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## Jesus as "Paradigmatic Individual" in Karl Jaspers' *Great Philosophers, Vol. I*

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**Abstract:** Jaspers ends his Jesus entry in *The Great Philosophers* with words of regret: "The historic reality of Jesus, the man, so extremely important for us in the history of philosophy, is without interest to the Doctors of the Faith, either amongst the rebels or the orthodox believers."<sup>1</sup> This essay attempts to unpack what Jaspers means by this assertion.



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<sup>1</sup> *The Great Philosophers, Vol. I*, Ed. and Trans. by Hannah Arendt and Ralph Manheim (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962), p. 96. Hereafter cited as *GP*.

Jaspers makes clear the conviction, in many of his writings, that 'religion is too important to be left to the theologians,' so to speak, or, as one might put it more accurately, his belief that the essence of religion is always *more* than what one finds in its organized, institutional forms. On the other hand, Jaspers certainly would have agreed with the observation of Max Weber that the so-called "charismatic" essence of religion cannot survive unless it passes over successfully into institutional form. Jaspers was not alone in taking this stance, whether in the 1950s or today for that matter. Somehow the so-called essence of religion, the spiritual core, if you will, has always seemed to transcend its mundane appearances and expressions. But Jaspers was in many ways unique amongst 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers by way of insisting that philosophy begins with religion; that is, that religion provides 'raw material' for philosophy to evaluate and clarify, so to speak, and that philosophy in some curious sense is *parasitic* on religion in this regard, having nothing uniquely its own to offer. Hegel said as much in his

critique of culture in the *Phenomenology*, namely, that "absolute freedom and terror" would follow an "emptying the wineskins" of religious content because the Enlightenment has nothing to substitute except "homelessness."<sup>2</sup>

At the center of the vast array of raw material provided by religions in their *manifestation*, in the phrase of Gerardus van der Leeuw, are the lives of its founders or neo-founders, such as Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, Mohammad, and what they taught. Jaspers again follows Hegel in drawing this out, being of the view that it is the task of philosophy to complete the "picture

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<sup>2</sup> This might be said of all philosophy – or all *Realphilosophie*, whether political or scientific or aesthetic, very much in the same spirit as Hegel in his preface to the *Rechtphilosophie*, viz., that "philosophy always comes on the scene too late" to be of any lasting consequence. For a more recent treatment of *homelessness* see the fine treatment of Susan Neiman in *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton University Press, 2002).

thinking" of religious visionaries and the iconography they inspire. And again like Hegel, who always ended his analyses of specific religions with an assessment of *cultus*,<sup>3</sup> Jaspers provides assessments as to how a given religion and its teachings passes over into culture, whether in a sublime or degenerate manner.<sup>4</sup> One can scarcely discount or devalue the emotional attachment that billions of people continue to have for religious saviors and avatars, and the tremendous influence this devotion has on culture and politics. Indeed, it is impossible to understand the geo-political stage of the 21<sup>st</sup> century apart from this reality.

John Findlay also famously argued that the "Three Paradigmatic Instances" of religion are "Socrates, Jesus and the Buddha."<sup>5</sup> He based this claim not only on what these individuals preached and taught but also on their personalities – or at least on what their traditions claim regarding their personalities. It is hard to disagree with the general tenor of the high assessments of Findlay and Jaspers since these paradigmatic individuals are the symbolic embodiments of the Greco-Roman, Judeo-Christian, and Indo-Chinese religious traditions. Paul Ricoeur held similar views maintaining, out of Hegel, that *Vorstellungen* and the surplus of meaning embedded within these symbolical representations are the keys not only to Hegel's philosophy of religion but the philosophy of religion generally.<sup>6</sup>

But Jaspers is altogether unique amongst 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers in conceiving his *Greats* as the basis for a series of textbooks in the history of philosophy with *paideia* grounded in an appreciation of the great religious sages of antiquity as philosophy's point of departure.<sup>7</sup> Nor would one be amiss in

asserting that a truly liberal education is impossible apart from a cross-cultural, inter-disciplinary grounding in the global foundations of religious and philosophical consciousness. A great deal of misunderstanding could be avoided if this kind of pedagogy were pursued in a concerted and responsible way.

