

Jesus, the Image of God

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Without the coming of Jesus of Nazareth into the world we would probably not know the meaning of the expression, “the image of God,” as found in Gen 2:26-27 and 2:7. Adam was a magnificent artistic creation that reflected something of the artist himself. The rabbinic interpretation of the “image of God” was for the most part, eschatological, in that he would be restored to life in the messianic age. He would receive his former glory, and those of the resurrection would share something of the restored image that had been severely damaged by the fall. Here the expression “image of God” appears to have been a manifestation of the glory of God more than a metaphysical concept (See Robin Scroggs, *The Last Adam*, pp 23-31, 38-49, for an excellent discussion of the rabbinic view of Adam.)

There are only a few references to Adam in the OT. In Gen 9:6 the sanctity of human life is based upon the fact that man was created in the image of God. In the Gospels there is a reference in the genealogy of Jesus that runs from Jesus back to Adam who is called the son of God (Luke 3:38). There’s also Jesus’ reference to Gen 2:24, concerning the command of God given through Adam that man was to leave his father and mother and establish a family of his own (Matt 19:4-6). There is also a possible reference in Matt 22:15-22, where Jesus compares the image of Caesar imprinted on the Roman coin to the image of God imprinted on man.

The development of Adam as a precursor of Christ is something revealed to Paul, which Paul beautifully develops in explaining to the human race why God was redeeming the human race and why man was of such importance to God. Paul’s use of the first man Adam to explain the presence of sin in the world is developed in Romans 5, and in 1 Cor 15. Paul uses the fall of Adam

to explain why the faith and obedience of Jesus was so critical to the story of redemption. Paul also uses this Adam typology to explain the concept of new creation in Christ, as contrasted with the first creation of man. All those who are of the old creation are condemned because they are yet “in Adam,” where those “in Christ” have experience new creation and are developing within themselves a restoration of the image of God. There is much more Adamic imagery in Paul, which will be further developed in this lesson. The first matter of importance concerns the meaning of the expression “image of God,” as it relates to Jesus of Nazareth.

The Image of God in the OT

The concept of the image of God comes from the opening chapters of Genesis, which is the written account of a very ancient oral tradition concerning the origins of man; an oral tradition I think was around a long time before the writing of Genesis. There are numerous creation stories or traditions dating back into the earliest anthropological periods of man, the Genesis 1-3 account is the most ancient (cf. Lesson 16, *Excursus on the Origins of Man*.) As relates to the creation of man, the Genesis account is as follows:

*And God said, Let us make **man in our image, after our likeness**: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the heavens, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth; and **God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them** (Genesis 1:26-27).*

This reference is followed by Gen 2:7, and a passing comment in Gen 5:1, “This is the book of the generations of Adam; in the day that God created man, in the likeness of God made he him.” Another in Gen 9:6, “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God has God made man.” There are numerous references to the Hebrew word *adam*’ used for “man” or “mankind,” but not as the proper name of the first patriarch, Adam. Adam does not appear again after the Genesis reference until used by Paul in his letter, which were the first documents of the NT to be

written. The significance of this is that Paul is the major architect of what has become known as “Adam Christology” in NT studies. In fact, Paul’s first references to Adam is found in 1 Cor 11:7, “A man ought not to cover his head since he is the image and glory of God.” Then, in his most extensive development of Adam typology, in 1 Cor 15:20-49. He then uses the term “image of God” in direct connection with Jesus in 2 Cor 4:3-6. This is followed by his use of Adam as the one who brought sin into the world, found in the letter to the Roman church (5:12-21), followed in Romans 8:28, with the instruction that the followers of Christ are to be conformed to the image of Christ, a concept earlier suggested in 2 Cor 3:18.

The two letters to the Corinthian church and the letter to the Roman church, written from Corinth, contain Paul’s most in depth discussion of a typology of the first Adam set in juxtaposition to Jesus as a second or last Adam (Paul’s Adam Christology). Typology is a literary device where one idea or figure serves as a “type” of something else. For example, Moses is used as a type of Jesus throughout the Gospel of Matthew. Typology is used especially in the messianic prophecies of the OT: 2 Sam 7:11-16; Isaiah 7:12-17.

In the prison epistles of Ephesians (4:22-24) and Colossians (1:12-15; 3:9-10), one finds what is, perhaps, the most in depth development of how God, from the expulsion of Adam from Eden, determined to redeem Adam’s offspring and his offspring through recreating him; first, in the renewal of his spirit, then in the recreation of his body at the end of man’s sojourn on earth. This was accomplished through the sending of man’s redeemer, the very one who was a personification of the image of God.

The Meaning of “the Image”

In typical Greek usage an *eikon* is a physical image or likeness of a person or thing. It was the major term used for an “idol” throughout the first century world, found in the Greek OT (LXX) in over eighty-eight occurrences in this sense. The Hebrew language is as concrete as the Greek language is abstract. For the Jewish scholars, the way of perceiving of an abstract concept was to give it concrete

visualization. The Jewish rabbis converted all abstracts into concrete visualizations. The way a rabbi would explain the meaning of an abstract term was to tell a story giving the abstract some form of visualization. For example, to give meaning to the word righteousness a rabbi would tell a story demonstrating an act of righteousness; thus, giving it visualization.

