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## JESUS CHRIST

*c.* 6 B.C. - *c.* 30 A.D.

The impact of Jesus on human history is so obvious and so enormous that few people would question his placement near the top of this list. Indeed, the more likely question is why Jesus, who is the inspiration for the most influential religion in history, has not been placed first.

There is no question that Christianity, over the course of time, has had far more adherents than any other religion. However, it is not the relative influence of different religions that is being estimated in this book, but rather the relative influence of individual men. Christianity, unlike Islam, was not founded by a single person but by two people—Jesus and St. Paul—and the principal credit for its development must therefore be apportioned between those two figures.

Jesus formulated the basic ethical ideas of Christianity, as well as its basic spiritual outlook and its main ideas concerning human conduct. Christian theology, however, was shaped principally by the work of St. Paul. Jesus presented a spiritual message; Paul added to that the worship of Christ. Furthermore,

St. Paul was the author of a considerable portion of the New Testament, and was the main proselytizing force for Christianity during the first century.

Jesus was still fairly young when he died (unlike Buddha or Muhammad), and he left behind a limited number of disciples. At the time of Jesus' death, his followers simply formed a small Jewish sect. It was due in considerable measure to Paul's writings, and to his tireless proselytizing efforts, that this small sect was transformed into a dynamic and much greater movement, which reached non-Jews as well as Jews, and which eventually grew into one of the great religions of the world.

For these reasons, some people even contend that it is Paul, rather than Jesus, who should really be considered the founder of Christianity. Carried to its logical conclusion, that argument would lead one to place Paul higher on this list than Jesus! However, although it is not clear what Christianity would be like without the influence of St. Paul, it is quite apparent that without Jesus, Christianity would not exist at all.

However, it does not seem reasonable to consider Jesus responsible for all the things which Christian churches or individual Christians later did in his name, particularly since he would obviously disapprove of many of those things. Some of them—for example the religious wars between various Christian sects, and the barbaric massacres and persecutions of the Jews—are in such obvious contradiction to the attitudes and teachings of Jesus that it seems entirely unreasonable to say that Jesus inspired them.

Similarly, even though modern science first arose in the Christian nations of western Europe, it seems inappropriate to think of Jesus as responsible for the rise of science. Certainly, none of the early Christians interpreted the teachings of Jesus as a call for scientific investigation of the physical world. Indeed, the conversion of the Roman world to Christianity was accompanied and followed by a drastic decline in both the general level of technology and the general degree of interest in science.

That science did eventually arise in Europe is indeed an indication that there was something in the European cultural

heritage that was favorable to the scientific way of thinking. That something, however, was not the sayings of Jesus, but rather Greek rationalism, as typified by the works of Aristotle and Euclid. It is noteworthy that modern science developed, not during the heyday of church power and of Christian piety, but rather on the heels of the Renaissance, a period during which Europe experienced a renewal of interest in its pre-Christian heritage.

The story of Jesus' life, as it is related in the New Testament, is familiar to most readers and will not be repeated here. However, a few points are worth noting. In the first place, most of the information that we have about Jesus' life is uncertain. We are not even sure what his original name was. Most probably it was the common Jewish name, Yehoshua (Joshua in English). The year of his birth, too, is uncertain, although 6 B.C. is a likely date. Even the year of his death, which must have been well known to his followers, is not definitely known today. Jesus himself left no writings behind, and virtually all our information concerning his life comes from the accounts in the New Testament.

Unfortunately, the Gospels contradict each other on various points. For example, Matthew and Luke give completely different versions of Jesus' last words; both of these versions, incidentally, are direct quotations from the Old Testament.

It was no accident that Jesus was able to quote from the Old Testament; though the progenitor of Christianity, he was himself a devout Jew. It has been frequently pointed out that Jesus was in many ways very similar to the Hebrew prophets of the Old Testament, and was deeply influenced by them. Like the prophets, Jesus had an extraordinarily impressive personality, which made a deep and lasting impression on the people who met him. He was charismatic in the deepest and fullest sense of the word.

However, in sharp contrast to Muhammad, who exercised political as well as religious authority, Jesus had virtually no influence on political developments during his own lifetime, or during the succeeding century. (Both men, of course, have had an enormous indirect influence on long-term political develop-

ments.) Jesus made his influence felt entirely as an ethical and spiritual leader.

If it was primarily as an ethical leader that Jesus left his mark, it is surely pertinent to ask to what extent his ethical ideas have influenced the world. One of Jesus' central precepts, certainly, was the Golden Rule. Today, the Golden Rule is accepted by most people, Christians and non-Christians alike, as a reasonable guide to moral conduct. We may not always act in accordance with it, but we usually try to do so. If Jesus had actually originated that almost universally accepted principle, he would surely have been the first man on this list.

In fact, though, the Golden Rule was an accepted precept of Judaism long before Jesus was born. Rabbi Hillel, the leading Jewish rabbi of the first century B.C., explicitly enunciated the Golden Rule and pronounced it the foremost principle of Judaism. Nor was the notion known only to the Western world. The Chinese philosopher Confucius had proposed it in about 500 B.C., and the saying also appears in the *Mahabharata*, an ancient Hindu poem. In fact, the philosophy behind the Golden Rule is accepted by almost every major religious group.

Does this mean that Jesus had no original ethical ideas? Not at all! A highly distinctive viewpoint is presented in Matthew 5:43-44:

*Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.*

And a few lines earlier: "...resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."

Now, these ideas—which were not a part of the Judaism of Jesus' day, nor of most other religions—are surely among the most remarkable and original ethical ideas ever presented. If they were widely followed, I would have had no hesitation in placing Jesus first in this book.

But the truth is that they are not widely followed. In fact,



*Rembrandt's "Hundred Guilder Print" of Christ preaching.*

they are not even generally accepted. Most Christians consider the injunction to "Love your enemy" as—at most—an ideal which might be realized in some perfect world, but one which is *not* a reasonable guide to conduct in the actual world we live in. We do not normally practice it, do not expect others to practice it, and do not teach our children to practice it. Jesus' most distinctive teaching, therefore, remains an intriguing but basically untried suggestion.