



HPRS4903 - INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

6 - Jesus Christ: Who Is Jesus?



JESUS CHRIST: WHO IS JESUS?

WHO IS JESUS?

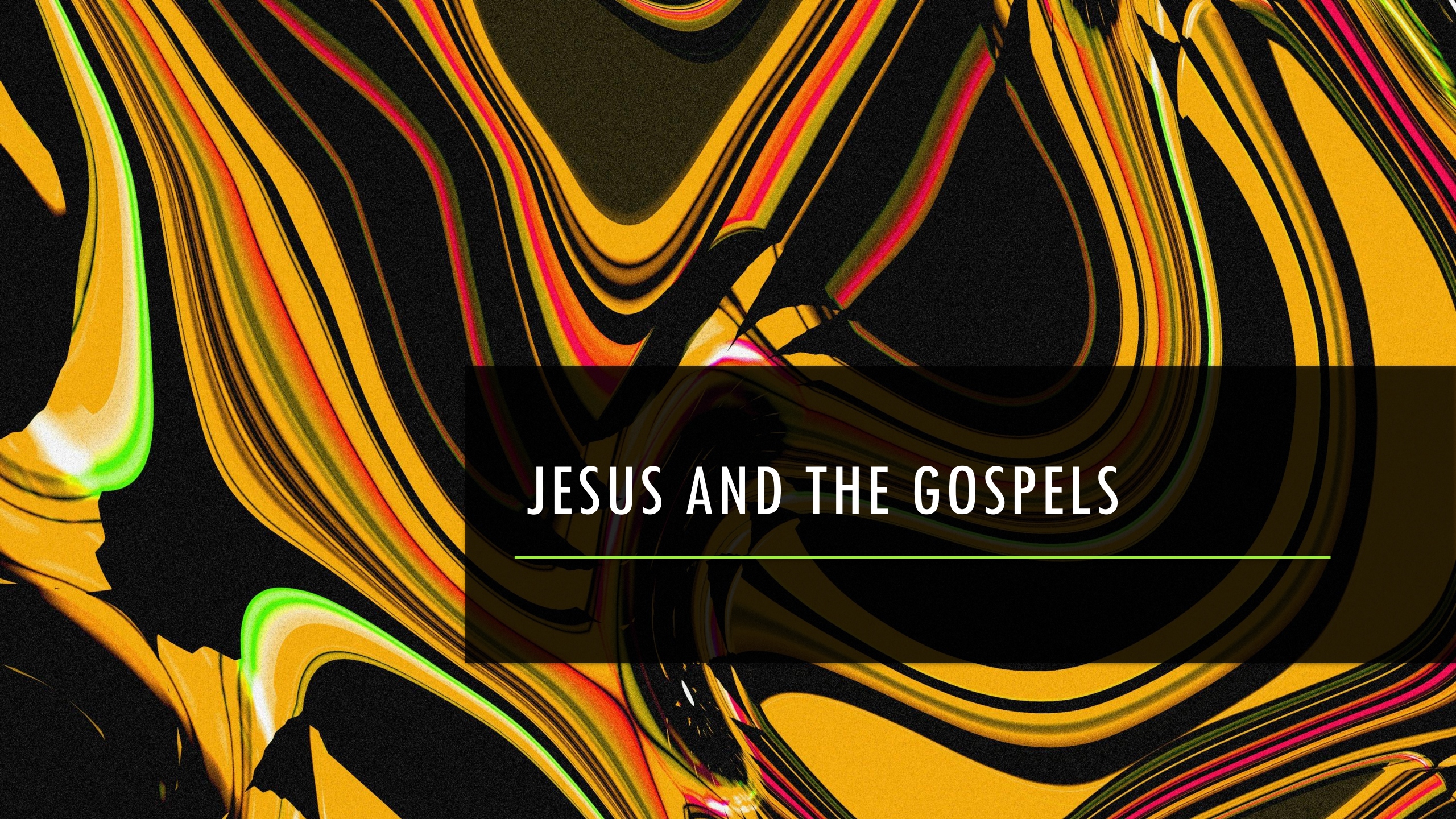
At the center of Christian theology stands another single, defining question: *Who is Jesus?*

Christianity is not founded on a set of abstract principles or ethical teachings, but on a very specific claim about a very specific person. Christians confess that Jesus of Nazareth is not only a historical figure, but also the Christ, the Son of God, and the decisive revelation of God to humanity.

This claim and all the claims that go with it make up the part of theology called 'Christology' and has shaped Christian belief, worship, ethics, and identity from the earliest centuries of the Church.

WHO IS JESUS?

This lecture explores how Christians have understood Jesus by examining the biblical witness of the Gospels, the distinction between the “historical Jesus” and the “Christ of faith”, the doctrine of the Incarnation, the development of Christological doctrine culminating in the Council of Chalcedon, and finally why Christology matters for the wider theological tradition.



