

CHRISTOLOGICAL: THE PHENOMENAL FIGURE FULL OF CONTROVERSIES

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore and analyze the development of views on Jesus Christ from both historical and theological perspectives, and to assess their relevance for contemporary Christian life. This research employs a qualitative approach, utilizing literature review and hermeneutic analysis to understand the manifestation and meaning of Jesus across various historical and theological contexts. Data is gathered through the examination of biblical texts, church documents, and theological literature from Christian thinkers throughout history. The analysis is conducted thematically to identify key themes in the understanding of Jesus, ranging from His identity as the Jewish Messiah to His significance in modern and postmodern Christian theology. The findings indicate that, despite the many interpretations and controversies surrounding the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith, the core teaching of Jesus as the Savior remains steadfast. Efforts to reconstruct Jesus in the modern context—such as those by Reimarus, Strauss, Bultmann, and the Jesus Seminar—offer alternative perspectives, but the foundational ideas of Jesus' divinity and His role in human salvation remain central to Christian faith. Additionally, the study reveals that Jesus is not only relevant in historical or doctrinal contexts but also in the lived experience of believers amidst current social and moral challenges. This research emphasizes the need for a more holistic and contextual approach to understanding Jesus Christ, helping Christians connect His teachings to contemporary issues such as justice, solidarity, and human dignity. It also highlights the importance of dialogue between theology, history, and culture in maintaining the relevance of Christian faith in a pluralistic and globalized world. Consequently, Jesus Christ remains the central figure of faith, not only doctrinally but also practically in the everyday lives of Christians worldwide.

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INTRODUCTION

Christ is the central figure of Christian faith, functioning not only as a religious figure but also as a symbol of transformative power in human history. For centuries, views of Jesus have continued to evolve, adapting to the changing times and social contexts (Allen et al., 2022; Rohr, 2019). Nevertheless, the foundational confession that Jesus Christ remains the same yesterday, today, and forever continues to serve as the main pillar for Christians. This indicates that although there are various interpretations of Jesus, His essential nature must not be altered by the changes of time. In this context, early Christian creeds affirm that Jesus Christ is an unchanging figure. Understanding Jesus does not depend solely on historical interpretation, but also on His continuing relevance to the lives of Christians throughout time. Thus, Jesus Christ remains at the center of controversy and debate, yet simultaneously remains the source of identity for the Christian community. The existence of Jesus Christ is not only related to theological doctrine, but also to the social, cultural, and political changes that influence humanity's perception of Him. Understanding who Jesus truly is has never been static, but has evolved according to the spiritual and intellectual needs of Christians in different eras. Each generation interprets Jesus uniquely within its own context (Reed, 2019; Villodas, 2020), often reflecting the challenges of its time. Therefore, Jesus Christ becomes a figure understood not only theologically, but also contextually, depending on prevailing social and cultural dynamics. As such, efforts to understand Jesus require acknowledgment that such understanding is always connected to the struggles and realities of each era. This makes Jesus Christ a relevant figure not only in the past, but also in the present. With this perspective, we can better appreciate the complexity of Christian understanding of Jesus Christ, which constantly seeks to connect faith with contemporary realities.

Since the earliest days of Christianity, Jesus Christ has been known by various titles describing different aspects of His identity. In the Bible, Jesus is often referred to as Rabbi, Prophet, High Priest, Son of David, Messiah, Son of Man, Son of God, and more. Each title reveals a different understanding of who Jesus was within His social, cultural, and theological context. These titles not only reflect Christian belief, but also show how Jesus has been understood across different historical periods. For instance, in His own time, Jesus was regarded as a teacher or prophet bringing messages of peace and salvation. However, over time, He came to be remembered as the Messiah who saves humanity from sin and brings eternal salvation. Therefore, each title plays an important role in shaping Christian understanding of who Jesus really is, and how believers live out His teachings in their lives. As time progresses, theological thinking about Jesus Christ has also changed. Various thinkers and theologians have attempted to understand Jesus through different intellectual frameworks, aligning His teachings with the evolving developments of human thought. Such understanding is heavily influenced by the historical and social contexts of each period. For example, in modern times, Jesus is often viewed not only as a religious figure but also as a universal symbol of humanity acceptable to many people, regardless of religious background (Blomberg, 2022; Douglas, 2019; Jacobsen, 2021). In this sense, Jesus is not only the center of Christian faith, but also a universal model for moral and spiritual life. However, despite the emergence of new interpretations, the core confession that Jesus is Lord and Savior remains the heart of Christian belief. This shows that while perspectives on Jesus may change, the essence of His teachings remains steadfast.

