

Jesus as the Image of God

What and how is Jesus the image of God? Is this in regards to appearance, character, or nature?

Human beings in God's image

In the beginning, God created human beings in His image. The Hebrew noun that underpins the English translation "image" is "tselem." As a noun, "tselem" means a "visual representation." But what does this really mean?

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image (**tselem**), according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." God created man in His own image (**tselem**), in the image (**tselem**) of God He created him; male and female He created them. (Gen 1:26-27)

1. The Genesis account indicates that God formed man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being (Gen 2:7). God's purpose of creating man appears to be making His image as a projection, a visual representation, of power and authority over earth; thus, the image of God includes the idea of supreme authority.

With the sin of Adam and Eve, the image of God became corrupt. Their nature now sinful and, by extension their character, the supreme authority they once had was lost.

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned— (Rom 5:12)

They answered Him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never yet been enslaved to anyone; how is it that You say, 'You will become free'?" Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin." (John 8:33-34)

Jesus answered and said, "This voice has not come for My sake, but for your sakes. Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. (John 12:30-31)

2. The image of God is a living being. This concept becomes apparent when God places an emphasis on the prohibition of creating any idol resembling Him. Idols were dead and as such, represented pagan gods.

You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. (Ex 20:3-4)

God intended His relationship with man based on His covenant and word, which is only possible between living personal beings; faith did not entail trust in a dead idol but trust in the word of the living God.

3. The image of God is holy, without sin, and eternal. The image of God as a living being is further qualified in God's judgment of the Fall of Man (Gen 3:1-7).

Then the Lord God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might stretch out his hand, and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever"— therefore the Lord God sent him out from the garden of Eden, to cultivate the ground from which he was taken. So He drove the man out; and at the east of the garden of Eden He stationed the cherubim and the flaming sword which turned every direction to guard the way to the tree of life. (Gen 3:22-24)

Here the image of God, as a living being, was originally eternal, which was the privilege that Adam and Eve had before their sin. Their expulsion from the Garden of Eden was specifically intended to deny them access to the Tree of Life. It will not be until the end of human history when human beings, now glorified, are in the presence of the predominant Tree of Life in New Jerusalem (Rev 22:1-2).

While God's invisible and nonphysical form is emphasized in the New Testament (John 1:18), the Old Testament does portray God's physical appearance in human form: Abraham sees God as three persons (Gen 18:1-16), and Jacob sees God as a single person (Gen 32:24-30). These accounts, as well as those that describe God with human characteristics, suggest that Adam, as the image of God, may include some physical / spiritual resemblance to God.

A son in his father's image

Just as God created man and made him in the image of God, the sons of human beings were created in the image of their respective fathers. There is a parallel between the image of God and the image of Man.

This is the book of the generations of Adam. In the day when God created man, He made him in the likeness of God. He created them male and female, and He blessed them and named them Man in the day when they were created. When Adam had lived one hundred and thirty years, he became the father of a son in his own likeness, according to his image (**tselem**), and named him Seth. (Gen 5:1-3)

In contrast to the creation of Adam, Seth is the beneficiary of genetic material from his parents Adam and Eve. In this instance, the meaning of "tselem" as a "visual representation" may include a physical nuance in meaning. Of particular note is that from this point on, the concept of "tselem" deemphasizes the female aspect of the original concept of man, male and female, created in the likeness of God (Gen 1:27; 2:21-23; 5:1-2).

But what did God mean by stating that Adam bore "a son in his own likeness, according to his image"? In Adam's genealogical account, his first two sons Cain and Abel were left out and neither were recognized as "a son in his own likeness, according to his image; Seth was the third son of Adam (Gen 4:25).

Birth order does not appear to be a factor in this designation.

In judgement of his sin of murder, Cain is "cursed from the ground," becomes a vagrant on the earth, and is removed from the presence of God (Gen 4:3-16).

