Most writers who attempt to retell the gospel stories struggle with the interplay of the humanity and divinity of Jesus. Helena Kaufman writes about “the symbolic as well as conceptual duality inherent in the Christ figure: the historical (rational) and the legendary (supernatural); the human and the divine; the Son of Man and the Son of God. Around this essential tension core are built some of the most famous literary Christ figures, such as Jesus from The Last Temptation of Christ (1953) by Nikos Kazantzakis” (451). Not surprisingly, in a more secular, rational age than the one in which the gospels were written, authors focus much more on the humanity of Jesus than on his divinity. Though they struggle, they largely end up creating a Jesus whom readers can identify with, someone much more like us.

In the same way that authors struggle with this dichotomy, the early church also struggled with the idea of Jesus as human and divine. The apostles, however, did not have this struggle, as they would have thought of him first as human because they had spent time with a very human Jesus. Thus, as Knox argues, “we shall not expect to find that his humanity constituted any problem for the earliest Church or was at first invested with any special theological significance. He would have been thought of simply as the human being he was” (5). As the church grew, though, the issue of Jesus’ divinity began to gain influence. The first stage is adoptionist theology, which sees Jesus as human until God resurrected him when he was exalted to the right hand of God and made into the Messiah (Knox 6–8). Later, but before Paul’s letters were written, Jesus’ divinity was more definitive. God
would not have simply waited around for a man to appear whom he could raise to the level of the Messiah; instead, God must have preordained Jesus’ presence on earth (Knox 10–11). From there, the next idea is *kenosis* or “emptying.” Knox writes, “A pre-existing divine being ‘emptied’ himself and became a man—precisely that man who because he was ‘obedient to death, even the cross,’ was ‘highly exalted’ and given the name of Lord” (12). This understanding marks Paul’s writings; however, it did not remain the only idea of how to interpret Jesus.

In reaction to this view, Docetism arose. Docetism, writes Knox, argues that Jesus “seemed to be [human]—and it was important for our salvation that he should have appeared as such—but actually he was not. He was actually the divine being he had always been and, in the nature of the case, could not have ceased to be. His humanity was a disguise he wore for a while or, better perhaps, a role he played” (16). This idea is most prevalent in the writings of the Gnostics. Basilides, for example, wrote that Jesus did not suffer, but a certain Simon of Cyrene was impressed to carry his cross for him and because of ignorance and error was crucified, transformed by him so that he might be thought to be Jesus. Jesus himself took on the form of Simon and stood there deriding them. Since he was the incorporated Power and Mind of the ungenerated Father, he was transformed as he wished and thus ascended to him who had sent him, deriding them, since he could not be held and was invisible to all. (qtd. in Grant 49)

Accordingly, Jesus was never a corporeal being; instead, he was the Power and Mind of God and, thus, could not have been a human being and could not have been crucified.

Ignatius of Antioch countered this type of Christology with the reasoning that would come to represent orthodox theology. He wrote, “Be deaf when anyone speaks to you apart from Jesus Christ, who was of the stock of David, who was from Mary, who was truly born, ate, and drank, was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate, was truly crucified and died in the sight
of beings heavenly, earthly, and under the earth, who also was truly raised from the dead, his Father raising him” (qtd. in Grant 57). Ignatius presents a Jesus who is definitely human (the emphasis on eating and drinking, as well as the witnesses who see him die), but who is also divine. This thinking would become the basis for the Apostles’ Creed and church teaching.

**JUST A MAN . . . : JESUS’ HUMANITY**

In their attempt to deal with Jesus’ humanity, these five authors focus on several areas of his life. First, the books by Burgess, Mailer, and Saramago deal with his childhood and how ordinary it is. Almost all of these books show Jesus’ relationships with women as examples of his humanity (Ricci’s being the exception), though with differences: women as temptations or as more positive influences. The novels by Kazantzakis and Mailer show Jesus struggling with other temptations, such as his desire to live a normal life, his resistance to going to the cross, and even a desire for money. Ricci’s book, however, takes a different approach. His assumes that Jesus is merely human and reinforces this idea by an inability to perform miracles, although people interpret what he does miraculously. All of these books bring Jesus down to a human level.

*Man of Nazareth*, however, downplays the humanity of Jesus more than do any of the gospels, as it focuses on Jesus’ role as the Messiah. It follows the gospel accounts fairly closely, and, when it does expound on those stories, it is usually to expand the dialogue. However, one area in which the divinity of Jesus is downplayed is his childhood. Unlike the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, which makes Jesus out to be a super-child, this book depicts Jesus as a typical child, who performs no miracles, but he is fascinated by Egyptian magicians. However, when he later performs miracles, it is clear that he is channeling God’s power, not using Egyptian magic.

Jesus also fights with other children, and he is quite successful, but that is due to his large stature, not to any supernatural help. He is described as “quick to take offence [*sic*] and hit out as his offender, even if the offender were much older and bigger” (70), an odd character trait for someone who will later preach love and forgiveness, even to those who strike one. Coale,
in fact, says that this Jesus is “no ethereal esthete, no ephemeral saint. He’s a strong muscular fellow, self-assured, unassailed by doubts . . .” (183). Also, Stinson writes, “Jesus is memorable for his powerful plain speaking and rugged athleticism. He comes across as a muscular, indiscreet, intellectual” (138). Burgess himself says of his Jesus, “I feared that the cinematic Jesus might be a weedy Dustin Hoffman. I wanted him to be massive, muscular, with the big-chested capacity for hyperoxidation that made Napoleon the man he was. The voice that delivered the Sermon on the Mount must have been immense” (305). Thus, even though Jesus’ childhood shows him to be more like an ordinary child, his stature still clearly sets him apart.

*The Gospel According to the Son* includes other aspects of Jesus’ childhood to suggest his humanity. When he is a child, he has a fever that is so traumatic that he forgets the story Joseph has told him of his birth. Before the fever, Jesus is puzzled by Joseph’s telling him that he is the Son of God and comments, “After school, on days when we would scuffle with each other, I would lose such fights as often as I won. How, then, could I be the Son of the Lord?” (Mailer 19). One of the problems scholars have with the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* is that it presents Jesus as a child who seems to be superhuman even then, raising friends from the dead. Mailer’s Jesus, though, seems like a normal child who loses as many fights as he wins, which seems much more realistic to most readers.1

That presentation, coupled with the fever that Jesus experiences, which clearly shows that he is vulnerable to human ailments, reminds readers of just how human Jesus is.

Both Burgess’ and Mailer’s books also have Jesus following in Joseph’s career path as a carpenter.2 Throughout Burgess’ novel, Jesus is referred to as Jesus Naggar, as naggar is Hebrew for “carpenter.” In fact, he is so

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1In *Lamb*, Christopher Moore presents an interesting combination of traits in Joshua’s (Jesus’) childhood. Jesus and his friend Biff pretend to be heroes of the Jewish faith, which is what one could easily imagine children doing, but Joshua always plays the heroes—David, Joshua, and Moses—while Biff plays the villains.

2As mentioned in the chapter on Joseph, some writers change Joseph and Jesus to a stonemason. Christopher Moore has Joseph remain a carpenter, but he has Joshua (Jesus) learn to be a stonemason from Biff’s father. Moore doesn’t develop this idea any farther, and he seems to have no real reason for doing so other than the fact that it enables Biff and Joshua to go to work together and, thus, give them opportunities for getting into trouble together.
accomplished by the age of fourteen that “he was as skillful in making ploughs as his foster-father (whom, of course, he called father)” (72). Jesus’ being a carpenter does not come up in the novel again until the end of the book. Jesus talks to the carpenter who designed his cross, and he thinks the man’s workmanship is shoddy. The old man thinks that no one notices, but Jesus reminds him that “God notices. God praises the good work, condemns the ill” (272). This scene does little to point out the human nature that Jesus may have embodied, as it shows a Jesus who believes that even the construction of a cross should be done to the glory of God. While this could very well be a human’s reaction before being crucified, it sounds like someone who is not worried about the pain that is about to come.

In Mailer’s case, Jesus serves as Joseph’s apprentice for fourteen years, planning to become a carpenter himself one day. He seems to enjoy the work, at least when it goes well: “Still, there was wisdom to be found in doing good work. When the task went well, I was at peace. The scent of a well-made chest cheered me, and I could feel a fine spirit between the grain and my hand” (4). He even dreams of working on the Great Temple itself, but he is not skilled in gold and silver and wonders if a modest man should strive to such heights. Ultimately, at the age of twenty-seven, Jesus becomes a master carpenter, though he still works with Joseph. Mailer, like Burgess, does not develop the idea of Jesus as a carpenter; in fact, both seem to be checking off a trait of Jesus that they know they have to fulfill before they can move on to other issues.

