The Blackwell Companion to Jesus

Edited by

Delbert Burkett

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Acknowledgments

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Images of Jesus: An Overview

Delbert Burkett

Jesus of Nazareth is arguably the most influential person in human history. As the founding figure of Christianity, the largest of the world religions, his influence has extended to the billions of people who have professed this religion, as well as to the billions of others who have been affected by it. Christians past and present have worshiped Jesus as a god, prayed to him for assistance, looked to him for salvation, and professed to emulate his life and teachings. They have traversed the globe to bring the knowledge of his name to the entire world.

Jesus' influence on the world has been complex and varied. In his name, his adherents have practiced pacifism or launched crusading armies, initiated missions of mercy and assistance or participated in pogroms and inquisitions, withdrawn from the world or established social and political movements. No single conception or image of Jesus could have spawned such diversity. From the beginning of Christianity, the image of Jesus has been protean, adaptable to the different perspectives and needs of different communities and individuals.

The *Blackwell Companion to Jesus* explores these diverse conceptions and images of Jesus that have arisen over the past 2,000 years, from the beginning of Christianity to the present. While no single volume can claim to cover all of these, the present volume does examine the most significant ways in which Jesus has been imagined or portrayed.

Jesus in the New Testament

Diverse conceptions of Jesus appear already in the earliest accounts of his life that have been preserved: the four gospels of the New Testament. The Gospel of Mark (see

The Blackwell Companion to Jesus, edited by Delbert Burkett

chapter 1) never suggests that Jesus is anything more than human. Though he is adopted as God's "son" and appointed as the "Christ," his special character comes not from his genes, but from the Spirit that God has given him, thus enabling him to perform miraculous deeds. In contrast, the Gospel of Matthew (see chapter 2) elevates Jesus to the rank of a demigod, the literal offspring of a divine father and a human mother. Additionally, it presents Jesus as a Jewish rabbi, an interpreter of the Jewish Law. But while some passages present Jesus as a lenient rabbi, others make him very strict. The Gospel of Luke (see chapter 3) retains the portrayal of Jesus as a demigod but lacks the image of Jesus as a strict rabbi. For Luke, Jesus is primarily a friend of the poor and oppressed, the outcast and the sinner, women and non-Jews. Only in the Gospel of John (see chapter 4) does Jesus exist in some form prior to his birth on earth, and only this gospel calls him "God." For John, Jesus is a pre-existent divine being who comes from heaven to become incarnate as a human being, to accomplish God's will, and to ascend back to the heavenly realm.

These gospels probably used earlier sources and traditions that have not been preserved, such as the one that New Testament scholars call "Q," a source common to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke (see chapter 5). These earlier sources and traditions did not necessarily present the same perspective on Jesus. Consequently, as the authors of the gospels combined them in their own works, the gospel portraits of Jesus that emerged were not necessarily consistent internally or with each other.

Other writings in the New Testament contribute other significant images of Jesus. The letters written by or attributed to the apostle Paul (see chapter 6) focus on the crucified and resurrected Christ as the means of salvation for those who confess that he is Christ, Son of God, or Lord. Jesus is also the "last Adam," whose obedience to God reversed the consequences of Adam's disobedience. The "cosmic Christ" of Colossians reconciles the entire world to God. Among the general or non-Pauline epistles (see chapter 7), the letter to the Hebrews is unique in presenting Christ as a heavenly high priest, comparable to, but superior to, those high priests that served in the Jewish tabernacle. The book of Revelation (see chapter 8) symbolically portrays Jesus not only as a lamb that had been slain, but also as a victorious rider on a white horse, leading the armies of heaven into war.

These images, for the most part, were not based on personal knowledge of Jesus. Paul did not know Jesus personally, though he knew people who did. Nor did the authors of the gospels know Jesus, according to New Testament scholars, but wrote forty to seventy years after his death. Nevertheless, new images of Jesus continued to emerge after Jesus' death, from people who never met him. In some cases, they could attribute their conceptions of Jesus to the "Spirit" of God, who inspired them and taught them new things about Jesus (John 14:25–26; 15:26; 16:12–15). In other cases, they developed their images of Jesus from passages in the Hebrew Bible or "Old Testament" (see chapter 9). Since they believed that these scriptures spoke about Jesus, they used them to construct their conceptions of him.