JESUS AND THE GOSPELS



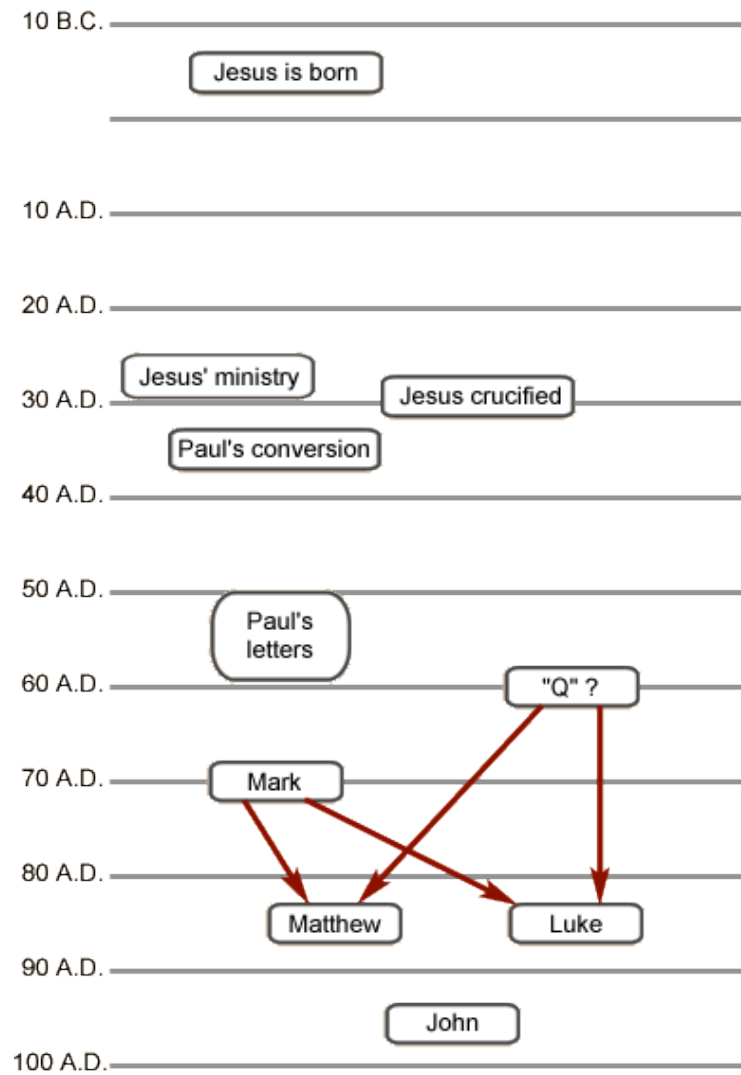
JESUS AND THE GOSPELS

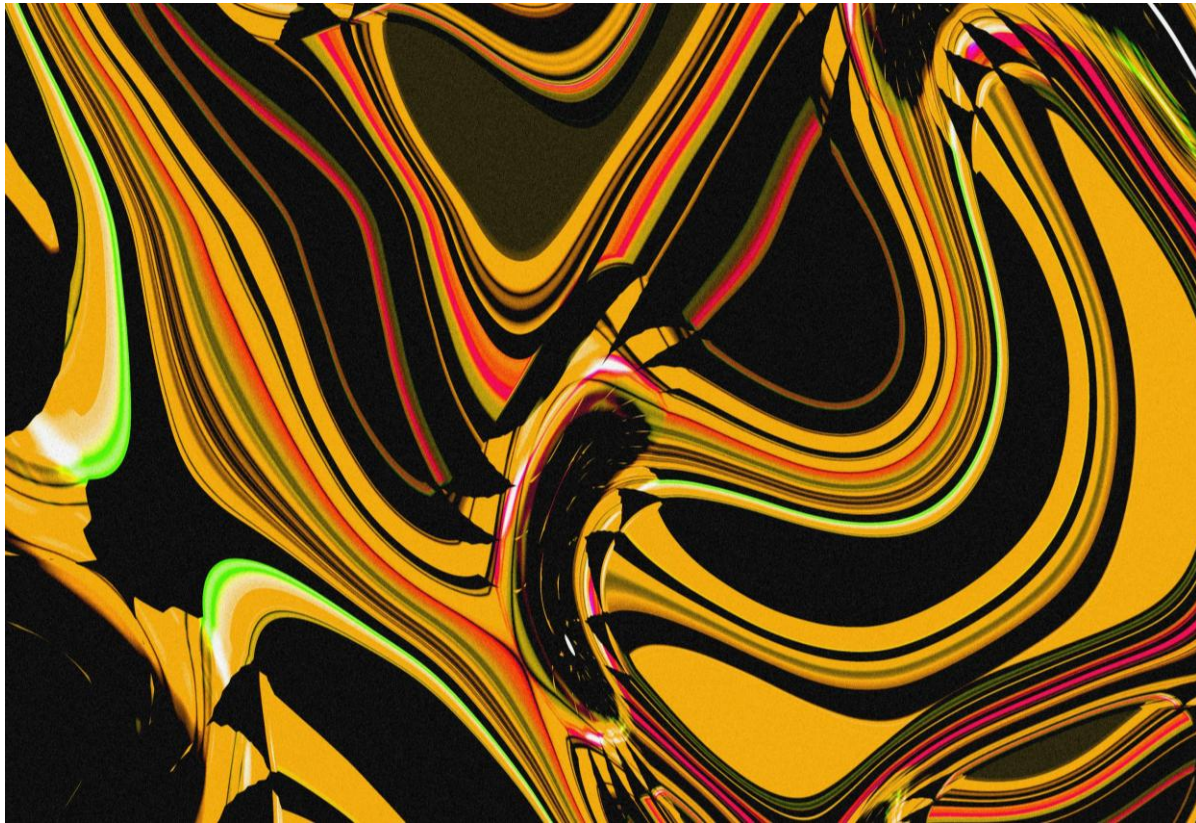
Our primary sources for the life and meaning of Jesus are the four canonical Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Crucially, these texts are not neutral biographies in the modern sense, but theological narratives written to proclaim the good news (*euangelion*).

Each Gospel presents Jesus in a distinctive way, shaped by its community, context, and each has their own theological emphasis and style.

New Testament Timeline





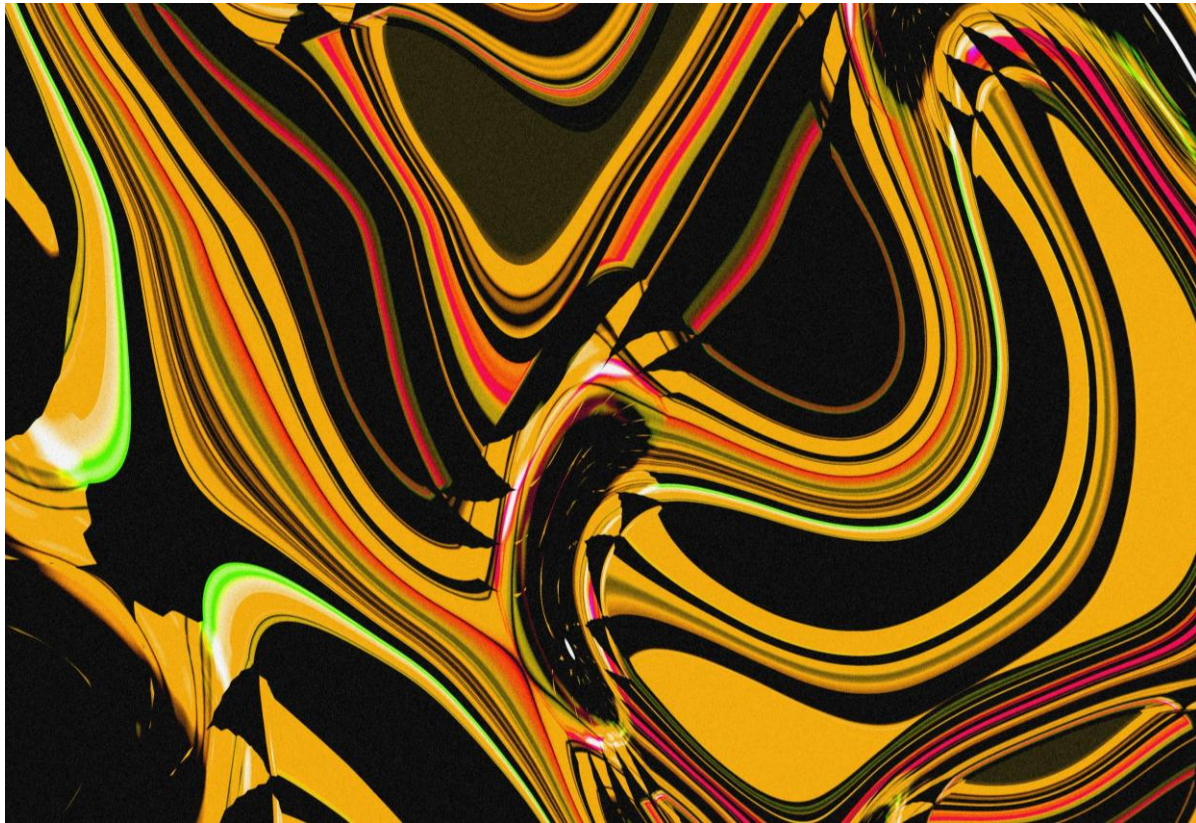
JESUS AND THE GOSPELS

Mark, generally considered the earliest written Gospel, portrays Jesus as the suffering Messiah whose identity is gradually revealed through his actions and words.

