



The Malleable Jesus

“Behold the man!” The words of Pontius Pilate, presenting Jesus to the Jews after the flogging, because, “I find no case against him against him” (John 19:5–6).

Behold the man! Ecce homo! Ah, but which man? Commentators disagree on the meaning and significance of this announcement in the New Testament, so let’s take it at face value. Behold the man. Here’s your guy. For Pilate, this man would have been a Palestinian Jew accused of treason, a wandering preacher and healer, a poor guy from Nazareth, who somehow had run afoul of the powers that be. But once Jesus is freed from the historical realities of the New Testament, who is he?

Now Jesus becomes all kinds of things. To each his own. For the church, the creeds, Jesus is “God’s only Son” and “our Lord,” “eternally begotten of the Father.” You can get there from the New Testament, but it ignores the life of the earthly Jesus, the simple Nazarene.

What about other portrayals of Jesus? We find, for example, the wildly popular Sallman’s *Head of Christ*, where Jesus is depicted as a visionary with long curly hair, a beard, and the facial features of a Western white man. Or Robert Zund’s *Road to Emmaus*, where the landscape looks suspiciously like West Virginia. One can find many images of a Black Jesus (which may be more faithful to his historical color) or a Native American Jesus, and probably other portrayals of an ethnic Jesus for almost any group. And then there is Edwina Sandys’s *Christa*, the portrayal of the Christ as a woman on the cross. This won’t work for our discussion of “Behold the man,” of course, but it is a provocative image.

Jesus can also be our “champion, who comes to fight,” as in “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” or the leader of the “Christian soldiers,” moving forever “onward.”

More interesting to me and, in my opinion, truer to the spirit of the New Testament is Matthias Grünewald’s *Isenheim Altarpiece*, depicting Jesus on the cross with plague-type sores, sharing the pain of human beings, not unlike the Servant who “carried our diseases” in Isa 53:4. In like fashion, though hardly known outside the walls of a small church in South Africa, is a simple picture of an emaciated Jesus suffering from AIDS, again sharing the particular “plagues” of that place and time.

Beyond those and much more impressive in its own way is the forty-three-foot-tall Christ of the Andes, high atop a mountain on the border between Chile and Argentina. Despite its imposing grandeur, the statue was meant to symbolize peace—the peaceful resolution of a border dispute between those two South American countries.

But who is the “historical Jesus,” the one sought by various “quests” of recent time? He is related to the Jesus of the “Jesus Seminar,” who seems to have spoken remarkably little, unlike the Jesus of some editions of the King James Bible, who somehow spoke in red letters.

Among artistic renditions, we ought not leave out the amazing “movement” in the wooden Christ figure by Tillman Riemenschneider, now in the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum in Munich. How can a hunk of wood come so alive?

More recently and on a less somber note than most of the ones already mentioned are several images of Jesus laughing, especially surrounded by children. Why not?

So, who is this malleable Jesus? Perhaps most odd is Bruce Barton’s *The Man Nobody Knows*, the title of his 1925 book. Upset by the sissified “Sunday school Jesus,” “a physically weak, moralistic man, and the ‘lamb of God,’” Barton describes Jesus as “the world’s greatest business executive” who was nothing less than “The Founder of Modern Business,” the strong masculine man “who created a world-conquering organization with a group of twelve men hand-picked from the bottom ranks of business.”¹

Ah, Jesus—ever malleable. A good thing or a bad thing? The good thing is the reality of incarnation in these portrayals. Jesus is seen incarnate in various times, places, and cultures with various moods and expressions. This is surely positive. Jesus comes into history, and history sees him in different ways, depending on the time and the circumstances. Jesus is preached in every age, and in those sermons, we say that Christ is present. As Bonhoeffer noted, the proclaimed word “is Christ himself walking through his congregation.”² Can the same be said of artistic portrayals of Jesus? Not quite. Jesus came as the word, and only words can fully proclaim his presence—at least for Lutherans. The Orthodox church, on the other hand, regards icons not just as pictures but as sacred images that give access to the image portrayed.

There can, of course, be bad sermons, sermons that obscure the true word of God, so we must say that there can also be bad pictorial representations of Jesus—not necessarily bad art, but art that doesn’t get Jesus “right.” That might be a matter of opinion, of course, but I can’t see Jesus as “the founder of modern business.” He didn’t have much good to say about the rich. And, forgive me those who have Sallman’s *Head of Christ* on their walls or in their churches, but this picture is, I think, far too romantic and far too Western.

One primary criterion, I think, is to go back where we started. Jesus was a real man, a particular historical figure, not an idea or even an image, but a wandering Palestinian preacher and healer. Contra Barton, truly the Lamb of God.

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¹*The Man Nobody Knows*, in Wikipedia, at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Man_Nobody_Knows.

²Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Worldly Preaching*, ed. and trans. Clyde E. Fant (New York: Crossroad, 1991) 101.