Jesus Beyond the New Testament

Other conceptions of Jesus appear in the early centuries of the Christian era in the "apocryphal" writings (see chapter 10). These circulated alongside those writings that eventually became the canon of the New Testament. Some of these sought to fill in the gaps in the life of Jesus that were left by the canonical gospels. For example, the Infancy Gospel of Thomas relates stories about Jesus' childhood. The young Jesus portrayed in this gospel is occasionally volatile, as when he curses another child who offends him and the child drops dead. Other apocryphal writings used Jesus to promote certain religious beliefs or practices. For example, the Acts of John promotes a "docetic" perspective by portraying Jesus as a purely spiritual being who only appeared to be human. In the Acts of Thomas, Jesus, in the form of his identical twin and apostle Thomas, functions as a mouthpiece to promote the "encratite" practices of abstinence from marriage, wine, and certain foods.

Diverse images of Jesus continued to emerge as various Christian groups competed for supremacy. Judaic Christian groups generally regarded Jesus as a human being. Since these groups continued to view the Jewish Law as the way to God, they placed little emphasis on the death of Jesus, typically regarding it as the death of a rejected prophet. Jesus' primary importance lay in his role as the future Messiah, who would return to liberate the Jewish people from Roman domination. For Proto-Orthodox groups, the precursors of what would later become "mainstream" or orthodox Christianity, Jesus was both human and divine. His primary importance lay in his death, seen as a sacrifice for others. The shedding of his blood atoned for sins. For Gnostic Christian groups (see chapter 11), who combined Christian ideas with Hellenistic philosophy, the problem for human beings was not sin, but ignorance of their true selves. Human souls were sparks of divine light that had fallen from the heavenly realm to become ensnared in material bodies. Jesus' primary importance lay in his role as a revealer, who descended from the heavenly world to bring self-knowledge to ensnared souls so that they might ascend back to the heavenly realm. Many Gnostics regarded the Christ who performed this task as a purely spiritual being who never became ensnared in a material body.

In the early centuries of Christianity, the question of Jesus' "nature," whether human or divine, became a topic of considerable debate. On one end of the spectrum, adoptionists regarded Jesus as a purely human being. On the other end, docetists and many Gnostics saw him as a purely divine being. While some theologians wished to make him partly human and partly divine, others wanted him fully human and fully divine. These debates continued unabated through the eighth century and resulted in the formulation of the major creeds of Christendom (see chapter 12). The creed adopted at the Council of Nicea in 325 described Jesus as "of the same substance (*homoousios*) as the Father." Theologians from Cappadocia explicated this to mean that Jesus was one of three "persons" of the Trinity, who shared a single divine "nature." The creed adopted at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 insisted that Jesus

had two natures, divine and human, which in some inexplicable way were neither mixed nor separated. Through these creeds and writings, emperors and bishops sought to establish one official interpretation of Jesus as the "orthodox" view, thus rendering all other views "heretical." This attempt only partially succeeded, since a number of Christian groups never accepted the official interpretations of Jesus' nature.

Interpretations of Jesus' death have been similarly diverse, though never reduced to an official creedal statement. Some early passages in the gospels present Jesus' death as that of a prophet. God sent Jesus to Israel not in order to die, but to deliver his message. Jesus' death came from those who rejected that message. Alongside this conception developed another, in which Jesus' death did not contravene God's will, but fulfilled it. God sent Jesus to die, and in some way he died on behalf of others as an "atonement" for sins (see chapter 13). While this conception prevailed to become the dominant view of Christianity, theologians and critics have continued to debate why Jesus needed to die and how his death could be for others.

During the Middle Ages, Christian theologians understood the nature of Jesus within the parameters set earlier by the creeds, though new theories of the atonement were developed by Anselm and Abelard. Thomas Aquinas justified the real presence of Christ in the Mass by the theory of "transubstantiation." Mystics sought mystical union with Jesus, while monks and nuns emulated his life of celibacy and poverty. Images of Jesus for the masses portrayed him primarily as hanging on the cross or presiding at the last judgment.

In the sixteenth century, the Protestant Reformation splintered Europe into warring factions. Reformers generally continued to restate earlier doctrines about Jesus. Building on earlier theories of atonement, Martin Luther and John Calvin developed the "penal substitutionary theory." A controversy over the Lord's Supper arose as Luther continued to accept the bodily presence of Jesus in the elements, while Calvin did not. Anabaptists who died for their faith looked to the suffering of Jesus as their model.

