



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

**Jesus' portrayal in Luke's gospel: a blank canvas for
future Christological imaginings.**

Paul B. Williams

Graduate Diploma in Bible and Theology
Independent Project TRDL6022

I certify that this project is my own work, and that any use of other people's work is fully
acknowledged in the references.

Paul Williams

Word count: 5280

Abstract

The gospels contain no information as to the physical appearance of their central character, Jesus. This omission – intentional or not – has left a gap that succeeding generations have sought to complete with a Jesus that reflects them. This essay will use reader-response criticism to approach this issue. We will firstly survey reasons that scholars have given for the absence of a physical description of Jesus. None of them are entirely satisfactory and none of them explain the omission. At the same time, Luke's gospel emphasises the universal dimension of salvation in Jesus Christ (as the fulfilment of an OT promise God made to Abraham). In addition to this, Luke subverts physiognomic categories that allow us to propose that Jesus lack of a physical presence in the gospel of Luke presents him as the figurehead of this inclusive community. For these reasons, Luke's gospel is a particularly fruitful choice. Reader-response approaches allow us to suggest that the omission of a physical description of Jesus and the inclusive nature of Luke's message can be, and have been, combined. The result is that followers of Jesus can develop images of Christ in *their* image. I conclude that the lack of a physical description of Jesus has left a blank canvas onto which "all nations" can develop new Christological images.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	4
1. Jesus' physical appearance in the gospels	5
1.1 What the gospels tell us about Jesus' physical appearance	5
1.2 The lack of a physical description: a surprising omission?	5
1.3 The "ugly" Jesus	6
1.4 The genre of the gospels	7
1.5 Other possible explanations	8
1.6 The typical/ordinary Jesus	9
1.7 Imaginative possibilities	9
2. Jesus: the blessing to all nations in Luke	10
2.1 The blessing to all nations	10
2.2 Gentiles and Samaritans in Luke's gospel	12
2.3 The universal scope of salvation	14
3. Jesus as the physical embodiment of the universal message of the gospel of Luke	15
3.1 A community where looks do not matter: "Reverse" physiognomy	15
3.2 Jesus, texts and readers: a hermeneutical event	16
3.3 An example: Kongo crucifix	18
Conclusion - Jesus as a blank canvas	19
Appendix – Kongo Crucifix	21
Bibliography	22

Introduction

None of the canonical gospels contain a physical description of their central character, Jesus. This might seem surprising as many visualisations of Jesus have emerged, a particularly dominant one being a representation of Jesus a European man with long flowing hair. This image betrays the influence of Christendom and bears no foundation in history and anthropology. Scholars have come up with several conclusions to explain why Jesus is not described in physical terms in the gospels. None of these solutions are entirely satisfactory and the gap remains.

Reader-response criticism, however, allows us to explore how generations of readers have sought to fill the gap. Reader response criticism focusses on the interaction between text and reader. This interaction allows space where new meaning to be formed.¹ This implies, firstly, that the text is not a self-contained unit that carries only the meaning its author seeks to convey. Secondly, the knowledge, experience and cognitive ability of the reader must be taken into account.² For Iser, the authority of the text and the authority of the reader are equal.³ Reader-response criticism comes to the fore particularly when dealing with lacunae in the text that the reader is “obliged” to fill in.⁴ One such lacunae is that Jesus is not described in terms of his appearance in any gospel.

In this essay, I will attempt to “[read] the reader reading the text”, particularly as it relates to the absence of a physical description of Jesus in the gospel of Luke.⁵ The choice of Luke’s gospel rests on two foundations. Firstly, its central theme is the universal scope of the salvation that Jesus brings. Secondly, Luke’s subverted use of physiognomy opens imaginative possibilities around the person of Jesus. I will contend that, since the writing of Luke’s gospel, generations of readers have combined the lack of a description of Jesus’ appearance with the

¹ John Darr, *On Character Building: The Reader and the Rhetoric of Characterization in Luke-Acts*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), p. 17.

² John Darr, “Reader-oriented approaches”, in *Dictionary of Biblical Criticism and Interpretation*, ed. Stanley E. Porter, (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 309.

³ Wolfgang Iser, “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach”, in *New Literary History*, 3.2 (1972), 279-299, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/468316> [accessed 20 August 2021], p. 279.

⁴ Darr, *On Character Building*, p. 17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

Lukan emphasis on the inclusion of “all nations” in Jesus’ salvific work to envision Jesus as a blank canvas on which “all nations” can project their physical distinctives and create new Christological images of Jesus.

1. Jesus’ physical appearance in the gospels

1.1 What the gospels tell us about Jesus’ physical appearance

None of the canonical gospels – Luke included – contain any information about the physical appearance of Jesus. We know nothing of his height, his hair, his face, his build or the colour of his skin.⁶ We could mention the Transfiguration (Matt. 17:1-8, Mk. 9:2-8 and Lk. 9:28-36) but the supernatural nature of this event does not tell us much about the “everyday” Jesus. His clothing is alluded to on two occasions. Firstly, a woman suffering a haemorrhage touches his clothing in Matt. 9:20, Mk. 5:27 and Lk. 8:44. Secondly, Jesus’ clothing is shared among Roman soldiers in Matt. 27:35, Mk. 15:24, Lk. 23:34 and John 19:23. These allusions are not descriptive and give no clue as to Jesus’ physical appearance. It is not that Jesus is not described at all in the gospels. For example, in Luke alone “he was famished” (4:2), “he fell asleep” (8:23) and “[he] rejoiced” (10:21). In Luke, and the other canonical gospels, Jesus is described in human terms, his humanity is not denied, but no attention is given to his physical appearance.