Understanding of Jesus Christ continues to develop alongside new discoveries in history and archaeology. These studies provide deeper insight into the cultural and social context of Jesus' life (Cho et al., 2019; Sanderan et al., 2022; Tumbol, 2020; Villodas, 2020), enriching our comprehension of His significance. Through such approaches, Jesus is no longer seen merely as a religious figure, but also as an individual living within a society marked by social and political challenges (Blomberg, 2022; Koyzis, 2019; Tanner, 2022; Thomas Massaro, 2023). In modern research, Jesus is often analyzed from a historical perspective, exploring the socio-political conditions that shaped His teachings

(Birch, 2019; Bussaja, 2024; Buzguța, 2024; Numonzoda, 2023). Regardless of these diverse approaches, the central question remains: what is His relevance to humanity—both in the past and in the present? Thus, understanding Jesus extends beyond religious boundaries, involving multidisciplinary studies that deepen the meaning of His teachings. Consequently, Jesus remains a relevant subject for exploration from multiple angles (Jacobsen, 2021; Rohr, 2019; Tanner, 2022).

Despite numerous studies on Jesus Christ, there remain gaps in understanding the relationship between the historical Jesus and His relevance to the spiritual lives of Christians in the modern era. Previous research has mostly focused on theological or historical analysis of Jesus' life, but few have explored the direct connection between His teachings and the spiritual needs of today's Christians. This gap is significant because deeper understanding of Jesus can help Christians around the world better embody His teachings in their respective contexts. Moreover, while many studies focus on theological and historical dimensions, there remains room to explore how perceptions of Jesus influence social and moral transformation in Christian life. Bridging this gap can provide new insights into the importance of Jesus in an ever-changing world. Therefore, it is crucial to explore how understanding of Jesus can develop without losing the essence of His teachings. This study aims to fill this gap by viewing Jesus Christ through a more holistic lens, connecting His historical and spiritual dimensions with the lived experiences of Christians today.

This research offers a distinct approach to understanding Jesus Christ, focusing on His relevance to the spiritual lives of Christians in the present day. The uniqueness of this study lies in its effort to bridge the historical understanding of Jesus with its implications for daily Christian life. In this context, Jesus is not only viewed from the past, but also as a figure relevant to current social, cultural, and spiritual realities. The study seeks to explore in depth how understanding Jesus Christ can contribute to a more meaningful and relevant Christian life in the modern world. Therefore, this research goes beyond theological or historical inquiry; it involves critical reflection on how Jesus' teachings can be applied in facing the challenges of the modern age. This provides a new perspective for Christians in understanding the relationship between faith and daily life. Through a more inclusive and contextual approach, this research aims to offer broader insight into the role of Jesus Christ in human life.

The primary goal of this study is to explore a deeper understanding of Jesus Christ, taking into account the development of perspectives on Him throughout history. The study seeks to understand how Jesus Christ has been interpreted within various cultural, social, and intellectual contexts over time, and how these interpretations relate to the spiritual lives of Christians. Additionally, the study aims to trace the relevance of Jesus in the context of Christian life today, especially how His teachings continue to significantly impact everyday life (Jacobsen, 2021). By examining multiple perspectives, this research hopes to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the figure of Jesus, both historically and theologically. It also aims to demonstrate that while views of Jesus may differ, the core of His teachings remains unchanged. Ultimately, the purpose of this research is to enrich Christian insight into living out Jesus' teachings in contemporary life. In conclusion, this study seeks to reaffirm that Jesus Christ remains the central and relevant figure of faith across all generations.