Matthew emphasizes Jesus as the fulfillment of Israel's Scriptures, presenting him as a new Moses who teaches with divine authority.

Luke highlights Jesus' concern for the poor, the marginalised, and outsiders, situating Jesus within a broader historical framework of liberation from bondage and oppression.

John offers the most explicitly theological portrait, presenting Jesus as the eternal Word (*Logos*) made flesh: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14).



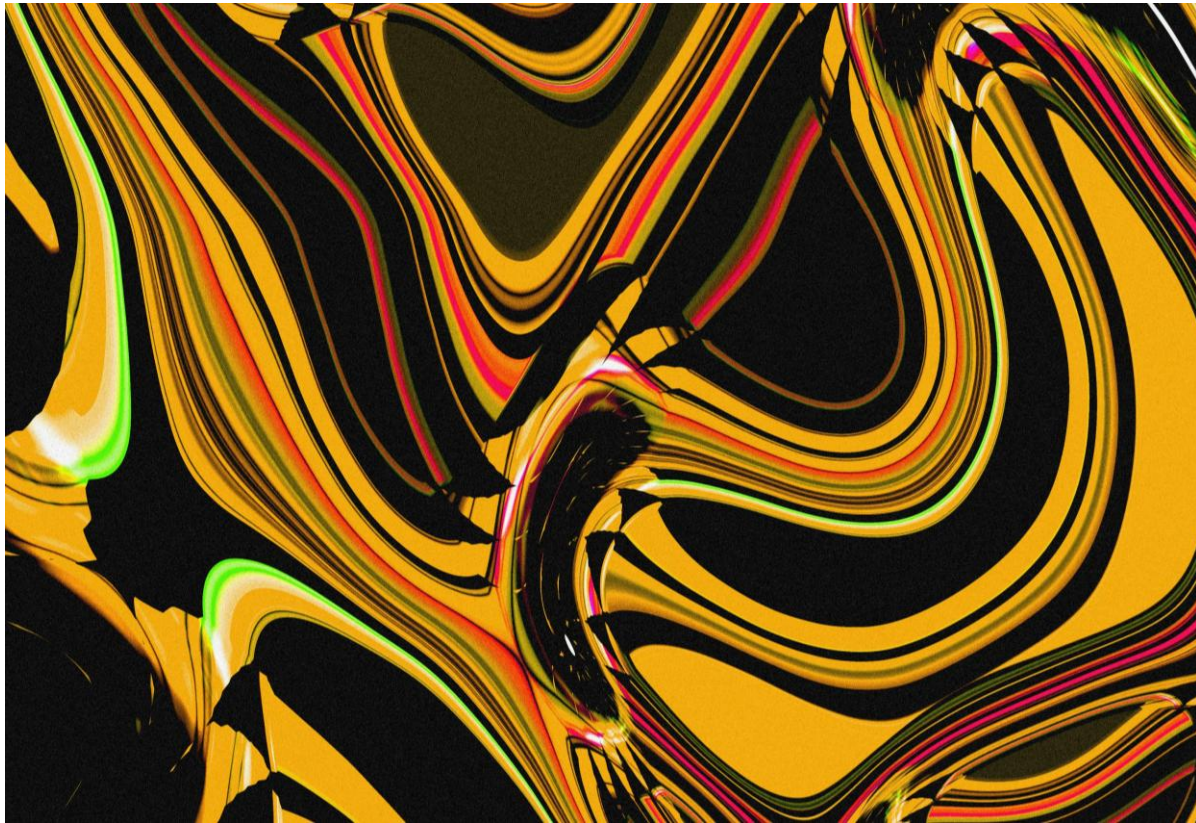
JESUS AND THE GOSPELS

Despite their differences, the Gospels do agree on key elements: Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God, performed acts of healing and exorcism, gathered disciples, was in conflict with religious authorities, was crucified under Roman authority, and was proclaimed risen by his followers.

Importantly, the texts shape the Christian understanding of who Jesus is, not merely by recounting events, but by interpreting their significance – by telling us what they mean and why they matter!

Gospels of Jesus

Gospels	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Present Jesus	Christ as king The prophesied king	Christ as servant The obedient Servant	Christ as man The perfect man	Christ as God The divine son
Key verse	Matthew 2:2 King of the Jews	Mark 10:45	Luke 19:10 Son of man	John 20:31 Son of God
Colour	Purple: royal color. Exodus 26:36	Scarlet: color of blood. Exodus 26:36	White: color of purity. Exodus 26:36	Blue: color of the sky. Exodus 26:36
Simbol	Lion: the king of animals	Ox: the animal that is slaughtered	Man: his perfect humanity	Eagle: the bird of heaven
Written for	Especially for the Jews	Especially for the Romans	Especially for the Greeks	Written for everyone