Methodologically, there is more than a hint of what Gadamer calls the "effective historical consciousness" (*Wirkungsgeschichtliche Bewusstheit*) operative in Jaspers' method,<sup>8</sup> for as Jaspers asserts: "...only through the great philosophers can we enter into the core of philosophy... There is no entry from the outside." Schleiermacher and Rudolf Otto also factor into Jaspers by way of the adaptation of what he calls a method of *psychological divination* in order to determine what a given religious sage not only said but might have said about problems and issues which develop much later in the history of philosophy.<sup>9</sup> What makes Jaspers different in this respect is that he accomplishes this task as a trained psychopathologist whose work on the subject remains a standard reference in psychology and psychiatry.<sup>10</sup> Apart from this medical background Jaspers' method of "divination" might be classified as a romantic hermeneutic without any further qualification. But Jaspers also stands in the legacy of Kant and Hegel by way of insisting upon "unity" (*Einheit*) in the "history of philosophical truth." In order to discern this unity, one must begin at the beginning of the grand narrative Jaspers calls "world-philosophy."

In the case of Jesus, of course, Jaspers does not begin at the very beginning, He begins rather at the end of what he famously terms the *Axial Time* that commences with Buddha, Lao Tse, and Confucius in the sixth century BC and stretches through early antiquity in the West.<sup>11</sup> It is a time encompassing the Pre-Socratics, the Major Jewish Prophets, and

<sup>3</sup> See Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, 3 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> Paul Tillich used to say that "culture is the form of religion, and religion is the substance of culture" – clearly a dialectical, Hegelian concept with which Jaspers would agree.

<sup>5</sup> See "Religion in its Three Paradigmatic Instances: Socrates, Jesus, and the Buddha," *Religious Studies* XI (Cambridge: April, 1975) 215-227.

<sup>6</sup> See Paul Ricoeur's essay, "The Status of *Vorstellung* as the Key to Hegel's Philosophy of Religion," in *Meaning, Truth, and God*, ed., Leroy S. Rouner (South Bend: Notre Dame University Press, 1982).

<sup>7</sup> *Die grossen Philosophen*, In *Vier Bänden* (Munich: R. Piper Verlag, 1957).

<sup>8</sup> See *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1992). Gadamer, of course, succeeded Jaspers at Heidelberg in 1949.

<sup>9</sup> *GP*, I, 6.

<sup>10</sup> See Karl Jaspers, *General Psychopathology*, 2 vols., trans. J. Hoenig and Marian W. Hamilton (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1997); original German edition, 1913. Albert Schweitzer, as we will see, has similar qualifications and arrives at similar conclusions regarding the person and work of Jesus.

<sup>11</sup> See Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. Michael Bullock (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968); original German edition, 1949.

Zarathustra in the ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern world – or, as Jaspers prefers to call it, the *Occidental* world. This axial time, a half millennium, is the time of the truly remarkable transformation from what might be called, in Hegelian and Jaspersian terms, "consciousness-in-general" (*Bewusstsein Uberhaupt*) to "self-consciousness" (*Selbstbewusstsein*) and "possible self-Being" (*mögliche Existenz*). The great religious sages, and their immediate followers, are viewed by Jaspers as primary agents of this transformation. Jesus stands outside this time but participates in it by dint of being, for Jaspers, the "last" of the major Hebrew prophets.<sup>12</sup>

There have been serious studies of Jaspers' treatment of the religious "Greats" during the past several decades. Among the studies of Jesus is an article by Harold Durfee on "Karl Jaspers' Christology"<sup>13</sup> written in the 60s. *Christology*, however, is a much too restrictive category for Jaspers' reflections, which may more appropriately be viewed as a kind of anti-Christology vis-à-vis the Neo-Orthodox positions so prominent and influential during the mid-twentieth century. Indeed, Durfee makes mention of Ricoeur's highly Barthian critique of Jaspers, to wit, that the Incarnate Christ is "no cipher" in the strong sense for Jaspers, if by that is meant the substantial corporealization of Transcendence in a single human being.<sup>14</sup> Whether Jaspers might have agreed with Findlay that Jesus was a paradigmatic *instantiation* of Transcendence or Being-Itself is an interesting question, but one which requires a much closer look at what Findlay means by instantiation and what Jaspers means by ciphers.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *GPI*, 88.