The implications of this study include a deeper understanding of the relevance of Jesus Christ in the spiritual lives of Christians today. By examining how views of Jesus have evolved, Christians can gain a clearer grasp of His teachings and apply them more effectively within their changing life contexts (Blomberg, 2022; Brown, 2023; Ogden, 2019). This is expected to positively contribute to deepening faith and spiritual practice. Future research should continue to explore the relationship between Jesus' teachings and the social, political, and cultural challenges of the present day. Further studies may also examine how Jesus is understood across various traditions and cultures, and how His teachings can serve as guidance in addressing contemporary issues. Therefore, it is important to continue

deepening the understanding of Jesus as a relevant figure in the daily lives of Christians. Hence, this study is intended to provide valuable insights useful for the spiritual lives of Christians worldwide.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using the literature review method (Bauer et al., 2021; Booth et al., 2021; Busetto et al., 2020; Ghanad, 2023) to explore a deeper understanding of Jesus Christ from both historical and theological perspectives. This approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to analyze various relevant sources, including biblical texts and other supporting literature, that reflect views on Jesus Christ throughout history. The study also utilizes a hermeneutical approach, aimed at interpreting and understanding the meaning of texts discussing Jesus' life and teachings within their social, cultural, and historical contexts. Through this method, the researcher seeks to connect Jesus' teachings with the challenges and changes of the times faced by Christian communities around the world.

Data for this study were collected through library research, encompassing biblical texts, theological books, academic articles, and previous studies relevant to the topic of Jesus Christ. The researcher also gathered information from secondary sources that examine the historical, cultural, and social changes influencing interpretations of Jesus. Once collected, the data were analyzed using thematic analysis, in which the researcher identified key themes emerging from various perspectives on Jesus and how these themes evolved over time and across different contexts. The collected data were then examined to uncover the relationship between historical viewpoints and the relevance of Jesus' teachings in the lives of Christians today.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Jesus is a phenomenal and controversial figure—respected and longed for; He was a controversial figure who appeared on the stage of history. Jesus emerged within a real religious, cultural, and political context. He was born during the reign of Emperor Octavianus Augustus (27–14 BCE), confronted the Herodian dynasty, faced a rigid and fanatical form of Judaism, and was condemned to death during the time of Pontius Pilate, Roman Governor of Palestine (26–36 CE). The creedal formulation “who suffered under Pontius Pilate” aims to affirm that Jesus, the object of the Church's faith, was truly a historical figure who appeared on the stage of history in a particular era, at a specific place, and within a defined situation. Thus, the object of Christian belief is not a mythical figure, a fantasy, or a fairy tale, but a historical person who actually existed. Nevertheless, a complete biography of this figure is nearly absent or undiscoverable. There are no fully comprehensive historical records about Jesus other than the testimonies of the Evangelists (Synoptics and John), which present Jesus from various backgrounds and perspectives. It can be said that the portrayal of Jesus in the New Testament—incomplete as it is—aside from being a “reconstruction” by the Gospel writers, does not represent the exact image of the historical Jesus, but rather approaches His identity as an extraordinarily significant historical figure.

Jesus was indeed a historical figure. The Jewish man named Jesus came from a village: Nazareth (Acts 10:37), born approximately between 6 BCE and 1 CE in a region of Palestine known as Galilee (Mark 1:9)—a Jewish area with a considerable population of non-Jewish inhabitants (Matt. 4:15). Because His parents' profession (Joseph) was that of a carpenter (cf. Mark 6:3), Jesus was categorized into the lower class of society. Jesus is strongly believed to have received a Jewish religious education; He could read and expound the Hebrew Scriptures. He is also thought

to have been fluent in Greek, aside from Aramaic, which was the daily language in Judea-Palestine. At the age of thirty (Luke 3:23), Jesus began His public ministry, leaving behind His birthplace, family, and occupation (Mark 3:31–35; Luke 4:23). Perhaps He was inspired by John the Baptist, who had appeared in Judea proclaiming repentance and divine judgment (Mark 1:4–5; Matt. 3:7–12). Like John the Baptist, Jesus traveled throughout Galilee announcing that the Kingdom of God was near (Mark 1:14–15). Of course, the “Kingdom of God” proclaimed by Jesus differed from the Jewish expectation—a messianic government that would liberate the people of Israel/Judah from Roman oppression.

