

# *Jesus and Cultures*

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Throughout the centuries and around the world, almost every culture has represented Jesus in characteristic ways that are relevant and appropriate to the faith, ideologies, and social contexts of a people. The resulting titles, names, images, and symbols used to speak of and to characterize Jesus are as diverse as the readers of the biblical text. Jesus can also be appreciated in a wide range of imagery that goes from the classic works of art found in museums around the globe to the contemporary renditions of pop art images and movies.

The representations of Jesus are so many that it would be impossible to cover all of them in this short article. What we offer here is a small sample, highlighting the cultural context from where they have emerged. First, we look at some of the images of Jesus as described in the New Testament, within his own culture and the culture of the early church. Then we briefly describe the quest for Jesus within the academic culture; and finally we present some of the ways Jesus has been depicted in contemporary cultures.

## *Jesus in His Culture*

Right from the start, the New Testament validates the plurality of images of Jesus by giving voice to the unique perspectives of four evangelists (the Gospel writers,



from the Greek word *euangelion*, “gospel”). The Gospels, our main sources for a life of Jesus, give him many different names and titles that convey particular roles and symbolize distinct aspects of his identity. Despite their similarities, each Gospel renders a particular representation of Jesus. In Matthew, for example, Jesus is predominantly presented as the teacher, the rabbi; for Mark, Jesus is the suffering son of God; the Gospel of Luke highlights Jesus as the savior of the world; and in John, Jesus is the incarnate Word (from the Greek *logos*). Together with these titles, some of the most familiar names and images of Jesus in the New Testament are Messiah or Christ, Son of David, Son of Man, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Almighty, Lamb of God, High Priest, Light of the World, and Good Shepherd. All of these are linked to particular aspects of Israel’s experience.

The influence behind the formation of these images of Jesus comes mainly from three cultural arenas: the political, the religious and philosophical, and the economic.

The first influence involves political reality not only in ancient Judea but also in the neighboring nations. After the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem, the Jews who returned from Babylon included in their sacred writings the expectation of a future king, anointed (in Hebrew, *moshiach*) as the great David had been, who would free them from foreign domination and oppression. It is important not to exaggerate the scope of this expectation, as if all Jews were “waiting for a messiah.” Early Jewish literature, in the Hebrew Bible and outside it, shows a wide range of expectations for priestly, royal, military, or even heavenly figures who would bring salvation, alongside movements to reform worship in the temple or law observance among the common people. In the era of Roman rule in Judea, the language of kingship or messiahship was apparently most used in a number of brief popular movements that rallied around militant figures (termed “bandits” by the Romans) whose careers were inevitably short-lived. Typically, such movements did not devote their energy to leaving literary remains for posterity.

The idealized expectation of a messiah nevertheless was crucial to the circles that first acclaimed Jesus as Messiah (in Greek, *christos*) or Son of David. It was in these circles that the concept of a suffering Messiah, who would die to cleanse the people of their sins, first appeared, based on innovative readings of Psalms 22 and 69 and Isaiah 53 (notice, for example, how phrases from Psalm 22 are woven into the accounts of Jesus’



crucifixion in the Gospels). This concept was never part of earlier Jewish expectations, however, and these passages of Scripture were never read as referring to a messiah before the Jesus movement.

The conception of a suffering and dying messiah helped the first believers in Jesus to understand his death, and in subsequent centuries Christian theologians developed it into the predominant understanding of salvation through the atoning death of Jesus. More recently, however, theologians have noted that an overemphasis on the divine necessity of the Messiah's suffering has the potential to make suffering as such seem a spiritual necessity. Historically, just such interpretations have brought much pain when they have been used—in contexts of slavery, conquest, imperialism, and the subjugation of classes of people—to tell the mistreated that their suffering is somehow justified.

New Testament images of Jesus were also influenced by the political context of Roman imperial rule. In the midst of an oppressive empire, ruled by emperors who were hailed as sons of God, saviors of the world, kings, and lords, it was a bold move—but a crucially important one—for emergent Christianity to acknowledge Jesus as the true Savior of the world, the only begotten Son of God, the King of kings, the Lord of lords, and the Almighty who would redeem his people from oppression. Early Christianity did not dismiss Jewish expectations of a powerful warrior-messiah, one capable of neutralizing the power of foreign adversaries like Rome. Instead, in the distinctive doctrine of the second coming of the messiah, believers assigned the traditional roles of Jewish messianic expectation—ruling over the earth in peace, subduing enemies, securing justice, restoring the oppressed—to Jesus at his future advent (see for example 1 Cor 15:24-28 or the prophecy of Rome's defeat in Rev 18).