<sup>13</sup> Harold A. Durfee, "Karl Jaspers' Christology," *The Journal of Religion* (Vol. XLIV, No. 2, April, 1964), pp. 133-148.

<sup>14</sup> See *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers*, The Library of Living Philosophers, Vol. IX, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp, Augmented Edition (Open Court, 1987), pp. 611-642.

<sup>15</sup> See *Chiffren der Transzendenz*, Munich: R. Piper Verlag, 1970. On the other hand, I suspect that Jaspers would basically agree with Findlay's Hegelian and Neo-Platonic assertion that there are three possible movements of *Geist*: "...away from the world, towards the world, and beyond both world and non-world." Hence Findlay concludes hopefully that the religious avatar to be preferred in the future is "Socrates without his logic chopping, Jesus without his messianic pretensions, and Buddha without his negativity." *Op.Cit.* p. 227.

The major recent treatment is by Harold Oliver in an article entitled "Jesus of Nazareth."<sup>16</sup> In this piece Oliver places Jaspers' theological views squarely within the Basel context of the 1950s, where the influence of Albert Schweitzer on prominent Swiss scholars, such as Martin Werner, Fritz Buri, and indeed, on Karl Jaspers, is particularly pronounced. So radical were the views of these individuals that they did not penetrate the mainstream of Neo-Reformation and Neo-Orthodox theology, but remained marginal alternatives to mainstream Catholic and Protestant scholarship.

Jaspers' divinatory method of elucidation focuses on the life, personality, message, and influence of his "paradigmatic individuals" in the history of religion, Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, and Jesus.<sup>17</sup> In the case of Jesus, however, Jaspers begins first with the "message," so important, he believes, is the message of Jesus culturally to the history of Western philosophy, religion, and civilization generally. It is important to note in the context of this privileged treatment that Jaspers' overall assessment of Christianity (and by implication, Jesus of Nazareth) is thoroughly Kantian, i.e., North German, Liberal and Protestant. This geographical positioning is not only significant with respect to understanding Jaspers' view of Christianity but particularly important when assessing his problematical relationship with Heidegger. The conflict between these giants of mid-twentieth century philosophy (who in their youth both believed they would revolutionize the staid Neo-Kantianism of the 1920s) may be viewed in terms of the regional tension between the urbane, bourgeois, and liberal northwest German background of Jaspers, on the one hand, and the rustic, south German, Swabian, Roman Catholic background of Heidegger, on the other. Jaspers' persistent critique of *Katholizität* and the authoritarian claims of the Roman Catholic *Magisterium* may be seen against this background,<sup>18</sup> as can Heidegger's life-long project of overcoming the North German Protestant philosophical lodestars of the Enlightenment and post-

<sup>16</sup> See *Karl Jaspers: Philosophy of History and History of Philosophy*, edited by Joseph Koterski and Raymond Langley (Humanity Books, 2002). The comments that follow are in close agreement with those of Oliver.

<sup>17</sup> Like Hegel, he overlooks Mohammad – yet another indication of the West's problematical relationship with Islam.

<sup>18</sup> See *Philosophical Faith and Revelation*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Collins, 1967; original German Edition, R. Piper Verlag, 1962).

Enlightenment, Kant and Hegel. Moreover, Heidegger's choice of Freiburg over Berlin (when offered a position at Humboldt University) as the locus of his career is symptomatic of this difference and another reason perhaps that Heidegger and Jaspers remained in tension, one with the other, both philosophically and politically, throughout their lives.<sup>19</sup>

