

14. WAS JESUS REALLY HUMAN?

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Jesus Physical aspect¹



1. The familiar image of Jesus comes from the Byzantine era, from the 4th Century onwards. Byzantine representations of Jesus were symbolic - they were all about meaning, not historical accuracy.
2. They were based on the image of an enthroned emperor, as we see in the altar mosaic of the Santa Prudenziana church in Rome.
 - 2.1. Jesus is dressed in a gold toga.
 - 2.2. He is the heavenly ruler of all the world, familiar from the famous statue of long-haired and bearded Olympian Zeus on a throne.



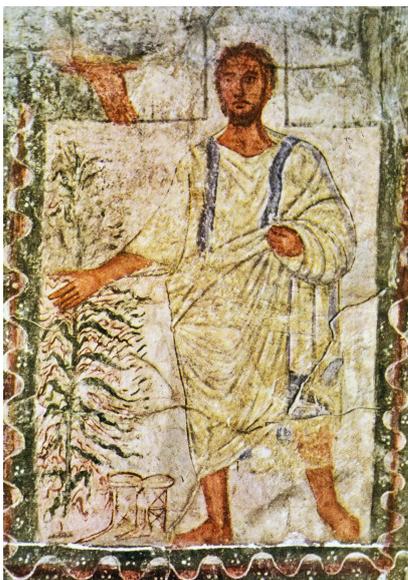
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¹ Cf Joan E. Taylor, *What did Jesus look like?*, Bloomsbury T&T Clark 2018

3. “In the Gospels, Jesus is not described, either as tall or short, good-looking or plain, muscular or frail. We are told his age, as “about 30 years of age” (Luke 3:23), but there is nothing that dramatically distinguishes him, at least at first sight”.
4. Experts on ancient skeletons in Israel believe that Judaeans of Jesus’ time were closest biologically to Iraqi Jews of the contemporary world. In terms of a colour palette then, think dark-brown to black hair, deep brown eyes, olive-brown skin. Jesus would have been a man of Middle Eastern appearance. In terms of height, an average man of this time stood 166 cm (5 ft 5 in) tall.
5. In 2001 forensic anthropologist Richard Neave created a model of a Galilean man for a BBC documentary, *Son of God*, working on the basis of an actual skull found in the region. He did not claim it was Jesus's face. It was simply meant to prompt people to consider Jesus as being a man of his time and place, since we are never told he looked distinctive.



6. The closest correspondence to what Jesus really looked like is found in the depiction of Moses on the walls of the 3rd Century synagogue of Dura-Europos:
 - 6.1. it shows how a Jewish sage was imagined in the Graeco-Roman world.
 - 6.2. It represents Moses in undyed clothing, short-haired and with a slight beard, and he's wearing a short tunic, with short sleeves, and a himation.



Jesus as a human being in the Gospels

7. If there is a trait of Jesus' identity the Gospels (especially the synoptics) are emphatic about is the reality of his humanity²:

8. Jesus had a human birth

18Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. **19**And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. **20**But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. **21**She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." **22**All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: **23**"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). **24**When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, **25**but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus. (Mt 1:18-25)

[Mary] she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (Luke 2:7).

When He was eight days old, Jesus was circumcised and brought to the temple for dedication. **21**And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. **22**And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord **23**(as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord") **24**and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons." (Luke 2:21,24).

9. He had a human ancestry. In Luke's Gospel His family line is traced all the way back to Adam³ and in Matthew's Gospel he descends from Abraham through the king David:

The son of Enosh, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God. (Luke 3:38).

All the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations. (Mt 1:7)

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² Cf Don Stewart, https://www.blueletterbible.org/faq/don_stewart/don_stewart_206.cfm

³ Ibid.