At the time of Adam's creation, God never mentions Adam as His son. But it is implied that Adam is His son when God's first mention of a firstborn son is in the figurative sense and a reference to the nation of Israel. While God sees the nation of Israel as His "firstborn son," the nation is never seen as in the "image of God."

Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the Lord, "Israel is My son, My firstborn. So I said to you, 'Let My son go that he may serve Me'; but you have refused to let him go. Behold, I will kill your son, your firstborn.'" (Ex 4:22-23)

Here God indicates a function of His son, "that he may serve Me." While identifying the nation of Israel as God's son presupposes a hereditary link to sonship, God defines sonship as he who serves Me. Sonship includes the sense of obedience and failure to do so disqualifies one as God's son.

Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel." (Ex 19:5-6)

So watch yourselves, that you do not forget the covenant of the Lord your God which He made with you, and make for yourselves a graven image in the form of anything against which the Lord your God has commanded you. For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God. (Deut 4:23-24)

They have acted corruptly toward Him, they are not His children, because of their defect; But are a perverse and crooked generation. (Deut 32:5)

When God identifies His son as the firstborn, he is one whose character He approves of. With that approval, the firstborn is the recipient of special privileges and responsibilities; the son receives the birthright. This can be easily understood in the singular sense when God declared David to be His firstborn (Ps 89:27). Although a genetic hereditary link is lacking, God makes a divine covenant with David promising that his house and throne will last forever (2 Sam 7:8-17; 1 Chron 17:8-15).

With similar consideration, the image of Adam is assigned to the one whose character is approved of by both God and Adam. Seth, created in his father's likeness, in accordance to his image, was the recipient of special privileges and responsibilities as the firstborn son of Adam. Observe carefully that it is the image of Adam that receives the birthright is not the image of God.

Jesus in the image of God

The New Testament brings together the concepts of the image of God and the image of Man in the person of Jesus Christ. When Jesus identifies Himself as the Messiah, Son of God, and the Son of Man, the concept of image of God takes on a greater meaning that is more encompassing than simply a "visual representation" of God.

While Jesus states explicitly on occasion that He is the Messiah (John 4:25-26) and the Son of God (John 10:34-36), in most instances, He only alludes or infers that He is the Son of God.

The inference is seen when Jesus connects the Messiah to the Son of God (John 3:16-18, 34-36; 5:25-27) or by connecting miracles to the Son of God (John 11:4).

But in over 70 instances, the most common inference Jesus makes is mentioning "my Father" to draw attention to their relationship and its implications to a Believer's relationship (i.e. Matt 7:21): intimacy and obedience. Jesus has little concern for the position esteemed in title of Messiah or Son of God.

Explicit public evidence was so scarce that at the time of His trial, Jewish religious authorities could only convict after Jesus answered affirmatively when asked if He was the Son of God (Luke 22:70; John 19:7).

Most of the unequivocal identifications of Jesus as the Son of God, recognizing His position and authority, came from supernatural beings: God Himself (John 1:29-34), angels (Luke 1:35), Satan (Matt 4:3-6; Luke 4:3-9), and demons (Matt 8:29; Mark 3:11; 5:7; Luke 4:41; 8:28).

In most instances, Jesus self identifies Himself as the Son of Man (Matt 12:8; Mark 10:45, etc.), and this use is exclusive to Jesus; it is never a way that others use to refer to Him. The phrase, first introduced in Daniel, "like a son of man" (Dan 7:13), is an Aramaic idiom that refers to somebody. Jesus appears to use "the Son of Man" as a way to speak of Himself modestly and to avoid speaking in the first person. The writer of Hebrews shares this view of modesty (Heb 2:6). Jesus' use of "the Son of Man" is a veiled way of expressing His relationship to both God and man.

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1. Relationship to God. With “Son of Man,” Jesus is referring to Daniel, the Old Testament prophet to the Jews in Exile, who prophesizes the return of the glorified King and Judge appointed by the Ancient of Days (Dan 7:12-14, 25-27). This self-identification is a subtle statement of the sovereign authority given to Him.

