los Angeles, CA  
Epiphany, 2015

## Abbreviations

BBR	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
BDAG	<i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> , 3rd edition. W. Bauer and F. Danker, eds. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001.
BDB	<i>Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon</i> . Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994.
BR	<i>Bible Review</i>
BS	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
EQ	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
ET	<i>Evangelische Theologie</i>
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
IJST	<i>International Journal of Systematic Theology</i>
ITQ	<i>Irish Theological Quarterly</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JFS	<i>Journal of Feminist Studies</i>
JSHJ	<i>Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus</i>
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JTI	<i>Journal of Theological Interpretation</i>
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
NAB	<i>New American Bible</i>
NIV	<i>New International Version</i>
NovT	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NPNF	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i> , 14 vols. Second series. New York: Christian Literature Company, 1890–1900.
NRSV	<i>New Revised Standard Version</i>
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
QS	<i>The Community Rule (Dead Sea Scrolls)</i>

<i>RestQ</i>	<i>Restoration Quarterly</i>
<i>RQ</i>	<i>Renaissance Quarterly</i>
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
<i>TB</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
<i>TS</i>	<i>Theological Studies</i>
<i>VC</i>	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
<i>ZNW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>