

<b>Institution:</b> King's College London		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 31 Theology and Religious Studies		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Revisualising Jesus		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2014–2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Joan Taylor	Professor of Christian Origins	From 2009
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2015–2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		

### 1. Summary of the impact

Traditional images of Jesus as tall and light-skinned, with long clean hair and flowing robes, reinforce powerful norms of ethnicity, gender and social class. Joan Taylor's research on Jesus's physical appearance has had the threefold impact of informing new visual representations of Jesus; shifting perceptions of Jesus's identity; and changing narratives linking Jesus to racial justice and social inclusion. The international reach of this impact extends from the UK to the USA, Canada, the Netherlands, France, Australia, Malaysia and South Africa. Its significance consists in the deconstruction of a colonising Jesus who embodies questionable ideas of masculine strength, social status, white supremacy and European hegemony.

### 2. Underpinning research

Taylor's innovative interdisciplinary research on Jesus's physical appearance began in 2014. Taylor used her expertise in archaeology, art history and literature to move back through the ages towards a more authentic image of Jesus. While previous art-historical studies had considered changing depictions of Jesus over time, Taylor framed her research by an historical question: **which images of Jesus might have preserved authentic ancient memories?** This involved considering not only art but diverse literature and relics, which led to new insights, including the origins of the Shroud of Turin. Reaching back to the earliest period, Taylor assembled ancient sources including archaeological remains, ancient Egyptian funerary art, and biblical, literary and epigraphic texts dating to the 1st and 2nd centuries CE. These texts included testimonies compiled by the 2nd-century scholar Celsus, who described Jesus as a scruffy, disreputable figure who "*wandered about most shamefully in the sight of all*" and "*obtained his means of livelihood in a disgraceful and importunate way,*" i.e. by begging. No other scholar had used this material to note that Celsus talked to Jews and Christians of the mid-2nd century who had preserved oral traditions on Jesus's appearance (with some Christians even having a portrait bust). A close reading of Gospel texts revealed the same picture that Celsus presented.

#### Key research insights

Taylor's original research showed how Byzantine images of Jesus, drawing on statues of long-haired, long-robed Graeco-Roman deities, effaced earlier sources that point to a smaller, less handsome, impoverished figure with low social status. Art-historical ideologies that prioritised Christ's divinity over his humanity, aligned with Eurocentric tendencies, obscured this earlier version, preserved somewhat in ancient images of Jesus as a philosopher like Moses.

From these material and literary studies, and drawing on the work of contemporary experts on physical anthropology, Taylor explored Jesus's Middle Eastern Jewish ethnicity and concluded that Jesus had brown eyes, fairly short dark brown to black hair, and olive-brown skin, and that his likely height was 5'5". He wore a distinctive Jewish mantle (*tallith*): "*Jesus not only was a Jew, but he looked like a Jew*" [1 p.181].

Crucially, in contrast to traditional conclusions that Jesus wore a fine robe, Taylor's research revealed new evidence that Jesus's clothing was shabby, rough and largely workmanlike, and that he chose to wear the most basic one-piece garment. On the basis of these findings, Taylor argued

### Impact case study (REF3)

that Jesus's physical appearance amplified his teaching about poverty and social exclusion and his resistance to high-status clothing. This research fundamentally undermines longstanding representations of Jesus that support and proliferate narratives privileging whiteness, affluence, social status and a highly selective ideal of masculine beauty. As Taylor summarised in an online piece stemming from her research, she argues that this *"is the beginning of a different way of seeing Jesus, and one very relevant for our times of massive inequality between rich and poor, as in the Roman Empire. Jesus aligned himself with the poor and this would have been obvious from how he looked"* ('What did Jesus wear?', The Conversation, 8 Feb 2018).

Taylor presented her research-in-progress in 2014 at the King's Arts and Humanities Festival, and in December 2015 in a BBC blog ('What did Jesus really look like?', BBC website, 24 December 2015), including illustrations. Developed conclusions published in her 2018 book *What Did Jesus Look Like?* included a new visualisation of Jesus drawn by Taylor (Fig. b) that directly contrasts with traditional representations (Fig. a). Taylor's portrait [1 p.192] shows Jesus wearing clothing correct for an ordinary Jewish man in his time and place (including distinctive *tallith* with fringes), with correct hair and sandals.



