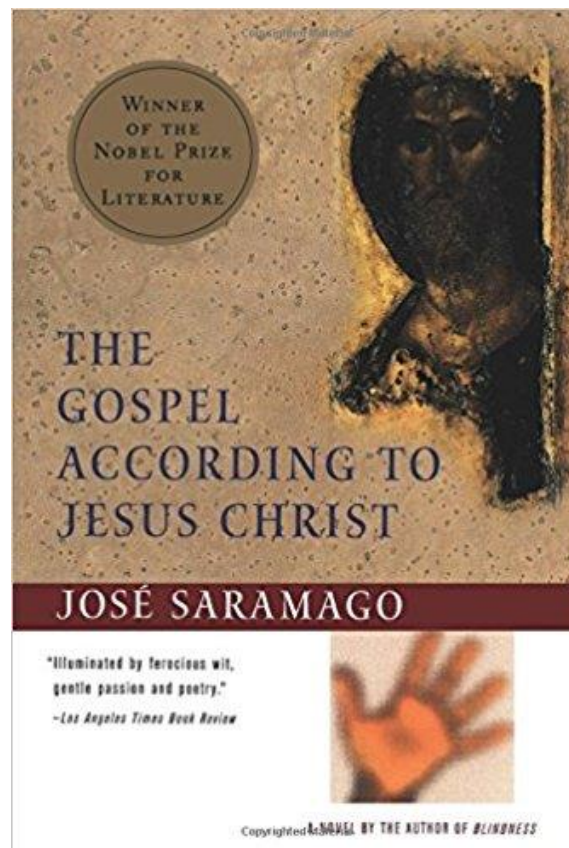


**The Choice of the Cross:  
An Existential Reading of the Life of Jesus Christ**

**Nidhin Johny, M.Phil. Research Scholar**

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Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.com/Gospel-According-Jesus-Christ/dp/0156001411>

**Abstract**

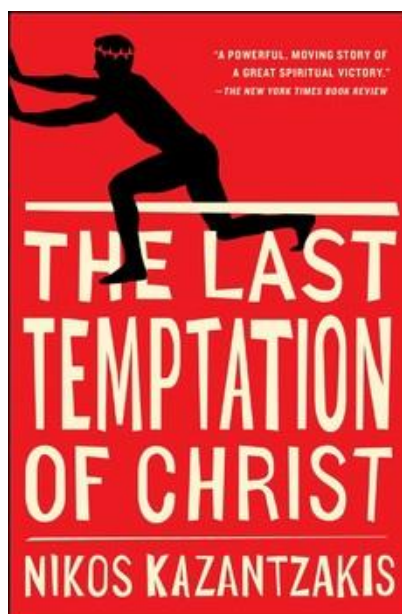
The primary texts that would be under deliberation would be *The Gospel according to Jesus Christ*, *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *The Gospel of St John* respectively. St John has been the passionate and the closest companion of Jesus Christ, in this aspect the gospel of St John is distinct from the other three gospels. It is rather a personal account of the life of Jesus and the account of his personal agony and the human nature. There is a humanist portrayal of Jesus Christ in the gospel. Jose Saramago in *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* gives a humanist portrayal of Jesus, he is seen as the man who became the victim of the patriarchal authority, the tension between the father and the son (God the father and Jesus the son) is depicted in the novel. In *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Jesus is portrayed as the man who doubts and is sceptical about the plans of the Father. He goes through the agony and doubts in his life, Jesus is thus a man in flesh and spirit. The idea of free will and choice are important in existential philosophy. The divinity and human nature of Jesus

Christ are important here, and in these texts we see this duality reflected upon. The man who suffered in the flesh must have suffered greatly in the mind as well.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, Choice, Free Will, Jesus Christ, Identity.

“It is therefore senseless to think of complaining since nothing foreign has decided what we feel, what we live, or what we are.”

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*



Courtesy: <http://www.simonandschuster.com/books/The-Last-Temptation-of-Christ/Nikos-Kazantzakis/9780684852560>

## Introduction

Numerous prophecies and visions have been spoken and seen before the coming of the Saviour. The action plan of his life has already been marked out by God the Father. The earliest hint of his life and action can be seen as described by Adam as the *felix culpa*, their fortunate mistake. Thus even before his birth, his destiny has been written. Divinity has been sort of thrust up in the life of Jesus. Son of the carpenter had nothing much to do, save to follow the path which has been carved out for him. It is this vision of the divine purpose which the portrayals of Jesus in these texts attempt to defy. Jesus in these texts does not blindly follow the will of God. He questions, mistrusts and tries to walk in a path of his own. He chooses the cross, makes his way and becomes triumphant in his own way.