The second cultural arena that influenced images of Jesus is the world of religious and philosophical experience and practice. The images of Jesus as the *great high priest* and Lamb of God derive from Israel's worship. The first, predominant in Hebrews, announces Jesus as the supreme mediator who surpasses all human priests who had served in the temple; the second speaks of Jesus as embodying and surpassing the sacrificial rituals in which the blood of an unblemished lamb was offered in expiation for sins (Lev 4:32). The New Testament writings, and especially the Gospel of John, refer to Jesus as the sacrificial lamb, unblemished and innocent, offered to expiate the



sins of the people. It is interesting that the lamb for the sin offering had to be a female. A similar application of feminine imagery to Jesus appears when he is represented as the personification of divine Wisdom (1 Cor 1:24, 30). Wisdom personified (the Hebrew, *Hokmah*, and Greek, *Sophia*, are both feminine nouns) appears and speaks in Proverbs 8 and became the subject of greater speculation among more philosophically minded Hellenistic Jews (Philo and the author of the Wisdom of Solomon). Such speculation apparently stands behind the masculine metaphor of the *Logos* in the Gospel of John. *Logos* and the imagery of Jesus as Light of the world both emerge from the cosmopolitan, hellenized society in which the church grew in the late first and early second centuries; they are related to the Greek philosophical view of the creating force that originates and sustains the order of the cosmos.

The third cultural arena of influence is Israel's agrarian society. In a land of shepherds, whose livelihoods depend on taking good care of their flocks, the image of a good shepherd is greatly valued. The New Testament—and many of the earliest visual representations of Jesus in Christian art—represent him as the *Good Shepherd* who takes great care and protects the flock (see John 10:1-5), just as YHWH did (Psalm 23).

The plurality of images of Jesus in the New Testament opened the door for new interpretations, some coming from theologians and teachers in the church, past and present, but many others coming from ordinary readers who have felt invited to appropriate Jesus in personal ways.

### *Jesus in Academic Culture*

In an effort to explain Jesus of Nazareth as a historical figure—apart from the interpretations of the church and the faithful appropriations of individual believers—scholars have used modern historical methods to analyze the Gospels in their cultural context. This historically oriented scholarship, begun at the end of the eighteenth century, is known as “The Quest for the Historical Jesus.” As controversial as some of the reconstructions of the “historical Jesus” have been, it is important to learn about them, because they help us understand the cultural conceptions and expectations that Jesus' followers may have had of him, and they help present-day readers understand better what the New Testament says about him. The contemporary quest for the historical Jesus has its roots in the Enlightenment, when the Bible became an object of historical science and of the historical-critical method. The quest for the historical Jesus thus



far can be explained succinctly as a three-phase endeavor: the first or original quest (late eighteenth to early twentieth century); the second or new quest (early 1950s to early 1970s); and a third quest (late 1970s to the present).

### *First Quest*

Attempting to depart from what they considered the unreal and “inhuman” Christ of faith created by the institutionalized church of the fourth and fifth centuries, the first “questers” for the historical Jesus stripped away the cloths of dogma and faith, hoping to find the human Jesus they assumed was hidden in the Gospels. Some of these interpreters proposed that Jesus should be seen in political terms, having had messianic intentions, thinking of himself as future king of a new kingdom, and at last entering Jerusalem and trying to seize power as a worldly messiah. Others sought to re-create Jesus’ mental and social outlook, depicting him as a supporter of a pure worship, a religion with no priests or external rites, based on feelings and emotions—an idealist who highlighted the infinite value of the human soul and had as his core message love and the fatherhood of God. The goal of this first quest was to recover the Jesus of history hidden behind the Christ of faith, and its main result was the realization that the Gospels were products of faith, not historical records. By the end of the nineteenth century a consensus had emerged that the Jesus of history had been lost behind the Christ of faith.

The original quest ended when, at the beginning of the twentieth century, William Wrede and Albert Schweitzer challenged these interpreters, revealing their biases and subjectivity in creating modern, liberal images of Jesus with whom they felt more comfortable. Schweitzer proposed a counter-image of Jesus, in light of his religious-historical context, as an eschatological enthusiast who, claiming to be the Messiah, sought to bring God’s longed-for kingdom but instead died tragically on the cross.