- 9.1. Even though these genealogy are fictional, they presuppose that for the authors of the Gospel Jesus did come from a lineage of real historical characters, especially from the king David.
10. The child Jesus grew in both stature and wisdom.
And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man. ([Luke 2:52](#)).
11. He had a family. His mother was named Mary and his father was Joseph, and we are told he had brothers, although usually this Greek term is taken as referring to cousins:
Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary, and his brothers, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? ([Matthew 13:55](#)).
12. He was a Jewish man.
The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans ([John 4:9](#)).
13. References abound to his body
Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately he was cured of his leprosy ([Matthew 8:3](#)).
14. He experienced hunger and thirst
And when he fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward he was hungry ([Matthew 4:2](#)).
15. Tiredness
Jesus therefore being wearied from his journey, sat thus by the well ([John 4:6](#)).
16. Sleep
And suddenly a great tempest arose on the sea, so that the boat was covered with waves. But he was asleep ([Matthew 8:24](#)).
17. Human Emotions
At the tomb of His dead friend Lazarus, Scripture records, "Jesus wept" ([John 11:35](#)).
As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it ([Luke 19:41](#)).
When Jesus heard the centurion's words of faith, "he marveled" ([Matthew 8:10](#)).
He says in [Matthew 26:38](#) that his "soul is very sorrowful, even to death."
[John 12:27](#) says, "Now is my soul troubled," and in [John 13:21](#), he is "troubled in his spirit."
18. Human knowledge

Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man. (Luke 2:52)

“Concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” (Mark 13:32)

18.1. “Early in his life he had discovered the mainstream of theology in the Sacred Scriptures that he had memorised extensively.

- i. The gospel writers put into his mouth frequent references to the Hebrew Bible.
- ii. Particularly Matthew implies that throughout his ministry he had spent much of his young life digesting the weighty contents of the Hebrew Bible.
- iii. Moreover, the gospel authors intend to indicate that quite obviously he had identified with those passages that referred to the promised Messiah, and he saw them as his mandate in his personal life’s ministry and destiny”.⁴

19. Human will

“I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.” (John 6:38)

Jesus prays to the Father, “Not as I will, but as you will.” (Matthew 26:39)

20. Love

Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him and said to him, "One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me" (Mark 10:21).

21. Compassion

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:36).

22. Disappointment

Seeing at a distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if perhaps he would find anything on it; and when he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs (Mark 11:12,13).

23. Anger

So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!" (John 2:15,16).

24. Angst

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⁴ Adam Gopnik, “What Did Jesus Do? Reading and unreading the Gospels”, *The New Yorker*, May 17, 2010, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/05/24/what-did-jesus-do>

Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour' (John 12:27).

25. Physical pain

And being in agony he was praying very fervently; and his sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground (Luke 22:44).

The Romans flogged Him. Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged (John 19:1).

26. Death

But when they came to Jesus and saw he was already dead, they did not break his legs (John 19:33).

Interpretations

27. Clearly the intentions of the Gospel was not to present a psychological portrayal of Jesus. This has not prevented the flourishing of an huge literature on the subject.

28. It will be interesting to compare two opposite attempts to reconstruct Jesus personality

28.1. One by the renown German theologian Romano Guardini (1885-1968) in the middle of the 20th century.⁵

28.2. The other by the now retired Presbyterian theologian and ordained minister J. Harold Ellens (University of Michigan, United States).⁶

Romano Guardini's portrayal⁷

29. "In Jesus we observe various kinds of emotional reaction. These show us that he was not cold and aloof, either by nature or by self-discipline. Thus we learn

29.1. that he had pity on the people because of their suffering (Mat. 9. 36);

29.2. that he "looked at and loved" a man in whom something special was going on (Mark 10. 21);

29.3. that he was irritated by the hypocrisy of those who watched to see if he would heal the sick on the Sabbath: he looked "round about on them with anger" (Mark 3. 5);

29.4. that he expressed anger at the stupidity of the disciples: "Do you not yet know or understand?" (Mark 8. 17);

29.5. that he "rejoiced in the Holy Spirit" at the return of those whom he had sent out (Luke 10. 21), and so on.

29.6. Obviously the sick and the suffering would never have come to him with such confidence; children would never have approached him for a blessing had they not felt a warm sympathy emanating from him. And the accounts about Gethsemane and Golgotha indicate anything but an

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⁵ <https://www.ncregister.com/news/romano-guardini-beloved-theologian-of-two-popes-and-potential-saint>

⁶ <https://www.bumc.bu.edu/len/religion/j-harold-ellens-phd/>

⁷ Romano Guardini, *The Humanity of Christ: Contributions to a Psychology of Jesus*, Pantheon Books (Random House), 1964, <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=5806>

unimpressible nature or the attitude of one who was a stern ascetic, above all emotion.