The Gospel According to Jesus Christ focuses on the humanity of Jesus, omitting consideration of his divinity until over halfway through the book. Ruth Pavey comments that “in Saramago’s characterisation, Jesus is neither wimp nor superman, just the thoughtful, tender-hearted son of a carpenter” (40). Ilan Stavans adds that Saramago’s goal seems to be “to humanize the son of Joseph and Mary, to make His odyssey immediate, to shape Him as a perfect novelistic creature, one suitable to our fin de siècle” (676). This focus is not surprising, as Helena Kaufman reminds us: “What marks this novel with a Saramago stamp is the essential belief, shared in all his narratives, that the only possible story is the one that belongs to this imperfect world
(terra). That is why his Jesus represents human struggle, and his story ends with death” (457–58). From Jesus’ birth until the end of the book, in fact, Jesus is presented as a man who is later informed that he is the Son of God, though he thinks he can escape that fate. Jesus is born because Mary and Joseph have sex, as this book makes clear. In fact, the sex between Mary and Joseph is not even presented as particularly good sex; it simply meets Joseph’s need, as he’s the male in this patriarchal culture.

There is nothing special about Mary’s pregnancy besides the beggar’s appearance. She does not visit Elizabeth and make the baby in Elizabeth’s womb leap, nor does an angel appear to Joseph, who is already married to Mary. There is no declaration at Jesus’ circumcision by Simeon nor is there a visit by wise men. Even the shepherds who come to see Jesus do so to bring food to the family, who is living in a cave. As Jesus grows older, he performs no miracles, though he is blessed with an extraordinary memory, which enables him to do particularly well in school. He grows up with his brothers and sisters as an ordinary child.

When Jesus gets older, however, these authors shift the focus from what he did not do as a child, especially a lack of miracle-working, to how he relates to women. Both novels by Burgess and Saramago allow him a normal relationship with a woman. Burgess’ novel allows Jesus humanity in his marriage to Sara. Jesus does not seem particularly tempted by women, and, in fact, his marriage seems to be a duty. He tells his mother that, in order to minister to all, he must “know the whole life of a man” (85). This novel describes Jesus nodding his head gravely when Mary asks him if he is set on marriage, “as if it were indeed a duty on which he had to embark and not a joyful entry into what can be the most joyous of states” (86). Concerning Jesus’ marriage, Burgess comments, “That he was married, though briefly, entering on his mission a somewhat embittered widower, seemed to me to be very likely: a state of bachelorhood lasting into the late twenties would have been unusual in a tight Jewish community. If there was a marriage feast at Cana, it may well have been Jesus’s own” (YH 306). Stinson feels that Burgess changes such scriptural stories, though, for good reason: “His departure from Scripture is intended mostly to provoke thought about, and to dramatize, the humanity of Jesus.
Thus, there is the surprise of the bridegroom of the wedding at Cana being none other than Jesus himself” (138). The marriage does not seem to be much of a surprise, as it is so perfunctory; if Jesus had taken some joy in the marriage, perhaps fallen madly in love with Sara, then it would come as a surprise and humanize Jesus somewhat.

*Man of Nazareth* skims over the five years of their marriage, except to point out that Sara had either two or three miscarriages (the book cites both figures). This illustrates that Jesus has sex while married. However, the novel never lets the reader know if Jesus is happy being married. The reader only knows that Sara is trampled to death by Syrian soldiers after the five years and that Jesus curses God after her death. It is here that God explains the idea of free will to Jesus. Again, Jesus seems not especially human, one who rages against God for years, bitter over what has happened to his wife. This is not surprising given the lack of love expressed in the novel. Instead, Jesus simply does not seek remarriage; he works hard in his shop until he decides it is time to pursue his ministry.

The main focus of Jesus as human in *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* is in his relationship with Mary Magdalene. While other authors show Jesus tempted by Mary’s sexuality, this book has Jesus having sex with her, then living with her as if she were his wife. In fact, Saramago’s novel presents Jesus and Mary’s relationship not as a hindrance to his ministry, but as a support. Mary can clearly see where Jesus is headed and stands with him in his decision to do so. Thus, rather than presenting Jesus as one who must not engage in the pleasures of this world, this novel seeks to show how those pleasures can make the life of someone, even of someone with such a high calling in life, much better.

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3Margaret George’s novel seems to present Mary and Jesus’ relationship as a temptation when Jesus tells Mary, “[Satan’s] bigger aim is to take that which is most natural and make it a stumbling block for us. . . . That is, the love of a man for a woman and a woman for a man” (438), and she argues in the afterword that it seems natural that at least one of Jesus’ disciples would have had strong feelings for him: “I assume that Jesus was an attractive person, and it would be unusual if none of his female followers developed heightened feelings for him. This happens often between a mentor and a mentee, a teacher and pupil, a master and disciple” (629). This might be a temptation for Mary, but it never seems to be so for Jesus.

4Marianne Fredriksson, in *According to Mary Magdalene*, also makes clear that Jesus and Mary have sex. In her work, their sexual relationship teaches him that “there is so much joy in [his] body” (107), which he had never understood until then, and it also seems to benefit, not harm, his ministry.
Michéle Roberts’ *The Wild Girl* goes even farther than Saramago’s book does in its portrayal of Mary and Jesus’ relationship. Not only is the physical aspect of their relationship portrayed positively, Jesus even tells Mary at one point, “I am the new Adam, Mary, and you are the new Eve. Together we bear witness to the continuation of creation. Between us, and inside each other, we bear witness to the fullness of God” (82). Drawing on the gnostic *Gospel of Mary*, Roberts depicts a Jesus seeing salvation in the reclamation of the Motherhood of God that has been lost with a focus on a patriarchal God. Thus, the physical union of man and woman, in addition to the spiritual reconciliation of the male and female within us, makes the kingdom of God manifest. *The Wild Girl*’s Jesus quotes from the *Gospel of Mary*, with a few slight changes to make this point: “I myself . . . shall lead Mary in order to make her male, so that she may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven. And I shall lead you, Peter, in order to make you female, so that you may become a living spirit resembling these women. For every man who will make himself female will enter the Kingdom of Heaven” (59–60). Thus, a Mary is revealed whose physical relationship with Jesus is not just accepted, as in Saramago’s book, but one that can help lead others to the recognition of the Kingdom of God.

*The Da Vinci Code* takes this progression one step further by actually depicting Mary Magdalene marrying Jesus. For Dan Brown, as with Burgess’ novel, this makes much more sense than a bachelor Jesus: “Because Jesus was a Jew, . . . and the social decorum during that time virtually forbid a Jewish man to be unmarried. According to Jewish custom, celibacy was condemned, and the obligation for a Jewish father was to find a suitable wife for his son. If Jesus were not married, at least one of the Bible’s gospels would have mentioned it and offered some explanation for His unnatural state of bachelorhood” (245). This also shows that there needs to be a physical union between man and woman in order to truly approach the divine, a view distorted by the church:

Women, once celebrated as an essential half of spiritual enlightenment, had been banished from the temples of the
world. There were no female Orthodox rabbis, Catholic priests, nor Islamic clerics. The once hallowed act of Hieros Gamos—the natural sexual union between man and woman through which each became spiritually whole—had been recast as a shameful act. Holy men who had once required sexual union with their female counterparts to commune with God now feared their natural sexual urges as the work of the devil, collaborating with his favorite accomplice . . . woman. (125)

Thus, in Brown’s novel, Christianity today has warped the original ideas about Jesus and about sex, and it is only by recognizing Mary and Jesus’ relationship that the truth can begin to be known.

The novels of Kazantzakis and Mailer take the approach that Brown comments on, woman as temptress, to show Jesus’ relationship with women in this way, not as leading to something to be enjoyed. *The Last Temptation of Christ* uses a variety of temptations to illustrate Jesus’ humanity, with sexuality certainly a major contribution. Leavitt points out that “Jesus in the novel is consistently human, the desires and fears of his youth persisting to the end of his life: he is attractive to women and attracted by them; he is frightened to be alone in the desert and rejoices when he is again among men; he is tempted on the cross at the end of his mission as he is tempted in the desert at its beginning” (76). When Jesus travels to a monastery outside Jerusalem, he passes through Cana, knowing that he will remember how he almost married Mary Magdalene. The feeling is more than he expected, though: “He shuddered. Suddenly he saw her of the thousand secret kisses standing once more before him. Hidden in her bosom were the sun and the moon, one to the right, the other to the left; and day and night rose and fell behind the transparent bodice of her dress. . . . Lowering his eyes, he rushed by this trap of Satan’s as fast as he could” (70). The temptation increases when he asks for Mary’s forgiveness. She sees how he really feels, and she torments him by pointing out how badly he wants her, even though he is unable to admit it. Before he departs from her house, while
she is pretending to be sleeping, he is tempted to touch her: “He wanted to leave, but at the same time he did not want to leave. Turning, he looked at the bed and took a hesitating step toward it. He leaned over—it still was not very bright inside the room—he leaned over as though he wanted to find the woman and touch her. . . . But as soon as he heard his own voice, he took fright. He reached the threshold with one bound, strode hurriedly across the courtyard and unbolted the door” (97). Because God will not allow Jesus to be with Mary, she becomes the forbidden fruit. Kazantzakis’ novel, thus, follows the orthodox Christianity to render Jesus celibate, but tempted in every way, including sexually.