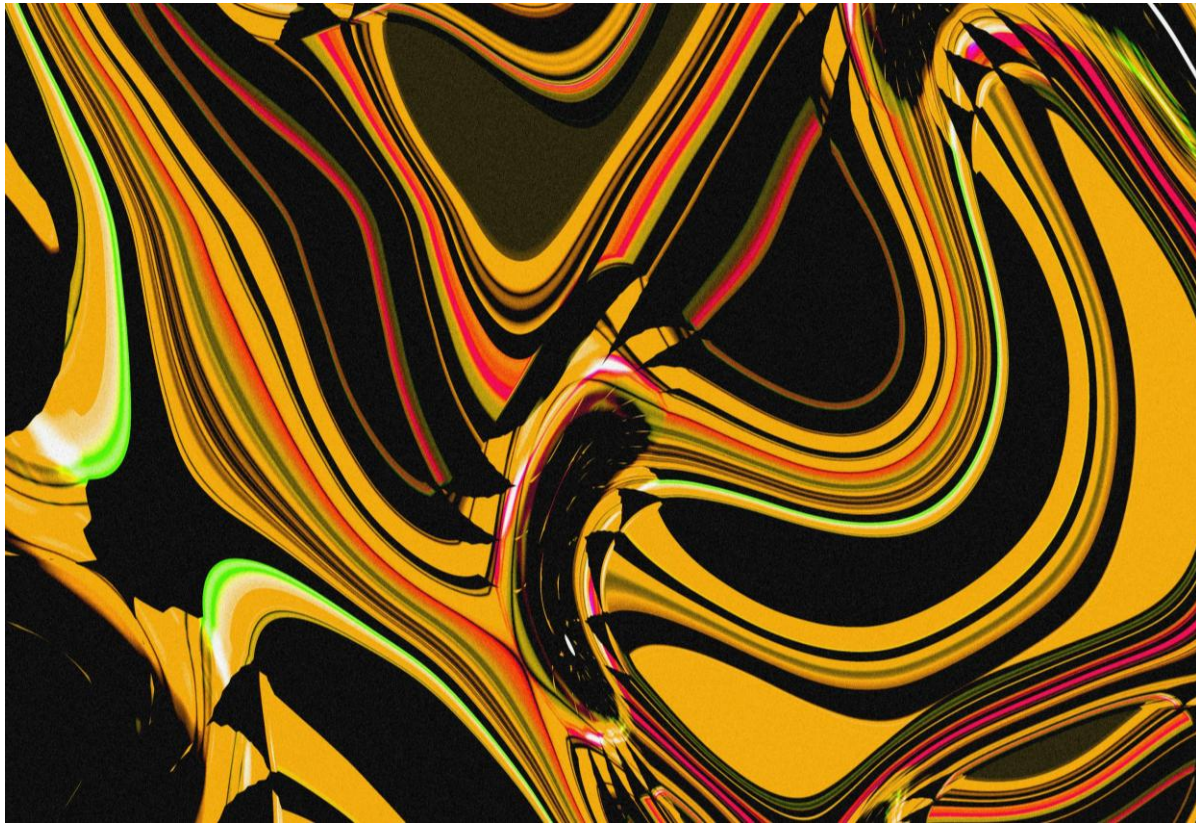


JESUS AND THE GOSPELS

Something that it is crucial to recognise, is that the Gospels are acts of faith, as well as accounts of historical memory.

They were all written several decades after Jesus' death, within communities that already confessed him as Lord. This does not make them unreliable, but it does mean they are interpretive in their nature.

The Gospel writers select, arrange, and frame material to answer theological questions – Who is Jesus? What does his life mean? How does he relate to God and to humanity? – which may have differed quite significantly from the kind of questions Jesus' was answering in his life.

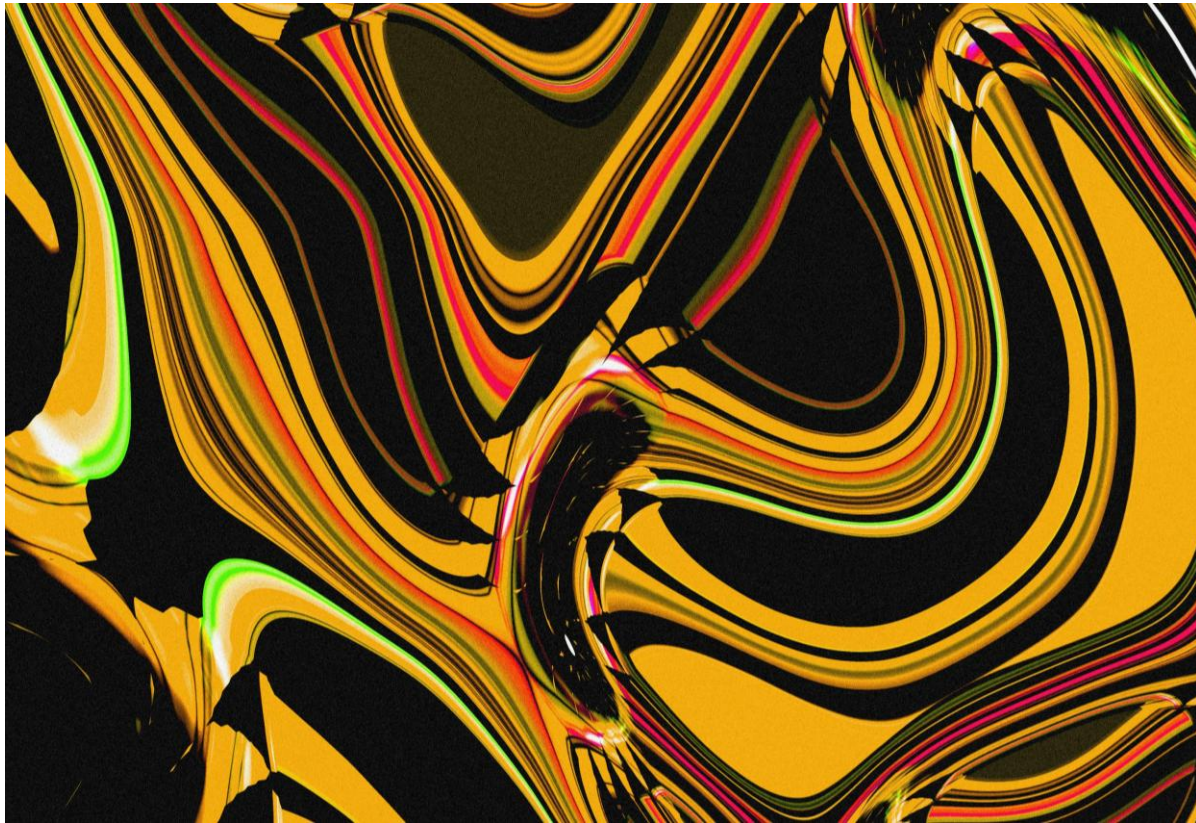


JESUS AND THE GOSPELS

Another thing to bear in mind is that the early Church did not preserve every possible account of Jesus that was floating around.

Instead, it recognised these four Gospels as authoritative witnesses and that the diversity among them reflects the difficulty of entirely encapsulating who Jesus is.

Jesus is teacher, prophet, healer, Messiah, Son of Man, Son of God, and Word made flesh – all of these things together all the time!



JESUS AND THE GOSPELS

So when we talk about Jesus in the Gospels, it raises quite important interpretive questions.

When we read miracle stories, parables, or resurrection narratives, we are not simply reconstructing events but are also engaging in making claims about God's action in history.

What we say about Jesus, we are also saying about God, and what we say about God, we are also saying about Jesus.



THE INCARNATION

THE INCARNATION

That dual aspect to Jesus / God arises because at the heart of Christology lies the doctrine of the Incarnation.

The Incarnation is the Christian claim that in Jesus Christ, God truly became human, without ceasing to be God, probably one of the most distinctive and controversial claims of the Christian tradition.

The biblical foundations of the Incarnation are especially strong in the Gospel of John and in the Pauline letters. John declares that the eternal Word through whom all things were made “became flesh”. Paul writes that Christ, “though he was in the form of God... emptied himself, taking the form of a slave” (Phil. 2:6–7).