### *Second Quest*

Following Schweitzer’s work, many academic interpreters became convinced that the Gospels offered no reliable accounts as sources for the historical figure of Jesus. In the 1950s, however, in the wake of the Second World War and influenced by the existentialist philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger, a “new quest” for Jesus began. Its proponents believed that the New Testament evangelists had said



little about the person and life of Jesus because they were not interested in those details. What had mattered to them, rather, was the question of how to interpret our existence when confronted with Christ's teaching.

With such an existentialist message, these scholars took it as their task in this new quest to seek out the history embedded in the early church's *kerygma* (proclamation), understanding that the Gospels had no historical interest apart from faith. Their goal was to reconstruct the historical context where the message about Jesus, the *kerygma*, was preached, rather than to reconstruct the historical Jesus *per se*.

### Third Quest

By the late 1970s, after the decline of existentialism and a period in which the quest for the historical Jesus became dormant, something of a renaissance in Jesus scholarship started a third quest, which has been characterized by its widely contrasting representations of Jesus and by a lack of a common methodology. There are, however, three points of consensus: the image of Jesus as an eschatological prophet has faded; a new image of Jesus as teacher has emerged; and the social world of Jesus has become central to the quest.

The goal of the third quest has been to free Jesus from the prison of Scriptures, where we have incarcerated him. Some of the portraits of Jesus that emerge from this third quest see him as a Jewish-Cynic peasant; a prophet of restoration eschatology; a Hellenistic-type Cynic sage; an egalitarian prophet of Wisdom; a social prophet; and a spirit person.

In the end, it may seem to some that the logic behind the battle between the Christ of Christian faith and the Jesus of history has destroyed both figures, leaving no winner. The result of the quest for the historical Jesus has been in some cases an ahistorical Jesus, dispossessed both from his Jewishness and from the community of faith that portrayed him in the Gospels. On the other hand, the Christ of faith has become "unbelievable" because he had been so extremely divinized and removed from the socio-cultural context of what Christians affirm as the incarnation. In the same way that too much light or too little light prevents us from seeing clearly, polarizing the question of Jesus' identity in the stark terms of history versus Christian faith may prevent us from understanding him in new ways, including ways that accept the tension inherent



in the Christian claim of his full humanity *and* his full divinity. Some of this new light has come through the images of Jesus current in contexts outside the West.

### *Jesus in Multicultural Contexts*

In the same way that the cultural context of ancient Israel and the context of the Roman Empire influenced the titles and representations of Jesus, every cultural context in Christian history has contributed its own particular images of Jesus. For the Christianized Platonic philosophy of the third century, Jesus was essentially the Cosmic Christ, the *Logos* who ruled the universe and in whom all things had their being. In a sixth-century mosaic, dressed in Roman armor and driving the chariot of the sun (in the figure of Apollo), Jesus was transformed into the Christ Militant. For the medieval Benedictines, Jesus became a monastic figure who simultaneously ruled the world. In the Renaissance he was turned into the Universal Man (though distinctly European!). As themes of judgment came to the fore in popular European imagination, the Reformers found in Christ the Mirror of God's parental love that justified the sinner. For the philosophers of the Enlightenment, he became the Teacher of Common Sense. The multicultural quest for Jesus today emerges as a response to contemporary racism, the colonial captivity of much of the world, and the thwarting of indigenous images of Jesus.

### *Dominant White Eurocentric Images*

When Jesus of Nazareth walked in Galilee, he looked visibly like his first-century Galilean Jewish contemporaries and shared their common culture. He came culturally from the region today called the Middle East, and he was ethnically like others descending from Afro-Asiatic Hebrews. Yet the image of Jesus that has been pervasive throughout much of the world is that of a white Northern European male with fair hair and blue eyes. How did that white Jesus become the prevailing image?

The earliest representations of Jesus were symbols such as a fish or a lamb. Early likenesses of Jesus show him as a beardless young man with a brown complexion. Only under the Byzantine Empire of the fifth and sixth centuries—which often depicted Jesus, with a beard and his hair parted down the middle, after the fashion of the Byzantine court, as a monarch, seated on a throne, his hand raised in command—did artists begin to create what has come to be the standard representation of Jesus. Like other regions, Europe developed culturally relevant representations of Christ for communicating the biblical story of Jesus.



But why did Europe's culturally appropriate Christ become the dominant image of the historical Jesus beyond Europe? The "European" Christ image was used to support European colonial expansion into Africa, Asia, and the Americas, as well as the genocide of indigenous peoples and the capture and enslavement of black Africans. In effect, a white likeness of Jesus served the purpose of being God's stamp of approval on the actions of white conquerors and demonstrated that the white "race" was superior to peoples of color by virtue of the whiteness of Jesus.