The Gospel According to the Son, in contrast, adopts the theory that Jesus may have been an Essene to present Jesus’ childhood. The book builds on that to emphasize that Essenes were taught not to desire women or marriage: “It will be understood, then: I was taught not to pursue women or even to approach them. We were to live as warriors for the Lord. We were not to lie down with women when such acts could weaken our purpose. To live by this rule was law, even if the war would last for the length of one’s life” (5). By making the source of Jesus’ ideas on sex to be the Essene tradition, a minor religious sect, however, Mailer’s book changes conventional Christian teaching of Jesus’ own divine knowledge or his Jewish heritage. Thus, this approach does not eliminate the temptation for Jesus, but it raises the question of how orthodox that view is.

Mailer’s book uses Mary Magdalene as temptress in the same way that Kazantzakis’ book does. When the Pharisees first bring her before Jesus to ask him what should be done with her, caught in the act of adultery, he cannot bring himself to look at her. Even when he does, he tries not to make eye contact. When he does, he is reminded of the Song of Songs: “The joints of thy thighs are like jewels, the work of a master’s hand . . . and thy navel is like a round goblet” (185). Jesus, however, does not give into this temptation; instead, he casts the demons out of Mary and forgives her of her sin, as in the gospel story in John of the woman, but not Mary Magdalene, taken in adultery. Perhaps it is the demons Mary carries that create this temptation and not the fact that Jesus is human, as well as divine.
In a similar way, Christopher Moore, in *Lamb*, uses women, in general, and Mary Magdalene (Maggie), specifically, as a temptation for Jesus. In keeping with the Essene background of Mailer’s Jesus, Moore’s Joshua is specifically told by an angel that he “may not know any woman” (83). However, since, like Burgess’ Jesus, he feels he needs to know the entire life of a man in order to minister to men, he has Biff hire prostitutes, and he eavesdrops on their having sex. He tells Biff, “Just describe what’s happening and what you’re feeling. I have to understand sin” (113). Moore’s Joshua is tempted by more than just having sex; he specifically wants to have sex with Maggie and be able to spend his life with her. A couple of days after Biff and Maggie have sex (Maggie thinks she’s having sex with Joshua before they leave town), Joshua says to Biff, “The night you spent with Maggie I spent praying to my father to take away the thoughts of you two. He didn’t answer me. It was like trying to sleep on a bed of thorns. Since we left I was beginning to forget, or at least leave it behind, but you keep throwing it in my face” (111). Unlike Burgess’ book, in which Jesus has no desire for marriage or women, Moore’s Jesus truly desires Mary Magdalene and the experience of carnal relations. This temptation is not fleeting, as in Mailer’s book, but it stays with Jesus for years, making him someone readers can easily identify with.

In the same way, *The Last Temptation of Christ* considers more than the sexual temptation to show Jesus tempted by the idea of marriage and stability, the idea of simply being normal in his society. His guardian angel (Satan in disguise) tells Jesus, “On our way, didn’t you want to ask me the meaning of Paradise? Thousands of small joys, Jesus of Nazareth. To knock at a door, to have a woman open it for you, to sit down in front of the fire, to watch her lay the table for you; and when it is completely dark, to feel her take you in her arms. That is the way the Saviour comes: gradually—from embrace to embrace, son to son. That is the road” (Kazantzakis 459). The battle between the flesh and the spirit is one that Jesus has to overcome to

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^In a similar approach, Marianne Fredriksson depicts Jesus not only tempted by Mary Magdalene but also tempted by his mother, in that he wants to be a good son: “How easy, so easy it would have been to be a good son, become a carpenter as the intention had been, and to please her, free her from her anxiety” (149).
fulfill his mission. Morton Leavitt writes, “Surely, Jesus favors the spirit, but he is drawn by his nature to demands of the flesh. He would overcome these if he could—and to some extent he does in the end—but the body, he knows, may truly be worthy, the earthly life at its best capable of beauty and a kind of immortality as well” (77). Kazantzakis’ Jesus may recognize the benefits of the earthly life, but he knows they are clearly not for him.

However, the main temptation that Kazantzakis’ Jesus faces is not sexual or even the desire to lead a normal life; it is the temptation not to admit that he is chosen by God and not to follow through with God’s plan that he be crucified. This is present in the gospels occasionally. Kazantzakis’ book draws on Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane when he asks God to take away the burden he is called to bear. The Jesus of the gospels does not struggle with this idea long, unlike Kazantzakis’ Jesus, who even builds crosses in an attempt to make God choose someone else, hoping that God would never use someone who has done such vile work. Before the crucifixion of the Zealot, he talks one night with a voice that only he can hear, presumably God’s. It is obvious that God is trying to convince him of something, as Jesus keeps shaking his head, resisting God’s advances, until he finally says, out loud, “I can’t! I’m illiterate, an idler, afraid of everything. I love good food, wine, laughter. I want to marry, to have children. . . . Leave me alone!” (28). By the end of this conversation, he tells God plainly that he “shall make crosses all my life, so that the Messiahs you choose can be crucified!” (28). Here is a Jesus who is truly struggling with what God is calling him to.

The local Rabbi, Simeon, who has been promised that he will not die until he sees the Messiah, begins to wonder whether or not Jesus may be that Messiah. He recognizes that God is calling Jesus for some purpose and that Jesus is resisting. He finally asks, “Jesus, my child, how long are you going to resist him?” Jesus responds with a “savage shout: ‘Until I die!’” (64). After this event, Jesus leaves home to go to the monastery outside of Jerusalem in an effort to escape God’s call. He believes that if he dedicates his life to God in one way God will not require it of him in another. It is at the monastery that he finally begins to believe that he may be the Messiah.
This realization, though, does not mean that Jesus is willing to be crucified. Kazantzakis’ novel, in the end, draws directly from the gospel accounts, and in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus asks God one last time for a different fate: “Father, . . . here I am fine: dust with dust. Leave me. Bitter, exceedingly bitter, is the cup you have given me to drink. I don’t have the endurance. If it is possible, Father, remove it from my lips” (431). He even confesses his shortcomings to Judas when Judas asks if Jesus would be able to betray him if the situation were reversed; Jesus responds, “No, I do not think I would be able to. That is why God pitied me and gave me the easier task: to be crucified” (421).

Then, Jesus “stood his ground honorably to the very end; he . . . kept his word. Temptation had captured him for a split second and led him astray. The joys, marriages and children were lies; the decrepit, degraded old men who shouted coward, deserter, traitor at him were lies. All—all were illusions sent by the Devil. His disciples were alive and thriving. They had gone over sea and land and were proclaiming the Good News. Everything had turned out as it should, glory be to God!” (496). Instead of readily accepting his mission, two critics observe, “Jesus grapples with his spiritual formation, blending belief and unbelief into a unity, in order to emerge as Savior” (Middleton and Bien 2). Leavitt writes, “In this milieu Jesus of Nazareth is unmistakably a man and only partially a god; his divinity, in fact, may be no greater than that which all men are capable of attaining. But he perseveres, overcoming the many temptations that confront all mankind, above all, the temptation to live a normal human life, with all its sorrows and joys” (62). Kazantzakis’ Jesus struggles more than do any of the other characterizations largely because of the multiple temptations that he has. In his humanity, he is tempted, but he struggles through it.

The Gospel According to the Son also shows Jesus suffering the temptation not to go through with the crucifixion. When Jesus prays on the night of his arrest, he asks that the cup will pass from him, but he ultimately says that God’s will is more important than his will. This book develops this fear of crucifixion into an overall fear of death, which leads Jesus to the temptation to escape the crucifixion. Even before he has set out on his ministry, when
They Love to Tell the Story

he is still a carpenter, Jesus is afraid of Herod Antipas, but he does not know why: “When I would watch [Herod] pass in procession, I did not know why my blood raced like a steed and I was ready to bolt. My heart was speaking to me even if my mind was not; I had no sense of why I should feel such fear at the sight of King Herod Antipas taking his royal passage through the avenues of Sepphoris” (Mailer 20). Later, after John has been imprisoned by Herod, but before he has been put to death, Jesus hears a rumor that Herod is considering having him “stilled.” It is then that he “decided that [he] would do well to look for a cave on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. For Yeshua of Nazareth would not seem the Son of God to the officers of Herod, only a poor Jew” (88). Jesus recognizes how others will view him and how that can easily lead to his death. Of course, this creates the irony that Jesus is put to death, at least in the gospels, by his claim to be the Son of God, not for any other reason.