1.2 The lack of a physical description: a surprising omission?

From a twenty-first century perspective the absence of a physical description seems surprising. Photography and film have made us accustomed to knowing what prominent people look like. The absence of a description of Jesus in the gospels is compounded by the fact that we have a very clear, and almost universal, image of what Jesus looked like: a (northern) European man with long flowing hair. But this is neither supported by common sense – Jesus was a Middle Eastern man – nor by the Biblical witness of the gospels who simply do not describe his appearance. In addition to this, and considering the Bible as a whole, this is surprising because the Old Testament shows an interest in the physical appearance of its heroes. Joseph “was handsome and good-looking” (Gen. 39:6). Moses was “a fine baby” (Ex. 2:2). David also “was handsome” (1 Sam. 16:12). Ryan notes the symbolic nature of these positive descriptions of

⁶ Joan Taylor, *What did Jesus look like?* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), p. 1.

these leaders.⁷ They are handsome because they have received God's grace, they are favoured by him and fit for leadership.⁸ Given this tradition of which the gospel writers were probably aware, it makes one wonder why Jesus' status is not signified in this way in the canonical gospels. This is particularly relevant as Luke in the book of Acts inserts himself in this tradition and describes Moses "as beautiful before the Lord" (Acts 7:20). This also shows that, on at least one occasion, the author of Luke-Acts can describe characters in physical terms. However, he refuses to do so for Jesus.

1.3 The "ugly" Jesus

With these Old Testament examples in mind, we turn to the first possible explanation as to why the gospels refuse to report Jesus' physical appearance: Jesus was simply too ugly to be described. This is in stark contrast to the flattering descriptions given to Joseph, Moses and David to signify their election by God and their ability to lead. This contrast perhaps points to Jesus as a different kind of leader. This "ugly Jesus" interpretative tradition originates with the early Church fathers, but Stephen Moore has given it the most attention in recent scholarship.

⁹ The heart of this understanding of Jesus' physical appearance is the prophecy of the suffering servant in Is. 53:2-3:

For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him of no account.

Other translations render this passage slightly differently. For example, the NIV replaces the "form" of the NRSV with "beauty" thus making the unattractiveness of the suffering servant even clearer. The tradition from early Christianity that Moore espouses understands Jesus as the fulfilment of the suffering servant prophecy of Is. 53:2-3. Jesus could not be beautiful. Its

⁷ Maurice Ryan, "What did Jesus look like? Reclaiming Jesus the Jew in art and religious education", in *Journal of Religious Education*, 69, (2021), 239-252, <https://link-springer-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/article/10.1007/s40839-021-00137-7> [Accessed 22 July 2021], p. 240.

⁸ Ryan, p. 240.

⁹ Stephen Moore, *God's Beauty Parlor: And Other Queer Spaces in and around the Bible* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2002) <https://archive.org/details/godsbeautyparlor0000moor/page/90/mode/2up> [7 June 2021], pp. 90-130.

point, Moore argues, is to contrast the “unglorious” and ugly earthly Jesus with the glory of the resurrected Christ.¹⁰ The vision has several problems. Firstly, it is not based in history. The early Church Fathers had not seen Jesus in the flesh (this could also be true of the gospel writers who did not attempt a physical description of Christ). Secondly, Callon highlights the strangeness of applying the foretelling of Jesus’ appearance during his suffering and death to his actual living.¹¹ The emphasis of the “ugly Jesus” hypothesis is theological. It is not concerned with the appearance of the earthly Jesus of history, and it does not help us understand why Jesus is not described in the gospels. However, it does give us an example of the earliest Christian thinkers noticing a gap in the gospel account and attempting to fill in the blanks with theological purpose.

1.4 The genre of the gospels

The second possible explanation comes from an understanding of the gospels as instances of the Graeco-Roman genre of βίος or *life*. The dominant view in the twentieth century was that the gospels were of a genre of their own and that they did not fit any already existing category of literature.¹² By analysing the structure of Graeco-Roman *lives*, BurrIDGE identified that this genre had four generic features.¹³ By applying the same methodology to the gospels, BurrIDGE discovered that the gospels shared these same features and could therefore be considered examples of *lives*. An important aspect of BurrIDGE’s work focusses on the use of verbs which place the spotlight on the subject of the *life*. Perhaps unsurprisingly (but this point had been denied in earlier scholarship), the verbs in the gospels put the emphasis on Jesus.¹⁴ The importance of verbs, as descriptors of action, is significant and reveal the character of the *life*’s subject as character analysis and description do rarely appear in βίοι.¹⁵ This emphasis on deeds may also reveal why the gospels do not include physical descriptions of Jesus. BurrIDGE alludes to this himself when he writes that βίοι are “portraits” rather than “photographs” of Jesus.¹⁶

¹⁰ Moore, p. 126.