Jewish rabbis were known for their storytelling, those especially gifted developed into a guild of storytellers called the *maggidim*. In contemporary Judaism the *maggid* is one of the most esteemed figures within Judaism. The reason for their popularity is their ability to make complicated issues intelligible by the use of stories. Where the Greeks were known for their love of the abstract, Jewish scholars were known for their ability to transfer an abstract concept into a concrete image, thus, giving the abstract visualization.

It is possible that this is what Paul, a schooled rabbi, has done to give visualization to the concept of the image of God. The concept is something of an abstract given that the expression “the image of God” is difficult to visualize in that God is identified throughout the Hebrew Scriptures as *ruach*, spirit. When one attempts to portray a spirit in literature or film, it is usually portrayed as a midst, a distorted light, or something similar. This is the case with the concept of “the image of God.” It is difficult to perceive without the use of a concrete or physical representation.

This is possibly why Paul, brought up in the deeply Hellenistic culture of Tarsus as well as being schooled at the feet of the master rabbi Gamaliel, was “the chosen vessel” given the revelation of God that Jesus was, in a typological sense, the second Adam. Paul could have understood the abstract nature of the image of God as a metaphysical thing; yet, be able to give it imagery or visualization by identifying Jesus as “the image of God.”

Paul goes to great lengths to make the moral character of Christ the paradigm by which the followers of Christ would be known. The moral character of Jesus was a reflection of the moral character of God, and the believe is to identify him or herself with Jesus to the extent that they are a reflection of Jesus in terms of his moral character and thus, a reflection of God in terms of moral character.

In the thinking of Paul, Jesus was “the image of God,” and thus was a reflection of his moral character. Paul is giving the abstract nature of the image of God concrete visualization in the person Jesus of Nazareth.

The thing most distinguishing the God of Israel from the gods and goddesses of the Greco-Roman world was their monotheism and the moral nature of the God of Israel. What he required of those he created was to love him with all of their heart, their minds, their souls, and their strength; this interprets out as loving God in all aspects of his being. The aspect of being with which we can most identify is his moral character.

The God of Israel was “a holy God” and this distinguished him from all other deity figures. The word “holy” in both Hebrew and Greek means, “that which is separate from what is common in nature and use. It means to be distinguished by purity of being, that which distinguishes itself by its sacredness.” Rudolf Otto has given the word “holy” its most distinctive meaning in his book, *The Idea of the Holy*, in which he defines “holy” as *mysterium tremendum*, a Latinism meaning “that which overwhelms man with wonder and awe, and at the same time fills him with fear and trembling (*Idea of the Holy*, pp 12-24). Because God is *kabod* (holy) he is separate or other than man; thus, according to Otto, God is “Wholly Other,” (p 25). Even though he is “Wholly Other,” he placed a part of himself in man, which man has always had great difficulty accepting, let alone living up to it.

This is critical for us to see if we are going to see God as we wish to be seen. The gods or goddesses of Rome, Greece, Egypt, or any other of the nations of the Mediterranean world, were anything but “wholly other,” and were known for their disdain and cruelty toward humans; especially, in the rape of mortal women and the slaughter of men at their pleasure. Jesus came into the world to show us the Father and this he did by showing God to be not only wholly other, but compassionate, merciful, and gracious, as a father love his children, and Jesus was the expression of that love.

The Image of God Personified

In Paul's second letter to the Christians in the Greek city of Corinth, he introduces his readers to a revelation given to him by God concerning the concept of new creation, which is after the pattern of the precursor of the human race called "Adam," from the Hebrew word for the matter (*adamah* - ground) out of which the human body was created. In Gen 2:7 we read, "Yahweh Elohim formed man (*adam*/LXX *anthropos*) of the dust of the ground (*adamah*), and [God] breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man (*adam*) became a living being (*nephesh chayah* - a living being containing breath), (Gen 2:7).

That man was the creation of God and that he was created in the image of God was a belief well known to the whole of Judaism, in Palestine and throughout the Diaspora of the Hellenistic world.

In 2 Cor 4, Paul writes,

. . . if our gospel has been hidden to the ones being destroyed, 4 the unbelieving in whom the god of this age has blinded their minds, it is to the end that the illumination of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is (estin) the image of God (eikon tou theou), may not dawn upon them (2 Cor 4:3-4).

Those who refuse to acknowledge the Messianic identity of Jesus of Nazareth are "the unbelieving" in verse 4. In the course of the argument Paul is presenting here, he is clearly identifying Jesus as the one who is "the image of God." In his letter to the Colossian church Paul writes,

[let us] give thanks to the Father, who made us fit to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light; 13 who delivered us out of the power (exousias-authority) of darkness, and transferred us into the kingdom/reign of the Son of his love; 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins; 15 who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation (Col 1:12-15).

