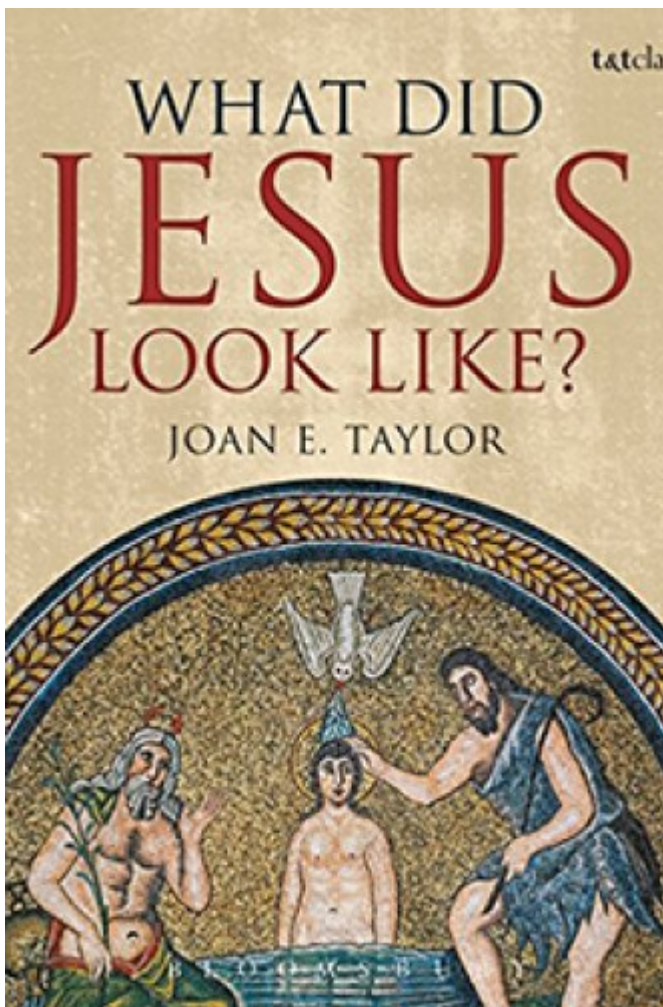


Why don't the Gospels describe Jesus' appearance?

Joan Taylor's top-notch scholarship reads like a detective thriller.

by [Edward J. Blum](#) in the [November 21, 2018](#) issue

In Review



What Did Jesus Look Like?

By Joan E. Taylor
Bloomsbury T&T Clark

According to Jewish wisdom literature, “the making of many books is endless, and excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body.” The same could be said of visual representations of Judaism’s most controversial child: Jesus of Nazareth, or whatever one wishes to call that Jewish person from the Middle East who probably lived there 2,000 years ago, may have amassed a following, and whose disciples organized churches and scriptures around stories of him.

Although the original texts relating to Jesus disclosed very little about his physical appearance, images of the peasant preacher appeared a few hundred years after his death. In the two millennia since, millions upon millions have been produced and reproduced. They have become staple elements of a global visual culture ranging from the walls of opulent cathedrals to films projected onto stretched sheets in parts of the world where it’s a struggle to obtain clean water. While the teachings and words of Jesus may not be universally known, and are definitely not universally followed, it seems that images of him have become omnipresent.

Given the lack of original textual evidence, how did this imagery become manifest? Why did some images become popular and others fade into obscurity? How can Jesus’ face, body, clothes, and footwear be revealed? What do those visual features mean to Christians and non-Christians over the centuries and today?

Several scholars before Joan E. Taylor have investigated the making and meanings of Jesus imagery, but none has approached the topic as she has. Part investigative journalist, part top-notch scholar, she approaches images of Jesus as clues to understanding the eras when they were made as well as to Jesus’ actual appearance. The result is an almost Sir Arthur Conan Doyle-esque detective thriller. Like Sherlock Holmes, Taylor navigates readers through much minutiae in a way that makes the pages bristle with excitement. To turn each page is to delight in what may come.