¹¹ Callie Callon, *Reading bodies: Physiognomy as a Strategy of Persuasion in Early Christian Discourse* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), <https://www.perlego.com/book/876061/reading-bodies-physiognomy-as-a-strategy-of-persuasion-in-early-christian-discourse-pdf> [accessed 3 June 2021].

¹² Steve Walton, *What are the Gospels? Richard BurrIDGE’s impact on scholarly understanding of the genre of the gospels*, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/72001002.pdf> [accessed 3 August 2021], p. 3.

¹³ Richard BurrIDGE, *What are the Gospels? A comparison with Graeco-Roman biography*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 111.

¹⁴ Walton, p. 9.

¹⁵ BurrIDGE, p. 121.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

Burridge even adds that the evangelists have left room for interpretation.¹⁷ Maurice Casey, Burridge's PhD supervisor, uses his student's work to address the question of the absence of a physical description of Jesus in the gospel. Casey firstly states that as βίοι, a description the physical appearance of Jesus would not necessarily have been within the scope of the gospels.¹⁸ Secondly, he claims quite boldly that Jesus' appearance has nothing to do with his message of salvation, particularly for the Gentiles. This seems too strong particularly as Burridge himself acknowledges the possibility that the evangelists have left some room for interpretation to develop the gospel "portrait". Even though the gospels are examples of ancient βίοι and demonstrate no interest in Jesus' physical appearance, they nonetheless leave an interpretative gap that can and has been exploited by the imagination of subsequent readers and listeners of these texts.

1.5 Other possible explanations

Another possible explanation is worth mentioning briefly. Could the gospel writers be afraid of falling foul of the Second Commandment: "You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth"? It could be that the gospel writers did not want to allow their listeners/readers to visualize Jesus.¹⁹ If this is what the gospel writers wanted to do, they have failed as the "universal" image of Jesus we alluded to earlier, as well as many other visualisations of Jesus, attest.

Given the end that Jesus would meet, it could be that gospel writers are presenting Jesus as an unblemished offering.²⁰ Avoiding describing him would prevent the risk of highlighting any defect.

¹⁷ Burridge, p. 121.

¹⁸ Maurice Casey, *Jesus: Evidence and argument or mythicist myths?* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), <https://archive.org/details/jesusevidencearg0000case/page/n5/mode/2up> [accessed 15 June 2021], p. 110.

¹⁹ Taylor, p. 2.

²⁰ Mikeal Parsons, *Body and Character in Luke and Acts*, (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011), <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/1587718/5> [accessed 3 August 2021], p. 40.

1.6 The typical/ordinary Jesus

A final explanation is the possibility that Jesus' appearance was so ordinary that it did not need to be described. In other words, Jesus looked like a typical first century Galilean. The account of Jesus' arrest (particularly in the synoptic gospels) might bear this out. Jesus was so undistinguishable from his disciples that Judas had to kiss Jesus to make him identifiable by the authorities that had come to arrest him (Matt. 46:48, Mk. 14:44 and Lk. 22:47&48). Commenting on the work of Richard Neave, who created a model of a typical man of Jesus' area and place to propose a more realistic vision of Jesus' appearance, Oliver suggests that there is nothing to suggest that Jesus looked any different than any of his contemporaries.²¹ This is probably the most likely explanation as to the absence of a description of Jesus' physical appearance in the gospels. However, it contributes nothing to answering why subsequent generations of readers/listeners have attempted to fill the gaps, left intentionally or not by the gospel writers.

1.7 Imaginative possibilities

Ryan is right to conclude that there is no scholarly consensus on the absence of a physical description of Jesus in the canonical gospels.²² Whatever the reasons for the absence of a physical description of Jesus in the gospels, it seems that subsequent generations of believers have seized this opportunity to use their imaginations to fill the blank outline of Jesus left by the gospel writers.

It is important, however, at this stage to briefly outline some limitations to the imaginative possibilities. Though Jesus physicality is not described, he is a man of his times. As we have just argued, Jesus did not stand out from his peers. Jesus was Jewish. This would have been inherited from his mother.²³ He was presented at the Temple in accordance with Jewish practice, as referred to above. He was educated in the Jewish faith; Luke is the only author to

²¹ Willem Oliver, "Reconsidering the skin colour (race) of Jesus and his ancestors" in *Journal of Early Christian History*, 4/2, (2014), 95-115, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Willem-Oliver/publication/321287057_Reconsidering_the_Skin_Colour_Race_of_Jesus_and_his_Ancestors/links/5c6256d192851c48a9cd530d/Reconsidering-the-Skin-Colour-Race-of-Jesus-and-his-Ancestors.pdf [Accessed 21 July 2021], p. 110.

²² Ryan, p. 240.

²³ Volker Küster, *The many faces of Jesus Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1999), p. 9.

include an episode from Jesus' youth, which happens to be a debate with religious leaders (Lk. 2:41-52). Jesus' teaching as an adult is steeped in Jewish tradition.²⁴ Culturally and religiously, Jesus was Jewish and any development around the significance of his physicality must be constrained by this.