Jaroslav Pelikan is correct in observing that Jesus is viewed as a liberal, moral teacher during the Enlightenment, and as a liberator by radicals in the twentieth century.<sup>20</sup> This generalization does not squarely fit with the view of Jaspers, however, precisely because of the aforementioned influence of Schweitzer. Unlike Hegel and Findlay, Jaspers, like Schweitzer, is not drawn to the Fourth Gospel (Saint John the Evangelist's so-called *Philosopher's Gospel* owing to its *logos* Christology) as a point of primary reference. Jaspers, qua psychologist, is far more interested in the "personality" of Jesus. Hence the Synoptics for him, and for Schweitzer, are more compelling sources of information. What grasps the attention of Jaspers is the "detachment" of Jesus, on one hand ("resist not evil"), and "activism," on the other ("I have not come to bring peace but a sword"). In other words, the complexity of Jesus's personality is not something to be overlooked, minimized and/or resolved but to be regarded as an important key to interpreting the person and work of Jesus. By insisting on the importance of this contradiction, Jaspers is as critical of the negativity in Nietzsche's *Antichrist* as he is of the positivity in conventionally pious interpretations of Jesus as the Christ. As such, Jaspers' position might be considered heretical, as in the case of Nikos Kazantzakis, whose *Last Temptation of Christ* (1951) strongly implies that Jesus, in addition to being a tragic figure, was a delusional schizophrenic.

<sup>19</sup> Jaspers mentions somewhere that when he first met Heidegger, it was at a birthday party for Husserl in Freiburg. Jaspers recalls that Heidegger was reading Luther's commentary on *The Epistle to the Romans*. The collection of essays entitled *Heidegger and Jaspers*, ed., Alan M. Olson (Temple University Press, 1994) is devoted to various explorations of this topic including the Nazi period of German politics. Adolf Hitler, of course, was a "south" German (Austrian); a point alluded to in the "augmented" Schilpp edition of Jaspers' *Festschrift* where the full text of Jaspers' "Philosophical Autobiography" is published – "following the death of Heidegger."

<sup>20</sup> See Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

Not surprisingly, Jaspers is particularly sympathetic to the portrait of Jesus that emerges in Albert Schweitzer's classic *Quest for the Historical Jesus* and in Schweitzer's *The Psychiatric Study of Jesus*.<sup>21</sup> In the former work, Schweitzer argued that Jesus must be regarded as *both* an activistic apocalypticist, in the prophetic tradition of Daniel and Enoch, and a fatalistic, hermetic apocalypticist, in the Essene tradition of John the Baptist and the Desert Fathers. In other words, the contradictory attributes of activism and pacifism cannot and should not be reduced one to the other in order to provide an unambiguous portrait of Jesus. One can do so only by being selective and altogether one-sided with respect to the available evidence. Consider the options: Is Jesus the miracle-working messiah one encounters in the Gospel of Mark? Or is he the Apocalyptic Rabbi one finds in Saint Matthew? Is he the supernatural god-man in the Gospel of Luke? Or is Jesus the Victorious Christ of the Church in Saint John the Evangelist? Or perhaps he is to be viewed in terms of Saint Paul's theological picture of Jesus as God Incognito and the instrument of cosmic atonement and justification? None of this is entirely clear for Jaspers, nor is it meant to be. For in following Albert Schweitzer, Martin Werner and Martin Dibelius,<sup>22</sup> Jaspers views Jesus as an exemplification of the ambiguities of human existence in the most powerful way imaginable. Jesus is "in the world but not of the world," for Jaspers and, as such, the ultimate "boundary" figure in the history of religion.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> See Albert Schweitzer, *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung* (Tübingen, 1906); published in English as *The Quest for the Historical Jesus: From Reimarus to Wrede* (London, 1910). *The Psychiatric Study of Jesus* was written as Schweitzer's MD dissertation and published in 1913 and in English translation in 1948 by Beacon Press, Boston. In the latter work Schweitzer makes clear that a psychiatric analysis of Jesus, in the rigorous sense, is completely impossible.

<sup>22</sup> Martin Dibelius was a colleague of Jaspers at Heidelberg and influential form critic who gave the Schaffer Lectures at Yale on *Jesus* in 1937, published by Westminster in 1949). See GPI, 74-75. More significantly, perhaps, is Jaspers failure to mention Rudolf Bultmann, certainly the most prominent biblical theologian of the time with whom Jaspers had an extended and quite hostile debate over the question of *Entmythologisierung*. See Jaspers and Bultmann, *Myth and Christianity* (New York: Noonday Press, 1958). Bultmann, of course, was a close colleague and friend of Heidegger during the latter's Marburg period.