In terms of social relationships, Jesus displayed striking behavior: He dined with those whom Jewish religious law considered “unworthy to be called God's people,” individuals marginalized from broader society and even excluded from worship (Mark 2:15; Luke 7:34). Jesus associated with those labeled “sinners”—tax collectors, prostitutes, and those suffering from contagious diseases such as leprosy (Matt. 11:19; Luke 15:2; 5:30; 19:1–2). Jesus did not wait for them to “repent” or return to the path deemed righteous by the scribes (Luke 19:7; 7:36–40, 49–50). Without hesitation or disgust, He approached and even touched them. In doing so, Jesus was in fact demonstrating God’s action through His rule—not waiting passively, but actively reaching out to the afflicted, the outcast, the disabled, the sick, the demon-possessed, and sinners (Matt. 4:23; 8:16; 9:35; 15:30; 21:14); the common people who were powerless socially, politically, and economically—even experiencing deprivation and loss of life and property rights (Luke 4:18–19; 9:35; 15:30; 21:14)—and He did so without any conditions. Jesus truly appeared in a radical and revolutionary manner. He initiated a “mental revolution” through teachings and example, emerging from within both the religion and society of His time.

His actions and conduct, which opposed and overturned the strict rules of traditional Jewish religion, were supported by His teachings. In terms of teaching method, Jesus was radically different from the religious teachers of His day (Matt. 7:29; Mark 1:27). Jesus did not base His identity and teachings on tradition, nor on the Hebrew Scripture and its interpretations (Talmud) that favored the status quo and preserved old patterns, refusing to teach anything new merely to preserve ancestral traditions (Matt. 15:2; Mark 7:3–5). If the religious leaders wanted something new that benefited their positions, they created new regulations as a protective “fence” for their own interests, even at the expense of the common people. In contrast, Jesus dared to challenge and abolish religious laws deliberately designed to perpetuate the dominance of religious leaders.

Jesus’ resistance against misinterpretations of religious law was carried out not through violence or traditional methods, but through proverbs, riddles, parables, sermons, and teachings. His most frequent method was speaking in parables or allegories (Luke 10:25–37). One might say that all of Jesus’ teachings were deeply contextual, arising from the real-life situations of His era. His expulsion of merchants from the Temple, His proclamation of Himself as the Messiah sent from God, and His addressing God as “Our Father” provoked anger, because these acts were perceived as threats to the pillars of Judaism. Roman authorities and Jewish leaders viewed Jesus’ actions as the most dangerous kind of challenge. Jesus was arrested, mistreated, and executed as a disturber of both religion and the state.

The tragic fate of Jesus on the cross seemed to confuse His followers, as He was perceived as a failure. Yes, His life ended in defeat—with no friends or companions to defend Him. Nevertheless, for Jesus, His death became a momentous turning point—the beginning of renewal through resurrection from death on the cross by God. His death became the path to eternal life. So, was Jesus mistaken in His teachings and actions? If Jesus was once an enigma that could not be fully understood, did His tragic death finally confirm that He was a failed Messiah?

The confusion among Jesus’ disciples after His death left lasting marks (Luke 24:13–35; John 20:1–29). Previously, Jesus was seen and celebrated as a King, a prophet from God destined to free Israel, but this hope collapsed

with Jesus' death, equated with that of a political criminal and religious agitator. The disciples, feeling abandoned and uncertain, returned to their homes and former occupations. For many of them, this was perhaps the bitterest experience of their lives. They had been called away from their work and families to follow someone upon whom they had placed all their future hopes—yet everything ended in uncertainty. Even more painful was the shame they had to bear, as many looked upon them with mockery and scorn, considering them misguided for having followed an uncertain figure for three and a half years. Christology emerging from post-resurrection experience first aimed to convince some of Jesus' former followers (Matthew 28:17) that Jesus was not a rebel, a deceiver, a false prophet, a desecrator of holiness, a mastermind of social unrest, or a subversive figure who deserved execution for threatening the established order of contemporary Jewish religion and politics. The historical Jesus turned out to share an intimate, even unified relationship with God, since until then, no one had ever been raised from the dead by God.