2. Jesus: the blessing to all nations in Luke

2.1 The blessing to all nations

2.1.1 The Abrahamic covenant

In Gen. 12:1-9, God asks Abram (later, Abraham) to leave his country, his community, and his extended family. In return, God makes several promises. Abram's descendants would form a great nation or people – *gôy* (גוי) in Hebrew or *ethnos* (ἔθνος) in the Septuagint. Abram's influence and reputation would endure through this people. This is quite a promise given that Abram and his wife Sarai (later, Sarah) were of advanced years and Sarai was unable to have children (11:30). Most significantly, God promises to bless Abram through this covenant. But this comes with the responsibility for Abram's descendants to be a blessing to others, including "all families on earth" (12:3). The exact way in which this blessing will be imparted is unclear from this text.²⁵ "Families" is to be understood as a kin group.²⁶ *Gôy* and *ethnos* do not in this case reflect any political dimension and seem to be interchangeable with "families" of v. 3.²⁷ The covenant is sealed with Abram's departure (12:4). This episode highlights Abraham's faith because he would never see the full realisation of these promises. The promises are repeated in 18:18, 22:18 and 26:4 with slight variations. The Abrahamic covenant returns in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament where the inclusion of the nations is associated with messianic hopes.²⁸ Kidner notes that the covenant "always imparted a sense of mission to Israel"

²⁴ Küster, p. 9.

²⁵ John Goldingay, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/2063239/3> [accessed 9 August 2021].

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Daniel Hays, *From every people and nation: A biblical theology of race*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/971165/0> [accessed 18 June 2021].

(Abraham's descendants) but it never was "a programme of concerted action until the ascension".²⁹ Nevertheless, the promises remained a foundational theme of Israel's history.

2.1.2 The infancy narratives

Some might disagree with Kidner by arguing that "a programme of concerted action" actually started later than the ascension with Peter's vision in Acts 10. It must also be acknowledged that Jesus did not "envisage an organized mission to the Gentiles either".³⁰ Irrespective of this, allusions to the Abrahamic covenant and the call to be a blessing to "all families on earth" appear from the very beginning of the Lukan corpus. The most significant example is Mary's song (also known as the Magnificat) in Lk. 1:46-46. Throughout Mary's song a motif of reversal is apparent: rulers are brought down and the humble lifted up; the hungry are fed and the rich go without. The reversal motif is also to be seen in the reference to Abraham in v. 55. Belonging to the people of God is being redefined. The fear of God (v. 50) is the qualification to belong rather than physical descentance from Abraham.³¹ The Abrahamic covenant is also referred to in Zechariah's song in v. 67-80. A third reference to Abraham takes place when Simeon meets the infant Jesus in 2:29-32. The specific mention of Gentiles in this verse leaves little doubt as to genetic/fear of the Lord reversal.³² It seems that Luke, from the very beginning of his gospel, is connecting Jesus with the fulfilment of the Abrahamic promises.³³ Luke is signifying that membership of God's family, as well as hope for the future are extending beyond Israel, Abraham's descendants, to all people and nations.

2.1.3 Final sending

Luke's gospel closes with a final reference to "the nations" in 24:46-47 where Jesus tells his disciples "that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in [the Messiah's] name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem." The reversal motif continues here.³⁴ The Scriptures

²⁹ Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 1967), p. 125.

³⁰ Küster, p. 12.

³¹ David Pao & Eckhard Schnabel, "Luke" in *Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament*, eds. G.K. Beale & D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 262.

³² Robert O'Toole, *The Unity of Luke's Theology: An analysis of Luke-Acts*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2016), <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/1721518/4> [Accessed 6 August 2021], p. 100.

³³ Hays.

³⁴ Pao & Schnabel, p. 401.

of the OT envisaged the Gentiles would come to Jerusalem to be converted/included into God's people (for example, Is. 2:2-5 and Jer. 16:19-21). But here the mission to proclaim "repentance for the forgiveness of sins" begins in Jerusalem and spread to the Gentiles. The connection with Abraham is less clear in this final example, but the course is set: in Jesus, God's covenant with Abraham is being fulfilled and all nations can be included in the blessing of salvation from sins and inclusion in God's family.

2.2 Gentiles and Samaritans in Luke's gospel

2.2.1 Gentiles

Luke includes Gentiles in this broadening of the understanding of God's people. In Lk. 7:1-10, Jesus is called upon to heal the servant of a Roman centurion. The Roman centurion does not approach Jesus directly but through a string of intermediaries. He is a supporter of the Jews, having built a synagogue, and "loves our people" Jewish elders tell Jesus (v. 5). The centurion had heard (v. 3) about Jesus and believed that Jesus could heal the servant. Jesus commends the centurion's faith in the highest of terms: "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." (v. 9). This is not a criticism of Israel.³⁵ Rather, it is a way of highlighting the magnitude of the centurion's faith. Even though the Centurion's response to the healing of his servant is not recorded, this episode shows that Gentiles can be included in the salvation Jesus is offering.³⁶ Furthermore, Jesus is repeatedly seen sharing a meal with "outsiders" which continues to demonstrate the universal nature of his mission. This is best seen in two eschatological banquet scenes. Firstly, in Lk. 13:22-30, "People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God." (v. 29). This invitation comes at the expense of the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In Lk. 14:15-24, those who thought they were invited are tuned away and servants are sent to collect guests in the "roads and lanes" (v. 23). The impression is developing that not only do God's purposes extent beyond Israel but can be brought about without her too.

³⁵ Leon Morris, *Luke*, (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), p. 158.