THE INCARNATION

The traditional formation of the Incarnation affirms that God does not remain distant from human suffering and limitation. Instead, God enters fully into human life, meaning birth, growth, friendship, temptation, suffering, and death. Jesus is not a divine being disguised as human, nor a human later adopted by God, instead He is fully human and fully divine.

This claim has really profound implications for the development of Christian theology. It means that human life matters to God, that material existence is not inferior to the spiritual, and that salvation involves the healing of human nature itself.



THE INCARNATION

This doctrine of the Incarnation did not emerge fully formed from the Gospels or from Jesus' teaching. Early Christians struggled to articulate how Jesus could be both divine and human without contradiction and many different interpretations arose, often emphasising one aspect at the expense of the other.

The Church responded through councils and developing creeds, seeking language that would protect the mystery of the nature of God without dissolving it. These formulations were shaped by Scripture, worship, and philosophical concepts drawn from Greek thought, particularly ideas of nature (*physis*) and person (*hypostasis*).



THE INCARNATION

The Council of Chalcedon, held in 451 CE, represents probably the decisive moment in the Christological development. Its definition sought to articulate a balanced account of Christ's identity in response to ongoing historical controversies.

Chalcedon affirmed that Jesus Christ is:

“one and the same Son... acknowledged in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation”.

According to this definition, Christ's divine and human natures are fully present and united in one person.

Importantly, Chalcedon does not explain *how* this union works. Instead, it sets boundaries to prevent misunderstanding. The four negations - without confusion; change; division; or separation – try to protect Christ's full humanity and full divinity.



ARIANISM

Arianism, associated with the figure of Arius in the fourth century, taught that the Son of God was the first and greatest of God's creations but not eternal or fully divine. He famously claimed, "There was a time when the Son was not". This view sought to preserve clear monotheism by placing the Son below the Father in being.

The Church condemned Arianism because it denied Christ's full divinity and threatened the Christian understanding of salvation and worship. If Christ is not truly God, then worship of Christ is inappropriate and salvation is compromised, since only God can reconcile humanity to God.

The implications of Arianism are far-reaching: it creates a hierarchy within God, undermines the Trinity, and renders Christ incapable of fully revealing God or effecting genuine salvation.

The Council of Nicaea (325) responded by confessing the Son as *homoousios* ("of one substance") with the Father, sharing in his "god-ness" fully and completely.

DOCETISM

Docetism, from the Greek *dokein* (“to seem”), taught that Jesus Christ only *appeared* to be human and did not truly possess a physical body or genuinely suffer. According to this view, Christ’s humanity was an illusion masking his divine reality.

This belief arose partly from early philosophical assumptions that matter was inferior or corrupt, making it unthinkable that God could truly take on flesh.

The implications of Docetism are profound: if Christ did not truly suffer, then human suffering is not experienced fully by God through Jesus. Salvation becomes unreal, the crucifixion loses its redemptive meaning, and the Incarnation is emptied of its central claim that God truly enters and experiences human life.

The Church rejected Docetism as heretical because it denied the full humanity of Christ directly contradicting the New Testament witness that Jesus was born, suffered, and died. As 1 John insists, “Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God” (1 John 4:2).

ADOPTIONISM

Adoptionism taught that Jesus was born an ordinary human being and was later “adopted” by God as Son, usually seen at his baptism, or resurrection. While this view affirmed Jesus’ moral excellence and divine favor, it denied that he was divine by nature from eternity.

This means salvation becomes something God does *to* a human being rather than something God does *as* a human being. God remains external to the saving process, and the Incarnation becomes symbolic rather than real.

The Church rejected Adoptionism because it undermined the belief that God truly becomes human in Christ. Scripture consistently speaks of Christ as pre-existent, for example “In the beginning was the Word” (John 1:1) and as Son prior to any historical event.

NESTORIANISM

Nestorianism emphasised such a strong distinction between Christ's divine and human natures that it effectively divided him into two persons, one divine and one human, loosely united in one body. This position is associated with Nestorius, who objected to calling Mary *Theotokos* ("God-bearer"), preferring *Christotokos* ("Christ-bearer"), to avoid suggesting that God could be born or suffer.

The Church rejected Nestorianism because it fractured the unity of Christ's person. If Christ is divided, then God does not truly experience human life, suffering, or death and remains separate from the experiences of the "human" person in Christ.

MONOPHYSITISM

Monophysitism held that after the Incarnation, Christ possessed only one nature (*physis*), typically understood as divine, with the human nature absorbed or overwhelmed.

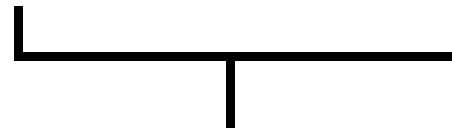
Inversely to some of the previous positions, if Christ's humanity is diminished or lost, then human obedience, suffering, and growth are no longer central to salvation. The life of Jesus becomes less a model for human existence, and redemption risks becoming a purely divine act detached from any real human participation.

The Council of Chalcedon rejected Monophysitism, affirming that Christ exists in two natures, divine and human, without confusion or change.

Divine and human natures,
two separate persons
(Nestorianism)

Divine but not
fully human
(eg. Docetism)

Divine nature Human nature



One person

(Chalcedon)

Human but not
fully divine
(eg. Adoptionism,
Arianism)