30. And we could cite many other examples. In spite of this, however, the impression we have of Jesus' nature is one of complete calm under all conditions, a calm which has the same origin as his fearlessness.
31. [...] When Jesus began to speak of the terrible things which were to happen to him and Peter tried to remonstrate with him, we are told that he turned and upbraided him (Mat. 16. 23).
 - 31.1. It was as though he could not bear to hear anything that might upset his decision, and one feels how his inner calm was being threatened by the horror of what was to happen. All the more impressive, therefore, is the way in which his calm continues,
 - 31.2. the way it lasts through all his experiences and enables him to go on teaching and helping men, strengthening him never to allow himself to be deflected by one hairbreadth from the perfect course of his mission, but, moment by moment, to perform all that that mission requires.
 - 31.3. Let us stress once more, however, that in all this there is no trace of the imperturbability of the Stoic or the renunciation of a Buddha. Jesus is fully alive, fully sentient, fully human.
 - 31.4. His deep calm and human warmth in a situation which was becoming increasingly hopeless revealed what John meant when he wrote: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give unto you; not as the world giveth, do I give unto you. Let not your heart be troubled; nor let it be afraid" (John 14. 27).
 - 31.5. These words are all the more significant because they were spoken on the last occasion when he was with his friends, just before the end".

J. Harold Ellens' portrayal⁸

32. "There is a portrait [of Jesus] enshrined in our hymns and hearts that is a dominant presence controlling our notions and emotions about the nature and character of Jesus. That is the line from the popular song, 'Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild.' Ironically, Jesus was none of those".
33. "Our notion of Jesus as gentle surely arises from his treatment of children."
 - 33.1. Even in those instances in which he used children as his example in making a teaching point, however, the narrative seems to be pointing out that the emphasis in the story was on Jesus confronting his disciples about their wrong-headedness, rather than on a special perspective on children".
34. "He was ambivalent about women and occasionally abusive to them, particularly his mother. [...]"
 - 34.1. When his Jewish mother nagged him about having disturbed her trip from Jerusalem to Galilee and made her anxious and uncomfortable, he shot back sharply at her asking why she was worried, given that she should have known that he would be about his heavenly father's business.

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⁸ J. Harold Ellens, "That tough guy from Nazareth: A psychological assessment of Jesus", <https://hts.org.za/index.php/hts/article/view/2059>

- 34.2. When she jostled him at the wedding in Cana about performing a miracle to help the host who had run out of wine, he castigated her with the peremptory denigration: ‘What is that to you and me. This is not the time to mention that kind of stuff!’
- 34.3. When she and his siblings, having heard him claim that he was the Messiah, thought him deranged and came to Capernaum to take him home to care for him, he ignored her. Indeed, he publicly put her down and shamed her by rhetorically asking the crowd who they thought his mother and brothers were. Then he declared that his true family was made up of his followers who listened to his preaching and were devoted to his ways!”
35. In “the healing of the blind man in John 9 ... Jesus [is] abusing that poor fellow in order to score a political point against the Pharisees, Scribes, and Sadducees.
- 35.1. Jesus undoubtedly knew [that] the blind man [...] had been a fixture in the society for 40 years, loved by most, ignored by many.
- 35.2. Along came Jesus on a Sabbath morning and asked him if he would like to change his rather well established status in his family, the city, the community, and the synagogue by being cured of his blindness. Well, who would not make that surprising exchange? So Jesus cured him.
- 35.3. Then the wholly predictable action began. If Jesus’ motive was to cure the poor fellow he would have done it on Tuesday, in which case everybody, including the religious authorities, would have honoured Jesus and rejoiced with the healed man. No, Jesus just had to pick the Sabbath to heal him.
- 35.4. This demonstrates that he did not care so much about the blind man’s comfort. He cared mainly about the political point he wanted to make about the erroneous perspective of the religious authorities regarding the Torah, the ten laws of Moses and the 613 additional laws of the Pharisees.
- 35.5. As Jesus certainly intended, healing the man on the Sabbath stirred up the religious authorities, because the law forbade Jesus’ kind of action regarding the laws the Pharisees held so dear. So the authorities hauled the blind man into court and asked him who the culprit was who had healed him on the Sabbath.
- 35.6. [...] The blind man declared that he did not know who did it but surely everyone must know that whoever it was had come from God. Never had any one in all of history opened the eyes of a blind man, except he had God’s healing power. The authorities declared that it was blasphemous for him to say that, given that whoever the healer was he had broken the Sabbath law. So he could not be from God.
- 35.7. [...] So the authorities threw him out of the synagogue, expelled him from his entire ethnic community, and severed his relationship with his family.
- 35.8. Although, in the end he came to know Jesus, he was, under Mosaic law a despised vagabond in Judaism. His latter state was worse than the first in the most important ways. Jesus used him to make a political point, and then left him isolated from his loved ones and friends, who were now forbidden by the authorities from consorting with him. Jesus could be fairly ruthless to others, not just to his mother”.
36. Jesus “was ruthless to the religious leaders whom he called serpents, corrupted tombs, and filthy cups.

