

PREMIER ISSUE

Religion and Spirituality (http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion_and_spirituality.aspx)

Jesus Christ: The Myth and the Reality

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Can we truly understand Jesus' message without knowing who He really was?

Have you ever gone to the store in late summer or early autumn to find a get-well card? When you get there you are encouraged because you see before you a considerable selection of cards; but as you go from one rack to the next, you quickly recognize that nearly the entire stock seems to relate to just one subject—[Christmas](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/origin_of_christmas_885.aspx) (http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/origin_of_christmas_885.aspx). Though December is still months away, the store already has an entire section dedicated to Christmas cards and decorations.

With the passing of the gift-giving season all those cards and decorations are no longer to be found in the store. But the images contained in them illustrate enduring ideas that are reproduced annually, without anyone giving any great thought to their accuracy.

Despite all its commercial trappings, [Christmas](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/history-of-christmas_4116.aspx) (http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/history-of-christmas_4116.aspx) is thought to be about the birth of an individual who came to provide the greatest gift for humanity—reconciliation with His Father and the promise of eternal life to believers. Yet seldom do we frame the questions that

need to be asked about the birth event and its purpose. How well does the Western world, which claims to be a Christian-based culture, understand or comprehend the individual from whom it has taken its lead?

At the start of the century, a young man in Europe challenged the accepted beliefs of Christianity about its founder. He undertook a quest to discover the real Jesus of history. Albert Schweitzer was a brilliant musician and concert organist who earned doctorates in philosophy, theology and finally medicine, and who lived out his life in the service of the peoples of central Africa. He completed his thesis for the doctorate in theology at the University of Strasbourg before the age of 30. It was a monumental effort challenging concepts and ideas that had surrounded the personage of Jesus for almost the last two millennia. Schweitzer showed that those ideas had no basis in Scripture. As a result, his thesis has shaped much of the academic study of Christ throughout this century.

In the public sphere, however, Schweitzer's enquiry into the [life of Jesus](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/series-index-the-gospel-of-jesus-4042) (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/series-index-the-gospel-of-jesus-4042>) has not had much effect. For example, the late-20th-century cinema and popular press portray Jesus as a failed human, guilty even of depravity. Schweitzer, on the other hand, did not want to reduce the Person he perceived as being great to the mundane. Rather, he sought to strip away the theological accretions that had been applied to Jesus and come to understand Him as the individual that He was. His work, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (translated by W. Montgomery, Macmillan, New York, 1910), differentiated between the "Jesus of history" and the "Christ of dogma." What is the difference and why is the distinction important?

As we approach the end of the 20th century and the second millennium since the birth of Jesus, it is an appropriate time to reconsider His universal impact.

THE THIRD QUEST: REEXAMINING THE ISSUE

Since Schweitzer, the study of Jesus of Nazareth has continued. Scholars are presently pursuing what they label as "the third quest for the historical Jesus." (This is a term used by Stephen Neill and Tom Wright in *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1986*, Oxford University Press, 1988). The first quest refers to Schweitzer. The second quest was never labeled as such, but refers to an attempt from the 1950s onward to establish methods for discovery of "authentic Jesus material." This quest has been helped by the vast amount of archaeological work undertaken in the Middle East during this century; today we may have a

greater insight into the cultural milieu of the life and times of Jesus and [the apostles](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/series-index-the-apostles-of-jesus-4043) (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/series-index-the-apostles-of-jesus-4043>) than has existed since the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

Yet there is often a great gap between academic and public knowledge. [Christmas](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-christmas/60785.aspx) (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-christmas/60785.aspx>) cards, for example, show scenes reflective of the art and thinking of previous centuries. Such scenes are frequently in contradiction with what the Bible teaches and explains. They more properly represent the Christ of dogma, not the Jesus of history that Schweitzer sought to rediscover.

How did Christendom come to adopt the ideas that Schweitzer challenged?

During the first century, the teachings of Jesus Christ spread among the non-Jewish, or gentile, peoples. This “opening” of the gospel message was put at risk when some teachers sought to distort the teachings of Christ. Jesus’ disciples spoke out vehemently against such actions (see Galatians 1:6; 2 Corinthians 11:13; 2 Peter 2:1–3; 1 John 4:1–5; 3 John 9–11). It seems that some wanted to appropriate the person of Jesus Christ for their own advantage.

Twentieth-century findings have allowed us to understand more about some of those early heretics. It is now understood that the apostolic writers unmasked philosophical assailants such as the gnostics, the Docetists, and even elements within Stoic philosophy, who sought to reinterpret the fledgling Christian faith and Jesus Christ to suit their own philosophical ideas (see *“Theological Terms Defined”* (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/article.aspx%3Fid%3D1048>)).