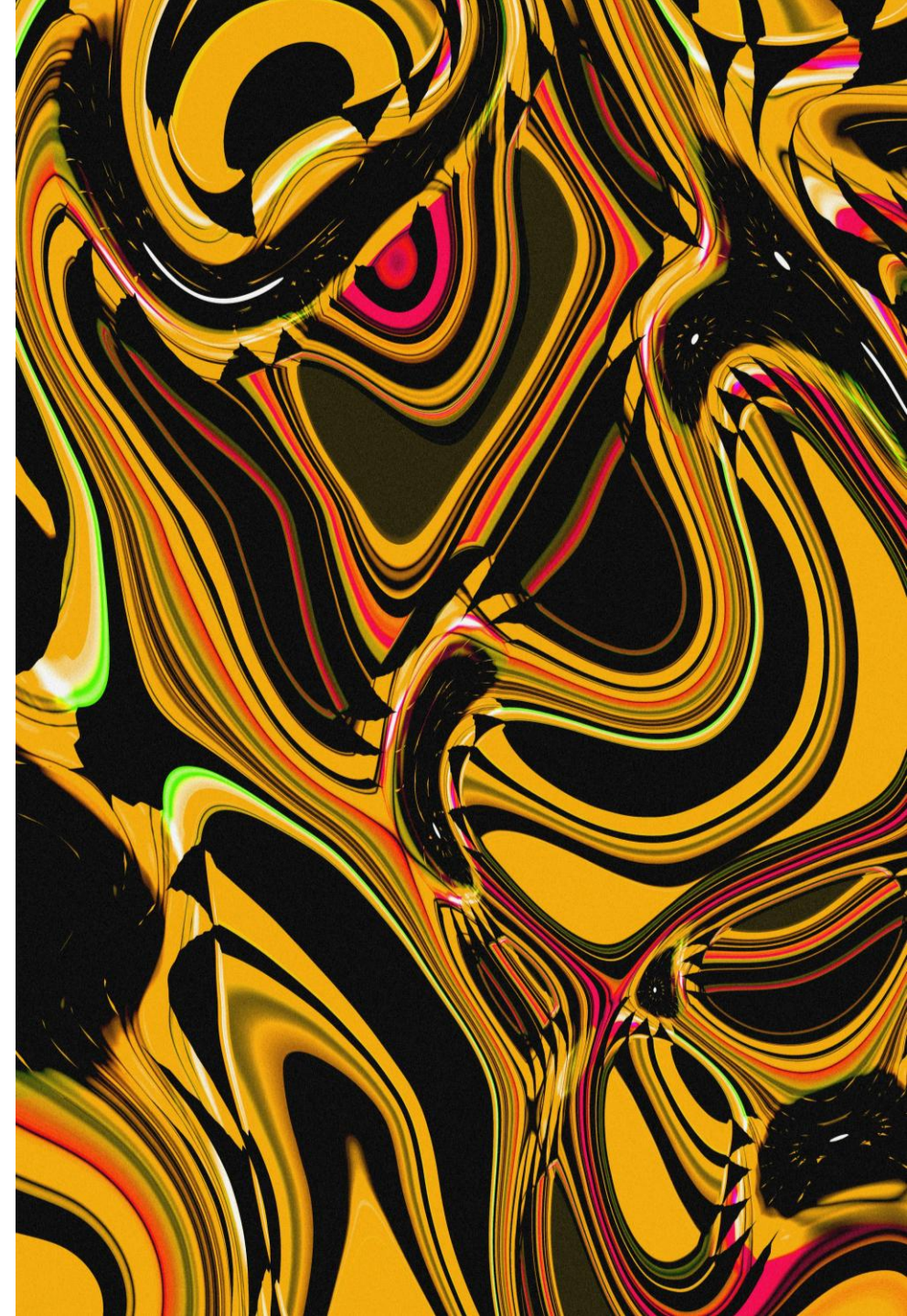
One person,
one nature
(Monophysitism)

CHRISTOLOGY

Like many areas of theology, Christology is not a self-contained doctrine. It shapes nearly every area of Christian theology including how one understands Jesus, God, humanity, salvation, ethics etc.

Christology shapes the doctrine of God as if Jesus reveals God, then God is not understood primarily as distant or impassible, but as relational and self-giving. The Incarnation suggests that vulnerability and love belong to God's very nature.

Christology also shapes our anthropology. If God becomes human, then human nature is affirmed and dignified in some way. This undergirds commitment to the value of human life, care for the suffering of others, and a resistance to dehumanization of others.

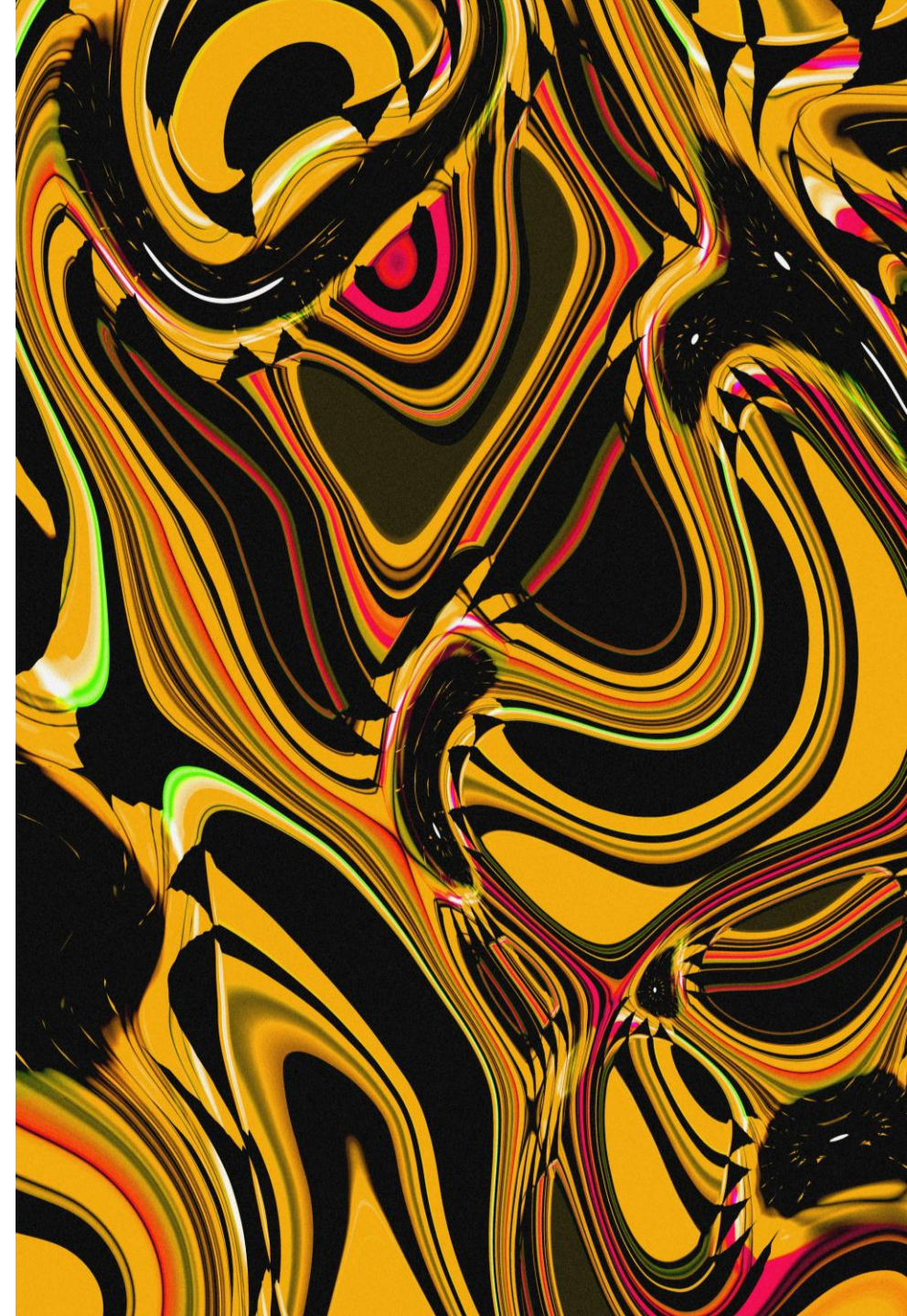


CHRISTOLOGY

Christology is also central to the Christian doctrines around salvation.