- 36.1. In Mark 8:31ff. he was ruthless to Peter, cursing him, turning his back on him, and calling him a devil, just because Peter had not yet gotten straight in his head Jesus' unique concept of the messianic Son of Man. Nobody else understood it either. Jesus seems to have been the only one at that point who understood the esoteric and poorly explained notion of the Messiah that Jesus was playing around with at the time, calling himself the suffering Son of Man".
37. "That posture placed Jesus in opposition with the Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and other authorities in the Israelite community.
- 37.1. They were intent upon following the Covenant of Moses that required simply the adherence to the laws of the Torah as the authorities articulated it.
- 37.2. The Pharisees wanted to reform Israelites from the outside in. They thought that controlling a person's behaviour would produce an inner spiritual renewal.
- 37.3. Jesus knew that spiritual conversion must start with a change of heart. That is accomplished by the infusion of the human spirit with the good news of God's radical grace.
- 37.4. Jesus knew that anyone who really gets that message, of universal and unconditional forgiveness by God, will turn to God in abject gratitude and devotion, desiring to be God's kind of person. From that conversion a radical shift in behaviour is inevitable. Real change comes from the inside out".
38. "In the gospels, Jesus is not gentle, meek, or mild.
- 38.1. He is robust, aggressive, uncompromising, incapable of negotiating his perspective on God's ways with humans, argumentative in the uttermost, abusive with people he did not like and with ideas he thought were erroneous or simply false.
- 38.2. He was immensely tough minded, and uncompromisingly courageous in what he stood for, without the slightest willingness to back down or compromise".
39. "Jesus' character displays a number of distinctly identifiable qualities.
- 39.1. He operates from a conflicted emotional and social life.
- 39.2. He finds his consolation in a unique and intense perception of his relation with God.
- 39.3. He has an ambivalent sense of himself.
- 39.4. He is persistently anti-establishment and critical of the father-figures of the authorities.
- 39.5. He stands for those who are marginalised in society, but is not preoccupied with them.
- 39.6. He keeps company with twelve close male followers.
- 39.7. He seems to be sought out by women for his general intimate sensitivity toward them.
- 39.8. He has an idealised image of God's intended destiny for the world and for his own vocation and destiny in that model.

- 39.9. He is capable of surprising expressions of humour, antipathy, and rage.
- 39.10. He is stubbornly committed to the path on which he has set his course. He never backs down, even in the face of his own pitiful demise”.

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- 40. One of the most thought-provoking analysis of recent literature on this topic can be found in an article on *The New Yorker*, “What Did Jesus Do? Reading and unreading the Gospels”,⁹ from 2010 by the art critic Adam Gopnik.¹⁰
- 41. “The human traits of his Jesus are evident: intelligence, short temper, and an ironic, duelling wit.
- 42. What seems new about Jesus is not his piety or divine detachment but the humanity of his irritability and impatience. He’s no Buddha. He gets annoyed at the stupidity of his followers, their inability to grasp an obvious point. “Do you have eyes but fail to see?” he asks the hapless disciples.
- 43. [...]. He’s verbally spry and even a little shifty. He likes defiant, enigmatic paradoxes and pregnant parables that never quite close, perhaps by design.
- 44. [...] Jesus’ morality has a brash, sidewise indifference to conventional ideas of goodness.
 - 44.1. His pet style blends the epigrammatic with the enigmatic.
 - 44.2. When he makes that complaint about the prophet having no honor in his own home town, or says exasperatedly that there is no point in lighting a candle unless you intend to put it in a candlestick, his voice carries a disdain for the props of piety that still feels startling.
 - 44.3. And so with the tale of the boy who wastes his inheritance but gets a feast from his father, while his dutiful brother doesn’t;
 - 44.4. or the one about the weeping whore who is worthier than her good, prim onlookers;
 - 44.5. or about the passionate Mary who is better than her hardworking sister Martha.
- 45. There is a wild gaiety about Jesus’ moral teachings that still leaps off the page.
- 46. He is informal in a new way, too, that remains unusual among prophets. MacCulloch points out that he continually addresses God as “Abba,” Father, or even Dad, and that the expression translated in the King James Version as a solemn “Verily I say unto you” is actually a quirky Aramaic throat-clearer, like Dr. Johnson’s “Depend upon it, Sir.”
- 47. This social radicalism still shines through—not a programmatic radicalism of national revolution but one of Kerouac-like satori-seeking-on-the-road. And the social radicalism is highly social.