One reason for the first-century corruption of Christ and His message was the attempt to make Christianity more acceptable to the gentile world. If that could be achieved by addressing the questions that gentile cultures asked of religion, it was thought that Christianity would develop more easily among them. After all, Greek thinking processes and educational systems dominated the gentile world of the time. It was a very different world from that of the Hebrew society in which the Bible had been produced.

The Hebrew mind differed from its Greek counterpart in that it was a mind grounded in reality, concerned with the practical issues of life. Relationships were at the center of God’s instruction to early Israel.

Two “great” commandments stand as pillars of the way of life that was given to Israel. They concern relationships with God and then with fellow man (see Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:36–40).

The Greek world favored philosophical and intellectual pursuits—things of the mind. The practical issues of life were not of prime importance. Understanding the world of metaphysics was considered a higher goal.

OUT OF CONTEXT, OUT OF FOCUS

To make Christianity more acceptable within that world, some thought Christ had to be recast in such a philosophical mold. But as a result, Jesus Christ, together with large sections of the Bible, was recontextualized. The danger is that once a subject is viewed outside of its context, it can easily become distorted.

This does not mean that Christianity was of value only to those who lived in Jesus' world. It is highly relevant for us today. The *entire Bible* still speaks to us, although the last pen was put to its parchments almost 19 centuries ago. However, it must be viewed in the context of the times in which its authors lived.

Even when society tries to remain true to the Bible's historical detail, it seems destined to get it wrong. How many [Christmas](http://www.vision.org/node/4701) cards portray three wise men? Yet the Bible never tells us that there were *three* men. It simply lists the three principal gifts they presented—gold, frankincense and myrrh—gifts of great value that were a common mark of respect to royalty in those days. The visitors are often shown presenting the gifts to the baby Jesus lying in a manger.

Yet according to Matthew 2:11, they found Jesus not as a baby in a manger but as a “young child” in a house! The accommodation crisis that had coincided with His birth had lifted by the time the wise men arrived. In fact, a considerable time may have passed from the birth of Jesus to the appearance of the wise men. After the Magi left, the paranoid Herod, fearful of a prophesied new king, killed all the children in Bethlehem under the age of two years rather than just newborn infants (Matthew 2:16).

Consider also the aspect of the shepherds in the field keeping watch over the flocks by night (Luke 2:8-20). This happens even to this day in the Middle East, with one exception. It never happens in December, as by then the weather is too cold and the flocks are stalled in barns or caves rather than being left to the vagaries of nighttime weather. Hence the angelic appearance to the shepherds could not have taken place in December, least of all late December, which is the depth of winter. Even Jerusalem and its environs, where the birth of Jesus took place, can be subject to an occasional “white Christmas.”

THE HUMAN JESUS, THE JEWISH JESUS

The Jesus Christ the Bible portrays is a very human individual. The details of His birth and early life present that aspect to us. Yet over the centuries the human details of Jesus have been replaced by ancient theological ideas. The development of the study of Jesus Christ (christology) in the first few centuries after His life created a being who was beyond the reach of humans. Hence Jesus Christ was removed from the context of the life He lived. That was not the picture portrayed by the writers of the Gospels. The *Gospel* picture was what Schweitzer wanted to see developed more fully.

Christianity uses the term *incarnation* (from Latin *in*, “in,” and *caro, carnis*, “flesh”) to refer to the birth of Jesus. The word is specifically used to describe a process whereby the divine becomes human. Although it is used in other religions, the most common application and use of the term is in Christendom, and then only in relation to a specific event—the birth of Jesus.

Incarnation became part of the church’s dogma in the fourth century at the earliest. The word conveys a sense of “mystery” of which the writers of the Gospel accounts appear unaware. To them, the birth of Jesus as the Son of God was not a mystery but rather the fulfillment of prophecies to which the devout had looked with longing (see Luke 2:25–38). It had been promised, and the fulfillment of those prophecies was to cause rejoicing—not questions as to how it could happen. Matthew and Luke, speaking specifically of the birth, show no inclination toward the dogma that later came to surround the birth.

In the closing decades of this century, academics have sought to understand more of the life of Jesus in its proper setting. The theological image that Christianity created for its leader and founder has been found to be inadequate.

Efforts to rectify this disparity have developed on many fronts. A document prepared by the Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations states: “Jesus was born, lived and died a Jew of His times. He, His family and all His original disciples followed the laws, traditions and customs of His people. The key concepts of Jesus’ teaching, therefore, cannot be understood apart from the Jewish heritage” (*Within Context: Guidelines for the Catechetical Presentation of Jews and Judaism in the New Testament*, Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Education Department of the United States Catholic Conference, and Interfaith Affairs Department of the Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith, 1986, p. 59).

