“Who do men say that I am?” Jesus asks his disciples in the Synoptic Gospels. They provide him with the various possibilities voiced on the street, but he is not interested in popular opinion. He wants to know where they stand. One way in which Christian tradition has responded is with creedal statements that aim to avoid error through clarity and definition. Take, for instance, the fifth-century *Quicunque vult*, the so-called Athanasian Creed. It wants to affirm at once that “our Lord Jesus Christ” is “Perfect God and Perfect Man”; he is “Equal to the Father, as touching his Godhead; and inferior to the Father, as touching his Manhood.” By contrast, biblical approaches to the question of Jesus’s identity bring the messiness of human experience into play: the Gospel stories, like narrative in general, open up possibilities rather than closing them down, require interpretation rather than assent.

A case in point: who do the Synoptic Gospels say that Jesus is, based on his last words? We find one “equal to the Father” in Luke’s gracious savior, who is merciful to those who mock him (“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,” 23:34) and who promises the “good thief” a reward for his faithfulness (“Today you will be with me in paradise,” 23:43). Likewise, the Gospel of John presents Christ in control of the horrible scene on Golgotha: he has the wherewithal to find his mother another son (19:26–27) and, before his final breath, to announce that enough is enough, “It is finished” (19:30). On the other hand, Matthew and Mark have Christ give up the ghost in a cry of dereliction, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” The dissonance between these “last words” is lost when the tradition of preaching the Seven Last Words, for instance, merges the six “comfortable” sayings found in Luke and John with the single cry of Matthew and Mark: “Elo-i, Elo-i, lema sabach-thani?” Numbers talk, at least if you can get the cry of dereliction out of your head.

But what about the Garden of Gethsemane? The Gospel of John has us barely enter it: John places Jesus in an olive grove across the Kidron Valley (18:1) for the merest moment, and then only as the backdrop for his arrest. In the Synoptics—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—we find something quite different. Take Matthew’s account in chapter 26:36–46. In this dramatic scene, Matthew’s Jesus remains extraordinarily vulnerable until he sees that the end is nigh and takes charge, saying, “Get up, let us be going.” Underscoring his loneliness, Matthew puts only Peter, James, and John in the Garden with him. When this trio was last assembled by Jesus, they beheld the apotheosis of the Lord in a cloud of glory and heard a voice from heaven say, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” (Mt 17:5). But now we have a reversal of the Transfiguration. Instead of encountering the Father’s beloved Son in blinding glory, we find a Jesus in passionate turmoil, as described by the narrator (“He was grieved and agitated”) and confirmed by Jesus himself (“I am deeply grieved, even to death”).
Add to these words dramatic gesture. When Jesus advances into Gethsemane’s “oil press”—the etymology of the place name—he also moves more deeply into his grievance unto death: “And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground.” Again, one recalls the Transfiguration account, when it was the disciples who fell to the ground “overcome by fear,” only to have Jesus comfort them: “Get up and do not be afraid” (17:7). Here Jesus comes to the disciples, appealing to them three times to watch with him, only to find them fast asleep. “The spirit indeed is willing,” he says, “but the flesh is weak.”

It is not the disciples’ weakness that is at the center of the story, however; rather, it is Jesus’s humanity: his deep emotion, his need for creature comfort, and his dependence on the men who were his “little children.” Whereas Peter, James, and John cannot stay awake even one hour, Jesus cannot rest for a single minute. Instead, he throws himself repeatedly on the ground, praying, “Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.” The Evangelist Mark further heightens the emotion by having Jesus call out not only to his Father but also (in a sudden move from Greek to Aramaic) to his Abba, his Papa—a one-word shift into an intimate mode of address. However, no loving paternal presence shows up in Matthew’s Gethsemane. Jesus is devastated and alone.

This vision of Jesus at such a loss is one the Evangelist Luke cannot abide. His Savior may be “inferior to the Father concerning his manhood”—he may (as in Matthew and Mark) pray that the cup be removed; he may even sweat “like great drops of blood falling down on the ground”—but he is not alone. Suddenly there is an angel on the scene, come to give him strength. Nor does Jesus thrash about on the ground—Luke says instead that he “kneels”—or keeps trying to wake his three closest disciples. There is neither fear nor anguish in this scene, only a hero fighting the good fight, about to earn his crown of glory.