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⁹ Adam Gopnik, “What Did Jesus Do? Reading and unreading the Gospels”, *The New Yorker*, May 17, 2010, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/05/24/what-did-jesus-do>

¹⁰ <https://www.newyorker.com/contributors/adam-gopnik>

48. The sharpest opposition in the Gospels, [...] is between John the Faster and Jesus the Feaster.
- 48.1. Jesus eats and drinks with whores and highwaymen, turns water into wine, and, finally, in one way or another, establishes a mystical union at a feast through its humble instruments of bread and wine.
 - 48.2. The table is his altar in every sense.
 - 48.3. [...] Jesus [lived] within a Mediterranean Jewish peasant culture, a culture of clan and cohort, in which who eats with whom defines who stands where and why.
 - 48.4. So the way Jesus repeatedly violates the rules on eating, on “commensality,” would have shocked his contemporaries.
 - 48.5. He dines with people of a different social rank, which would have shocked most Romans, and with people of different tribal allegiance, which would have shocked most Jews.
 - 48.6. [...] Jesus isn’t a hedonist or an epicurean, but he clearly isn’t an ascetic, either: he feeds the multitudes rather than instructing them how to go without. He’s interested in saving people living normal lives, buying and selling what they can, rather than in retreating into the company of those who have already arrived at a moral conclusion about themselves”.

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49. From my book *Touched By God*¹¹

God has ‘become flesh’ to *dwell among us* or, according to a more literal translation of the Greek *eskenosen, to plant his tent among us*.¹²

He is not afraid of plunging into our mess, exposing himself to the hazards of human existence, joining our uncertain journey, making himself vulnerable to our need of loving and be loved, allowing himself to being touched by us.

Thus, he became a child who, like all of us, would not have been able to constitute his identity, acquire the ability to feel, speak, walk, develop emotionally, humanly and intellectually had he not benefited from the loving and caring touch of a mother and the reassuring and enveloping embrace of a father.

In his mission of proclaiming the coming of the kingdom of God, that is of making God’s action and presence visible and felt in our midst, he did not confine himself to touching our misery only metaphorically. When a man with leprosy came to Jesus begging to be healed, Jesus was not only *filled with compassion*, but *reached out his hand and touched him*.¹³

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¹¹ Luigi Gioia, *Touched By God. The Way To Contemplative Prayer*, Bloomsbury 2018
https://www.amazon.com/Touched-God-way-contemplative-prayer-ebook/dp/B07FPQMS27/ref=tmm_kin_swatch_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=

¹² John 1.14.

¹³ Mk 2.41.

We see that Jesus washes his disciples' feet and dries them with a towel¹⁴ and is comfortable with John leaning on his bosom while eating. This must have happened quite regularly for this disciple never to be referred to by his name but only by his being *the disciple whom Jesus loved* and 'he who used to lean his head on Jesus' chest'¹⁵ (and how indicative of many translators' prudery are not their comical attempts to avoid the suggestion of a man reclining on Jesus' chest, as in variations like 'sitting next to Jesus at the table' or even 'at the table to the right of Jesus in a place of honour').

Similarly excruciating for generations of translators has been Mary's irreverent overfamiliarity when, on recognizing the risen Jesus, she hugged him for a long time (implied by the present tense which in Greek designates the continuance of an act).¹⁶ A consistent twist to this passage consisted in translating it as 'do not touch me' (the *Noli me tangere* depicted in some celebrated paintings) which states the exact contrary of what was actually happening - namely that Jesus had allowed Mary to hold him for a while until he really had to go. Like John, Mary too was known for her physical familiarity with Jesus, since she is introduced as she who *poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair*¹⁷, and is shown doing exactly that a second time few days before the death of Jesus - just with the same disconcerting ease: she *takes a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume, poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair* with the pleasant advantage that *the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume*.¹⁸

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¹⁴ John 13.5.

¹⁵ Cf. John 13.23 and 21.20.

¹⁶ John 20.17.

¹⁷ John 10.2.

¹⁸ John 12.3.