



*Rediscovering Jesus: An Introduction to Biblical, Religious and Cultural Perspectives on Christ*

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*Who is your Jesus? This textbook introduction gives an enjoyable and challenging look at how we encounter Jesus in Scripture and our culture – from the New Testament to the gnostic gospels, historical Jesus studies, Islam, Mormonism, Hollywood and Americana. Follow the path to seeing Jesus truly and notice the difference it makes for faith and life.*

## We've Got the American Jesus

Americans love conspiracy theories and superheroes. And, when these two obsessions collide, the perfect storm of an irresistible fascination is born. Throw Jesus into the mix, and the media have their feeding frenzy, which explains why every Christmas and Easter “shocking, new revelations” about Jesus appear in the news and tabloids. The same thing happens whenever a new Superman movie comes out: the story of conspiracy to keep Clark Kent’s identity a secret despite his miraculous abilities often inspires talk about Jesus. So, it’s not surprising that a recent film about the *Man of Steel* (2013) included a marketing strategy aimed directly at ministers and churches. Surely Christians would see the obvious parallels between the son of Jor-El and the Son of God coming to earth to save humankind. Predictably, Superman’s ship crashed in the heartland of America. We don’t question that part of the story. Where else could he have been raised? After all, Superman is to fight for “truth, justice and the American way.” Had he landed in Nigeria, it would have been awkward, not least because Superman is white. But it is more than race; the Superman-Jesus myth is built upon the bedrock American conviction that the center of God’s saving work for the world is the United States of America. Without blushing, therefore, churches celebrate Independence Day by singing patriotic songs as worship to God, by hearing sermons about “freedom in Christ,” and by displaying crosses draped with the American flag. We pretend that the Fourth of July is a Christian holiday. So, it’s no wonder that Superman reminds us of Jesus. To American ears, the “gospel” story of the mission and purpose of both of them sound the same.

### Who Does America Say That I Am?

For a country that emphasizes the separation of church and state, we sure have a hard time keeping Jesus out of American ways. Jesus shows up in our politics, in our schools, in our businesses, in our entertainment, in our history. He appears on billboards and bridges (“Jesus Saves”), in advertising and speeches, on jewelry and monuments, for Democrats and Republicans. He is everywhere and for everyone. Indeed, Jesus seems to be the person everyone wants on their side. Name any political or social issue, and Jesus is there. Jesus supports the war in Afghanistan and promotes world peace. He inspires revolution and requires obedience to the government. He’s for gay marriage and encourages traditional marriage. Jesus sides with the poor, and the wealthy are “blessed.” He protects the vulnerable and advocates for the rights of the individual. Jesus defends the powerless and empowers the rulers. Even though the apostle Paul claimed it, Jesus seems to be the one to have pulled it off: he’s become all things to all people so that by all means he might save some (see 1 Cor 9:22).

Hebrews claims, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb 13:8). But that’s difficult to believe when we consider the many manifestations of the American Jesus. From the founding fathers to our postmodern world, Jesus seems to conform to the image-

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*“Making Jesus in our own image – a dangerous temptation. Capes, Reeves and Richards provide the antidote in this well written and witty book that tackles two key questions: Who is the Jesus of the Bible, and how does he differ from claims made about him in other religions? Using down-to-earth examples and stories from around the globe, the authors help readers better understand Jesus’ life and teachings, and why this matters for our faith today. This book will be required reading in my NT survey course!”*

– Lynn Cohick, professor of New Testament, Wheaton College

making preferences of every generation. In fact, that is one of the first things that happened to the American Jesus: stripped of his Jewish history, the Gospel story of his life was rewritten by the story of America. Or, as the historian Stephen Prothero so aptly puts it, “Jesus has an American history. To hold Jesus up to the mirror of American culture is to conduct a Rorschach test of ever-changing national sensibilities.” During every stage of the American experiment in democracy, a revised Jesus supported the cause. In the beginning, with the help of Thomas Jefferson, Jesus was edited down to a proverb-spitting rationalist, encouraging colonists to live by the higher law of “love thy neighbor.” During the Great Awakenings of the eighteenth century Jesus was cast as the friend of sinners and savior of souls. With the industrial revolution, Jesus was called into the service of big business, the ultimate entrepreneur according to Bruce Barton’s book *The Man Nobody Knows*. And yet, at the same time and on the other side of the fence, Walter Rauschenbusch held up Jesus as the champion of factory workers when he attacked the industrial prisons known as “sweatshops” that treated employees like slave labor. During the two World Wars and the Great Depression between them, a manly Jesus appeared to guide Americans through troubled times, epitomized by Warner Sallman’s painting *Christ Our Pilot*, depicting Jesus with his hand on the human pilot’s shoulder (but not on the wheel), pointing to where the pilot ought to steer the ship. After Vietnam Jesus was touted as the original “flower child,” promoting peace and love. By the end of the century Jesus had become a hot commodity that could sell almost anything: necklaces, bracelets, bumper stickers, breath mints, diet plans, t-shirts, music, films, videos, paintings. In light of his stratospheric rise to iconic status, it could be argued that Jesus was the first “American Idol.”