After John’s death, then, Jesus’ fear of his own death becomes magnified. He sends his disciples out, nominally because he believes they need to go out and try to work miracles on their own and spread the gospel without him. The deeper reason he sends them away is so he can deal with his fears, especially the fear of what will happen to him. He knows that some people think that he is John the Baptist resurrected, and he is afraid of what that belief will lead people to do, especially Herod: “If Herod Antipas had slain John the Baptist once, he might not fail to kill him again. The way of John’s death was a scourge to my sleep” (112). Mailer’s Jesus does not overcome this fear even when he is on his way to Jerusalem. In fact, as Jesus approaches Jerusalem on the third day, the day he believes will be his last, his fears become so heightened that he can barely get up. He feels as if he is almost paralyzed with fear. This fear makes him doubt his ultimate calling and his true identity: “If prudence comes to us from God and cowardice from the Devil, the line between cannot always be discerned. Not by a man. On this morning I was no longer the Son of God but only a man. God’s voice was weak in my ear; a low fear was in my heart” (204). The acknowledgment of Jesus as a man here underscores his humanity that this book is trying to suggest. It is not just that Jesus is afraid, which makes him human enough, but the idea that that fear might take him from being the Son of God to being simply a man.
It also serves as a reminder for the reader that fear helps to make us human and rising above that fear moves us closer to God. Oddly enough, though, it is not God that moves Jesus beyond his fear; it is compassion for Judas because knowledge of the betrayal that is coming gives him the strength to approach Jerusalem for the last time.

On Jesus’ approach, his steps grow heavy again, so he stops in the Garden at Gethsemane. Here Jesus prays much the same prayer given in the gospel accounts, asking that the cup pass from him. On the cross, however, this temptation reaches its height. It is bad enough that Satan comes to tempt him one last time, offering to take him down from the cross, take revenge on the Romans, if only Jesus will worship him. Even before Satan arrives, Jesus cries out to God, “Will You allow not one miracle in this hour?” And after God responds, “Would you annul My judgment” and Jesus agrees, he still prays, “One miracle” (Mailer 238). This exchange echoes Jesus’ cry on the cross that he has been forsaken, but this book intensifies that to show Jesus bargaining for his life. The Jesus of the gospels accepts his role in the Garden of Gethsemane and seems to willingly play out his role, but Mailer’s Jesus asks to exchange God’s judgment for one last miracle. However, he ultimately believes that God knows what is best, and he fulfills his calling.

One of the most interesting ways that this book reminds the reader of Jesus’ humanity is when Jesus is being nailed to the cross. Jesus’ fear of pain and death is certainly understandable, but an odd thought briefly crosses his mind. As the soldiers lay him on the cross, Jesus notices that “The wood was crude, and nailed together with slovenly blows of the hammer. It offended me that it had been built so poorly, but in any case they removed my robe and made me lie down upon the cross and stretch out my arms” (Mailer 234–35). In his moment of agony, Jesus, humanly, notices the mundane details of life that he knows best from his days of carpentry, like an electrician condemned to death who might notice the faulty wiring of an electric chair. It is in such a human action at a time of immense suffering that the reader can understand Jesus’ humanity.

Mailer’s book even provides Jesus with yet another temptation: greed. Despite his frequent outbursts against wealth and his unwavering support for the poor, near the end of his ministry he begins to understand the draw
of plenty. When a woman anoints him with spikenard, he feels his loneliness subside, if only for a moment. Jesus knows he is still poor, but he says, “So for the first time, I knew how the rich feel, could understand their need for display. To them, a lavish presentation of their worth was as valuable as their own blood” (201). He does not ultimately succumb to this temptation, but his comment that his disciples will always have the poor with them causes him to lose Judas’ loyalty, ultimately leading to Jesus’ death.

This novel even shows Jesus struggling in theological discussions. He does not have the difficult theological problems figured out; he questions whom he should associate with and whom he should not and why. In fact, he is often made to look foolish in debates and loses one outright. In Nazareth, Jesus’ hometown, where according to the gospels Jesus either does not or can not perform any miracles, he discusses healing on the Sabbath with a man in the synagogue. The man has ready answers for Jesus while Jesus falters throughout the debate. In the end, the man “laid his hand on [Jesus’] shoulder as if he were fatherly and [Jesus] was of lesser faith.” Jesus is defeated: “He had shamed me. My powers left. Once again, and in my own synagogue, I was without strength” (Mailer 106). In the gospels, Jesus can not do any miracles in Nazareth because of the people’s lack of faith; Mailer’s book instead renders Jesus as more human than his neighbors.

Even near the end of his ministry, when he is in the Great Temple in Jerusalem, Jesus has a long discussion with a scribe about the law, Gentiles, and healing on the Sabbath. Although he ultimately says what he wants to say, he struggles throughout the argument: “I could hear more and more sounds of assent among those who listened. Some of my own people were muttering that he was right” (Mailer 169) and, later, “I was thinking that even a drunken

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6Twice in Reynolds Price’s short gospel, Jesus questions the goodness of God and the existence of evil: “if God was truly the Father of all and if so then who could watch the world of blood and hate and think God was loving?” (246). He seems to have come up with an answer by the end, though the answer seems unsatisfactory: “By the first day of Passover week Jesus thought he had answered his awful question—how could it matter if the Father loved his creatures? The Father was the only God; if Jesus was his Son then the question was meaningless—God’s will was sovereign for joy or pain” (270).

7This description of Jesus is echoed in Jim Crace’s Quarantine in which Jesus “was not so clear on any of the other, weightier and wingless issues of the day” (108) and he “had a simple view, a village view of god [sic], that was not scholarly” (109).
man would know what it was now politic to say. I was lacking in all knowledge of how to offer what would gain the most and offend the least” (170). This Jesus is not the all-knowing, all-powerful Jesus of the gospels. Here he often has a clever reply for those who would dispute with him but just as often does not. This is a Jesus who is witty and quick, but he does not seem to possess the divine knowledge that might be so useful in these debates.

Ricci takes a different approach than the other authors. Testament’s Jesus is far from divine; in fact, Wald-Hopkins notes Jesus is “the portrait of a difficult, alienated, but compassionate and charismatic, intellectual and religious rebel who is intensely human” (EE-01). In an interview, Ricci comments, “In my case I found the opposite. I found it [Jesus’ divinity] completely uninteresting. The main thing that I wanted to do—that people like Mailer, Saramago, Kazantzakis, and all the rewriters of the Jesus story didn’t in most cases do—is completely take away that divine element” (Starnino G1).

One of the main ways that Ricci’s novel portrays Jesus as much more human than divine is through the miracles that Jesus works. Jesus seems to have learned some healing arts when he lived in Alexandria, though the reader never sees this education. Instead, a variety of narrators say that Jesus has lived in Alexandria and where he studied under teachers, but they do not say what he has learned. This background serves to provide a rational explanation for Jesus’ healing. This novel makes evident that a superstitious culture was prevalent in ancient Israel, so that Jesus’ healing arts can appear to the uneducated narrators as miracles.

There are numerous miracles that the novel takes pains to explain as Jesus working with the sick. Judas observes him treating a girl who is seemingly possessed by a demon: “. . . at the sight of Kephas [Peter], the girl, who despite her rantings had appeared relatively harmless until that moment, suddenly lunged at the poor man and began hitting him with her rag-covered fists. It took both Yaqob [Jacob] and Yohanan [John] to pull her off him” (Ricci 28). However, it turns out that she is pregnant. The seeming miracle is best understood when Jesus cleans off the girl’s face: “From out of that demonic visage of grime and blood there emerged suddenly a child, an innocent” (29). Jesus is able to heal because he accepts something others
do not accept, which shows that he is different from those around him. Obviously, no supernatural healing has taken place.

Even the most dramatic miracle, Jesus’ resurrection of Lazarus (Elazar in Ricci’s work), is given a physical explanation, though it is still quite dramatic for that. Elazar seems to already be dead when Jesus arrives, as Simon of Gergesa, the narrator of the final section, describes him as “stiff as a beam,” and when a burning ember sparks from the fire onto his leg, he does not flinch (400–1). Jesus brings him back from the dead, though he does not call him forth from the grave. Instead, he “put his fingers right down inside the man’s skull, right through the bone like that, and after he’d felt around in there for a bit, something gushed out from the fellow’s head into Jesus’s hands, dark and alive” (401). He tosses what he finds in Elazar’s head into the fire, where it sizzles, and Elazar opens his eyes, alive again. Though Elazar’s life is saved by Jesus, it is through natural means, the removal of whatever was in his head, and Ricci’s Jesus certainly does not bring Elazar back after he’s been dead for four days, as Jesus does in the gospel of John.8

Ricci’s novel especially reminds the reader of Jesus’ human limitations in the fact that Jesus is unable to heal everyone who asks him. Jesus hints to his followers that this lack of ability is because it is not God’s plan to heal everyone, but he does not elaborate: “Yeshua’s [Jesus’] answer to these charges was always that it was only by God’s will that people were cured, not his own; and it was true that there were many who came to him for whom he could do nothing, though whether because of their own sinfulness and lack of faith, or because of God’s greater plan, Yeshua wouldn’t say” (146). And Mary Magdalene later says about the people whom Jesus could not heal, “But many others went away still baffled by the things he said or disappointed because they’d wished him to cure things only God could undo such as blindness or barrenness” (149). Ricci’s point here is clear: Jesus can heal normal physical ailments, but he is unable to heal serious problems; that is God’s territory.

8In a more complicated healing that raises the question of Jesus as either divine or human, Jim Crace shows Jesus merely saying to a dying man, “So, here, be well again” (26), a common benediction of the time. However, the next day, Musa is completely well. Jesus is not even aware that Musa has survived, and he certainly did not intend to heal him, yet it seems that he does so.
Chapter 11: Just a Man ... or More Than a Man?