The Synoptic Gospel writers gave very explicit testimony that Jesus was a figure surrounded by controversy from the beginning to the end of His earthly life. His birth shook two major powers: the Herodian dynasty, the Jewish religious leadership, and the Roman rulers. His friendships with sinners, His resistance to religious fundamentalism, and His identification with the marginalized led to rejection by His own people, persecution, and ultimately His crucifixion. Indeed, the controversy surrounding Him has continued beyond His death until today. Entering the 21st century, Christianity has once again been shaken by the emergence of several books whose authors claim to challenge Christological doctrine. Among the most popular are *The Da Vinci Code* (Dan Brown), *The Jesus Dynasty* (James D. Tabor), and *The Jesus Family Tomb* (Simcha Jacobovici and Charles Pellegrino). Although each book addresses different aspects, they share a central focus: asserting that Jesus was simply an ordinary human being, no different from anyone else. These authors believe that the Church's current Christology is flawed—an effort to preserve views shaped by conspiracies involving past church and political leaders—and therefore the Church must revise its Christology. Beyond these external attacks, Christology also faces direct internal challenges, particularly from the Jesus Seminar, a group formed and led by Robert W. Funk (1985), John Dominic Crossan, and other theologians and scholars. The Jesus Seminar is a group of theologians active in this century who are vigorously investigating Jesus. Their goal is to reveal the full portrait of the historical Jesus based entirely on extra-canonical documents and archaeological findings they call the "Fifth Gospel."

Discussion

Christianity has, for a long time, emphasized one-sidedly that on one hand, Jesus is truly God; yet on the other hand, the Bible and Christian teachings also affirm that Jesus was truly a human being. The Orthodox Church formulated in its creed: Jesus is truly God and truly man. The foundational proclamation (kerygma) in the New Testament, especially in the Gospels, can be summarized in the statement that God, through Jesus Christ—through His life and ministry—has accomplished salvation for the entire world. The New Testament emphasizes more the role and actions of Jesus rather than His mere existence. In other words, "who" Jesus really was become evident through His actions; His true nature is known only through His saving work. Therefore, in the New Testament, Jesus' person and work are not presented separately but as a unity: Christology is soteriology. This unity is reflected in the Christological titles found in the New Testament: titles pointing to His pre-existence (the Word, the Son of God, and God); titles related to His earthly ministry (Prophet, Servant of the Lord, High Priest); titles encompassing His present work; and titles connected with His future work (Christ, Son of Man). All these titles can be found within two early Christian streams of Christological thought: those rooted in Jewish background and those shaped by Hellenistic (Greco-Roman) context.

The encounter between the doctrine of Christ and historical contexts has continued throughout the ages, carried out by theologians from the apostolic era until today. Justin Martyr (+165), for instance, employed philosophical reasoning, although he himself did not intend to undermine the core message of Christian preaching with Greek philosophy (Banna, 2024; Rebaque, 2020; Slabon, 2024). According to Justin, Christ is “the first-born and the Logos in whom all people participate; the true Logos, the fulfillment of the seed of logos (pneumatikos), which had been scattered and received by philosophers.” Consistent with His position as the central and pivotal figure of Christian faith, Christological doctrine has occupied a central place in church teaching since the earliest times. Various forms of initial efforts to formulate this doctrine are found throughout the New Testament. Although their form is simple and not always expressed precisely, the essential core of the early church’s belief regarding this doctrine is sufficiently clear. However, it must be acknowledged that attempts to understand Christological doctrine have never been easy—even when based on data found in the New Testament. The person of Christ is indeed enigmatic (astonishing), no less so than the essence of His works.

Therefore, when false teachings began to emerge and spread, one of the primary targets of such attacks was Christology. Church leaders usually responded quickly to such disturbances, resulting in official church meetings. These gatherings produced agreements—manifestos of Christological belief—which, though imperfect, reflected the insightfulness of early theologians in understanding the most fundamental biblical teachings about the doctrine. Observations of the beliefs of early church figures show that precision and clarity in presenting ideas were not particularly prominent features. Writers of that time were satisfied merely with quoting and presenting biblical verses to support their teachings, without including adequate interpretation. They were not overly concerned with theoretical development or detailed explanations of the texts they used. One reason for this phenomenon was that at the time, they had not yet encountered significant heretical teachings, so their concern was mainly directed toward practical Christian living issues (such as the Didache and the Shepherd of Hermas).