Taylor begins by asking a simple but profound question. Why did the gospel authors neglect to describe the physicality of Jesus? Ancient writers routinely depicted the bodies and clothes of teachers and leaders. Taylor suggests that a physical rendering would have been too dangerous. If they described Jesus as beautiful, then explaining his horrific execution became difficult. If they characterized him as ugly, then many of the age would have questioned his royal lineage or assertions of divinity. According to Taylor, the most obvious answer is that the writers pocketed

the problem. They simply did not write about it.

Most of the book focuses on images from the first few centuries after Jesus' life and death. The second chapter explores the influential but largely forgotten fraud of the late 15th century known as the Publius Lentulus letter. Its description of Jesus as a tall and beautiful man with long brown hair and a long beard served as the basis for much of European and American art during the past five centuries. This concept influenced Warner Sallman's *Head of Christ* (1941), which is probably the most well-known image of Jesus.

Taylor also explores the legend of Veronica, in which a woman hands Jesus a piece of fabric as he carries his cross. When he wipes his face, his features imprint onto the fabric, and it achieves healing powers. Taylor looks into the potential origins of the Veronica legend, which tied Rome to early Christianity. Interestingly, some medieval European Veronica paintings may have displayed Jesus with dark skin. Although Taylor does not make this connection, brown or black Jesus figures would have corresponded with Europe's medieval dark-skinned Madonnas, of which there were several.

In addition, Taylor investigates the Shroud of Turin and Byzantine iconography of "Cosmocrator" (ruler of the cosmos). She links representations of Jesus as a boy to images of Dionysus, Hermes, and Antinous in their youth—all of which portray scantily clad young men who manifest the beauty of gods. She connects Jesus to depictions and descriptions of Moses, draws attention to physical renderings of ancient philosophers, and explores clothes, beards, and concepts of ethnicity. Overall, Taylor weaves together countless images and texts over centuries to offer a diverse tapestry. Working alongside her fluid writing and inspiring analysis are more than 70 richly colored artistic renderings of Jesus, ranging from photographs of ancient statues to textiles, fabrics, paintings, and even skulls.

The book concludes by positing what Jesus probably looked like. Taylor suggests that he was average, and archaeological scientists claim that the average man of his era and region stood five feet, five inches tall and had olive-brown skin, brownish eyes, and short brown-to-black hair. With the exception of height, Jesus would look like a modern-day Iraqi Jew. As for clothing, Jesus probably wore an undyed tunic and sandals, plus a mantle when the weather turned cold. Taylor hopes that this realistic sense of what Jesus looked like will inspire more artistic work, so that images of him as tall, white, long-haired, and beautiful will occupy less imaginative and material

space in the world.

Taylor's book, while terrific, left me with questions. I wonder how one creates art that becomes iconic when it's based upon averages and likelihoods. I imagine an artist meeting with a church committee to explain her plan for a new stained-glass window: "I've titled it, 'A composite image of an average Jewish man from 2,000 years ago.' What do you think?" Or I envision a father explaining to his child in church, "Oh, that's just what an average man looked like when Jesus lived. We have no idea what he really looked like. Let's pray."

Taylor neglects a crucial point made by art historian David Morgan decades ago. For visual imagery to bear meaning, it must be familiar and particular. For individuals to connect emotionally with a visual representation, it needs to tap into deep psychological wells and provide comfort and safety. For this reason, images from childhood often stick. The shift to a new visual representation—even a more accurate one—often fails because there is no emotional connection. It's almost like asking adults to transfer their connection to a parent onto a new stepparent. There can be love and affection, but never that secure attachment born amid infancy relations.

Yet *What Did Jesus Look Like?* is significant for all who are interested in Christian history and faith. Although it's not exactly a coffee-table book, it would be a nice addition to any living room. Each time I flipped through it and beheld the pieces of art, I was flooded with memories of my own experiences involving images of Jesus. Time and again, I felt like Holmes's comrade, Dr. Watson. With each turn of the page, I was astounded as Taylor took historical clues and transformed my confusion into clarity.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Picturing Jesus."