The novel leaves the question of Jesus’ most dramatic miracle, the resurrection, for the reader. Only one of the four narrators follows Jesus all the way to the crucifixion, and it is clear that he, Simon of Gergesa, does not believe that Jesus rises from the dead. However, he repeats the rumors of Jesus’ resurrection:

Then there was the story that went around that the morning after Jesus was killed, Mary and Salome went to the grave and his body was gone. That might have had to do with the group who had come to the tomb for their relation, and somehow the story had got skewed, or maybe it had happened that the group had taken Jesus’s body by mistake. But eventually it got told that he’d risen from the dead and walked out of the place, and there were people enough to come along then to say they’d met him on the road afterwards looking as fit as you or me. (453)

Jesus’ limitations as a healer suggest that his resurrection is not physical, and in light of Ricci’s interest in the findings of the Jesus Seminar, it makes more sense that Ricci is drawing on the idea of Jesus living on in his believers’ minds. If Ricci’s Jesus cannot raise others from the dead, there is no reason to believe that his resurrection is any different. For Ricci, there is always a scientific explanation for any supernatural-seeming event.

Thus, Ricci’s novel, apart from the rest, grants Jesus no supernatural abilities at all. The other books emphasize the humanity of Jesus, lowering him to our level. Some of them do it by presenting him as a comparatively normal child; some present his relationships with women. All of them strive to create a human Jesus to whom readers can relate.

... Or More Than a Man?: Jesus’ Divinity

All five of the books under consideration raise the question of Jesus’ divinity and whether or not he is the Son of God. Most of the emphasis in their
approaches seems to be whether Jesus can perform miracles or not. If he can, then he must be divine; if not, then he must not be. However, they do not limit themselves to this approach exclusively. All but Ricci’s novel show Jesus performing at least one miracle; however, the other four books also limit the miracles he can do. Either he can perform only the miracles God wants him to perform or he only has so much energy to expend on miracles. Burgess’ novel also uses the fulfillment of prophecy to show how Jesus at least perceives himself to be the Son of God. All of the books, save for Ricci’s, again, also show Jesus’ struggle as to whether or not he is the Son of God. Man of Nazareth, for example, has him easily accepting it, while The Last Temptation of Christ and The Gospel According to Jesus Christ both show him resisting the idea.

Burgess’ Jesus never seems to have any doubts that he is the Son of God and what his mission on Earth is; however, this book does downplay the miraculous aspects of Jesus’ divinity and focuses on the teachings instead. Many of the miracles are included in the novel, such as the resurrection of Lazarus, the calming of the storm, various healings, and the casting out of demons, but many miracles are omitted, as well.

Before Jesus begins his ministry, he is married to Sara at Cana in Man of Nazareth. At the wedding feast, as in the gospel story, the hosts run out of wine. However, Jesus does not actually convert the water into wine here. Instead, he pretends to do so and makes a game out of it. However, legend changes what truly happened: “This so-called miracle has passed down into our annals, so that it appears that Jesus was establishing a precedent for the converting of other fluids to wine, but some remember the true tale and call water wine of Cana. I certainly believe that this feast ended soberly”

—Though Crace’s Jesus may not work any miracles in the novel (it’s unclear whether or not he healed Musa), his mere existence at the end of the work seems to be a miracle in itself. In the epigram to the book, Crace quotes from Ellis Winward and Michael Soule’s book The Limits of Mortality: “An ordinary man of average weight and fitness embarking on a total fast—that is, a fast during which he refuses both his food and drink—could not expect to live for more than thirty days, nor to be conscious for more than twenty-five. For him, the forty days of fasting described in religious texts would not be achievable—except with divine help, of course. History, however, does not record an intervention of that kind, and medicine opposes it.” By having his Jesus seemingly die, yet still walk out of the desert to begin his ministry, he creates an implied miracle that shows that Jesus has received divine help of some sort.
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(Burgess 89). Even the miracles that are associated with the crucifixion are shown to be nothing more than coincidences or legends:

The rain and the thunder and lightning were coming anyway, the end of a long drought was due, and it was only by a kind of dramatic fitness of which nature is only too capable that the death of a man and the flushing of the grateful earth were fused into an unworthy trinket of cause and effect. There were no earthquakes, no fallings of buildings, but there was certainly a rending of the veil in the Temple. An aged priest was struck dumb by, it was alleged, an angelic visitation, and in his inevitable faintness he took hold, for support, of the curtain that divided the assembly in the Temple from the Holy of Holies. He fell, and the veil was rent. (281)

Providing scientific explanation for what otherwise are seen as miraculous events does not entirely take away the association of the miraculous; it simply shifts the focus from miracles to Jesus’ teachings. Jesus even regularly reminds his disciples that the miracles have little to do with his mission. After he casts out a demon in Capernaum, people begin to flock to him for healing, but he tells his disciples that he does “not come merely to mend sick bodies” (141). Before he sends them out to preach on their own, he tells them, “Don’t speak much of miracles, healings, giving sight to the blind. For miracles join all the acts of man’s history in becoming matter for doubt to those who have not witnessed them. But the truth that is spoken remains truth for all eternity” (191). This approach is actually rather similar to what happens in the gospels when Jesus often tells the crowd not to look for a miraculous sign from him, and he refuses to perform upon command.

However, one miracle that Jesus (and, thus, *Man of Nazareth*) makes absolutely definite is the transubstantiation that occurs during the Eucharist. Jesus tells his disciples that “this sacrifice [his sacrifice] must be remembered, as the Passover is remembered, till the end of time. But it must be more than remembered—it must be renewed, it must be re-enacted
daily, for the continuing redemption of mankind. . . . And now I teach you the mode of the daily renewal of the sacrifice—no mere remembrance, but a true re-enactment” (Burgess 242). Burgess’ Roman Catholic education provides an understanding for him to make Jesus repeat the importance not only of the Last Supper, but how it is to be re-enacted throughout the centuries. Coale comments, “Chief among the beliefs from Burgess’s Catholic heritage is his belief in the Eucharist, the Mass. For him ‘this representation of a sacrificial death and the resurrection’ remains a ‘great source of inspiration, of refreshment.’ It is ‘the still center’ of his faith, around which all else revolves” (5). The focus on this event in Burgess’ novel makes it clear that Jesus accepts his role as Son of God and knows what his future role in the church will be.

Christopher Moore’s Joshua (Jesus) is also aware of his role as the Son of God, though he doesn’t know what he is supposed to do with that knowledge. This shows up early in his life through miracles he performs while he is still a child. When Biff first meets Joshua, in fact, Joshua’s younger brother James is smashing a lizard with a rock; he then puts the dead lizard into Joshua’s mouth, and it comes out alive again, all so James can smash the lizard again and repeat the process. He even tries to resurrect a dead woman when he is nine years old, but he is not quite capable of doing so at that point. What is interesting about this book having Joshua perform miracles when he is a child is that Moore says that, when doing research, he found many of the “gnostic Gospels [to be] either too fragmentary, or frankly, just plain creepy (the Infancy Gospel of Thomas describes Jesus, at age six, using his supernatural powers to murder a group of children because they tease him. Sort of Carrie Goes to Nazareth. Even I had to pass)” (441). While it’s true that Moore’s Joshua doesn’t murder any children, his Joshua does perform a number of miracles as a child, and his attempts to resurrect people who simply end up wandering around like zombies until they completely drop dead certainly comes off as creepy in its own right. It is easy, though, to understand why authors such as Moore might want to have Jesus performing miracles in his childhood; Boulos Ayad writes, “It is difficult for a Christian to believe
that Christ lived his life with-out evidence of miracles until he reached the age of thirty” (55). If one begins with the premise that Jesus knows he is the Son of God at an early age, it only makes sense that he would try out his powers to see what he can and cannot do. From a writer’s perspective, it is little different from writing a story about Superman; the character must figure out when he realizes he is different from others, what he can do because of that, and how, then, he will use those powers.

As with Burgess’ novel, *The Last Temptation of Christ* does not focus on Jesus’ miraculous abilities, though it does relate them to the idea of Jesus as the Son of God. It is only after meeting John and after his time in the desert that Jesus truly begins to draw on the power of God, especially for healing. Jesus heals a Roman centurion’s daughter, though he is not certain that he can do so. This event begins to convince the disciples that Jesus is the Messiah: “He had been frightened more than anyone else at the sight of the girl jumping out of her bed. The disciples, unable to constrain their joy, formed a circle and danced around him. . . . He was the real thing: he performed miracles” (Kazantzakis 324). Though Jesus does not emphasize this inference, those around him do, reminiscent of the disciples in the gospels. Those who follow Jesus, especially those beyond the twelve, want Jesus to perform miracles so that they too can know he is the one.