There is very little glory in more contemporary literary renderings of Jesus in the Garden. Nor is there much of any Godhead in his Manhood. For instance, in Rainer-Maria Rilke’s “The Olive Garden” (1908), Jesus says, “I am alone, I am alone with all of human grief.” Rilke does not allow any divine intervention: no angel enters the scene. Furthermore, he insists that Jesus’s aloneness in the Garden links him to everyone else’s plight: he is no different from anyone “born in the world.”

And then there is Nikos Kazantzakis’s Last Temptation of Christ (1955), which presents Christ’s whole life as a struggle between willing spirit and wavering flesh. Gethsemane is where “the longing to see men, to hear a human voice, to touch the hands he loved” overwhelms Jesus. Thought of heaven all but disappears as he longs “to find on earth the only paradise anyone could want.”

“Father,” Jesus murmurs, “the world you created is beautiful, and we see it; beautiful is the world which we do not see. I don’t know—forgive me—I don’t know, Father, which is the more beautiful.”

For José Luis Saramago, in The Gospel According to Jesus Christ (1991), Gethsemane turns into a temptation scene, in which God and the Devil are revealed to be two sides of the same divine coin. Together, they present Jesus with the “cup” of the future. They predict the deaths of the disciples, give a lengthy alphabetical procession of subsequent martyrs, and foretell the horrors of Crusades and Inquisition. This vision of continual suffering provokes a final confrontation between Son and Father. The scene ends with the Devil’s observation, “One has to be a God to countenance so much blood.” Saramago’s Jesus is a dupe, his Father a vampire. We have come a long way from the Gospels here, let alone from the both/and mystery of the eternal Word made mortal Flesh.

Where I want to conclude, however, is with a contemporary poet, Denise Levertov (1923–97), who attempts not only to affirm the two natures of Christ, following orthodox Christianity, but also describe
a dynamic tension between them. She wants to convey the tightrope that Jesus walked, that Jesus was.

_Salvator Mundi: Via Crucis_[1]

Maybe He looked indeed
much as Rembrandt envisioned Him
in those small heads that seem in fact
portraits of more than a model.
A dark, still young, very intelligent face,
a soul-mirror gaze of deep understanding, unjudging.
That face, in extremis, would have clenched its teeth
in a grimace not shown in even the great crucifixions.
The burden of humanness (I begin to see) exacted from Him
that He taste also the humiliation of dread,
cold sweat of wanting to let the whole thing go,
like any mortal hero out of His depth,
like anyone who has taken a step too far
and wants herself back.
The painters, even the greatest, don’t show how,
in the midnight Garden,
or staggering uphill under the weight of the Cross,
He went through with even the human longing
to simply cease, to not be.
Not torture of body,
not the hideous betrayals humans commit,
not the faithless weakness of friends (not then, in agony’s grip)
was Incarnation’s heaviest weight,
but this sickened desire to renege,
to step back from what He, Who was God,
had promised Himself, and had entered
time and flesh to enact.
Sublime acceptance, to be absolute, had to have welled
up from those depths where purpose
drifted for mortal moments.

With the double title of her poem, Levertov places her text in the Latin world of the West, as well as
(literally and figuratively) in Jerusalem. We are asked to behold the Savior of the World along the Holy
City’s tortuous Way of the Cross, long memorialized on the walls of many a Catholic church and perhaps
presented most horrifically in Mel Gibson’s 2004 film _The Passion of the Christ_. But “Salvator Mundi”
also points to another Christological reality—to a traditional iconographic pose, in which Christ (holding
an orb or some other accoutrement of authority) looks straight into the eyes of the viewer, as in the
Albrecht Dürer painting of this name. This is John’s Christ, radiant with glory.

Levertov depends heavily on visual art, but it is no Christus Rex whom she actually conjures up; rather,
she alludes explicitly to two very different portrayals of the human savior of the world, each of which
offers us a “Maybe” (the poem’s opening word) of what Jesus was like. To begin, she names Rembrandt
and refers to his portraits of unnamed Semitic-looking young men taken to be “a Christ head after life”; his models were, in fact, contemporary Amsterdam Jews. Levertov does not allude to Rembrandt’s Philosemitism or her own Jewish ancestry. Rather, she concentrates on the vivid, welcoming humanity of an un-haloed Christ—a thirty-something rabbi, an itinerant healer, or perhaps the word-playing stranger who engaged the much-married Samaritan woman at her village well.