Jesus in World Religions

Alongside these developments, Jesus became a figure in religious traditions other than Christianity. Christianity has traditionally presented Jesus as the only way to the divine. As adherents of other religious traditions have encountered this claim, they have often found themselves compelled to respond. As part of their response, they have produced alternative visions of Jesus that are compatible with their own religious traditions.

Since Jesus was a Jew, as were his earliest followers, Judaism had the first encounter with Jesus (see chapter 14). As Jewish Christians preached that Jesus was the Christ, this message found little acceptance among Jews but had greater success among non-Jews. Christianity thus became a religion primarily of Gentiles, who increasingly developed hostility toward the Jews who rejected their view of Jesus.

After Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, it had the power to put this animosity into effect. Jews throughout Europe became a persecuted minority in a hostile Christian environment. Not surprisingly therefore, Jews developed a less than positive attitude toward the Jesus in whose name they suffered. Ancient and medieval Jewish sources portray Jesus as an illegitimate child, an apostate from Judaism, a sorcerer who led Israel astray into idolatry, who was rightly condemned for blasphemy. Not until the nineteenth century, when Jews became more fully integrated into European culture, did Jewish scholars develop a more positive conception of Jesus as a Jewish prophet or sage, whose teachings have a place alongside those of other Jewish sages.

When Muhammad founded the religion of Islam in the seventh century, Christianity was a dominant power that required a response. The Qur'an provides a response by presenting an image of Jesus acceptable to the monotheistic faith of Islam (see chapter 15). This portrait adopts many aspects of the Christian Jesus: Jesus is born of a virgin, he is the Messiah, he performs miracles, and he is taken up to God. However, unlike the Jesus of Christianity, this Jesus is neither God nor the son of God nor a member of a divine Trinity. In the Qur'an, Jesus himself repudiates such claims. He is the greatest prophet other than Muhammad, but he is not divine. Nor did he die as an atonement for sins. In fact, he did not die at all, but was raised up to God alive. Later Islamic literature develops the portrait of Jesus in line with this basic image.

As Hindus have encountered the Jesus preached by Christian missionaries, they have developed images of Jesus that understand him within the context of Hinduism (see chapter 16). Hindus have no trouble accepting Jesus as an incarnation of God in human form, since the Hindu tradition itself includes the concept of an "avatar," a divine being who descends to the world to bring revelation of the truth. Some Hindus therefore regard Jesus as an avatar. However, they part company with the Christian view when it claims that Jesus was the only incarnation of God. For Hindus, Jesus was one avatar among others, such as Rama and Krishna. Other Hindus regard Jesus not as an avatar, but as a teacher of morality and ethics.

Similarly, Buddhists understand Jesus within the context of Buddhism (see chapter 17). In the most common appropriation of Jesus in Buddhism, he is a bodhisattva, a being who postpones entrance into nirvana in order to help other sentient beings toward enlightenment. Since there are many bodhisattvas, this perspective too rejects the Christian claim that Jesus is the only way to ultimate reality. Buddhists also regard Jesus as a spiritual teacher. They especially appreciate Christian teachings about love, which correspond to the Buddhist emphasis on the virtue of compassion.

Philosophical and Historical Perspectives on Jesus

With the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a new era dawned in perceptions of Jesus. Ideas about Jesus based on tradition or revelation or

theological speculation came under suspicion. Since that time, rational philosophical enquiry, applied to the traditional image of Jesus, has raised doubts about the supernatural aspects of it. Jesus' birth from a virgin, his divinity, his miracles, his resurrection from the dead, the whole concept of the Trinity, have all come under scrutiny (see chapter 18 on the resurrection). Many critics have regarded these claims about Jesus as impossible, improbable, or incredible.

A similar result has issued from secular historical methods applied to the story of Jesus. The historical-critical method understands the past as analogous to the present. If the events that occur in the present have a natural explanation, then the same must be true for events that occurred in the past. Consequently a historical reconstruction gives natural explanations for the events of Jesus' life, just as it would for the life of Alexander the Great or any other figure of history. A reconstruction of Jesus as a historical figure presents Jesus in purely human terms.

