The Historical Jesus

1. Jesus was a Jewish preacher and healer appearing in Galilee (in today's Israel), especially in the region of Lake Gennesaret. His biography is visible only sketchily behind the religious reception of his activity, which reception forms the content of the four "Gospels" (writings of the Christian Canon) and related sources. That Jesus was born shortly before the death of King Herod the Great (4 BCE) may be a historically accurate approximation. His father and he were building artisans. The father seems already to have died by the beginning of Jesus's public appearance (between 26 and 29 BCE). Under Roman governor Pontius Pilate, Jesus was executed in Jerusalem by crucifixion (Cross/Crucifixion); it may be assumed that the accusation was his criticism of Jewish temple worship and the suspicion of having planned a popular uprising against the Romans.

Teaching

2. Jesus taught mainly among the simple folk of a country region. He proclaimed an entirely new relation between God and human beings, along with the imminence of the world event that he called the 'Kingdom of God.' In preaching this Kingdom, he clothed it in stories and sayings that make use of a rich pictorial language ('parables'). The point of departure for his ethics is the conviction that the interior of a person is more important than the exterior, and that therefore a purification and renewal of the human being must occur from within, through trust in God, righteousness, and love. Outward behavior is not unessential, but it is without value if it is in contradiction with an inner attitude. This conception brought Jesus into conflict with other expositions of the Jewish order of life; the confrontation was kindled especially in his denunciation of official determinations of Sabbath rest, and of the rejection of persons who were regarded as unclean (skin diseases, handicapped, mentally ill, etc.). According to the writings of his followers, Jesus turned to such persons repeatedly, delivering many of them from disease or possession with a call to God, and thus led them back into society.

Reception

3. From the very beginning, a number of groups appealed to Jesus. For instance, homeless and destitute itinerant ascetics raised the claim of continuing Jesus's lifestyle. Their ideas are ordered in a larger ascetical movement, originally resident in India, and there, among other things, taking a classic form in Buddhist monasticism. It appeared in the Mediterranean area in the form of itinerant Cynic philosophers, for example.

Jesus in Christianity
Emerging from Jerusalem, another group was formed, whose point of crystallization was the belief that Jesus had been raised from the dead by God and had thereby been certified as the Messiah (in Gk., Christós). Both of the latter currents quickly had effects beyond Judaism, and led to the rise of Christianity as a distinct religion, at whose center stands Jesus as the risen Lord. On the other hand, Jesus's effect among his own Jewish popular and religious community was of brief duration.

By the fifth century, the dogma had formed in Christianity that, in the person of Jesus, God had appeared in human form, taking that form actually, and not merely seemingly. Jesus Christ was interpreted as one person, in whom divine and human nature are joined 'unconfusedly,' but undividedly. Thus he was understood according to his divine nature as one of the three persons of the divine 'Trinity'—along with the Father and the Holy Spirit—that, together are the one, 'triune,' God. This dogma provided the wherewithal for the formation of countless different interpretations of Jesus in Christianity. In the Byzantine Empire, he represented especially the Ruler of the All (Pantokrator), while in the Western European Middle Ages the suffering aspect of the crucified Christ was emphasized. The Reformation held firmly to the latter aspect, but marked even more profoundly the redemptive effect of Jesus's death.

In the nineteenth century, Romanticism discovered Jesus's 'co-human' traits anew. Authors of this period like Ernest Renan, David Friedrich Strauss, and Daniel Schenkel sought to write the actual life of Jesus, until, in his Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung (Ger., “History of Research into the Life of Jesus”), Albert Schweitzer showed these biographies to have been reflective images of the time in which they had been written. Nonetheless, the concerns of theologians to reconstruct the actual historical Jesus and his proclamation went even further, with the attempt to uncover this factual material through a critical analysis of the biblical texts. The extent to which this material can become visible 'behind the Bible's Christ of faith,' however, remained disputed.

For many members of the Christian churches, Jesus Christ is a super-terrestrial figure, vaguely mingling with the image of God, and is often felt to be someone watching one's own life for signs of good and evil unless he is invoked in a process of emancipation. Characteristics that are positive, but powerfully typical of the folktale, attach to the image of the infant Jesus ('Christ Child') activated at Christmas time and offered to children as being the one who brings 'presents.'

In recent decades, the discussion is fraught with the fascination of alternative images of Jesus (Jesus the revolutionary, the hippie, the magician, the 'female man'), and with a high vulnerability to theses that present Christianity's Jesus of faith as deceit. In this connection, the relation between Jesus and the Jewish Qumran community, among other things, is brought into play.

### Jesus in Other Religions

The religious effect of Jesus reaches far beyond Christianity. In Islam, Jesus is central to the message of the Qur'an as a prophet who was born of a virgin through the word and Spirit of God. Islam sharply rejects any interpretation of Jesus as a divine person, along with his death on the cross and his resurrection. For Muslims, Jesus is alive in heaven, and effective as an advocate in need; at the end of the world, he will play an important role, and will confess himself a Muslim.

In reform Hinduism, since the nineteenth century, Jesus has been adopted as one of the human manifestations (avatara) in which God appears time after time, or as one of the supreme actualizations of the principle that God and the human being are ultimately undivided. In the Theosophical Society,
anthroposophy, and the ‘New Age movement,’ further concepts—often in mutual dependency with the Indian interpretations—have been influential.

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