Fig. a



Fig. b

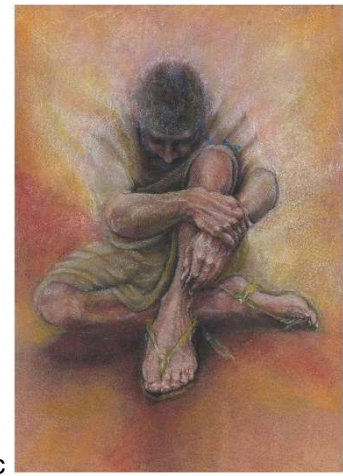


Fig. c

The book also includes a painting by artist Cathy Fisher, commissioned by Taylor to indicate the ethnic dimensions of the study. Fisher's creative visualisation replaces classic images with a more robust and workmanlike Jesus (Fig. c).

### 3. References to the research

1. Taylor, J. E. (2018). *What Did Jesus Look Like?* London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark.

This book received strong affirmations of the high-quality, significance and originality of the research in academic reviews in A\* journals:

- *Journal of Theological Studies* 70 (2019): "joan taylor has produced an insightful and readable survey of how art and literature have imagined Jesus' appearance throughout the ages. The study is a wide-ranging interdisciplinary work that contributes to art history, biblical studies, and the reception history of the New Testament ... Taylor expertly shows in page after page how a particular way of imaging Jesus communicates the values, commitments, and influences of the ones doing the imaging."
- *Neotestamentica* 54 (2020): "Joan Taylor, a leading Christian origins scholar, [has] surveyed the historical evidence of prevalent images of Jesus to suggest an entirely different version of this most famous man ... the book [is] well researched and the thematic chapters [are] logically developed in meticulous detail."
- *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 81 (2019): "Taylor holds a well-deserved reputation as an eminent scholar of the historical Jesus and this book will increase appreciation for her perceptive analysis and research ... This is not a topic that ... has previously been considered in such a sustained fashion, especially treated across nearly twenty-one centuries ... One of Taylor's particular strengths is her ability to dissect, arrange, and clearly communicate technical information... She [is] a master with both art and text."
- *Novum Testamentum* 60 (2018): "Throughout her beautifully illustrated book Joan Taylor ... shows how different artists in various lands over several centuries imagined a Jesus suitable

## Impact case study (REF3)

*in their own times and contexts. ... Taylor's theme [is] of the highest significance to Christian believers and to art historians."*

- *Bulletin of Biblical Research* 29 (2019): "Taylor's research [is] careful, informative, and well-documented. ... and serves well both church and academy."
- *Theology* 121 (2018): "This book ... makes a real contribution to interdisciplinary studies – art, archaeology, literary studies and theology. And it is a detective story."

Following the book's publication, Taylor disseminated her research in a series of high-profile online articles. Her piece in *The Conversation*, '[What did Jesus wear?](#)' attracted 331,125 readers (as at 2 December 2020), the largest readership ever for a *Conversation* article by a King's researcher in Arts and Humanities. Taylor's article on Jesus's appearance in the *Irish Times* was its second most-read piece online in 2018. Interviews were broadcast on radio, including Australian National Radio. Recorded public talks have resulted in widely seen YouTube videos, such as [Ideacity](#), Canada, profiling "the world's top thinkers and doers" and [St Paul's Cathedral, London](#).

### 4. Details of the impact

Jesus is the most represented figure of the last 2,000 years of human history, but traditional images of Jesus as tall and light-skinned, with long clean hair and flowing robes, reinforce powerful norms of ethnicity, gender and social class. His representation is thus charged with significance and used to underpin values. Revisualising Jesus in line with the best evidence challenges past representations that embody questionable ideas of masculine strength, social status, white supremacy and European hegemony. The impact of this research comprises new visual representations; shifts in perception; and changing narratives.

#### New visual representations of Jesus

The research has led directly to new visual representations of Jesus that challenge traditional images of masculine strength (signified by Jesus's height and build), social status (signified by Jesus's long robes and clean appearance), white supremacy (signified by Jesus's hair, eye colour and skin tone) and European hegemony (signified by Jesus's facial features).

(i) Taylor's research was used by the production company Nutopia to make the TV series *Jesus: His Life* [A], screened on the History Channel in 2019. Nutopia producer Alex Dwiar has confirmed that Taylor's book was "used by the research team in building up the information for the casting and costumes teams for *Jesus: His Life*" [A1]. The resulting representation of Jesus reflects Taylor's research findings on Jesus's hair, skin tone and clothing (Fig. d). The Sky History website published an article on Jesus's appearance to accompany the series *Jesus: His Life*, making direct reference to Taylor's research [A2].