## Jesus the Man and Christ the Messiah

The life Jesus has been a continuous mediation between the ordeals of the Messiah and as the son of the carpenter. Little is known about the life Jesus led during the thirty years of his life. Like every other man Jesus worked and lived in the society. It becomes evident in latter part of his life that Jesus was a man who was cynical, mentally disturbed about his passion, and was divided between the ordinary and the divine. The desires and frailties of the body haunted him. His desire for Mary Magdalene and his fears and doubts can all be put together and Jesus can be seen as a man who went through all the dilemmas of an ordinary man. The texts view Jesus not just as the divine being but as a culmination of divinity and humanness in the human body. The gospel of John gives the

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most humane picture of all the gospels. In this gospel, Jesus can be seen weeping over the death of Lazar and the temptations he had.

### **Portrayals of Jesus Christ in the Novels Under Study**

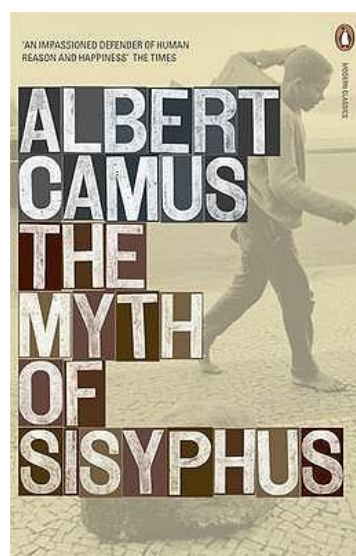
The novel *The Gospel According To Jesus Christ* shows Jesus as a victim of authority where his autonomous act of crucifixion can be seen as an act of rebellion against authority. *The Last Temptation Of Christ* portrays Jesus as a man and god as a human being struggling to mediate between the two roles; he has his doubts, fears, desires, and temptations. In the first look at the texts, we can see that the title of son of God is more of a burden for Jesus. Had he been born and raised as the son of the carpenter Joseph the whole story would have been different. The divinity is sort of thrust upon the individual. We can see Jesus as an individual trying to make sense into the senseless world he has been thrown into. He mediates between the human and the divine nature of his existence.

### **Existentialism, a Theoretical View**

Existentialist philosophy holds individual at the centre. As God is withdrawn from the centre, human beings become the makers and conveyers of meaning. It views that human beings are responsible for defining meaning to their circumstances. They try to make rational choices in the inherently meaningless universe. Existentialism believes that individuals are absolutely free and must take responsibility for their actions. Therefore, action, freedom, and decision seem as fundamentals. Existentialism holds that the only way to rise above the essentially absurd condition of humanity is by exercising our personal freedom and choice. It views human beings are “thrown into” a fundamentally meaningless universe where they enjoy absolute freedom and their choices define what they are.

### **Sartre**

One of the major proponents of existentialism was Sartre and he speaks mainly about man’s absolute freedom and choice. He says human beings are thrown into a senseless universe where attempts by the individual impose meaning to the world. As the meaning is dispossessed from its central position, the mere fact of existence takes precedence over essence. Therefore, it becomes the responsibility of the individual to make sense of his circumstances.



Courtesy: [https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/91950.The\\_Myth\\_of\\_Sisyphus](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/91950.The_Myth_of_Sisyphus)

## The Choice of the Cross

The three texts view the Cross not as a predestined task but as a carefully thought and freely chosen will. He was just like Sartre's Mathieu in the age of reason. "He was free, free in every way, free to behave like a fool or a machine, free to accept, free to refuse, free to equivocate; to marry, to give up the game, to drag this death weight about with him for years to come" (Sartre). One thing that is evident throughout the life of Jesus is the appearance of the choices. Some call it the temptations but if you look at them in a different light we can see them as the opportunities presented before him. It is from these different choices he chooses the Cross. In the temptation scenes, we see Jesus is presented with choices; they are not thrust upon him but are presented before him, only for him to choose willingly. He is given a choice throughout his life, to choose freely, to choose willingly.

Existentialist believes that there is no meaning *a priori* but that we make, hence the duality of Jesus' being becomes important here. The man Jesus becomes obliged to make sense to the circumstance he is thrown into. Therefore, the whole of passion and his crucifixion become a choice which he willingly makes. We see Jesus Christ following the will of God the Father throughout his life. Was there a choice? There can be a parallel drawn between the life of Sisyphus and the life of Jesus, the boulder and the cross defined their existence, as seen in the work of Camus. There is triumphant smile on the face of Jesus Christ similar to that of the one on the face of Sisyphus, The smile arising from the exercise of the free will. The idea is that the hero could will meaning into the meaningless situation surrounding him.

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