<sup>23</sup> In other words, by resolving this complexity one winds up with either a "liberal" or a "fanatical" Jesus.

Given this ambiguity, the differences between Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Heaven also remain unclear and indeterminate in Jaspers. Did Jesus espouse an earthly or a supernatural kingdom? Again, Jaspers seems to agree with Schweitzer that the answer has to be "both." Hence the need for an *interim ethic*, as concluded by Schweitzer and as avowed by Jesus in his *Sermon on the Mount*, prior to the eschatological consummation. In other words, there was no need for the development of a social ethic of indefinite duration. And it is precisely as an interim ethic that the "law of love" and "centrality of faith" can be effective, including a recasting of the Deuteronomic question of "who is my neighbor?" into the metaphysical principle of a universal humanity. This recasting is of tremendous consequence for Schweitzer and his development of an ethic based upon "reverence for life." It is also important for Jaspers and plays an important role in the development of his notion of "metaphysical guilt"<sup>24</sup> – a notion that makes no sense apart from what he asserts regarding the relationship of the *Kerygma* to *Freiheitsphilosophie*.

In reaching these quite similar conclusions, it is of no small interest that both Jaspers and Schweitzer did so out of medical backgrounds. Indeed, Jaspers begins his career with medicine and ends with philosophy whereas Schweitzer begins with philosophy and theology and ends with medicine. Schweitzer's medical dissertation, as mentioned previously, was *The Psychiatric Study of Jesus* (1913) in which he repudiated many of the psychopathological studies of Jesus as a paranoid schizophrenic because they were not based upon sound analyses of Jesus *Sitz-im-Leben*, that is, late classical Jewish apocalyptic, within which the messianic views of Jesus are entirely consistent. His endorsement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century researches into the "thoroughgoing eschatology" that defines the cultural intellectual horizon of Jesus was decisive for Schweitzer's conclusion that Jesus ultimately is a tragic figure.<sup>25</sup> But

it is a tragic vision, for both Schweitzer and Jaspers, transparent to a transcendent encompassing and a moral vision *beyond* the tragic as conventionally understood – if, by the tragic vision, one means infinite resignation in the face of inevitable failure. What remains for both Jaspers and Schweitzer, however, is precisely the transvaluation of values that changed the course of world history.

Not unlike the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, the most important conclusion one can make regarding the identity of *Yeshua bar Yusef*, according to Jaspers, is that "Jesus is not Job." The petitions of Jesus regarding the will of God, Jaspers asserts, are defined by an "unshakable trust" – a trust transparent to and grounded within the "perfectly good will" of which Kant speaks so compellingly in *The Groundwork to a Metaphysics of Morals*. The "last of the major prophets," Jesus is a devotee of the "Personal" but "utterly Transcendent and Imageless One."<sup>26</sup> "The essence of the faith of Jesus is freedom," and like Kant, Jaspers believes that it is a faith "where the soul expands in the Encompassing...believing that man can become truly free."<sup>27</sup>

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history to his purpose is hanging upon it still. This is his history and his reign." Schweitzer's famous conclusion in *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* and reprinted in *The Psychiatric Study of Jesus*.

<sup>26</sup> GPI, 88.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* One can argue that this conclusion also is a "choice" and not a conclusion unambiguously supported by the evidence. What is unique about Socrates, Jesus and Buddha is that they did not write anything – or at least nothing that has survived. Hence the ability of these paradigmatic individuals to speak anew to every age.

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<sup>24</sup> See *The Question of German Guilt*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001; first German edition, 1947).

<sup>25</sup> "In the knowledge that he is the coming son of man, Jesus lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on that last revolution which is to bring all ordinary history to a close. But it refuses to turn and he throws himself upon it. Then it does turn and it crushes him. Instead of bringing in the eschatological conditions, he has destroyed them. The wheel rolls onward, and the mangled body of the one immeasurably great man who was strong enough to think of himself as the spiritual ruler of mankind and to bend