Fig. d

(ii) In 2018, Dutch TV company EO produced the documentary film *Jezus van Nazareth veroverd de wereld* (Jesus of Nazareth conquers the world) [B]. Taylor worked as a casting and costume consultant and as a direct result of Taylor's input an Iraqi Jewish actor was used to visualise Jesus and a new garment was created. Boudewijn Drechsler, Senior Editor from EO, has confirmed that: "We followed the descriptions from [Taylor's] book and her oral explanation. Without her, we would never have ended up with an Iraqi Jewish man. She helped us with judging ... the garment we have had made for our model, all in order to help our host and audience in their imagination of how Jesus must have looked like ... With Taylor's research we managed to reach a pretty detailed image of how Jesus might have looked like. Without this knowledge, we could not have been that specific" [B1]. The documentary included an extended contribution from Taylor, explaining her research to presenter Kefar Allush in the storerooms of the Israel Antiquities

### Impact case study (REF3)

Authority, with discussions of ancient clothing and Taylor's verdict on images of Jesus (see Fig. e from [B2]). It specifically featured an image of her book *What Did Jesus Look Like?*

Fig. e



(iii) When American artist Joseph Hoffman was commissioned to create a life-size bronze sculpture of Jesus for a Lutheran church in the city of Long Beach, California (Fig. f), he consulted Taylor on Jesus's appearance and clothing. Hoffman testified that *"my first sketch [of Jesus] was greatly informed by your writing"*, and through a series of email and Skype exchanges Taylor guided Hoffman to change details of the sketches, models and costume replicas he was creating as a basis for the final artwork. During the design process Hoffman wrote to Taylor indicating where specific changes had been informed by her research and affirming the extent and value of her contribution to his work: *"I truly appreciate all your critical input"* [C].

Fig. f



### Shifts in perception

Following the publication of *What Did Jesus Look Like?*, feature articles questioning traditional depictions of Jesus ran in print and online media in several countries. In Feb 2018, numerous mainstream newspapers and magazines carried features on Taylor's book. A *Daily Mail* article (generating 3,100 comments and shared 2,800 times on social media) publicised Taylor's research conclusions: *"The long-haired and bearded Jesus we recognise today can be found in art from the fourth century onwards, but he can also appear as a youthful, beardless, good-looking figure, not unlike Classical sculptures of Roman gods"* [D1]. The *Daily Telegraph* published a review of the book that concluded *"we should forget the flowing robe with wide sleeves. Jesus ... was an artisan and a wanderer ... It is all a far cry from the Jesus of the Sacred Heart"* [D2]. Newsweek carried a story highlighting how Taylor's research provided a *"radically different picture of God's son"* [D3]. In March 2018, the *Sydney Morning Herald* ran a feature titled 'Have we had Jesus wrong all along?' which praised Taylor's research for *"de-westernising"* Jesus [D4]. In May 2018, the global Catholic publication *Aleteia*, distributed in eight languages to a monthly readership of 3 million, published an article on Taylor's book which stated that *"New research calls for a re-framing of the most famous icon in Western history"* and reproduced Taylor's drawing of Jesus (Fig. b) [D5]

In September 2018, Rich Tenorio published a feature article on the research in the *Times of Israel* (shared 1,417 times on social media). It included four Europeanised images of Jesus, extensive interview quotes, and asked, *"how likely is it that a Levantine Semite from 2,000 years ago actually looked like the fair-haired-and-skinned man represented in so much Christian religious art?"* Calling the research a *"forensic pilgrimage"*, Tenorio states: *"Joan Taylor paints quite a different portrait in a challenging new book, What Did Jesus Look Like?"* [D6].

Blogs, comments and popular reviews are indicative of individuals' changed perspectives: *"This book has forever changed my mental image of what Jesus looks like"* [D7]; *"Taylor decides that*

## Impact case study (REF3)

*Jesus probably looked like just an ordinary Middle Eastern guy. This is a conclusion that should warn us away from making Jesus in our own image thereby confirming our prejudices” [D8].*

### Shifts in narrative

Taylor’s research has contributed directly to new narratives linking Jesus’s appearance to issues of racial justice and social inclusion. In Mar 2018, the *Herald Malaysia* highlighted the consequences of Taylor’s book for social justice and racial equality, asking readers to “*consider the impact of a darker-skinned Jesus*” in the history of colonialism, in apartheid South Africa and in the history of segregation in the USA: “*clearly, the psychological impact would have been tremendous if the people being oppressed and discriminated against had known that Jesus ... looked more like one of them rather than their oppressors down the ages*” [D9]. In January 2020, Michael Eli Dokosi discussed Jesus’s appearance in articles for *Face2Face Africa* and *Keep the Faith*, which connected Taylor’s research to issues of racial equality [D10].