Missionaries from Europe could have discarded the Western images of Jesus upon arrival in Africa, the Americas, Asia, and the islands of the great oceans. With the help of indigenous people, new images of Jesus could have been shaped that spoke powerfully to the people encountered. But this did not happen. The propagation of white images of Jesus continues even to our own time through media portrayals in movies and television, as well as in the pictures of nearly every Bible produced for use around the world.

The effects of a Western image of a white Jesus have been far-reaching. In contexts outside of Europe, the whiteness of the image makes Jesus seem like a foreigner, a stranger, or even an enemy. If your oppressor is white and the oppressor's image of Jesus is white, it appears that Jesus has endorsed your domination—an impression the oppressors were often only too happy to promote. In this way, the Jesus who taught the love of enemies (Matt 5:44, Luke 6:27) has repeatedly been transformed into the enemy, a monarch who presides over brutal oppression carried out by those who look like he does.

When white Western images of Jesus appear in contexts outside of Europe, Jesus seems like a captive of the West. This makes it difficult for non-European people to understand Jesus as separate from those who brought him from Europe. When the Bible is interpreted from a Western bias, Christian faith and Western culture come to appear synonymous. White images of Jesus subtly give the impression that European and Euro-American ways of thinking and acting are normative. The effects of regarding Western Christianity as the normative and superior form of the Christian faith demeans any other form of Christianity, including ancient rites like the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Egyptian Coptic Church.

White images of Jesus have been used to deny the biblical message of liberation. The Jesus who preached good news to the poor and freedom for the oppressed (Luke



4:16–19) was altered to sustain systems of exploitation. For example, the religion of the slaveholder in the United States required only a belief in the incarnation (God made flesh in Jesus Christ): there was limited concern for the historical Jesus. Christianity was a religion of right belief. As long as one subscribed to the right belief or doctrine, one could enslave people in good conscience. Slave masters forced enslaved Africans to bow down in worship to this white image who looked racially like the brutal overseer. But the effects on white people in the United States have been no less troubling. In order to bless slavery and condone the white man's divine right to own Africans, the Bible was stripped of its liberating power. The Jesus that preached, practiced, and prayed for freedom and liberation was replaced with a Christ who was a symbol of right belief. Christian faith was domesticated, stultified into a pale reflection of white power and privilege.

### *Restoring Culturally Appropriate Images of Jesus*

Today we know that the colonizer, the slaveholder, and the white supremacist lied about Jesus. Yet the image of a white Jesus remains deeply imbedded in our psyches. In order to change perceptions, people need to see that Jesus was not white. Jesus must be returned to his rightful place in a faith with roots in Africa and Asia. Even white people may need an Afro-Asiatic Jesus to be set free from racism. Whites who assent to an Afro-Asiatic Jesus will find it more difficult to accept society's racial hierarchy.

There is also a need for culturally relevant depictions. Some Native Americans describe Jesus as a respected spiritual leader. Latina/o scholars living in the United States have connected with a Galilean Jesus who knows the experience of feeling cut off from one's culture of origin and unaccepted by the dominant culture in a new land. African Americans have claimed a black Jesus who is friend, fellow sufferer, confidant, and liberator. Of course, the historical Jesus with African blood flowing through his veins (at least one drop!) could easily blend in among the wide range of skin colors and hues found in the AfricanAmerican community today.

Jesus must also be internationalized. Asian scholars remind us that the Jesus of history lived and breathed on the Asian continent. We need to reclaim this cultural connection. Latin American images of Jesus are diverse and include traditional portrayals of the infant Jesus and the suffering Jesus, as well as modern images such as the Indian Jesus, the black Jesus, the revolutionary Jesus, and Jesus as friend and liberator of

women. Africans are contributing images of Jesus like Greatest Ancestor, First Ancestor, Elder Brother, Healer, Liberator, and Mother (or Nurturer of Life).

It is interesting to note that there are also some representations of Jesus coming from Asian non-Christian contexts. Within Islam, Jesus has been known as *Isa Masih* (Jesus the Messiah). Isa is known as one of God's most prominent and beloved prophets, who was called to guide the people of Israel. A Hindu view of Jesus recognizes him as one of the *Avataras*, the incarnations of the divine. Within Buddhism he has been called *Bodhisattva* ("one whose existence is enlightenment"), a being whose wisdom lies in the commitment to redeem all of life.