It is therefore unsurprising that the apostolic and early church fathers had not yet developed adequate hermeneutical (interpretive) techniques, and were content simply to quote Scripture as the foundation for various teachings. However, unrest soon arose when deviant teachings began to appear among believers. The early church was already facing the seeds of error. As these erroneous teachings grew increasingly formalized and aggressive, the situation changed. Doctrines such as Ebionitism, Marcionism, Arianism, and Apollinarianism powerfully shook the church, forcing it to formulate its Christological beliefs—who Christ truly was—and related aspects of the doctrine.

These controversies gave rise to several remarkable thinkers. Their intellectual contributions culminated in the creed formulated at the official church council held in Nicaea in 325 AD. At its core, this creed affirmed that Jesus is of one substance with the Father, fully divine and fully human, with both natures united perfectly in one person, without mixture, corruption, or diminishment of the purity of either nature. The formulation presented at the Council succeeded in establishing a sufficiently adequate Christology.

Their success stemmed from several key factors:

Acceptance and placement of Scripture as the highest authority. Their Christology was the fruit of serious engagement with Scripture; it did not allow external sources to become the basis of doctrinal development. Willingness to acknowledge the existence of miracles and divine intervention in theological formulation. Therefore, they were willing to submit reason to the authority of divine revelation. Openness to receiving traditions passed down by earlier church fathers and theologians. They did not accept them blindly, but first examined and tested them against Scripture as the ultimate standard. Courage to live with paradoxes and accept truths that could not always be explained rationally. This attitude helped maintain a balance between faith and reason in their doctrinal beliefs.

However, an important issue emerged: the church did not always formulate its doctrines clearly and accurately. In many formulations, ambiguity was easily recognized, or there were gaps into which new elements could be inserted, potentially leading far from the original intended meaning. This reality gave birth to various new deviations, making the problem increasingly complex. This became clearly visible in the Christological debates following the Council of Nicaea, which focused on aspects that had not yet been elaborated with sufficient detail and precision. The Protestant Reformation initiated and propelled freedom and theological inquiry in ways previously unseen. In its process, the combination of high regard for human reason as the measure of truth and the rejection of submission to tradition or fixed systems colored discussions, especially when Christology became the center of debate. Adopting the doctrine of the two natures of Christ from dogmatic tradition (*communicatio idiomatum*), Luther taught the complete unity of Christ's divinity and humanity. His humanity fully participated in His divinity, and vice versa (*ubiquity*). As a follower of Augustine, Luther sharpened his teacher's line of thought. Thus, Luther's Christology, together with Calvin's, was essentially about salvation accomplished by God in Christ. However, post-Reformation controversies surrounding Christological dogma, which had begun in the first four centuries, peaked especially in the 19th century. Thinkers of that era sought to reconstruct the face of Jesus relevant to the rational-empirical spirit of the Enlightenment, which was critical of Christian teachings wrapped in Greek metaphysics. Consequently, what emerged was an ethical portrayal of Jesus: The Teacher of Wisdom.

This tendency had actually appeared a century earlier, notably in the thought of Hermann Reimarus (1674–1768) in his work *Apologie oder Schutzschrift für die Vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes* (A Defense or Protective Writing for the Reasonable Worshippers of God). Reimarus' version of Jesus was Jesus freed from dogma—in his view, the historical Jesus, distinct from the Jesus proclaimed by the disciples. He believed Jesus was a failed political Messiah—a teacher who preached noble ethics and spiritualized Judaism.