³⁶ Robert Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A literary Interpretation*, Vol. 1, (Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1986), p. 115.

2.2.2 Samaritans

The universal inclusivity of Luke's gospel is also seen in Jesus's attitude towards Samaritans. Before commenting further, it is important to note the animosity between Israel and Samaria. Even though they had much in common (monotheism, an attachment to the land of Israel and the Hebrew language) through a shared heritage, their history was complex. Israel considered Samaritans as impure, not least because they allowed intermarriages with other peoples.³⁷ The relationship between the Jews and the Samaritans was strained in the first century CE.³⁸ O'Toole qualifies the relations as hateful.³⁹ Oliver describes it as an example of racialism because of Israel's superior view of itself in relation to the Samaritans.⁴⁰ This brief sketch provides the backdrop of Jesus' encounters with Samaritans in Luke's gospel and an indication of prevailing attitudes towards Samaritans.

In Lk. 9:51-56 Jesus and his disciples set off from Galilee to Jerusalem. Some messengers (disciples) are sent ahead to a Samaritan village to preach and presumably to arrange lodgings (which may contradict Jesus' direction, elsewhere in Matt. 10:5, to not enter Samaritan villages).⁴¹ They receive a hostile welcome. James and John ("Sons of Thunder" in Mk. 3:17), offended at the rejection shown to their master and perhaps betraying their negative perception of Samaritans, ask Jesus whether they should "command fire to come down from heaven and consume [the Samaritan villagers]" (v. 54). Jesus rebukes them immediately. The time for judgement has not come. This episode shows a willingness by Jesus to engage with Samaritan "outsiders".⁴² It also paves the way for a favourable portrayal of Samaritans in the remainder of the gospel. In another episode only found in Luke, the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37), a fictional Samaritan is held up as having the correct response to the law. The impression is developing that God's purposes can be fulfilled outside of Israel. Later, in 17:11-19, after Jesus heals ten lepers only one returns to thank him, "And he was a Samaritan" (v. 16). The astonishment seems almost palpable in those words. Luke seems to want to show that a Samaritan is better capable of recognising who Jesus is than some members of his own

³⁷ Gary Knoppers, *Jews and Samaritans: The Origins and History of Their Early Relations*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), Oxford Scholarship Online [Accessed 10 August 2021].

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ O'Toole, p. 102.

⁴⁰ Oliver, p. 99.

⁴¹ Morris, p. 198.

⁴² O'Toole, p. 102.

community. These three episodes point to the universal reach of Jesus' work by challenging the fiercest of enmities and illustrating the openness and inclusivity of Jesus' redefinition of belonging to God's people.

2.3 The universal scope of salvation

All the canonical gospels share an interest in the salvation that Jesus offers coming for "all nations". Matthew does by including gentile women in Jesus' genealogy, for example. He also makes the clearest call to international mission (Matt. 28:16-20). Interestingly, Sim argues that while they recognised the importance of this call, the Matthean community maintained "that only Jews could share in the salvation brought by Christ."⁴³ This contradiction forms one of the major themes of Matthew's Gospel.⁴⁴ Mark does not connect Jesus' mission directly to Abraham but he does refer to the "blessing to all nations" in 11:17 and 13:10.⁴⁵ Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-26) is a Johannine example of openness to the nations. It is in Luke that the theme finds its broadest exposition. Luke's message can be summarised by 3:6: "all flesh shall see the salvation of God". This is a quote from Isaiah 40. All gospels quote this passage, but only Luke extends the Isaian quote to include these words. They are the foundation of his message.⁴⁶ This leads Bock to suggest that Luke's central question is: "How did the hope of God open up to include all races...?"⁴⁷ Shillington formulates a similar, but broader, set of questions to summarise Luke's aims in his gospel:

This text deals with the quest of all human quests: How does a human person in any culture achieve salvation out of the confusion and depravity that so plague the human family? How does one become a member in the people of God on their way to salvation?⁴⁸

These are not abstract questions and must be worked out in practice, particularly within the community of faith.⁴⁹ The rest of this essay will be dedicated to exploring how Jesus' lack of

⁴³ David Sim, "Christianity and Ethnicity in the Gospel of Matthew" in *Ethnicity and the Bible*, ed. Mark Brett (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, Inc., 2002), p. 194.

⁴⁴ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), p. 26.

⁴⁵ Hays.

⁴⁶ Pao & Schnabel, p. 276.

⁴⁷ Darrell Bock, *Luke*, Vol. 1, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994), p. 1.

⁴⁸ George Shillington, *An introduction to the study of Luke-Acts*, (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), p. 70.

⁴⁹ Tannehill, p. 2.

a physical description in Luke's gospel and Luke's emphasis on Jesus bringing salvation "to all nations" has been connected by generations of readers and listeners.