Mailer’s Jesus, though, is not certain that he can perform miracles at all, despite the fact that he believes he is the Son of God. Thus, when he performs his first miracle, he does it quietly, hoping that no one will notice. When he turns water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana, he does so merely by eating a grape while contemplating the Spirit within. In the gospel accounts, Jesus’ mother asks him to help out, while here she merely comments on the lack of wine. In the gospels, Jesus has men bring stone vessels filled with water, which he then changes to wine. In Mailer’s work, Jesus notices the stone jars filled with water, but it is the eating of the grape, coupled with the contemplation of the spirit alone that brings about the miracle. He involves no one else, nor does anyone notice the miracle.
As Jesus gains confidence in his ability to perform supernatural acts, he becomes willing to perform them in public. He casts out a demon after preaching in a synagogue; he heals Peter’s mother-in-law; he heals a man of leprosy. Only in the case of the healing of the leper does he tell the man not to tell anyone what he has done, and that is only because he believes the miracle is so great that it will draw too much attention to himself. However, unlike the Jesus of the gospels, in *The Gospel According to the Son*, Jesus has limited healing powers. In fact, his few healings take so much out of him that he has to withdraw from people in order to rest.10 Later, as word spreads of his healing power, Jesus is inundated with people to heal. He does not feel that he can turn them away, but they take too much out of him: “Nonetheless, I could feel the desire of these people to touch me, and I gave way until they were too many and I lost the power to cure. Truth, their fingers so implored my flesh that I had to live with my own bruises when day was done” (89).

Later, Jesus even admits that there are people whom he can not cure, and these people frighten him. He thinks that he can see “darkness in their eyes, and that could make them seem like angels of Satan” (95). Even when Jesus does perform a miracle, such as the calming of the sea, he’s not certain that he has anything to do with what has happened: “In truth, I do not know if I can say that this miracle was mine. Even on awakening I could sense that the end of the storm was near” (96). Later, when he raises a girl from the dead, he questions his involvement in that miracle, as well: “Nor did I know whether she had actually died and come back” (103). However, in *The Gospel According to the Son* Jesus still performs mighty miracles, such as the casting out of demons from the man in the Gadarenes and the resurrection of Lazarus. By depicting a Jesus with limits as to what he can do, this novel constantly reminds the reader that Jesus is very human, shifting the

10Reynolds Price also shows Jesus needing time to recover from healings: “He failed no one and was white with exhaustion when the last man, woman and child were gone and he could rest on Simon’s packed floor” (250). Margaret George’s Jesus, in *Mary Called Magdalene*, suffers from the same problem: “There are too many. . . . Too many. I cannot help all of them” (275). Jesus also cannot heal people who do not believe that he can heal them, which prevents him from healing Joel, Mary’s husband: “But he is not a believer in my message. . . . I learned in Nazareth that if someone does not believe, I can work no healings there” (325).
emphasis away from divinity, even though it is clear that he remains the Son of God. This is yet another example of an author trying to craft a Jesus who is more in line with the modern worldview, one whom contemporary readers would be able to identify with.

This helps explain why this Jesus attacks the gospel writers for inflating their account of his miracles. He claims that he fed merely five hundred people, not five thousand, and he certainly didn't give them an entire meal. Instead, this miracle is transformed into a type of communion service:

And I took those five loaves and divided them exceedingly small, until there were a hundred pieces of bread from each loaf. Then the two fish gave up more than twice two hundred small morsels. And, with five hundred bits of bread and five hundred of fish, I passed these morsels to each of the followers, doing it myself for all five hundred. I would lay one flake of fish and one bit of bread upon each tongue. Yet when each person had tasted these fragments, so do I believe that each morsel became enlarged within his thoughts . . . and so I knew that few among these hundreds would say that they had not been given sufficient fish and bread. (Mailer 120)\textsuperscript{11}

Thus, Jesus argues that this presentation of the miracle is greater than the representation in the gospel accounts: “And this was a triumph of the Spirit rather than an enlargement of matter. Which for the Lord is but a small deed, considering that He made the heavens and the earth out of nothing, and could certainly have changed our five loaves into five hundred” (120). Paul Gray points out that “Mailer’s Jesus takes pains to debunk or diminish most of the reports of his miracles in the Gospels. The story of the loaves and fishes was ‘much exaggerated,’ he confides” (75). Again, this is a constant

\textsuperscript{11}Margaret George, in \textit{Mary Called Magdalene}, approaches this miracle in much the same way. The disciples do not have enough food to feed the 5000, but Jesus tells them to give whatever they have to the people. When the people are grateful for the little they get, the disciples are surprised, but Jesus tells them, “The offering of the food means more than the food itself. . . . People are dying for lack of interest, and the spirit is hungrier than the body. A word can mean more than a loaf of bread” (419). However, George’s Jesus can multiply food, as he does so for the disciples at their next meal. Thus, the fact that he did not do so for the 5000 was not because he could not do so, but because he wanted to teach the disciples to act on their own and not to depend on him.
reminder to the reader that Jesus is not the all-powerful deity that has been presented in the gospels, despite his clearly being divine. This novel presents him, instead, as a divinity with certain limits, which some would argue removes the capacity of divinity altogether.

Lest the reader of Mailer’s book conclude that the miracles are all serious and that God has no sense of humor, as can easily be construed from the gospel accounts, this book includes a joyful portrayal of Jesus’ ability to walk on the water. Jesus actually begins to swim to the boat, not attempt to walk toward it, but God surprises him: “Of a sudden, I was up and above the waters! I was walking! And I could even hear my Father’s laughter at my pleasure in walking upon His water. Then came a second wave of His laughter. He was mocking me. For I had concluded too quickly that there was no extravagance in His miracles” (122). This is a reminder that miracles are exuberant and extravagant, more than anything else; they are not merely a way for Jesus to confirm his divinity or a pragmatic solution to terrible problems. This also continues the process of humanizing Jesus, showing him as someone who enjoys the power of God.

Oddly enough, the central miracle of Christianity, the resurrection of Jesus, gets little mention in Mailer’s work. Jesus admits that he did rise from the dead, but his description of it is terribly plain: “For I know that I rose on the third day. And I also recall that I left the sepulchre to wander through the city and the countryside, and there came an hour when I appeared among my disciples” (245). However, Mailer’s Jesus says little more than this. He does not describe what happened while he was dead, as Lazarus does earlier in the work, nor does he describe the feeling of being reborn. It seems that the resurrection is an afterthought, not the central tenant of the faith.

12Christopher Moore approaches the resurrection much the same way. Since Biff, the narrator, dies before the resurrection, he cannot relate it to us. Instead, Maggie merely tells him, after he has finished writing his gospel, that “He [Joshua] came back.” Biff merely replies, “I know, I read about it” (437). Nothing more is said about the resurrection. And, in fact, Moore’s book sets the reader up for something completely different at the beginning of the book when Biff writes his opening sentences: “You think you know how this story is going to end, but you don’t. Trust me, I was there. I know” (7). What this book really changes is how Jesus gets there, not where he ends up.
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Given Jesus’ relationship to God after his life on Earth, as this book presents it, this approach is not surprising. It seems as if God believes Jesus failed in his mission on Earth: “My Father, however, does not often speak to me. Nonetheless, I honor Him. Surely He sends forth as much love as He can offer, but His love is not without limit” (Mailer 247). Mailer’s Jesus does imply that God may have a trick up his sleeve concerning the resurrection. Jesus later says, “Yet it is believed by most that God gained a great victory through me. And it may be that the Devil was not clever enough to comprehend the extent of my Father’s wisdom” (247). While this statement makes it sound as if the novel is going to end with the orthodox position on the resurrection, Jesus adds just before the end of the book, “For my Father saw how to gain much from defeat by calling it victory. Now, in these days, many Christians believe that all has been won for them. They believe it was already won before they were born. They believe that this victory belongs to them because of my suffering on the cross. Thereby does my Father still find much purpose for me” (248). It is evident that Jesus does not believe that his crucifixion and resurrection were planned or even that they are a victory; instead, he must take comfort in the fact that God has been able to use them as if they are. This approach lessens the omniscience of God and certainly of Jesus, yet it still allows God predominance over Satan.

Saramago’s Jesus can perform miracles, but he can only perform the miracles God wants him to perform so that God works through him. When he first has Simon and the other fishermen cast their nets back into the water, he does so more out of a sense of optimism than out of omniscience. He knows that his early miracles are nothing more than “magic tricks, clever, fascinating, with a few quick words of abracadabra, not unlike those performed with rather more style by Oriental fakirs, such as tossing a rope into midair and climbing it without any visible sign of support, no hooks, no hand of a mysterious genie” (293). However, Jesus doesn’t seem to know how much he is capable of or even why the miracles happen: “To work these wonders, Jesus had only to will them, and if anyone had asked him why, he would have had no answer other than that he could hardly ignore the misery of fishermen with empty nets, the danger of that raging storm, or
the mortifying lack of wine at that marriage feast, for truly the hour has not yet arrived for the Lord to speak through his lips” (293). Like the other books, *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* shows a Jesus who clearly has powers because he is the Son of God, but he does not have the omniscience traditionally credited to him. Instead, like a human, he fumbles along, trying to figure out exactly what he is able to do.