The application of this method to the gospel accounts of Jesus' life has led to an ongoing quest for the historical Jesus (see chapters 19, 20, and 21). New Testament scholars engaged in this quest seek to place Jesus firmly within the historical context of first-century Judaism in the Roman Empire. But since the sources about Jesus are few and subject to interpretation, this quest has produced not one, but many different images of the historical Jesus. Scholars have portrayed Jesus as a revolutionary seeking to overthrow Roman domination, as an eschatological prophet announcing that God was about to establish his kingdom on earth, as a social reformer trying to improve the society in which he lived, as a Jewish rabbi concerned about the correct interpretation of the Jewish Law, as a magician, a sage, and even a feminist.

Modern Manifestations of Jesus

Alongside these various forms of the historical Jesus, other images of Jesus have also emerged in the modern era. Christian theologians, primarily in Europe and North America, have grappled with the problem that modernity poses for traditional conceptions of Jesus (see chapter 22). Some have embraced the Enlightenment goal of "religion within the limits of reason alone," seeking an understanding of Jesus that is credible within those limits but still relevant for Christian faith. Others have rejected those limits and developed more traditional christologies based on revelation and faith.

Theologians in Africa, Asia, and Latin America have also produced christologies that have relevance for their particular cultures (see chapter 23). South American theologians find most meaningful an understanding of Jesus as a liberator of the poor and oppressed. Theologians in Asia use various cultural analogies to make Christ relevant for that context, including the Hindu concept of the avatar to understand the incarnation of Jesus, the Chinese concept of yin and yang to understand the divine and human in Jesus, and the analogy of the guru to understand Jesus as a

spiritual teacher. Similarly theologians in Africa portray Jesus in terms from their own culture, as an ancestor, a chief, or a medicine man (healer).

If Jesus has thus been adaptable to different cultures, that has been true nowhere more than in the United States, where Jesus has been a ubiquitous cultural icon (see chapter 24). In America, Jesus has ousted God the Father as the central figure of Christian devotion. Freed from creeds and tradition, he has become an intensely personal Savior. Members of the Ku Klux Klan take him as their role model, football players give thanks to him when they score, and presidents look to him for guidance in their foreign policy.

Since Jesus is typically portrayed as a white male, many black people have found it ironic to worship a Christ who resembles the white people responsible for their oppression. The struggle of blacks in the United States for liberation thus gave rise to an image of Christ as black (see chapter 25). In one sense, to call Christ black means that he supports blacks in their struggle for freedom; in another sense, it means that Jesus was ethnically black with dark skin. Proponents of the Black Christ have adopted one sense or the other or both, producing an image of Christ with which black people can identify.

While the whiteness of the traditional Christ has alienated many blacks, his maleness has posed a problem for many women. The depiction of God and Christ as male has traditionally justified the subjugation of women. Consequently the relevance of Jesus for women has come under scrutiny by the feminist movement that arose in the 1970s. While some feminists regard Jesus and his religion as incompatible with their goal of liberation, many Christian feminists have sought to retain Jesus by developing feminist christologies (see chapter 26). These have sought to develop an understanding of Christ that supports the goals and aspirations of women. "Womanist" christologies have developed such an understanding specifically for black women (see chapter 25). From these efforts, new images of Jesus have emerged, such as the Jesus who is a prophet of Sophia, a feminine personification of God's wisdom in the Jewish tradition. This is a Jesus who opposes patriarchal structures.

While the maleness of Jesus raises one issue for women, it raises another for gay men (see chapter 27). Can Jesus be relevant for gays? Could Jesus himself have been gay? Some interpreters have in fact found evidence that Jesus engaged in a homoerotic relationship with another man, pointing to his relationship with "the disciple whom Jesus loved" in the Gospel of John (John 13:21–26; 19:26–27, 34–35; 20:1–10; 21:1–8, 18–24). Depictions of Jesus as homoerotic also occur in art, literature, and theater. Some theologians argue that a "gay" Jesus is not incompatible with Christian theology.

Outside of official Christianity or the academic study of religion, more popular images of Jesus have abounded (see chapter 28). Modern apocrypha, forged texts that claim to be ancient documents, present a variety of perspectives about Jesus. For example, the *Life of Issa* fills in the "lost years" of Jesus between the ages of twelve and thirty, by relating how he traveled to India and studied with Hindu and Buddhist teachers. The *Essene Letter* describes how Jesus survived the crucifixion. Without

using a forged text, modern "mystifications" – unverified speculations about Jesus – continue this tradition. Among these new mythologies is that disseminated most successfully in *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown. This claims that Jesus and Mary Magdalene had children whose descendants are still among us. While Brown's book is fiction, it relies on works that actually make this claim.

