

Examine how representations of Jesus Christ have evolved over time.

Representations of Jesus Christ have never been a simple recovery of a stable historical figure; rather, they have been a repeated reconstruction, shaped by the changing assumptions historians bring to evidence, objectivity, and culture, often shaped by historians' assumptions about faith as the instigator for their perspective.¹ Early Christian writers represented Jesus as the Christ of faith, wielding their histories to affirm theological truth and ecclesiastical authority.² Enlightenment critics then turned Jesus into a historical problem by examining the gospels with the same scrutiny as other ancient texts, however, this did not produce a proven factual representation of Jesus' life.³ From Reimarus and Strauss to Schweitzer, Bultmann, Sanders, Crossan, Wright, Levine, and Ehrman, each stage of scholarship has produced a decidedly different Jesus as each has adopted different rules for their historiography, and what counts as historical fact.⁴ Thus representations of Jesus have evolved from theological affirmation to critical reconstruction. However, the key driver of this evolution has not been the evidence alone, but rather the unresolved tension between confessional theology and secular historical method.⁵ Constructions of Jesus of Nazareth have throughout time been predominantly shaped by the methods, contexts and purposes of those who seek to represent him, possibly more so than any other historical figure. Few others expose so clearly the way evidence, belief, culture and method interact in the writing of history.⁶

Early representations of Jesus were not concerned with separating the historical Jesus from the one written about in the gospels.⁷ Writers such as Eusebius of Caesarea wrote within a fourth-century context in which Christianity was moving from persecution to imperial legitimacy under Constantine, meaning history became a tool for defending the authority of

¹ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, London 1910, page 4.

² Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, Book I.1, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/250101.htm>.

³ Hermann Samuel Reimarus, *Fragments*, London 1971; David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, New York 1860; Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, London 1910.

⁴ Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, New York: Harper & Row, 1963; E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, London 1985; John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, San Francisco 1991; N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, London 1996; Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew*, New York 2006; Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, New York 2012.

⁵ N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, London 1996; Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, New York 2012.

⁶ E.H. Carr, *What is History?*, London 1961, page 30; Schweitzer, page 4.

⁷ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. 1, New York 1890, Book I, Chapter 1, pages 81-82, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf201.iii.vi.i.html>, accessed 9 June 2026.

the Church.⁸ Eusebius was also writing soon after the Diocletian persecution, when Christian suffering could be presented as evidence of endurance rather than defeat.⁹ Constantine's conversion and patronage gave this history a new political function, as the survival of the Church could be framed as providential vindication.¹⁰ His context therefore encouraged a history that connected Jesus, martyrdom, imperial favour, and orthodoxy into one continuous sacred narrative.¹¹ In *Ecclesiastical History* Eusebius represented Jesus as the fulfilment of divine prophecy and the foundation of Christian truth, using history to legitimise doctrine, episcopal succession and orthodox belief.¹² However, a conclusion that Eusebius was simply careless or dishonest is overly simplistic.¹³ Ancient Christian historiography operated under vastly different assumptions than modern empirical history, where the purpose of historical writing was primarily to show the meaning of what happened within a sacred narrative, as opposed to merely establishing what happened.¹⁴ Eusebius's context therefore shaped his methodology; he selected and arranged evidence to show that the Church preserved truth.¹⁵ As a result Jesus was represented not as a historical figure open to critical construction but as the theological centre of a divinely guided Christian order. This context also narrowed the range of possible representations. A historian in this era could debate chronology, succession, and martyrdom, but not whether Jesus should be approached as a merely human figure whose identity was open to historical inquiry, as Jesus' divine status was a premise upon which his life was studied. The crucial historiographical point is that early Christian histories did not lack a method, rather their method was confessional. It assumed that faith supplied the interpretive framework that historical evidence was constructed around.

The Enlightenment period produced the first major dissent to the Christ of faith narrative by transforming Jesus from an object of inherited belief into one of historical investigation.¹⁶

This shift emerged from a broader intellectual context that privileged reason, natural

⁸ James Corke-Webster, *Eusebius and Empire: Constructing Church and Rome in the Ecclesiastical History*, Cambridge 2019, Chapter 2, 'The Ecclesiastical History', pages 54-86.