After Jesus begins to see how much power he has, he believes that he is able to resurrect Lazarus, but Mary prevents him from doing so, telling him that no one has committed so much sin that they should be made to die twice. Jesus is also able to heal, but the people have to have faith in order to be healed: “Jesus cured one man who, being mute, was unable to plead, but he sent the others away because they did not have enough faith” (Saramago 351). This idea stems from what is in the gospels, but this book expands the idea. There is only one account in the gospels where Jesus could not heal people because of their lack of faith when Jesus returns to Nazareth, but it seems that people in Saramago’s novel lack faith much more often.

Burgess’ novel diverges from the others by focusing on Jesus’ fulfillment of prophecy. In fact, Jesus seems to want to perform actions for no other reason than to make his actions conform with scriptural prophecy. The temptation in the wilderness, like the baptism by John, seem to be rites that Jesus must pass through but without any genuine meaning. After the resurrection, when Jesus is talking to his disciples, he says, “Totally fulfilled, everything. Even to the throwing of the dice for my garment. I liked that garment. . . . ‘They parted my garments among them, and upon my vesture did they cast lots.’ We no longer have anyone with us who can say: That, master, is in the twenty-second of the Psalms of David” (302–3). Jesus seems happy to have fulfilled the prophecies, and he does not seem bothered at all by Judas’ absence, which he also would have attributed to fulfilling prophecies. Coale writes that Christ in *Man of Nazareth* is “little more than a wooden puppet, spouting his beliefs, marking time, until the political plots and his own crucifixion catch up with him” (183). Thus, though Jesus is presented as divine, as the Son of God, who preaches a
loving, forgiving approach to life, in the end he is cold, merely doing what has to be done as a duty. There is little humanity to this Jesus, resulting in a lack of balance that leaves the reader wanting more.

*Man of Nazareth* does try to provide evidence that Jesus is the Son of God because of what he taught about love, which is still quite revolutionary, and not merely because of the miracles he may or may not have performed: “Christ’s doctrine according to Burgess is more or less close to the mark. Christ preaches love . . . Christ’s message carries no political content but upholds the things within the spirit of love, as opposed to the things without, Caesar’s trophies,” writes Coale (182). Thus, this novel shifts the focus of attention from the miracles without denying their possibility and without taking away from the idea of Jesus as revolutionary, though the love that is the centerpiece of his teaching is seldom shown; it is usually simply described.

Concerning Ricci’s religious beliefs, Paul Gessell writes, “Ricci still does not call himself a Christian. That’s a term implying belief in the divinity of Jesus. And Ricci does not believe Jesus was divine” (F1). However, that does not prevent his portraying Jesus as divine, though much differently from the other writers. Typically, Jesus’ divinity is portrayed in his miracles or his resurrection. *Testament*, however, shows a Jesus who can heal people through medicine, but not with supernatural power.

Jesus has empathy for everyone he meets, whether that person needs physical healing or merely acceptance.\(^\text{13}\) Even the way he treats the people he heals illustrates the love he has for the people with whom he comes into contact. When he puts a splint on Jerubal’s leg while on the way to Golgotha, the people are more amazed by his demeanor than by his ability to form a splint so easily and readily:

> The crowd had fallen quiet, watching Jesus work there in the rain. He hadn’t done any miracle, maybe just what any doctor

\(^{13}\)After Moore’s *Joshua* (Jesus) realizes the full capacity of his healing powers (and after he has coffee for the first time, which would also explain his exuberance), he walks through a city healing people merely by bumping into them. Biff tries to get him to calm down, as he’s drawing too much attention to them, but Jesus merely responds, “But I love these people” (128). He can’t seem to stop himself from healing those who are hurting, no matter the consequences, because of that love.
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would do, but still they could see there was something in him, that he wasn’t what they’d expect in someone condemned. I saw his mother looking on, still at the back of the crowd, and how she watched him as if she was seeing him for the first time. Likely she hadn’t known anything of him but the stories people told and so had been afraid he’d become a delinquent or worse. But now she saw him with Jerubal, not just the skill he had but the dignity. (442)

This presentation of Jesus shows that he is not just an ordinary man who happens to have healing powers; instead, he is someone who clearly stands out because of his love for others. Although this does not make him divine, it does set him apart from others.

Jesus also accepts those who are outcasts from his society. He accepts women and treats them differently from how any man of his time does; when Mary runs to greet him upon his return from a trip, she says, “But Yeshua [Jesus] embraced me openly, the first time any man had ever done such a thing” (128). His acceptance of women causes trouble, but he does not allow others’ opinions on this subject to affect him, even those closest to him:

That Yeshua kept us women with him made him many enemies and caused much dissension even within our following. More than once it happened that some young man who had heard him preaching in the streets and been moved to attend one of our meetings instantly fled at the sight of Ribqah [Rebecca] and me; and even Shimon [Peter], at first, seemed on the verge of bolting at every minute, barely able to settle himself and sometimes rising to pace so that the meeting could hardly go on for the distraction he made. But Yeshua, though he listened patiently to every argument, didn’t relent. (130–31)

Again, a love and acceptance that go beyond the normal social bounds show that Jesus has a wider view of love than do others in that culture. No one else comes close to the levels of love that he exemplifies, which
Ricci uses to set up the idea that he is clearly different from those who are around him.

Christopher Moore expands this idea of accepting everyone by having Joshua leave Israel and travel throughout the East. When he arrives in India, the first person he meets is an Untouchable. Jesus has already interacted with Simon (who is called Lazarus), whom Moore’s novel turns into a leper, but this book never shows Joshua actually touch him. In India, Joshua moves “among them, healing their wounds, sicknesses, and insanities, without any of them suspecting what was happening.” Showing a sense of humor, he also has “taken to poking one of them in the arm with his finger anytime anyone said the word ‘Untouchable.’ Later he told me that he just hated passing up the opportunity for palpable irony” (271). Although this scene is clearly meant to be humorous, it also shows Jesus willing to physically touch those whom society has labeled as outcasts. Moore’s Joshua goes beyond merely healing people to touching them in ways that most people would not, magnifying a love that goes beyond most humans’ understanding.

Testament’s Jesus, like Jesus in the gospels, also accepts the poor and common, especially fishermen, from whom he draws most of his disciples. When Simon of Gergesa joins Jesus’ group, he describes the disciples: “Working with them I saw they weren’t so different from me in the end, like a crew of fishermen you’d meet at the Gergesa harbour” (Ricci 364). However, the group that Jesus accepts, which shows his ability to transcend mere human limits about acceptance, is the lepers. He visits the leper colonies regularly, healing the ones he can and comforting those he cannot. Jesus takes Judas to a colony to teach him about acceptance:

Yeshua [Jesus] was surely the first visitor from outside the camp whom many of these people had seen in months or

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14 Jesus in Quarantine also looks to the poor and the unclean as people who deserve God’s love: “He’d even be prepared—and glad—to defile himself on those kept out of temples—lepers, menstruating women, prostitutes, the blind, even the uncircumcised—if they would listen to him, if it would cause discomfort to the priest. These were the ones, he thought, that god [sic] had created weak and blemished and imperfect by design. These were the chirping innocents that he should rescue from the devil’s claw, for he himself was weak and blemished and imperfect by design. These people were his family” (150–51).
years. He told me they had shunned him when he’d first come, out of shame and their concern for his own purity. But now at his approach they came together quite openly, gathering on a little rock shelf that jutted out from the cliff face. It was an astounding sight, these dozens of lepers congregating there, men, women, and even some children, many of them so gnarled-limbed and deformed they were hardly recognizable as human. But what was surprising in lepers was that as putrid and corrupt as their outward form might be, their mental faculties were not affected in the least, so that you were suddenly astounded to hear from out of their mass of rotting flesh a perfect human voice. Thus it was that Yeshua did a most simple and amazing thing: he sat himself down amongst these lepers and conversed with them as if their affliction counted for nothing in his eyes. (58)

It is this ability of Jesus, the ability to treat everyone equally, no matter their gender, social status, or appearance, which illustrates his divinity. He does not condescend to these people or treat them any differently from how he treats others; instead, as Judas says of him, “. . . it was as though he had thus taken their affliction upon himself, to share the burden of it” (60), language that is reminiscent of the orthodox teaching of Jesus’ crucifixion bearing the burden of humanity’s sins.

Testament introduces a non-biblical character to highlight Jesus’ divinity. Simon of Gergesa meets Jerubal when he is trying to catch up with Jesus, who has already begun the journey to Jerusalem. Jerubal has the ability to work wonders in his own way, as mere tricks, and he uses his abilities for his own ends. One of the first times Simon sees him do this is when Jerubal presents himself as a shaman to a village and supposedly casts demons out of the nearby forest. Simon is in the trees throwing out sticks covered with resin that seemingly explode, to convince the villagers that Jerubal is casting demons out of the forest. His reward for doing so is a feast with plenty of wine. In another instance, Jesus and his followers
have some fish that goes bad, so they leave three baskets of it on the side of the road. Jerubal has Simon carry the fish to a nearby village, so he can sell it. Jerubal tells the village that Jesus told some fishermen to cast their net into the river, and it came up teeming with fish (an obvious reference to Simon Peter’s first encounter with Jesus in the gospels). The villagers are encouraged to buy a fish and hang it over their doors for good luck, saving Jerubal and Simon from a horde of angry villagers a bit later.