3. Jesus as the physical embodiment of the universal message of the gospel of Luke

3.1 A community where looks do not matter: "Reverse" physiognomy

Earlier in this essay I expressed surprise at Jesus not being described in physiognomic terms, as Joseph, Moses and David had been. Parsons describes physiognomy as "the study of the relationship between the physical and the moral."⁵⁰ In the example of Joseph, Moses and David their physical attributes are relayed with the principal aim of telling us something about their character. We also noted that Luke was aware of this physiognomic tradition as he uses it to describe Moses in Acts 7:20. Even though Parsons admits that physiognomy was not a major feature of ancient Jewish literature, he does detect further examples in Luke's gospel and Acts.⁵¹ These are the crippled woman of 13:10-17 and Zacchaeus (19:1-10). These two characters are people who had been excluded both from civil and religious society – at least partly, in the case of Zacchaeus – on the basis of their physical body. Yet, these are the only two protagonists that Luke names as children of Abraham.⁵² We see here part of the fulfilment of the Abrahamic promise – all nations, all peoples being included in the promised blessing (Genesis 12).⁵³ Parsons argues that Luke excludes no one from the new Israel forming around Jesus on the basis of their physical appearance.⁵⁴ In fact, in another instance of the reversal motif noted earlier in relation to the Mary's song, Luke introduces physiognomic devices only to undermine them.⁵⁵ The crippled woman is depicted by the positive attribute of hospitality, and Zacchaeus of courage. The expectation that a disabled person and a person of small stature should be portrayed negatively is not only challenged but reversed.

Parsons does not address the question of the lack of a physical description of Jesus in Luke's gospel. The non-application of physiognomic devices to Jesus perhaps serves to depict Jesus as a different kind of leader. Luke could be signalling that Jesus' identity as the Son of God

⁵⁰ Parsons, p. 12.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 61.

⁵² Ibid., p. 82.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 14.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 82.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 82.

does not need propping up by complimentary epithets. Parsons' model of "reverse physiognomy" is perhaps not the most helpful in the case of Jesus' lack of a physical identity, particularly in Luke's gospel. However, Parsons' conclusion on Luke's subversion of physiognomic strategies may be particularly relevant to our ends. Parsons concludes that Luke's use of "reversed" physiognomy is to show that no one is excluded from the eschatological community that is forming around Jesus on the basis of their looks.⁵⁶ Of course, not judging someone on their appearance is a biblical idea (see, for example, 1 Sam, 16:7 and John 7:24). Luke is merely implementing this idea. If looks do not matter, could it be that Luke's portrayal of Jesus is to show him as the figurehead of this new community? Jesus' lack of a physical description and this vision of a community where appearance does not matter seem to combine quite naturally. This would also allow all people (and the variety of different features, skin tones and builds that come with them) to be able to identify with Jesus. In this process, they might also project their distinctive traits on to Jesus. Volker Küster's thoughts on the relationship between biblical texts about Jesus and their creative imaginings of him will allow us to develop this idea further.

3.2 Jesus, texts and readers: a hermeneutical event

Küster's work *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ* analyses the development of Christological images that have emerged throughout the world. He examines different images of Jesus Christ that have evolved in the contexts of Africa, Latin America, North America, and Asia. The book is an instance of reader-response criticism, in the sense that it seeks to "[read] the reader reading the text".⁵⁷ The work does not address specifically the physicality of Jesus but the title and the illustrations in the book do show how Jesus has been apprehended by the various contexts in which the gospel has been received in a way that is familiar to that context. For example, the cover alone has three representations of Jesus in distinctly South American and South Asian styles. This is true of both the artistic technique and the physical appearance of Jesus. For Küster, Christology is the crucible of contextual theology. He defines Christology as "talk about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ".⁵⁸ Contextual theology arises from the contact between the gospel and the receiving culture.⁵⁹ On the importance of Christology,

⁵⁶ Parsons, p. 82.

⁵⁷ Darr, *On Character Building*, p. 20.

⁵⁸ Küster, p. 29.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

Küster writes: “at the end of the day it is the Christology that decides whether or not for the person concerned, faith in Jesus Christ finds a home in its context.”⁶⁰ Apprehending Jesus on terms that are comprehensible to the context in which he is received is essential. For that reason, Küster notes that Christology is a particularly fruitful area in understanding how the Christian faith has been received. He argues that the encounter between readers/listeners and the Biblical stories themselves is “generative”.⁶¹ This encounter generates new understanding of Jesus. Shockingly, perhaps, Küster proposes that the Biblical stories themselves “must develop their relevance to the situation of those who hear them”.⁶² This seems to suggest that the stories themselves have the capacity to evolve which seems absurd. However, Küster seems to be arguing that the interpretation of stories has plenty of potential for creativity. Stories can “develop their relevance” when different interpretations are applied to them. The relationship between text and reader is dynamic because of this. This is seen in the many ways in which Jesus has been interpreted to meet various people at various times and in various contexts. Küster concludes that “Christological discourse is a hermeneutical event.”⁶³

It is this idea of “talk” about Jesus being a creative hermeneutical event that is of interest at present. Of particular interest, is the possibility that readers can interpret gaps left by writers, intentionally or not.⁶⁴ In the gospels, Jesus is not described. The physical appearance of Jesus is clearly not his most important feature, but it seems that having a visualization of what Jesus looked like is important to readers, at least as an introduction to him. We see this in the illustrations of Küster’s book and in the many varying representations of Jesus that have emanated from the various parts of the world in which the gospel has been proclaimed and received. From the earliest days of the Christian faith, people (believers and non-believers) have sought to fill in the blanks left by the gospel writers (“ugly Jesus” is an example of this). This is a hermeneutical event. It seems that, whether consciously or not, readers of biblical stories about Jesus have identified the gap left by the gospel writers (intentionally or not) and have found the space to freely use their imaginations to imagine (and portray) Jesus in a way that resembles themselves.