Jesus in Art, Fiction, and Film

It is not surprising that a figure as popular as Jesus has frequently been depicted in art, fiction, and film. The history of Christian art testifies to various conceptions of Jesus (see chapter 29). Artists have depicted him as the good shepherd, the teacher of true philosophy, a healer and wonder-worker, a member of the Trinity, the creator, the giver of the new covenant, and the judge at the final judgment. Icons of Jesus have invited the veneration of the faithful.

Literature too has produced its own portrayals of Jesus. Since 1770, around 300 novels about Jesus have appeared in English, no two of which are exactly alike (see chapter 30). Most of these attempt to harmonize the differences between the four stories of Jesus in the gospels, in order to produce a single unified account. By rewriting the story, novelists are able to provide what they consider satisfactory solutions to problems in the gospel narratives. They answer such problematic questions as how Jesus' virgin birth occurred, how he regarded himself, what he thought he was doing, how he could perform miracles, who was responsible for his death, and what happened to his body. The novel allows the author to present his or her own perspective on Jesus, which may be characterized by devotion, cynicism, or humor.

Similarly, since the invention of motion pictures in the late nineteenth century, hundreds of movies about Jesus have appeared (see chapter 31). Like Jesus novels, most of these attempt to harmonize the four gospels. Yet no two portray exactly the same Jesus. While *King of Kings* presents a clear-headed and self-confident messiah of peace, *The Last Temptation of Christ* portrays a man beset by doubts and struggling with his own desires. While *The Greatest Story Ever Told* depicts a pious Christ, whose every word drips with solemnity, *Jesus Christ Superstar* gives us a hippy Jesus who sings his dialogue to the accompaniment of rock music.

Reflections on Jesus

Jesus of Nazareth would probably have a hard time recognizing himself in the plethora of different images that have borne his name over the past 2,000 years. How should we explain this diversity? No doubt a variety of factors were involved, but here I will focus on only one: the Christian claim that Jesus is "the truth." This claim emerged as early as the Gospel of John, in which Jesus proclaims, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

But if a particular understanding of Jesus represents ultimate truth, then all those who do not accept it are aligned with falsehood to a correspondingly ultimate degree. Christianity has frequently promoted precisely this perspective: it has claimed the status of ultimate truth for its own understanding of Jesus and thus condemned all those who reject it. To such a potent claim, spread by Christian missionizing, some communities and individuals have responded by putting forward a counter-image, an alternative image of Jesus as the truth. Such responses have produced numerous images of Jesus, because every community and individual has a different conception of the truth.

Some communities have rejected Jesus as a symbol for the truth, yet even such rejection may produce an image of Jesus. For example, the Jews of antiquity and the Middle Ages rejected the Jesus of their oppressors. In the process, they created a counter-image of Jesus as the opposite of the truth, as a deceiver who led Israel astray.

More frequently, communities have accepted Jesus as a symbol for the truth but have assimilated his image to their own particular truths. This process is attested already in the earliest writings about Jesus. A Jewish community that strictly followed the Law portrayed Jesus as a strict rabbi. One that had a more lenient attitude toward the Law depicted him as a lenient rabbi. Communities immersed in Hellenistic culture portrayed him as a demigod or incarnation. Another steeped in the tradition of sacrifice regarded him as a sacrifice for sins. Each of these communities produced a Jesus who reflected and supported its own particular truth.

This process continued as various world religions encountered the Jesus of Christianity. Islam adopted a Muslim Jesus who supported the truth of Islam. Hindus and Buddhists likewise assimilated Jesus to the truths of their own traditions, imagining him as an avatar or bodhisattva. This process has continued down to the present, as images of Jesus have emerged that support the particular truths of black people, feminists, and gay men.

Ultimately humans have created Jesus in their own image, and since humans are infinitely diverse, this diversity has extended to their images of Jesus. These images may not tell us a great deal about Jesus of Nazareth, but they do tell us about the people who conceived or imagined them. The continuing influence of Jesus in the future will depend on his ability to maintain this protean character, his ability to be all things to all people.

PART I

Jesus in the New Testament