During Easter 2020, a *New York Times* feature by Eric Copage – ‘Searching for a Jesus Who Looks More Like Me’ – brought together Taylor’s research and his own Black American perspective to envision a “*multi-ethnic*” Jesus. Copage’s article constructs a narrative of “*pilgrimage in search of more authentic renderings of Christ – ones reflective of race, but also of gender and sexual orientation.*” Copage compiled 12 Jesus images, reproduced in the article, that “*translate local idioms and sensibilities into the universal ethos Christianity strives to represent.*” In email correspondence Copage informed Taylor that “*I’ve read so much of your work on Jesus*” and solicited a quotation from Taylor about her own childhood experience of Nordic representations of Jesus which featured in his article [D11].

In July 2020, a few weeks after the death of George Floyd, Sandi Dolbee wrote an influential piece in *The San Diego Union-Tribune*: ‘Examining the Color of Jesus’. Like Copage’s *New York Times* piece, Dolbee’s article focused on Black American perspectives and the “*legacy of colonization*”; it discussed *What Did Jesus Look Like?* and included excerpts from an interview with Taylor: “*I think people of color themselves can explain much better than I can how it makes a difference if Jesus is understood as a man of color, rather than a man of European descent. From what they’ve shared with me, there is a profound sense of relief. Seeing Jesus with brown skin severs Jesus from a link with the global legacy of European authority and dominance*” [D12].

## 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- [A] Items relating to 2019 TV Programme (2019) Nutopia, [Jesus: His Life](#) [A1] Testimonial from Alex Dwiar, Producer of *Jesus: His Life* [A2] Sarah Pruitt, The Ongoing Mystery of Jesus’s Face, Sky History website, 20 February 2019
- [B] Items relating to 2018 EO produced documentary film *Jesus van Nazareth veroverd de wereld* (Jesus of Nazareth conquers the world) [B1] Testimony from producer, Boudewijn Drechsler. Emails [B2] [Lazarus, Hoe zag Jezus eruit?](#) [youtube video]
- [C] Testimonial from: Sculpture Artist, Joseph Hoffman, Long Beach. [via email].
- [D] Report containing examples of news items, reviews and feature articles relating to Taylor, J. E. (2018). *What Did Jesus Look Like?* London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark. [D1] Daily Mail, ‘Is this what Jesus REALLY looked like? Delving into the past to uncover early depictions of ‘5ft 5in, muscular’ Christ’, Nick Rennison, 22 Feb 2018 [D2] The Daily Telegraph, Robin Griffith-Jones, ‘What did Jesus really look like?’ 10 Feb, 2018 [D3] Newsweek, Melissa Matthews, ‘What Did Jesus Look Like? Popular Images of White Savior Are Wrong, New Book Claims’ 28 Feb, 2018 [D4] Sydney Morning Herald, Barney Zwartz, ‘Have we had Jesus wrong all along?’ 31 Mar, 2018 [D5] Aleteia, V. M. Traverso, ‘What did Jesus really look like?’ 5 Mar, 2018 [D6] Times of Israel A. Rich Tenorio ‘In a forensic pilgrimage, a scholar asks, ‘What did Jesus look like?’, 8 Sept, 2018 [D7] Amazon and Goodreads book reviews [D8] Crosslight, Nick Mattiske, ‘What did Jesus look like?’ 4 May 2018 [D9] Herald Malaysia Online, Anil Netto, ‘Another look at what Jesus may have looked like - and does it matter?’ 16 Mar, 2018 [D10] Keep the Faith/Face2Face Michael Eli Dokosi, ‘Was Jesus Christ black? This scholar argues so’, 9 Jan 2020 [D11] *New York Times*, Eric V. Copage, ‘Searching for a Jesus Who Looks More Like Me’ 10 Apr 2020 [D12] The San Diego Union-Tribune, Sandi Dolbee, ‘Examining the Color of Jesus’, 19 Jul 2020.