⁶⁰ Küster, p. 1.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 30.

⁶² Ibid., p. 29.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 29.

⁶⁴ Darr, *On Character Building*, p. 17.

Luke's gospel is particularly fertile ground for this approach because of its emphasis on inclusivity.

3.3 An example: Kongo crucifix

To illustrate this point, I will refer to a crucifix held by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. This crucifix originates from the Kongo Kingdom which extended from modern-day northern Angola to south-eastern Gabon and dates from the 16th or 17th century.⁶⁵ The artist is unknown. The subject matter is immediately recognisable as Jesus crucified but presented in a distinctly African way. Christianity had reached Kongo through Portuguese traders in the late 15th century. These traders did not only bring cloth, but they brought their Christian faith also.⁶⁶ Walls notes that, due to their limited capacity to meet their numerous commitments, the Portuguese were unable to enforce the Christian faith on the Kongo people.⁶⁷ Given that they were unable to coerce people into accepting the Christian faith, the role of the early missionaries was to persuade the Kongo people into the faith. Walls argues that this is what gave rise to the modern missionary movement. Because of this, Van Reybrouck states that the Christianisation of the Kongo Kingdom did not resemble the missionary movement of the 19th century.⁶⁸ It seems that the faith was accepted quite readily, given that some commonalities existed with pre-existing religions.⁶⁹

This Kongo crucifix is particularly interesting because it depicts Jesus in an African way, particular in the facial features and the wrap he wears around his midriff. It was designed and made without a westernised visualisation of Jesus (artworks and descriptions) that subsequent generations of missionaries might have imposed.⁷⁰ It seems that these early adopters of the faith in Kongo felt free to imagine Jesus looking just like them. Importantly, the heart of Jesus' significance remains untouched. Jesus' crucifixion, the central event of the Christian faith, is

⁶⁵ Anon. 'Crucifix' [online] < <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/318323> > [Accessed 13 August 2021]

⁶⁶ David Van Reybrouck, *Congo: The Epic History of a People*, (London: Fourth Estate, 2015), p. 21. Kindle eBook.

⁶⁷ Andrew Walls, "Africa in Christian History – Retrospect and Prospect", in *Journal of African Christian Thought*, 1.1, (June 1998), p. 5.

⁶⁸ Van Reybrouck, p. 21.

⁶⁹ Emma George Ross, *African Christianity in Kongo* (2002), <https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/acko/hd_acko.htm> [accessed 13 August 2021] (para. 1 of 4).

⁷⁰ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984), p. 222.

represented in a manner that faithfully follows the traditional teaching of the Church and which is easily recognisable. The addition of kneeling supplicants demonstrates an understanding of Jesus as worthy of worship. This artwork represents an instance of an “hermeneutical event”. Early Kongo adopters of the Christian faith perceived the gap left by the gospel writers, combined it with the Lukan emphasis on the inclusion of “all nations” into Jesus’ salvific work and created a Jesus that looked like them and signified that Jesus’ work was for them. They did not perceive Jesus as an imposition from outside, the Christian message included them.

Conclusion - Jesus as a blank canvas.

Before concluding, I will summarise three key points. Firstly, the canonical gospels, Luke’s included, contain no physical description of Jesus Christ. Though scholars have put forward several explanations for this omission, none of them are entirely satisfactory. The most realistic option is that Luke determined that it was not relevant to his purposes (this point could be developed further but it is beyond the scope of this piece of work). Though racialism existed at Jesus’ time in relation to Samaritans, it seems that physical traits were not the basis of this prejudice.⁷¹ That is not to say that appearance did not matter, as we saw in the stories of Zacchaeus and the crippled woman. Their physicality matters to Luke’s account. In the case of Jesus, the lack of a physical description of him does leave an outline and, therefore, the possibility for this outline to be completed.

Secondly, the gospel of Luke emphasises the universal scope of the salvation that has come in Jesus. The central theme of the third gospel is its author making sense of the salvation Jesus makes possible being opened up beyond the people of Israel. This is seen throughout the gospel, in the infancy narratives, in Jesus’ bias towards the outsider (practically, in his life and ministry, and figuratively, in his teaching), and, after the resurrection, in his sending the disciples to spread the message that “that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in [the Messiah’s] name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” (Luke 24:46-47). We also hypothesised, in response to Parsons’ research, that Jesus’ lack of a physical description might allow him to be perceived as the figurehead of an eschatological community where all are included. It seems that the absence of a physical description of Jesus and the Lukan emphasis

⁷¹ Oliver, p. 99.

on the universality of salvation have been combined by successive generations of readers of the Bible.

Thirdly, though a reader-response approach allows for the elaboration of many imaginative possibilities, it should not fall into relativism.⁷² Readers have noticed a gap and sought to fill it. As such, Jesus – the figurehead of the new community that looks forward to the consummation of all things – has been translated to resemble the people that make up the many communities that have received the Gospel. Jesus *can* be represented outside of history and made to share the various skin tones, features and other distinctives that exist among human beings. This is particularly helpful as an introduction to the person of Jesus. This, however, should not be a disorderly and boundary-free process that deforms the significance of Jesus. As the Kongo crucifix example shows, the central tenets of the Christian faith can be maintained, even if the appearance of Jesus is modified to fit the prevailing culture.