In our contemporary multicultural context, Jesus is emerging with new faces that are relevant to those who live in a culture different from the West. Following are a few examples.

### *Jesus the Liberator*

In the midst of the economic oppression of poverty, the social oppression of dehumanization, and the spiritual oppression of sin, Jesus has emerged in Latin America as liberator from all oppressions. Jesus' miracles in the Gospels are seen not so much as demonstrations of Jesus' divinity but as actions of liberation that freed the oppressed as a consequence of their participating in the creation of God's kingdom. Jesus' followers must do what Jesus did: generate partial liberations in anticipation of the future liberation of all that God will bring about. As liberator, Jesus is also seen as a prophet who questioned the religious-political authorities and demanded justice, challenging the oppressive systems of his time. This image gives hope and liberation to the powerless to demand justice. Jesus the liberator does not arise exclusively from Latin America: a similar Jesus has emerged from the realities of oppression and poverty in Asian and African nations and of racism in the United States.

### *Jesus the Galilean–Mestizo*

This Jesus emerges from the Latina/o reality of marginality in the United States. Jesus' identity as a Galilean, on the boundaries of Judean culture, is a symbol of marginality, a mirror where the marginalized community today can find a clear cultural identity. This Galilean Jesus was a human being with no particular privilege (Phil 2:6-7); he even assumed the form of a slave, in the eyes of the slaveholder less than human. He



came into the world of the voiceless, the sick, the hungry, and the oppressed, not to do things for them, but to become one of them. The challenge of this Jesus today is to understand what Galilee was and what it means to be a Galilean today, and to seek out those who live on the cultural margins in today's world. It is there, in the most unsuspected places, that God continues to work.

### *Jesus the Ancestor*

In some African cultures the concept of communion with the dead is an important part of their worldview. Those relatives who have died acquire a sacred status that implies supernatural powers and closeness to God. In that position they can act as mediators between God and humanity. For many, the deceased ancestors are liturgical companions of the living. Being an ancestor is more than simply having died; it means one lived an exemplary life, was married and transmitted life to another generation, then died a natural death. With the intention of translating the Christian faith into categories that are familiar to African people, the image of Jesus as Ancestor conveys the important role of Jesus as mediator between God and humans. A complementary understanding of Jesus as Elder Brother emphasizes his companionship in daily life.

### *Jesus as Chief*

The concept of chief among some African communities is that of the guardian. The chief is the leader over political and religious matters in the community and is seen as a hero who can conquer enemies in both the earthly and the spiritual realms. Located at the intersection of both realms, the chief receives strength and authority from the ancestors and is considered an ancestor himself. In such position the chief is mediator between members of the tribe, the ancestors, and even those who have not been born. The identity of the community is derived from the chief. Just as the chief mediates between the tribe and the ancestors and gives identity to the community, Jesus mediates blessings to the church from God and gives identity to the church.

### *The Peoples' Jesus*

As history shows, each of us has a particular vision of Jesus that may be influenced by our faith, ideologies, traditions, experiences, and all the other cultural elements that play a role in shaping our vision of reality and our own identity. No matter how diverse all these individual images of Jesus are, it is always important to acknowledge his historical context in first-century Judea and the fact that Jesus was a Jew. When our

images of Jesus are divested of his cultural and ethnic background, they risk becoming anti-Semitic.

With so many images of Jesus available already, it is impossible not to ask, is there a limit to the images and representations of Jesus that we can create? Our answer: Not really. As long as diverse people come to Jesus, approaching him with particular images in mind, personalizing their own distinct encounters with him and perhaps coming to call upon him with distinct names, there will be no such limit. However, we could say that a limit is set by the spirit of love and liberation that the gospels convey. Images that depict a Jesus contrary to the spirit of the Gospels go beyond that limit. It should be inconceivable, for example, to represent Jesus as someone who meant to inflict oppression and pain. Imperialist images of Jesus, or the Aryan, Nazi Jesus who sponsored racism, or a violent, armed, revolutionary Jesus—all are distortions of the gospel depiction of a Jesus who preached the love of God.

The first-century Jesus of Nazareth had a particular culture and a distinct ethnic look. Jesus as the Christ has come to reside in all cultures, embraces all cultures, and speaks forth from all cultures. The Jesus of history and the Jesus who emerges from the pages of the Bible has come to be and remains the peoples' Jesus.