Reimarus' effort was continued by two later thinkers: David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874). In his controversial work, *Leben Jesu* (The Life of Jesus, 1835), Strauss described Jesus as someone born and raised in Nazareth, baptized by John, and gathering disciples who then traveled throughout Palestine proclaiming the Kingdom of the Messiah. He was rejected and eventually crucified. However, early Christians covered up these human events with various myths. The writings of Reimarus and Strauss were insufficient to portray the full image of Jesus, reducing His existence to morality: a teacher of wisdom and ethics. Jesus became nothing more than a Palestinian who died foolishly, later given deeper meaning by His disciples. Therefore, liberal Protestant theologians corrected their views. Two 19th-century liberal Protestant theologians, Albrecht Ritschl and Willem Hermann, worked hard to investigate the historical Jesus based on Gospel testimonies. Although Jesus was believed to be the "Revelation of God," in their view, He was more the founder or cause behind the emergence of the Christian community, whose life was based on the law of love. Their main points of investigation included: Jesus was a failed political Messiah; His followers turned Him into the Son of God and Savior. History had indeed been falsified; the Gospels were fabrications (Reimarus, Strauss, Baur). The Gospels were not report about Jesus but reflections on how people thought about Him. The "historical Jesus" differed from the "believers' Jesus"—the foundational pattern of Christian faith. The "faith-based Jesus" was the influence of Jesus. Historical Jesus may have caused faith, but that faith subsequently created the image of Christ as the "Jesus of faith." In the first half of the 20th century, Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) emerged onto the modern theological stage by developing a demythologizing approach. In this approach, Bultmann radically distinguished between the historical Jesus and the risen Christ. As a result, even the idea of bodily resurrection needed to be demythologized. The resurrection referred to was not the resurrection of the historical Jesus, but the resurrection of faith in a compassionate God, seen through the historical Jesus. Bultmann's demythologizing program immediately

provoked strong reactions from theologians like Karl Barth. Theologians who disagreed with Bultmann even banned his lectures, considering them too liberal.

Contextualization efforts, representing a new breakthrough in theology, gained emphasis from theologians of the 1960s, both Catholic and Protestant. Their main goal was to make Jesus relevant to ever-changing sociocultural contexts. Context became the matrix for understanding who Jesus is in contemporary settings. Hence, the views of these theologians were often considered deviant or even traitorous to official church teachings. This assumption was reasonable because all emerging theological/Christological efforts were fragmented and local attempts to understand the meaning of Jesus as Christ and the promised Savior. Such theological explorations could become wild and, in the postmodern era, could instill fear because Jesus' identity was equated with pluralism—an effort that risked plunging Christian faith (Christology) into relativism: one Jesus with many faces (e.g., the Liberator in Latin America, the Great Ancestor in Africa, Avatar in India, Minjung in South Korea, the Teacher in Java, Indonesia). As a result, Jesus Christ and Christology itself stood at a crossroads.

Christology in Contemporary Discourse

Entering the 21st century, Christianity has once again been shaken by the emergence of several books aiming to challenge Christological doctrine. Among the most popular are *The Da Vinci Code* (Dan Brown), *The Jesus Dynasty* (James D. Tabor), and *The Jesus Family Tomb* (Simcha Jacobovici and Charles Pellegrino). While each book addresses different aspects, they share the same focus: asserting that Jesus was an ordinary man, no different from any of us. The authors believe that the Church's current Christology is flawed, having been preserved as part of a conspiracy by past church and political leaders. Therefore, the Church must revise its Christology.

Moreover, if Christology is wrong, Christianity as a whole must also be reconsidered. Thus, Christianity needs similar corrective action. Protests and struggles led by proponents of "modern gnosticism" reflect this idea, exemplified by the popularity of the Gospel of Judas. It was claimed that the truth revealed in this text overturned traditional Christian theology, differing fundamentally from the Jesus taught by the Twelve Apostles. In reality, Irenaeus had already declared such teachings heretical as early as 180 AD. Yet, these writings were not new or revolutionary issues. A number of thinkers/theologians from the 17th to the 20th centuries—Reimarus, Schleiermacher, Strauss, Bultmann—had already expressed similar beliefs. Only, initially, their ideas influenced only Europe, later spreading to Britain and America, and finally reaching the global theological stage. It is important to note that these ideas touched only theologians and academics, not grassroots Christianity.

In addition to the above-mentioned external attacks, Christology also faced internal challenges, most notably from the Jesus Seminar group, founded and led by Robert W. Funk (1985), John Dominic Crossan, and other theologians and scholars. The Jesus Seminar is a group of theologians actively investigating Jesus in the 21st century. They aim to reveal the full portrait of the historical Jesus based entirely on extra-canonical documents and archaeological findings they call the "Fifth Gospel."

Key positions held by the Jesus Seminar include:

The historical Jesus is not the Christ of faith (the Jesus according to the Four Gospels and the Church).