To conclude, I propose that Jesus, as described in the gospels, has been received as a blank canvas. The gap left by the gospel writers has been perceived as an outline that readers have attempted to fill in *their* image. This implies the continual development of new Christological images of Jesus. It may have deep theological significance as it allows members of “all nations” to imagine themselves as being included in the community of faith that is, to this day, forming around Jesus. In addition to this, the development of Christological images may highlight aspects of Jesus’ significance that would otherwise have been missed and lead to a richer Christology. The most important factor is to remain within the bounds of the canvas so that the new images remain faithful to the central beliefs about the person and work of Jesus Christ.

⁷² Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), Kindle eBook, loc. 4656.

Appendix



Anon. 'Crucifix' [online] <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/318323>
[Accessed 13 August 2021]

Bibliography

The Bible with Apocrypha, New Revised Standard Version Anglicised Edition, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995)

Anon. 'Crucifix' [online] <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/318323> [Accessed 13 August 2021]

Blomberg, Craig. L., *Matthew*, (Nashville: Broadman, 1992)

Bock, Darrell, L., *Luke*, Vol. 1, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994)

Burridge, Richard, A., *What are the Gospels? A comparison with Graeco-Roman biography*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995)

Callon, Callie, *Reading bodies: Physiognomy as a Strategy of Persuasion in Early Christian Discourse* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019),
<https://www.perlego.com/book/876061/reading-bodies-physiognomy-as-a-strategy-of-persuasion-in-early-christian-discourse-pdf> [accessed 3 June 2021]

Casey, Maurice, *Jesus: Evidence and argument or mythicist myths?*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), <https://archive.org/details/jesusevidencearg0000case/page/n5/mode/2up> [accessed 15 June 2021]

Darr, John, A., *On Character Building: The Reader and the Rhetoric of Characterization in Luke-Acts*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992)

Darr, John, A., "Reader-oriented approaches", in *Dictionary of Biblical Criticism and Interpretation*, ed. Stanley E. Porter, (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 309-310

George Ross, Emma, *African Christianity in Kongo* (2002),
https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/acko/hd_acko.htm [accessed 13 August 2021]

Goldingay, John, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020),
<https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/2063239/3> [accessed 9 August 2021]

Hays J., Daniel, *From every people and nation: A biblical theology of race*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/971165/0> [accessed 18 June 2021]

Iser, Wolfgang, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach", in *New Literary History*, 3.2 (1972), 279-299, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/468316> [accessed 20 August 2021]

Kidner, Derek, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 1967)

Knoppers, Gary, N., *Jews and Samaritans: The Origins and History of Their Early Relations*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), Oxford Scholarship Online [Accessed 10 August 2021]

- Küster, Volker, *The many faces of Jesus Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1999)
- Moore, Stephen, D., *God's Beauty Parlor: And Other Queer Spaces in and around the Bible* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2002)
<https://archive.org/details/godsbeautyparlor0000moor/page/90/mode/2up> [7 June 2021]
- Morris, Leon, *Luke*, (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988)
- Oliver, Willem, H., "Reconsidering the skin colour (race) of Jesus and his ancestors" in *Journal of Early Christian History*, 4/2, (2014), 95-115,
https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Willem-Oliver/publication/321287057_Reconsidering_the_Skin_Colour_Race_of_Jesus_and_his_Ancestors/links/5c6256d192851c48a9cd530d/Reconsidering-the-Skin-Colour-Race-of-Jesus-and-his-Ancestors.pdf [Accessed 21 July 2021]
- Osborne, Grant, R., *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), Kindle eBook
- O'Toole, Robert, F., *The Unity of Luke's Theology: An analysis of Luke-Acts*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2016), <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/1721518/4> [Accessed 6 August 2021]
- Pao, David, W. & Schnabel Eckhard, J., "Luke" in *Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament*, eds. G.K. Beale & D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007)
- Parsons, Mikeal C., *Body and Character in Luke and Acts*, (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011), <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/1587718/5> [accessed 3 August 2021].
- Pelikan, Jaroslav, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984)
- Ryan, Maurice, "What did Jesus look like? Reclaiming Jesus the Jew in art and religious education", in *Journal of Religious Education*, 69, (2021), 239-252, <https://link-springer-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/article/10.1007/s40839-021-00137-7> [Accessed 22 July 2021]
- Shillington, V. George, *An introduction to the study of Luke-Acts*, (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015)
- Sim, David, C., "Christianity and Ethnicity in the Gospel of Matthew" in *Ethnicity and the Bible*, ed. Mark Brett (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, Inc., 2002)
- Tannehill, Robert, C., *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A literary Interpretation*, Vol. 1, (Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1986)
- Taylor, Joan, E., *What did Jesus look like?*, (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018).
- Van Reybrouck, David, *Congo: The Epic History of a People*, (London: Fourth Estate, 2015). Kindle eBook.
- Walls, Andrew, F., "Africa in Christian History – Retrospect and Prospect", in *Journal of African Christian Thought*, 1.1, (June 1998), p. 2-15.

Walton, Steve, *What are the Gospels? Richard Burridge's impact on scholarly understanding of the genre of the gospels*, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/72001002.pdf> [accessed 3 August 2021]