⁹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book VIII, Introduction and chap. 1, 323-324.

¹⁰ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book X, chap. 9, 386-387.

¹¹ Christopher Bonura, 'Eusebius of Caesarea, the Roman Empire, and the Fulfillment of Biblical Prophecy: Reassessing Byzantine Imperial Eschatology in the Age of Constantine', *Church History*, 90, no. 3 (2021), pages 509-536.

¹² Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book I, chap. 1, 81-82.

¹³ Timothy D. Barnes, 'Eusebius of Caesarea', *The Expository Times*, 121, no. 1 (2009), pages 1-14.

¹⁴ Arnaldo Momigliano, 'Pagan and Christian Historiography in the Fourth Century A.D.', in Arnaldo Momigliano, ed., *The Conflict Between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century*, Oxford 1963, pages 79-99.

¹⁵ Corke-Webster, *Eusebius and Empire*, 54-86.

¹⁶ Schweitzer, page 4.

explanation, and scepticism toward inherited religious authority. In this setting, the Church tradition no longer determined historical truth, and the gospels could be treated as human texts shaped by authorship and purpose.¹⁷ Reimarus challenged the traditional Christian representation of Jesus by arguing the gospel narratives should be read critically as opposed to devotionally. His work separated Jesus' own historical intentions from the beliefs later attributed to him by his disciples, arguing that Christianity was shaped by later interpretation rather than by Jesus' original aims.¹⁸ This reflected an Enlightenment suspicion that religious institutions could distort original truth, making source criticism appear necessary rather than hostile. Strauss deepened this challenge in *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (1835) by treating many gospel narratives as mythological texts: not necessarily entirely false, but theological stories shaped by early Christian belief.¹⁹ This more sceptical approach to the sources changed the framework in which historians interpreted the gospels, allowing details such as the conflicting birth narratives in Matthew and Luke to become evidence of theological construction rather than minor problems to be harmonised as previously thought.²⁰ Matthew places Jesus' birth under Herod the Great, whilst Luke places it with the census of Quirinius, creating a chronological impossibility that critical scholars used as evidence that those who wrote the gospels were emphatically not writing a strict biography of Jesus.²¹ Schweitzer then turned the critique back onto the critics in *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906), wherein he argued that liberal scholars who claimed to recover the real Jesus had often remade him in their own image, depicting him as a rational moral teacher suited to the ideals of their nineteenth-century Protestant context.²² Schweitzer's critique showed that Enlightenment and its liberal successors had not escaped context, but had replaced confessional assumptions with rationalist and Protestant ones.²³ Although Schweitzer's own apocalyptic Jesus was also shaped by context, his critique exposed the limits of the supposedly objective secular criticism.²⁴ The Enlightenment produced new representations of Jesus shaped by rationalist and liberal assumptions, rather than simply

¹⁷ David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*, trans. Marian Evans, vol. 1, New York 1860, page 30.

¹⁸ Hermann Samuel Reimarus, *Fragments from Reimarus: Consisting of Brief Critical Remarks on the Object of Jesus and His Disciples as Seen in the New Testament*, London 1879, pages 27-28.

¹⁹ Strauss, *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*, vol. 1, pages 40-43.

²⁰ Strauss, *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*, vol. 1, pages 145-148.

²¹ *The Bible*, Matthew 2:1; Luke 2:1-2; Strauss, *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*, vol. 1, pages 146-148.

²² Schweitzer, pages 4 and 200.

²³ Simon Gathercole, 'The Critical and Dogmatic Agenda of Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*', *Tyndale Bulletin*, 51, no. 2 (2000), pages 263-264.