When John Lennon claimed in 1966 that the Beatles were more popular than Jesus Christ, he unknowingly set off a fierce competition in the marketplace for the battle of American loyalties. Not only did Christians gather to smash phonograph records made by the Fab Four, but also a flood of merchandise to challenge Beatlemania accompanied the modern “Jesus Movement.” Ironically riding the wave of music inspired by the Beatles, “Jesus rock” took to the airwaves and infiltrated music stores. Jesus music festivals drew devoted fans to re-create Christian versions of Woodstock. And all kinds of “merch” (as those in the business call it) – what singer Keith Green notoriously railed against as “Jesus junk” – was made available to a souvenir-hunting fan base. So-called secular artists rode the wave of Jesus’ celebrity, as the Doobie Brothers sang, “Jesus is just alright with me,” and James Taylor asked Jesus to help him make a stand in “Fire and Rain.” Catching the spirit of celebrity endorsement, Billy Graham began to feature famous people (actors, athletes, musicians) giving personal testimony of their faith in Jesus Christ during the massive crusades that filled sports arenas and convention centers. Christian television networks were launched, and Christian theme parks were built in order to give entertainment options to those committed to “hold up the name of Jesus.” Fame and fortune, popularity and money enshrined Jesus as a cultural phenomenon in America.

For the most part, none of these things happened anywhere else. No other country has seen

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the likes of such megatrends. Why did it happen in America? Prothero thinks that it's because America was born without a history. The colonies were trying to get away from their puritanical past; in order to create the new world, they cast off their Calvinistic theological moorings, trading their reformation heritage of *sola scriptura* for the existential *solus Iesus*, making room for the American ideals of individual freedom and rationalism. Jesus became the "go-to guy" to justify the interpretation of events that shaped a country, creating a "history-in-the-making" tradition that forged America's identity. Personal piety eclipsed theological creeds. Knowing Jesus became more important than going to church. America replaced Israel in the sweeping story of redemption. Consequently, as America was creating its own history, Jesus was stripped of his, turning him into the poster boy of the latest development in the ever-changing landscape of this social revolution. This new free enterprise of religion also explains why the first American-made religion was Mormonism, a faith that blossomed in the new frontier because it so capably blended the stories of Israel, Jesus and America into one.

The theologian Stephen Nichols finds the syncretistic ways of a people formed in a "melting pot" as the best explanation for the culturally fashioned Jesus. The fact that orthodox Christians, known for a robust Christology, have welcomed an acculturated Jesus from the beginning highlights the religious syncretism that is part and parcel of American history. So, like Prothero, Nichols shows how Americans took Jesus with them as they went forth and conquered, establishing a brave new world. Early in the republic, Jesus blended into the fabric of American civil religion as founding fathers such as Thomas Jefferson mixed threads from the Gospels with the yarn of the Enlightenment. A rugged Jesus accompanied those who explored westward, but later the Victorian ethic that turned pioneers into settlers also turned Jesus into a sweet and gentle Savior, domesticated for home and hearth. During both World Wars Americans needed a hero, so Jesus was extolled as a "man's man." By the end of the twentieth century we were looking for a rock idol and a movie star, for the age of consumerism had turned Jesus into a product that made life better. In other words, the Jesus we have today, even in the evangelical world, is, as the title of Nichols's book suggests, a *Jesus Made in America*.

Most current versions of the evangelical Jesus are reincarnations of one form or another of an American Jesus who has been around for a long time. Because we have a short view of history and inhabit a culture that constantly celebrates the latest and greatest, we act as if the most recent "made in America" Jesus is novel, exciting, even spiritual. But these current "American Jesuses" have been around for a long time.

– Adapted from chapter thirteen, "The American Jesus"