By using Jerubal as a foil, this novel foregrounds how Jesus uses his abilities for the good of others, never for himself. The fact that the last person Jesus heals is Jerubal highlights this connection. Jerubal is motivated by fun more than greed because he usually gives away the money he gets, but Jesus is motivated by love for others, an agape love that exceeds social boundaries and almost every level of comfort.

No matter how others perceive him, what Jesus himself thinks about his role as the Son of God is important to his divine status. Jesus in Man of Nazareth, for example, never doubts who he is or what his mission is. When Jesus is talking with his mother, discussing the possibility of marriage, she reminds him of his birth and asks him if he believes what occurred. He does not doubt the miracle of his birth in the least; he merely thinks it is irrelevant to their discussion. And when Satan tempts him in the wilderness, Jesus tells Satan clearly that he is both flesh and spirit: “In both, he who was to come and has come and whose presence will be made manifest in the world. The Messiah” (Burgess 120). Jesus is “conscious of the fact that he is part of some preordained design, some ‘necessary sacrifice,’ if not entirely clear on exactly what it signifies” (183).

Jesus in Man of Nazareth, in fact, never questions who he is. He only reminds the disciples and those who would seek to follow him of what kind of Messiah he will be. He wants them to understand that he will not be an earthly king: “Earthly rule is but earthly rule, and who shall rule in the earthly dispensation is the smallest of man’s concerns. You slay the tyrant, and you put a good man in his place, but the good man is very likely himself to turn into a tyrant. It is in the nature of earthly power for this to happen. It is not through change in the governing of men that men
themselves are changed. For the change must come from within” (Burgess 186–87). It is clear that Burgess’ Jesus recognizes that he is the Messiah, the Son of God, who has come to create a new kingdom, a new type of rule. Unlike Jesus in the other novels, here he never wavers, and he never questions either his status as divine or his role in God’s plan.

Jesus in *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* is also clearly the Son of God, as both the Devil and God tell him, but he is not what most people typically think of as the Son of God. He does not have any idea of God’s plans, and he is certainly not God incarnate. Instead, he seems to be a man whom God has chosen to be the Son of God. Though Jesus tries to avoid this label, seeking to die as the King of the Jews, God announces to all at the crucifixion: “This is My beloved son, in whom I am well pleased” (Saramago 376).

Jesus’ death, in fact, does not fulfill the orthodox role of redemptive sacrifice in Saramago’s work. When Jesus is told by God that God wants him to be his martyr, it is so that God, “within the next six centuries or so, despite all the struggles and obstacles ahead of [them] . . . will pass from being God of the Jews to being God of those whom we will call Catholics, from the Greek” (311). This God is certainly not based on the gospels and may not have ultimate power himself, as Josipovici comments, “This God, it turns out, is a curious mixture of power and helplessness. He has grown tired of being worshipped by only a small group in a tiny corner of the world and has decided to extend his power over the whole earth. Yet he cannot do it by force or by some simple miracle, for the other gods, who rule over the Romans and many other nations, also have their rights” (31). This God is using Jesus to encourage more people to worship him and, possibly, to gain more power; thus, he and Jesus seem more concerned about themselves.

The different interpretation of Jesus’ death is mirrored by the fact that this book conspicuously leaves out the resurrection. It does not indicate that the resurrection took place, nor does it have Jesus refer to it, for Jesus has no real idea what God’s plan for him is. Jesus has not come to defeat death and to gain eternal life for all those who follow him (though they may receive that; God is not clear on this point, as he’s talking more about
what he will gain from the death than from what people will gain); thus, the resurrection is irrelevant. *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, then, presents a Son of God who is not truly God, nor is he the Savior of mankind. Instead, he is merely someone to spread God’s name beyond the Jews so that God may have a wider realm of influence.

Jesus in *The Last Temptation of Christ* fights his divine calling through most of the book, despite early signs that he has been chosen by God. He is visited by shepherds and wise men, but only in a dream of Mary. Kazantzakis also includes other strange events surrounding Jesus’ birth. Joseph is chosen as Mary’s husband because his staff blossomed, showing that God has chosen him to be her husband. Mary and Joseph climb to the summit of Elijah to ask Elijah to intercede on their behalf and to have God bless them with a son that they will then dedicate to Elijah’s service. While there, Joseph is struck by lightning, and he is paralyzed. Simeon certainly wonders about Jesus’ calling in life, as he has witnessed some of the strange events of Jesus’ childhood: “I’ve seen signs. Once when you were a boy you took some clay and fashioned a bird. While you caressed it and talked to it, it seemed to me that this bird of clay grew wings and flew out of your grasp” (153). This story comes from the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* as an effort perhaps to show Jesus’ burgeoning divinity.

Jesus, however, does not believe that he is the son of God; in fact, he doesn’t want to be chosen by God at all. He asks Andrew about John the Baptist, about why Andrew leaves him, and Andrew says that he wanted to find the Messiah. He assures Jesus that John is not the Messiah, so Jesus asks Andrew if he has found the Messiah now. Andrew answers that he has, but he answers so quietly that Jesus does not hear him. Jesus is seeking out information from others to tell him who he might be, as he does not know, and he is afraid that he might be the Son of God as others think him to be.

But it is Judas who encourages Jesus to turn to John the Baptist to discover whether or not he, Jesus, is, in fact, the Messiah. When Jesus is baptized, the crowd sees a miracle that seems more pagan than Christian: “The flow of the Jordan had abruptly ceased. Schools of multicolored fish
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 floated up from every direction, circled Jesus and began to dance, folding and unfolding their fins and shaking their tails, and a shaggy elf in the form of a simple old man entwined with seaweed rose up from the bottom of the river, leaned against the reeds, and with mouth agape and eyes popping from fear and joy, stared at all that was going on in front of him” (Kazantzakis 239). The book also includes the image of the descending dove from the gospels, but no one hears what it says to Jesus. It is apparent that Jesus is the Son of God, but the very pagan presentation of the scene raises questions about the kind of Messiah he might be. Oddly enough, the book does not develop this theme; it simply stands as one pagan influence in a novel that is otherwise largely influenced by Christian legends, the gospel, and Kazantzakis’ imagination.

Despite this scene, John is not sure of Jesus’ role in God’s plan. He knows that Jesus might be the Messiah, but he is bothered by Jesus’ insistence on love; he believes there needs to be fire, as well. He advises Jesus, but he makes it clear that he is still not certain whether or not Jesus is the Messiah: “If you are the One I’ve been waiting for, hear my last instructions, for I think I shall never see you again on this earth, never again” (Kazantzakis 243).

Just before the resurrection of Lazarus, Jesus finally seems to have accepted his role as the son of God, as equal with God. Simeon hears him speaking poorly of the Temple, and he cautions Jesus about being boastful; Jesus responds, “When I say ‘I,’ . . . I do not speak of this body—which is dust; I do not speak of the son of Mary—he too is dust, with just a tiny, tiny spark of fire. ‘I’ from my mouth, Rabbi, means God” (Kazantzakis 365). When the Rabbi accuses him of blasphemy, Jesus refers to himself as “Saint Blasphemer” and laughs, but he has clearly and finally begun to think of himself as God (366). This knowledge enables him to reach outside of the orthodox interpretation of the Messiah and speak what others considers blasphemy. In fact, observes Morton Leavitt, Jesus “is not the same hope that Simeon, Joachim, and Judas have long awaited; even his followers are slow to realize that he might be the Messiah. In his parables, in his travels through Samaria, in accepting the publican Matthew among his disciples,
he is rebelling against the formalistic Old Law of the Jews” (70). He can come to this point, however, only after he accepts his role as the Son of God.

The event that causes Jesus to truly understand his role as the son of God is a vision in which God presents him with a text from Isaiah: “He has borne our faults; he was wounded for our transgressions; our iniquities bruised him. He was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth. Despised and rejected by all, he went forward without resisting, like a lamb that is led to the slaughter” (386). From then on, he understands that the role of the son of God is to be crucified, not to rule over the Romans, and he accepts his fate, even through the temptation on the cross, where he dies by saying, “It is accomplished! And it was as though he had said: Everything has begun” (496).15 It is this acceptance that convinces Jesus that he is the Messiah, but not the Son of God that Judas and the others expect.

Just as the early church struggled with Jesus’ divinity and humanity, so, too, do the authors who re-tell his story. Not surprisingly, in a much more secular era, they focus on Jesus as a human much more so than on Jesus as divine. They try to create a Jesus readers can identify with, not one who is larger than life. A character without faults or at least some sort of conflict is uninteresting; thus, they create a Jesus who struggles, who is clearly tempted, and who sometimes even fails.

15In Quarantine, Jim Crace only presents Jesus in his time in the wilderness, but even he presents Jesus and the idea of his sacrifice. When he crawls out from his cave near the end of the book, he remembers a passage from the scriptures: “Make sacrifices to god [sic], and then prepare yourself for the winds of judgment.” Crace then comments about Jesus, “He was prepared. He was the sacrifice” (192).