Paul appears to be working from the belief that Jesus of Nazareth was not only “one of us” as a human being, he was the very part of God in whose image all men were created. In him, in some mysterious and wondrous way, he was “the image of the invisible God, and the firstborn of all those created anew by the power of his resurrection from death. Paul is not the only inspired writer to portray Jesus as a reflection of God, but he is the one who gives the most ink and papyrus to the concept.

As developed in the previous lesson, one of the most significant Pauline text where this theme is found is Phil 2:5-11.

Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, existing in the form (morphe) of God counted not being the same (isos - equal to, the same as) with God a thing to be grasped (harpagmon - to hold in one's clutches), (Phil 2:5).

Here Paul presents Jesus as being one with God, in the form (*morphe* - likeness, appearance, or identifying characteristics) of God. When something is being compared to something else, there must be identifying characteristics by which the comparison is made. Without visible form *morphe* would have to be other identifying characteristics by which something is identifiable or known.

Jesus consistently portrayed God as a compassionate God, full of loving-kindness, grace, and mercy, and Jesus was a very reflection of all that God was as a moral being. The image or reflection of God Jesus set before the people of Israel was a God who was not only a holy God, he was a God full of moral goodness, which Jesus exemplified in acts of compassion.

As discussed in the previous lesson, the writer of Hebrews is as close to the teaching of Paul as one can be without taking up the terminology of Paul's Adamic Christology. The writer is identifying Jesus as one who was the radiance or reflection (*apaugasma*) of the glory of God, who was the exact expression (*charakter*) of the essence of God. The radiance Jesus revealed was not a physical display of his person; rather, it was a revelation of the moral nature of God. The Greek word translated as “exact expression” is *charakter*, which is

defined as, “the impress or stamp on coins, seals, etc.; to set a stamp upon a thing; the mark or token impressed on a person or thing, a characteristic, distinctive mark; a likeness, image, exact representation,” (Liddell & Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*). The writer is saying that Jesus was a reflection of the glory of God and, metaphysically speaking, he was an exact expression of the *hupostasis* of God (i.e. the reality, substance, nature, or essence of a thing. Liddell & Scott, *Lexicon*).

The Hebrews author does not speak of Jesus as the second Adam, as has done Paul; he does, however, make use of texts from the Hebrew Scriptures that relate to the Adam and relates them to Christ. In Heb 2:6 he quotes Job 7:17, where Job asks God,

What is man, that you should exalt him, that you should set your heart on him, 18 that you should visit him every morning, and test him every moment? What is man that you make so much of him, that you give him so much attention, 18 that you examine him every morning and test him every moment?

Also in this verse, he quotes Psalms 8:4, where the psalmist raises the question with reference to God’s concern for man (Adam) and the son of man (Adam’s offspring), and uses these texts to address the issue of the identity of the one who came into the world as a man and through the sacrifice of himself reversed the curse of death placed upon Adam. In this text (2:1-9) the writer admonishes his readers to take great care concerning how they hear the message of salvation that had been a part of God’s plan since the fall of the first Adam.

We must give more attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. 2 For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, 3 how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord (Christ), was confirmed to us by those who heard him (the twelve). 4 God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will (the apostles and

prophets of the early church) *5It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking. 6But there is a place where someone has born witness saying. [Here the writer refers to Psalms 8:4-6, which is a reference to the creation of Adam] What is man (Adam) that you are mindful of him [Job 7:17; Psalms 8:4] or the son of man (the offspring of Adam) that you care for him? 7You made him a little lower than the angels; you crowned him with glory and honor 8 and put everything under his feet," [Psalms 8:4-6; Gen 1:26-27)]. In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him (mankind, the sons of Adam). 9But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone (Hebrews 2:1-9).*

The writer draws from Job 7 and Psalms 8, which refer to Adam, and applies them to Jesus as the one who fulfilled the task of Adam to reign as the head of all God's creation. The Christology of the writer of Hebrews sees Jesus, as does Paul, he is the one who was the very reflection of God, an exact representation of God in all aspects of his being.

Conclusion

Jesus' understanding of who he was is consistently presented throughout the writings of the NT; but, that Jesus was the very personification of the image of God was something that was revealed to Paul and others later.

What man was given at creation as "the image of God" is revealed by Jesus in his earthly incarnation. When asked by Philip, one of the twelve, to show them the father, Jesus replied, "in that you have seen me, you have seen the Father," (John 14:9-10). How so? He was "the image of God" as Paul affirms in Col 1:13-15,

For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. 15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

So also in 2 Cor 4:3-6,

*And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. 4The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of **the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.** 5For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. 6For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.*

What was it Jesus had shown his disciples whereby they could see a reflection of God? His whole ministry was intended to reveal the Father to Israel and nations. God was holy in their eyes, but they knew him better as a lawgiver than as a Creator, whose love for his creation led him to come into the world and take upon himself the task of redeeming mankind from self-imposed enslavement to the powers of sin and death.

Jesus was the very manifestation of the image of God; as a man he had born the image of God in his humanity, but as the Son of God, he was the very image of God; not in physical appearance, but in his moral character, as manifested in his words and deeds. In all he said and did he was showing them the Father.

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