The Jesus portrayed in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) differs from the Jesus depicted in the Gospel of John. Differences in the dating of Gospel writings: Mark was the first Gospel written (64–68 AD), followed by Luke around 80 AD and Matthew around 90 AD. Mark serves as the source for much of the depiction of Jesus. The Q Document (Quelle: source) refers to approximately 235 statements believed to have been spoken by Jesus; it was used by Luke and Matthew. Jesus was not a fiery Jewish preacher but a philosopher (a wise man) traveling through Palestine, proclaiming parables about the need for justice and mutual love among people. The Gospels in the New

Testament were compiled based on oral traditions circulating in the early Church, which were embellished by Christians with various legends and myths (supernatural elements). The responsibility of proving that the "Historical Jesus" is the "Christ of Faith" in the present lies directly upon conservative Christians. They are under pressure to demonstrate the historical reliability of the Gospels. Controversial views from this forum sparked the publication of thousands of books questioning the historical Jesus, as well as various legends/myths surrounding His person, family background, female figures in His life, alleged travels to India, and claims that He died at age 120, along with numerous other extra-canonical writings. Another highly controversial "theologian" of this era is Sakkie Spangenberg. In his book *Jesus of Nazareth* (1988), Spangenberg argues that biblical scholars distinguish three images of Jesus: The historical Jesus—the Jesus who lived and worked as a Jew in Palestine, The proclaimed Jesus—the Jesus presented by New Testament authors, The doctrinal Jesus—the Jesus witnessed by the Church in later centuries, especially in the 4th century. Therefore, a clear distinction must be drawn between these portrayals of Jesus, especially between the doctrinal Jesus and the biblical Jesus, even though the Bible itself offers varied depictions of Him. The "Christian" Jesus is not exactly the same as the Jesus of Nazareth.

According to Spangenberg, the Gospel preached in churches is not the Gospel taught by Jesus. Western Christian interpretations of Jesus are products of the thinking of Latin and Greek church fathers, differing from the message found in the Bible (the Gospels). For Spangenberg, there is no evidence that Jesus was the Messiah or the Son of God, since the term "Son of Man," common in His day, could not serve as proof of His divinity. By rejecting the Synoptic Gospel accounts of Jesus' titles, Spangenberg concludes that the idea of Jesus' divinity inferred from His person and work should be set aside (Jacobsen, 2021). He reasons that monotheistic Jews could not possibly worship Jesus, as only God Himself deserved worship. Clearly, the concept of the Trinity is speculative, unbiblical, and irrational, and thus must be abandoned. Spangenberg's final conclusion is that Jesus was nothing more than a Jewish prophet and teacher of wisdom. Since the New Testament presents only varied and often conflicting portrayals of Jesus—competing rather than complementary—he rejects outright all narratives concerning Jesus' life, works, death, resurrection, and appearances, whether in the New Testament or in church creeds, viewing them as absurd theological formulations. These views have also been used as weapons by Islamic scholars to critique Christianity.

CONCLUSION

Jesus Christ remains one of the most influential and controversial figures in human history. His life, teachings, death, and the subsequent belief in His resurrection have shaped not only religious traditions but also cultural, philosophical, and political landscapes throughout the centuries. As a historical figure, Jesus emerged from a specific sociopolitical and religious context—first-century Palestine under Roman rule—and challenged the dominant religious and social norms of His time. His radical message of love, inclusion, and divine compassion, especially toward the marginalized, positioned Him as both a spiritual leader and a revolutionary figure. The Gospels, while not exhaustive biographies, provide a theological and contextual portrait of Jesus that has become foundational to Christian faith. Despite the lack of complete historical records outside early Christian writings, the impact of His life and legacy continues to be deeply felt across the world.

Theological interpretations of Jesus have evolved over time, reflecting changing intellectual and cultural contexts. From the early Church councils that defined His dual nature as both divine and human, to modern scholarly attempts to reconstruct the "historical Jesus," the discourse surrounding His identity remains dynamic and often contentious. Movements such as the Protestant Reformation, Enlightenment rationalism, and contemporary critical scholarship have all contributed to diverse understandings of who Jesus was and what He represents. While some

interpretations seek to demythologize or contextualize Jesus within modern frameworks, others emphasize His doctrinal significance as central to Christian salvation. Ultimately, whether viewed as the incarnate Son of God or a moral teacher, Jesus continues to provoke thought, inspire faith, and spark debate across disciplines and cultures.

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