Maybe He looked indeed
much as Rembrandt envisioned Him
in those small heads that seem in fact
portraits of more than a model.
A dark, still young, very intelligent face,
a soul-mirror gaze of deep understanding, unjudging.

In contrast to this gentle, serene visage—this portrait of the Savior as a young Jew—she then conjures “that face, in extremis” and therefore moves us away from the day-to-day life of Christ’s ministry to the terrible end-game of his passion. But whereas Rembrandt could give a probable likeness of the young Jew, she says, none of the Old Masters (“even the greatest”) could convey in line or paint what the tortured man must have looked like in his agony. “That face, in extremis, would have clenched its teeth / in a grimace not shown in even the great crucifixions.”

The rest of the poem takes us along the Via Crucis—the second part of the poem’s title—from the Garden of Gethsemane to Golgotha, by means of an imaginative exploration of the Savior’s interior life. Levertov signals Christ’s divinity not only by referring to him as “He” and “Himself” in the reverential upper case, but also by the quasi-creedal language she uses in her God’s-eye view of the Incarnation. The descent into human vulnerability was “what He, Who was God, / had promised Himself, and had entered / time and flesh to enact.” Here we have one “Equal to the Father, as touching his Godhead.”

Most of the text, however, explores what Levertov refers to as Christ’s “burden of humanness,” that is, the sheer weight of his being human. This Jesus is “like any mortal hero out of his depth.” He tastes “the humiliation of dread”; he experiences “the cold sweat of wanting to let the whole thing go.” In a show of personal empathy and identification with the male Christ, the female poet likens him to “anyone who has taken a step too far / and wants herself back.” She also suggests what the final refusal of the cup would have meant:

Not torture of body,
not the hideous betrayals humans commit
nor the faithless weakness of friends, and surely
not the anticipation of death (not then, in agony’s grip)
was Incarnation’s heaviest weight,
but this sickened desire to renegade,
to step back from what He, Who was God,
had promised Himself, and had entered
time and flesh to enact.

“Maybe.” The poem begins in surmise, and uses the resources of art history, lectio divina, and the work
of sympathetic imagination to give us a keener sense of the God-Man. It draws to a close, however, in a
flourish of the indicative, with the repeated assertion of what is (or, rather, what is not) the case. We
approach the mystery of Christ’s anguish by eliminating the likely possibilities of what he felt: we
cannot know for sure. In her final lines, however, Levertov moves very subtly away from negative
assertion and back into surmise. She won’t presume to fathom the Savior’s heart and mind any more
than the “greatest painters” could capture his full likeness. All she has to go on is the fervor of her
personal identification, her own conviction:

Sublime acceptance, to be absolute, had to have welled
up from those depths where purpose
drifted for mortal moments.

In these, her poem’s “last words,” Levertov brings together the passion accounts of Matthew and Mark
with those of Luke and John without erasing their differences. The “sublime acceptance” of the Passion
we find in Luke and John had to have, could only have “welled up” from the depths we witness on the
bare ground of Gethsemane. For the God-Man to have been human indeed, and not merely playing at
humanity, he would have had to (repeatedly) throw himself on the earth, his soul “deeply grieved, even
unto death.” Before the Manhood could be taken into God, it would have had to return to the dirt from
which Adam was molded, dust thrown down into dust, ashes to ashes.

In “Salvator Mundi: Via Crucis,” Levertov works valiantly to maintain the precarious balance of dogma
but with an obvious tip of the scale in our human direction. She upholds the “purpose” of the
Incarnation with orthodox conviction; she gives us a Savior of the World “Who was God.” Yet her poem
both lingers and terminates where it must, in the drift of those very “mortal moments” that link us to
the God-Man—the “maybe” moments that may be all that mortals ever know for sure.

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FOOTNOTE

[1] “Salvator Mundi: Via Crucis” By Denise Levertov, from EVENING TRAIN, copyright ©1992 by
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