²⁴ Schweitzer, pages 4 and 200.

moving toward an empiricist historical method. Schweitzer's verdict that "each successive epoch of theology found its own thoughts in Jesus" showed how historians often shaped Jesus according to their own assumptions, and yet whilst his apocalyptic prophet was justifiably closer to Jesus' true nature than the liberal moral teacher of past portrayals, it remained a reconstruction vulnerable to the same critique he levied upon others.²⁵

Bultmann and form criticism intensified this crisis by questioning whether the historical Jesus is even possible to attain at all.²⁶ Writing as a German Lutheran New Testament scholar and theologian in a twentieth century Protestant context shaped by critical biblical scholarship, modern scepticism toward supernatural claims, and the crisis of traditional theology, Bultmann approached the gospels as texts formed by the needs of early Christian communities.²⁷ Earlier critics of the Gospels had challenged particular passages, but Bultmann treated them as a result of a lengthy process of oral tradition, preaching, and worship amongst the earliest Christian communities.²⁸ In *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (1921) Bultmann broke the gospels into smaller traditions, including sayings, parables, etc., arguing that many had been shaped by the beliefs and needs of the early Christian community after Jesus' death.²⁹ The Gospels became less like straightforward biographies and more like theological artifacts of early Christianity.³⁰ Jesus' representation shifted again, with the historical Jesus becoming more difficult to access because most sources appeared to preserve Christian faith rather than clear biography.³¹ Yet Bultmann complicates any simple division between confessional Christian work and secular scepticism. His criticism served a Christian theological purpose.

Influenced by Martin Heidegger's existentialism, he grounded faith in the *kerygma*, the Christian proclamation encountered through preaching. A reconstructed biography of Jesus that prior historians had attempted to create could not provide that foundation. This position was drawn on the Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith, where historical knowledge

²⁵ Schweitzer, pages 369-370 and 388-389.

²⁶ Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. John Marsh, New York 1963, pages 1-3.

²⁷ Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, pages 1-3.

²⁸ Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, pages 1-3.

²⁹ Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, pages 11-16, 69-73 and 179-244.

³⁰ Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, pages 337-368.

³¹ Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, pages 1-3.

could not become a means of securing salvation.³² His project of demythologisation interpreted the New Testament's mythological language existentially so its theological meaning could be retained without requiring literal historical certainty.³³ Bultmann's critical method restricted what historians could claim about Jesus of Nazareth while his theology preserved the meaning of the Christ of faith. His method therefore reflected a context in which historical criticism could not simply be rejected by theology, but had to be absorbed into it. Bultmann argued that if the gospels mainly reflect the beliefs of early Christians after Jesus' death, then historians cannot use them as straightforward biographies of Jesus.³⁴ Instead, they reveal how early Christian communities understood, remembered, and reshaped Jesus. Jesus becomes less a recoverable individual than the obscured origin behind Christian proclamation. The strength of this approach was its seriousness about the formation of the sources, whilst its weakness was that it risked making Jesus so inaccessible that the historical inquiry itself became secondary. Bultmann therefore shows that the changing representations of Jesus were not driven only by secular attacks on Christianity, they were also shaped by theologians who accepted historical criticism and redefined what faith required from history.³⁵

The New Quest first reopened the historical question that Bultmann had restricted. The movement began with Ernst Käsemann's 1953 lecture 'The problem of the Historical Jesus', and became known as the 'New Quest' through James M. Robinson's *A New Quest for the Historical Jesus* (1959). Käsemann, a former student of Bultmann, argued that Christian proclamation could not be separated entirely from Jesus of history without allowing the Church to construct Christ according to its own purposes. New Quest scholars therefore used criteria such as dissimilarity and multiple attestation to identify sayings or actions that might predate the early Christian communities. Yet this method risked increasing Jesus' authenticity

³² Rudolf Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology', in Hans Werner Bartsch, ed., *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, London 1953, pages 1-44; David W. Congdon, 'Is Bultmann a Heideggerian Theologian?', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 70, no. 1 (2017), pages 19-38; David W. Congdon, 'Demystifying the Program of Demythologizing: Rudolf Bultmann's Theological Hermeneutics', *Harvard Theological Review*, 110, no. 1 (2017), pages 1-23, especially pages 10-12.

³³ Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology', pages 1-44; Congdon, 'Demystifying the Program of Demythologizing', pages 10-12.

³⁴ Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, pages 1-3 and 337-368.