This is not an isolated viewpoint. The *Jesus at 2000* Symposium, organized at Oregon State University in February 1996, reported that in recent times there have been “at least seven plausible contending portraits of Jesus in scholarly circulation” (Harvey Cox, *Jesus at 2000*, edited by Marcus J. Borg, Westview Press, Oxford, 1998, p. 94). Each of these seven portraits represents a different aspect of the contemporary Jewish milieu of that day. They range from Christ being a Pharisee or teacher of the Torah, to being a magician or wonder-worker, or an end-time prophet, or a charismatic. Some see Him as motivated by political ends as a Zealot who sought to overthrow the Roman rule of His day.

Putting Jesus back into a first-century Jewish context creates a dilemma for Christians and for Christmas. The concept of keeping a day to celebrate [the birth of Jesus](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality/the_gospel/the_life_of_jesus/481.aspx) (http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality/the_gospel/the_life_of_jesus/481.aspx) would have been incomprehensible to someone in a Jewish community of the first century—even a disciple of Jesus. The day of a person’s death was what was remembered. It would normally mark the fulfillment of that life and its accomplishments (Ecclesiastes 7:1). It is interesting to note that Jesus instructed His followers to remember His *death* as a memorial of Him (Luke 22:19). The concept of remembering the day of a person’s birth is foreign to the entirety of the Bible.

THE GAP IN THE KNOWLEDGE MARKET

Why is it necessary to appreciate what Jesus was like?

Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, German academics involved in the “third quest for the historical Jesus,” note that there is a “gap in the knowledge market.” They speak of the “false guise in which the church has presented him [Jesus]” and of the desire by people to “create a new Jesus from the religious longings and ethical values of our time” (*The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide*, translated by John Bowden, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1998, p. vii). Theissen and Merz address two problems. First, the false portrayal of Jesus that Schweitzer sought to expose as unbiblical, and second, the desire to recreate Jesus in 20th-century terms.

For example, various liberation movements have sought to find in the life of Jesus justification and meaning for their respective causes and actions. Yet He lived His life as the Savior and Redeemer of *all humanity*, not just a group or section of society that seeks within His teachings support for its own ideology or doctrine.

The reality is that the [life and teaching of Jesus Christ \(/visionmedia/series-index-the-gospel-of-jesus-4042\)](#) is a challenge to all humanity—past, present and future—regardless of nationality, race, gender or any other descriptor. That challenge is for us to live life as He lived, a challenge for which humanity has shown little capacity during the past two millennia. None of us can claim Him as our own until we live the life that He intended we should live.

Jesus' own closing words to His closest followers were that they should be known for emulating the life that He had lived in His relationship with other people and with His Father (John 13:15, 34–35). The conventional English translation is that He instructed them to love one another, as He had loved them. Yet in our 20th-century world, the concept of love differs greatly from what Jesus conveyed to His disciples. Love today is too often confused with emotion, feelings, or even lust—typically Grecian-influenced interpretations of the word. Yet to a Jew of Jesus' day, love was a very practical thing. It described the totality of one's relationship with another.

Schweitzer was right in that theology about Jesus Christ had removed Him from the natural context of His life. Hence all too many people have failed to understand what Jesus taught and the relevance of His teaching for their lives. He has been molded in the image of a different age insofar as He has been made to be relevant to the new situation people face. He has been created in *their* image rather than they being created in *His!*

Sadly, Jesus Christ is, to a great extent, known in Christianity for only two events in His life: His birth and His resurrection. This approach has been encouraged even in this century by the rise of certain existential theologies that see no relationship between the life lived by Jesus and the role of a Christian. For such people, Christianity is a “post-Easter” event, so that the life Jesus lived is largely irrelevant. Rather we are expected simply to concentrate on a figurative dying and living with Christ.

The search for the historical Jesus has also been driven by another desire, which contains the seeds of its own destruction. It is a rationalistic approach in which every element must be subject to “scientific” proof. It is, as Theissen and Merz recognize, an approach of a “post-Enlightenment society” (*The Historical Jesus*, p. vii). When it conforms to that standard, such an approach cannot use the proof of Christianity that Jesus established: proof by doing (see Matthew 7:17–20).

It is only by seeking to live a life in conformity with Jesus Christ's own life that we can come to know and understand the real Jesus Christ who lived and died some two millennia ago. That requires faith, something that is not defined by science or dogma, but by the life one lives. Only then can we come to understand the life of the Person sent by God to provide light for the entire world.

Jesus Christ claimed that part of His mission was to reveal the Father to humanity. He did this, not just through the message He taught, but by *His actions* and how He related to His fellow man. He set us an example that we should follow; hence His actions or practices, with their motivations and insights, become important for humans to follow and emulate. They were a representation of the Father and the way of life He requires for His creation. This is not an existential philosophy, but a practical and complete way of life revealed by the Father.

The challenge for the new millennium is for humanity to come to know the Jesus of praxis, or practice, rather than the Christ of dogma. Only then can humanity begin to see resolution to its numerous problems.