Because Christians believe that Jesus does not merely teach salvation but embodies it, his life, death, and resurrection reconcile humanity to God. Different models of atonement depend on different Christological assumptions about who Jesus is, what he accomplishes, and how he does so.

Similarly, to follow Christ is not merely to obey abstract rules, but to try to imitate a particular way of life that is marked by love, humility, and self-giving. Ethical reflection in the Christian traditions is therefore often inseparable from reflection on Jesus' identity and example – we learn how to be good people, by copying the actions of Jesus.



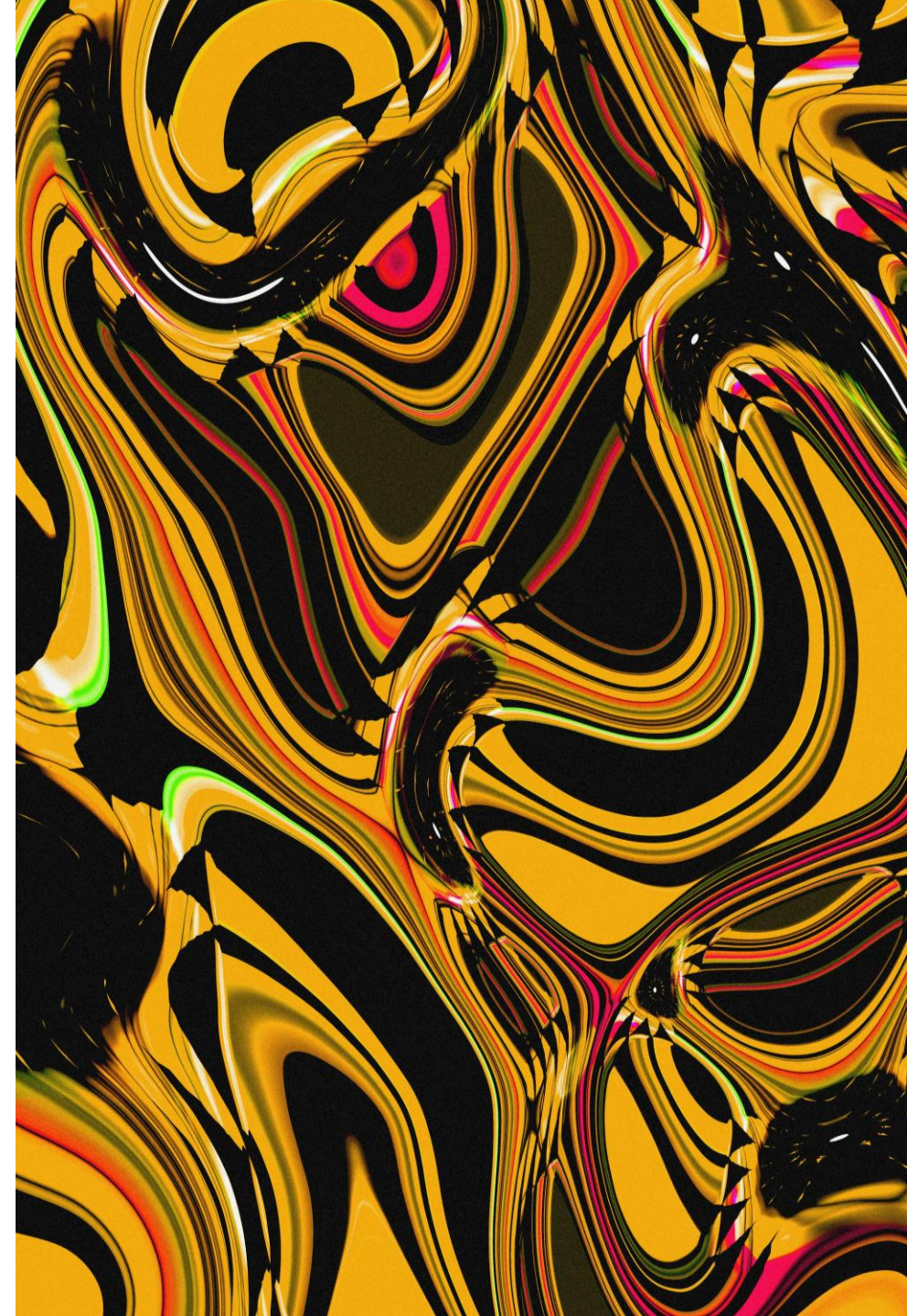
CHRISTOLOGY

Another thing to bear in mind is that despite creeds and councils, christology remains a living and quite contested discipline in Christian theology.

This is because different cultural contexts raise new questions about Christ. Feminist, liberationist, and postcolonial theologians have asked whose humanity is represented in traditional forms of Christology and how Jesus relates to experiences of oppression and suffering today.

What does a male Jesus have to say to women?

How do we come to understand the nature of salvation for the poor?