³⁵ Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology', pages 1-44; Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, New York 1958.

by separating him from both Judaism and early Christianity, implausibly isolating him from the world he occupied.³⁶

From the later 1970s the movement N.T. Wright termed the 'Third Quest' shifted attention from isolated authentic fragments to broader reconstructions of Jesus within Second Temple Judaism. This methodological adjustment came as a response to the context of late twentieth-century scholarship, where historians were increasingly critical of earlier Christian interpretations that had detached Jesus from Judaism, or treated Judaism as the failed religion from which Christianity emerged. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, and within a more secular and pluralistic academic environment, older anti-Jewish assumptions became harder to defend.³⁷ The result was a major correction in Jesus scholarship, with Jesus no longer treated as a timeless moral teacher standing above his Jewish world, but as a figure shaped by the beliefs, institutions and expectations of Second Temple Judaism.³⁸ Sanders' *Jesus and Judaism* (1985) was central to this shift, arguing that Jesus must be understood within Second Temple Jewish context, particularly through restoration eschatology, Jesus' 'cleansing of the temple' and the hope for Israel's renewal.³⁹ This reimagined Jesus as a Jewish prophetic figure operating within a specific historical context.⁴⁰ Sanders' method mattered as much as his conclusion. He began with what he considered secure historical facts and worked outward, aiming to resist both confessional harmonisation and excessive scepticism.⁴¹ His cautious method reflected the Third Quest's broader concern with grounding Jesus in a plausible Jewish setting rather than forcing him into later Christian doctrine or modern liberal ideals. In *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (1991), Crossan used some overlapping evidence with Sanders but produced a sharply different Jesus through a different historiographical framework.⁴² Crossan belonged to the same late twentieth century resurgence, although Wright classified his work and the Jesus Seminar as a renewed

³⁶ Ernst Käsemann, 'The Problem of the Historical Jesus', in *Essays on New Testament Themes*, London 1964, pages 15-47; James M. Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus*, London 1959; Stephen Neill and N. T. Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1986*, Oxford 1988, pages 379-403; E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, London 1985, pages 77-119; Paula Fredriksen, 'What You See Is What You Get: Context and Content in Current Research on the Historical Jesus', *Theology Today*, 52, no. 1 (1995), pages 75-97.

³⁷ Amy-Jill Levine, 'Misusing Jesus: How the Church Divorces Jesus from Judaism', *The Christian Century*, 28 March 2006, https://lstc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Amy-Jill-Levine-Misusing-Jesus_-How-the-Church-Divorces-Jesus-from-Judaism-Copy.pdf, accessed 3 June 2026.

³⁸ Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, pages 77-119 and 222-241.

³⁹ Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, pages 77-119 and 245-269.

⁴⁰ Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, pages 77-119.

⁴¹ Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, page 11; James D.G. Dunn, 'Jesus and Judaism. By E.P. Sanders', *The Journal of Theological Studies*, 37, no. 2 (1986), pages 510-513, page 512.

⁴² Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, xxvii-xxix.

New Quest rather than the Third Quest. Combining textual stratification, anthropology, and social history, he represented Jesus as a Mediterranean Jewish peasant whose message challenged imperial power and social hierarchy.⁴³ This reflected his context of the growing influence of social-scientific history, where historians were more interested in class, economics, power and marginal communities rather than doctrine.⁴⁴ Wright by contrast argued that historical method and theological seriousness could reinforce each other. In *Jesus and the Victory of God* (1996), he represented Jesus as an eschatological prophet whose symbolic actions announced the return of Israel's God,⁴⁵ allowing a more orthodox Christian interpretation to remain historically possible, reflecting his context within late twentieth century Christian scholarship, attempting to recover Jesus' Jewishness without surrendering the possibility of theological meaning.⁴⁶ These differences show that a shared emphasis on Jewish context did not create one stable historical Jesus. Sanders was cautious and deliberately limited, Crossan more socially radical/reconstructive, and Wright more synthetic, integrating historical and theological claims. Sanders is most persuasive when he is anchored in public actions, especially the Temple incident, because these connect Jesus to real Jewish expectations and institutions. Crossan gives Jesus' world sharper political and economic texture, although his Jesus can appear unusually suited to modern radical politics. Wright offers the most ambitious thesis, but his willingness to treat historical inquiry and Christian theology as mutually reinforcing leaves him open to the criticism that confessional possibility shapes his judgement of historical probability.⁴⁷ As the same broad evidence could produce an apocalyptic prophet, a social radical, or a theologically charged messianic figure, the Third Quest's advance in Jesus historiography was contextual rather than conclusive. It made any historically accurate Jesus anchored more in Judaism, while leaving the choice among representations dependent on contested methods and assumptions historians bring to their work.⁴⁸

⁴³ Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, pages 15-19 and 313-314.

