

What did Jesus look like, and does it matter?

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Q. This might be a silly question, but do we know what Jesus looked like? Does it matter?

A. There is a depth to this question that one might not immediately notice. After all, Jesus Christ is the “image of the unseen God” (Colossians 1:15). He himself also said, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). When the Word became flesh, he did it so that we could see and know him. Apparently, it is a good thing to be able to see Jesus.

In fact, there is something incredible about the Incarnation that reveals the very identity of God himself.

The fullness of revelation is most importantly connected to the words and actions of Jesus while he was on this earth. The Gospel writers never said, “Jesus stretched out his long finger and wrote in the dirt on the ground” or “Jesus looked through his piercing, dark eyes at the rich young man. . . .”

St. John does kind of describe Jesus in figurative language in the beginning of the Book of Revelation, and Isaiah describes something of Christ’s appearance in his prophecy about the Suffering Servant, but these are less about the actual visage of Jesus and more about the nature of how he looked.

We can deduce that it is a good deal less important to know what Jesus looked like than it is to know his identity. His identity is revealed through what he said and what he did.

There is an incredible variety of depictions of Christ through art. Some are good art, some are bad art. Some are good theology, and some are bad theology. The images are meant to teach or reveal something. What they reveal ought to be accurate.

Still, regardless of the talent and objectivity of the artist, almost all images of Jesus are essentially caricatures; one thing is emphasized at the cost of the whole.

The same is true when it comes to images of Jesus in art. They are products of their time and of the aspect of Christ that the artist is trying to convey. They are essentially bound by the limitations of the artist.

We have all heard the critique of the “blond haired and blue-eyed Jesus” of Hollywood. That’s fine, but it is no more limited than the “African Jesus” or the “Asian Jesus.” In fact, this may be an asset, if it helps to remind us that Jesus identifies with all human beings, regardless of race or ethnicity.

Yes, Jesus was Semitic. As such, he would have most likely looked like any other Jewish man of his time and region. He would have most likely been dark-complected with dark eyes. He was likely around five and a half feet tall and well under 200 pounds. Jesus got 100 percent of his DNA from one woman: Mary. He would have looked like her in many ways.

For something of an accurate “photo” of Jesus, the Shroud of Turin seems to be genuine. Of course, it might not be, but it is my understanding that the latest scholarship has supported its authenticity.

No matter how well done a piece of art of Jesus is, it will always be limited. Some will leave us unmoved. So what are we to do? Is there no “face” of Jesus? Well, we have at least two.

First, Jesus identifies himself with the poor, the immigrant, the marginalized, the widow and the orphan. If you want to know what Jesus looks like, we have only to look at those whom the world rejects.

We are obsessed with good-looking people and with fit and healthy people. Beauty and strength are goods, and they reflect something of God. But Jesus identifies himself more with the weak and rejected than with the strong and the popular.

The other image of Jesus is just as incredible and mysterious. While all images of Jesus in the world are approximations of what Jesus might have looked like, the Eucharist is Jesus. We look at art. We look through icons. We behold the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. His face is both seen and unseen in the Eucharist.

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