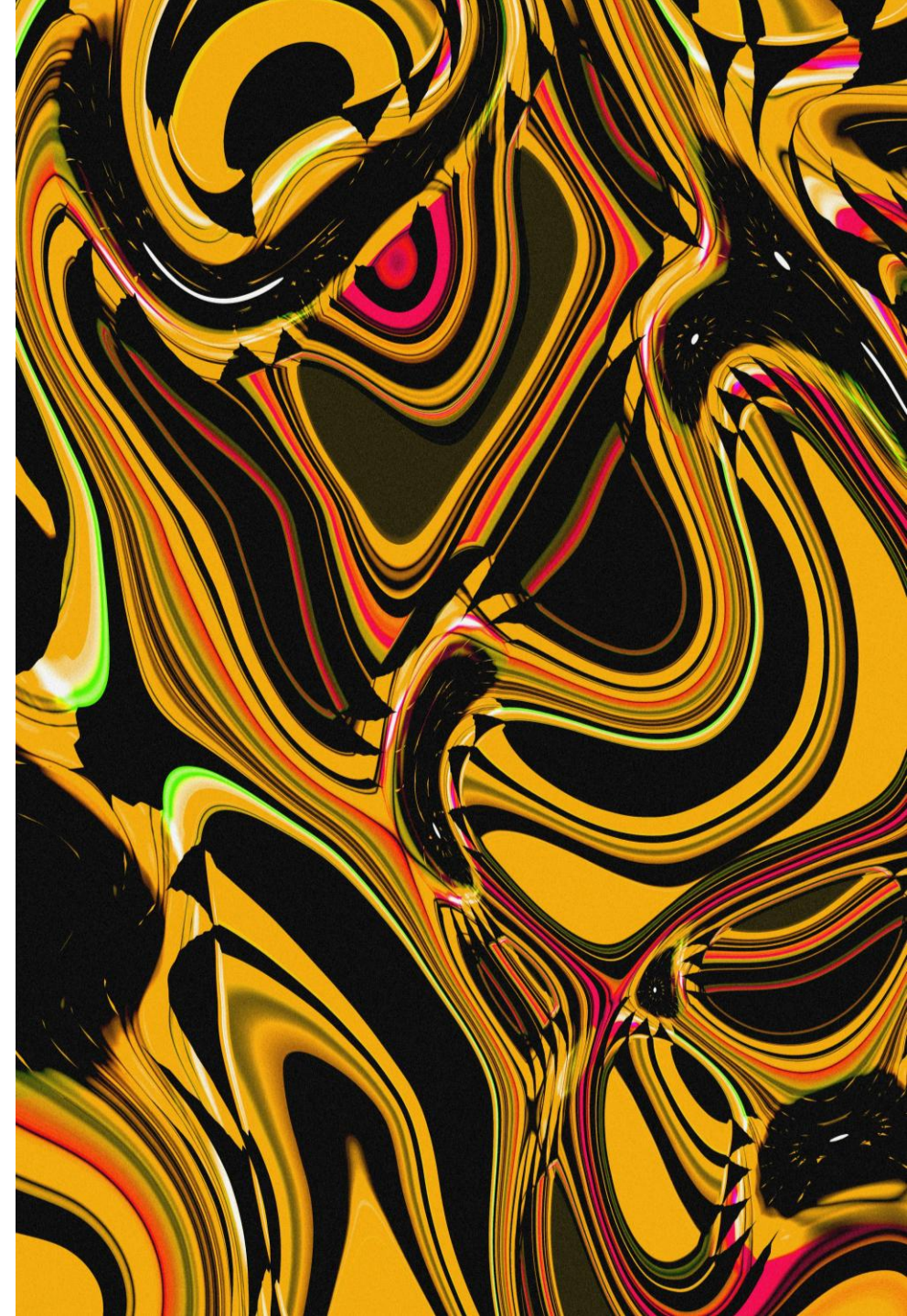


CHRISTOLOGY

If the history and development of Christology tells us anything, it is that Christological thinking is not a finished system, but as an ongoing conversation.

The Christian faith seeks understanding, but our understanding never exhausts the mystery of Christ as God.

As the New Testament itself shows, Jesus resists easy categorisation. When he asks his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?”, the question remains open to every generation.

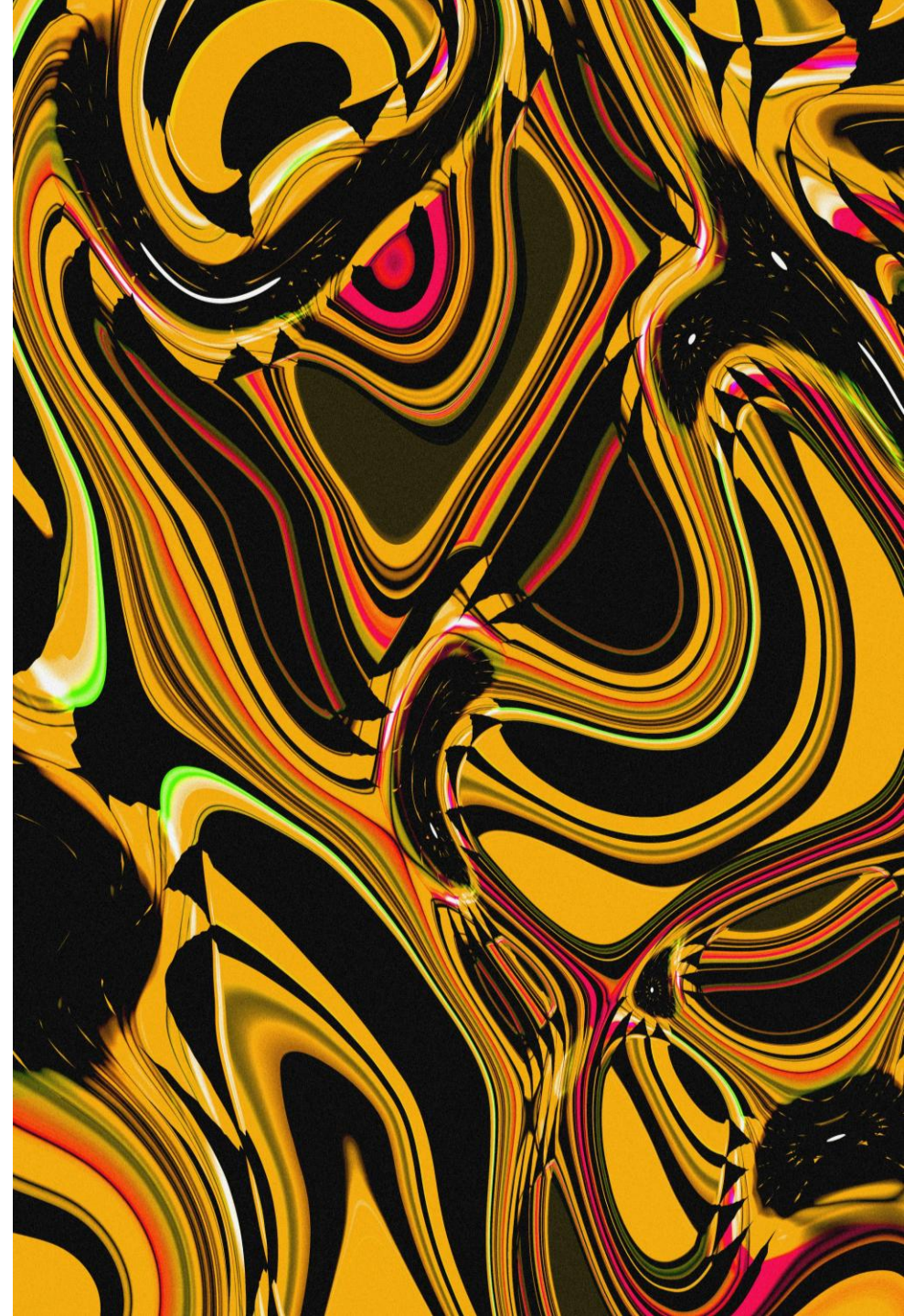


CHRISTOLOGY

Therefore the question “Who is Jesus?” continues to stand at the heart of Christian theology, welcoming all sorts of attempts at answering it incompletely!

The Gospels present a portrait of Jesus as teacher, healer, Messiah, and the Son of God, while historical study can help situate Jesus within his first-century context, and faith confesses him as the risen Lord who reveals God.

We can see that throughout history, the Christian tradition is really an attempt to answer and figure out who Jesus is, and what he means in differing circumstances – something that is unlikely to be completed any time soon.





READINGS

Philippians 2:1–18

Weinandy, Thomas G., 'The Doctrinal Significance of the Councils of Nicaea, Ephesus, and Chalcedon', in Francesca Aran Murphy (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Christology* (2015; online edn, Oxford Academic, 10 Sept. 2015)