⁴⁴ Ramon D. Echea, 'Inter-Disciplinarity in the Current Search for the Historical Jesus', *Hapag*, 4, no. 2 (2007), pages 133-144, pages 138-140.

⁴⁵ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 169, 226-227, 449-451, and 488-489.

⁴⁶ Steve Walton, 'Exit the Second Coming? N.T. Wright's Jesus and the Victory of God', *Anvil*, 16, no. 4 (1999), pages 281-292, pages 283-285.

⁴⁷ John Dominic Crossan, 'What Victory? What God? A Review Debate with N.T. Wright on Jesus and the Victory of God', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 50, no. 3 (1997), pages 345-358.

⁴⁸ Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, page 11; Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, pages xxvii-xxix; Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, pages 169, 226-227, 449-451 and 488-489.

More recent scholarship has complicated this periodisation by turning criticism onto the assumptions of the field itself. Rather than simply asking where Jesus fits into Judaism, scholars increasingly ask why earlier Christian and Western historians separated him from that world in the first place.⁴⁹ This shift reflects a modern academic context shaped by post-Holocaust criticism of Christian anti-Judaism, feminist scholarship, secular textual criticism, and growing suspicion toward inherited theological categories. In this context scholars became more attentive to the ways earlier Christian, Western and male assumptions had separated Jesus from Judaism, marginalised alternative early Christian voices, and treated orthodox Christianity as the inevitable endpoint of the Jesus movement.⁵⁰ Archaeological and textual discoveries such as the Dead Sea Scrolls and Nag Hammadi texts also complicated older representations by revealing a more diverse world of Jewish sectarianism and early Christian belief than traditional church history allowed.⁵¹ Scholars such as Amy-Jill Levine and Paula Fredriksen challenge readings that turn Jesus into a figure opposed to Judaism,⁵² while Bart Ehrman represents a secular textual approach that emphasises contradiction, transmission, and the limits of certainty.⁵³ The representation of Jesus that emerges is less a single recoverable personality than a figure whose meaning was shaped by Jewish context,⁵⁴ early Christian memory, and later interpretive conflict.⁵⁵ The historiographical importance of modern scholarship is that it makes the historian's own framework part of the evidence. It asks not only what can be known about Jesus, but how Christian, Western, male and secular assumptions have shaped what historians thought was worth knowing.⁵⁶

Representations of Jesus have changed because each era approached him through different assumptions about faith, evidence, authority and historical method. Eusebius represented Jesus through a confessional and imperial Christian framework, Enlightenment critics transformed him into a historical problem, and later scholars reconstructed him through form criticism, Jewish contextualisation, social history and secular textual criticism. None of these

⁴⁹ Levine, 'Misusing Jesus: How the Church Divorces Jesus from Judaism'.

⁵⁰ Fredriksen, 'What You See Is What You Get', pages 75-97; Levine, 'Misusing Jesus: How the Church Divorces Jesus from Judaism'.

⁵¹ Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, New York 1979, pages xiii-xxiii; Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Qumran in Perspective*, London 1977, pages 11-26.

⁵² Levine, 'Misusing Jesus: How the Church Divorces Jesus from Judaism'; Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*, New York 1999, pages 3-10.

⁵³ Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*, New York 2005, pages 5-15.

⁵⁴ Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*, pages 3-10; Levine, 'Misusing Jesus: How the Church Divorces Jesus from Judaism'.

⁵⁵ Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, pages 5-15; Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, pages xiii-xxiii.

⁵⁶ Fredriksen, 'What You See Is What You Get', pages 75-97; Levine, 'Misusing Jesus: How the Church Divorces Jesus from Judaism'.

representations are fully neutral, but some are more convincing because they acknowledge their own method and the limits of the evidence. The historical Jesus is therefore not simply recovered from the past, but continually reconstructed through the contexts and purposes of those who write about him.

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