The Son of Man revealed, while present on earth, that He was Lord of the Sabbath (Matt 12:8; Mark 2:28; Luke 6:5) and forgave sin (Matt 9:5-6; Mark 2:9-10; Luke 5:23-24).

The Son of Man and the Messiah are One. The Son of Man (Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45) and the Messiah (Jer 23:5-6; Dan 9:24-26) came to save. The Son of Man / Messiah suffers (Matt 17:12; Mark 8:31; 9:12; Luke 9:22 / Isa 53:2-7) and dies (Matt 20:18; 26:2; Mark 10:33 / Dan 9:26).

The Son of Man and the eschatological return of the glorified King and Judge are One (Matt 16:27-28; 24:30-31; 26:64; Mark 13:26-27; 14:62; Luke 21:27 / Dan 7:12-14, 25-27).

When you see Jesus, you see God His Father (John 14:7-11).

2. Relationship to Man. With “Son of Man,” Jesus is referring to Adam. This self-identification carries with it the idea of the firstborn and birthright.

In tracing Jesus’ genealogy all the way back to God (Luke 3:23-38), Luke establishes that Jesus was the Son of Adam and also the Son of God.

In tracing Jesus’ genealogy to Abraham, Matthew establishes that the Son of Man is a descendant of David, which Jesus acknowledges (Mark 12:35-37; Rev 22:16) and, as others recognize, the Son of David (Matt 15:22; 20:30).

The apostle Paul sees Jesus’ relationship to Adam as a contrast to emphasize Jesus’ Messianic purpose and recovery of the image of God (1 Cor 15:42-49).

First Adam	Perishable Body	Dishonor	Weakness	Natural Body	Living Soul
Last Adam	Imperishable Body	Glory	Power	Spiritual Body	Life Giving Spirit

But the apostle Paul recognizes Jesus as the Firstborn Son of God, and states explicitly that “He is the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15). Paul sees no difference between the glorified Jesus Christ, image of God, and the very essence of God the Father, the invisible God. In so doing, the apostle is making a distinction from Adam who was originally created in the image of God.

For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. (Col 1:16-17)

For the apostle Paul, Jesus is like His Father, a living Being involved with creating all things including other personal beings. Jesus’ existence before Creation attests to His eternal life (Gen 1:26). Jesus and God the Father are One (John 10:30; 17:11, 21), and They coexist as seen by sharing the same title “the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end” (Rev 21:6; 22:13).

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He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. (Col 1:18)

For the apostle Paul, Jesus like His Father, is the basis of faith and is entitled of worship. All that God the Father has is Jesus' (John 16:15). All that was given to Jesus (John 6:37, 39; John 13:3; 17:2; Matt 11:27; Luke 10:22; John 3:35) is everything belonging to God including the authority of salvation and judgment (John 5:21-22; 9:39). Jesus has the power to forgive (Mark 2:1-12), is the means for everlasting life (John 6:47) and determines who enters the Kingdom of God (Rev 20:11-15).

For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven. (Col 1:19-20)

For the apostle Paul, the image of God can be summed up in one phrase, "for it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in" Jesus His Son. The phrase, "through Him to reconcile all things to Himself," speaks of Jesus' atoning sacrifice and emphasizes God's agape love (John 3:16-17) in restoring broken relationships. Without Jesus coming as a human being, the context of agape love would be missing in the concept of the image of God. The apostle Paul makes this connection elsewhere:

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. (2 Cor 4:3-4)

The apostle John also recognizes Jesus' representation of the invisible God in heaven (John 14:7-9; 15:24):

No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him. (John 1:18)

In Jesus Christ, the image of God, the nature and being of God is perfectly revealed.

The significance of Jesus Christ as the image of God is that it reasserts the image of God as the power and authority over earth (John 14:9). Only through Jesus Christ can human beings recover their original created purpose as the image of God (Rom 8:29-30; Phil 3:20-21).

References:

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