

How Jesus Looked

We all have our own visual images of Jesus, do we not? And there are Abraham, Moses, David, John the Baptist, Paul, and a host of other Bible heroes. We have most likely been influenced by portraits by artists dating “way back there,” and pictures in Bible literature. By his sculpture, Michelangelo even lets us see David in his birthday suit. And he gives us a glimpse of God and Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

Early in life I came to realize that we have no physical image of any Biblical character and that there are few, if any, actual spots where we can say for sure that a person of Bible history once stood. Yes, there are “traditional” places which may be identified by tourist guides as authentic, but that is more for the sake of tourism.

Why would God leave us no portraits? Surely, there have always been people with the artistic skills for sketching, painting, and sculpture. Why would God allow those landmarks to be obliterated or the exactness of the location to be lost? People have always made historic markers.

In my precocious youthful wisdom (?), I explained that the providence of God allowed people hostile to Christianity to occupy that land and destroy landmarks lest we make holy places out of them for veneration. That may be right but it is a conjecture rather than a specific teaching in the Bible. We do know that millions have journeyed to the “Holy Land,” though God has no holy land. Only holy people.

We can hardly conceive of writers of the Gospels omitting any mention whatever of Jesus’ appearance --- the color of his eyes, hair, or complexion, if he were tall, short, slender, or sturdy. The only reference to his looks that I recall is in the prophetic words of Isaiah (53:2) that “*he had no form or comeliness that we should look upon him, and no beauty that we should desire him.*”

In our culture, especially influenced by Hollywood, the hero must be portrayed as tall, handsome, macho, and a “babe-magnet.” A religionist or intellectual is often typed as an unappealing nerd. We can hardly picture Jesus as being of slight stature looking like Michael J. Fox. Moses might have looked more like Saddam Hussein than Charlton Heston. Abraham might have been more like Yassir Arafat (perish the thought!) than your favorite movie actor. And who can think of Paul looking like Marlon Brando or Henry Kissinger?

Because Christianity spread early into the Roman Empire, the early depictions of Jesus were that of a Westerner rather than a Middle Easterner. Artists portrayed him as “their own kind” rather than as someone strange to their race and culture. As missionaries took the Gospel to other races and cultures, they took that image of Jesus and other Bible characters with them also.

Why did no one paint a portrait of Jesus, Moses, and David? Our answer can be more solidly based on this point. The Second Commandment forbade the making of graven images. Most of us would not interpret that as a prohibition of painting a portrait like artists have made of noted heroes throughout history. Portraits indicate no leaning toward idolatry. Rabbis, however, interpreted that commandment as forbidding any physical representations of the human form.

The Rabbis can hardly be faulted for their restrictive view for history has demonstrated the tendency of believers to venerate images related to their religion. Great veneration has been given to images depicting Jesus, Mary, the apostles and others, also to crucifixes, sculptures, relics, and crosses. Many miracles relating to them have been claimed.

Debate about the use of religious images, or icons, lasted for generations. In the Eighth Century, the Iconoclast Controversy became a contest between the state and the church. Leo III favored their use. St. John of Damascus argued that to reject images of Christ was basically rejecting Christ's incarnation. He maintained, "If you do not worship the image neither do you cherish the Son of God who is the living image of the invisible God. . . I worship the image of Christ as God incarnate." About a century later the patriarch Photius, asserted, "He who denies that Christ can be painted, denies Him to have been born of man, and he who does not adore His image, clearly does not adore Him either." (The Columbia History of the World, p. 433-437). The ultimate doctrinal acceptance of icons helped to bring about the Great Schism in 1054 resulting in the division of the church into West and East or Roman and Greek with the Eastern church rejecting all such veneration of images.

Anthropological research concerning Middle Easterners produced by Discovery Channel and BBC suggests that Jesus may have been swarthy (of darker complexion), broad-faced with dark, close-cropped hair and beard. Before our age of ample food, vitamins, and balanced diet, people generally were not as tall as they are today in Western countries. So, physically speaking, as the old saying goes, we might not recognize him if we were to meet him in the middle of the road.

That is a matter of no consequence. Being physical in a physical world, we can form no perceptions apart from sensual influence. Since neither inspiration nor providence gives us an image of Jesus, we are free to visualize him based on characteristics with which we may relate more comfortably. However, we must avoid giving reverence to the image which is due the spiritual being.

The early disciples were promised that they would see Jesus in his return (the parousia), yet no physical description was given by which to recognize him. However, they saw the power of his presence in fulfilling his predictions in his coming circa AD -70.

It is clear that God did not want us to be drawn to Jesus by superficialities like physical attraction and personal charisma which would emphasize the physical over the spiritual. “..He had no form or comeliness that we should look upon him, and no beauty that we should desire him.” Isaiah proceeds in prophetically describing the physical experiences of the Suffering Servant, not as pleasing and appealing but as shocking and painful, as he poured out his soul to death in making himself an offering for sin. The attractive message is: “he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.” How Jesus looked --- his stature, size, complexion, color of eyes and hair, and presence are obscured in insignificance.

(Cecil Hook; July 2002) []