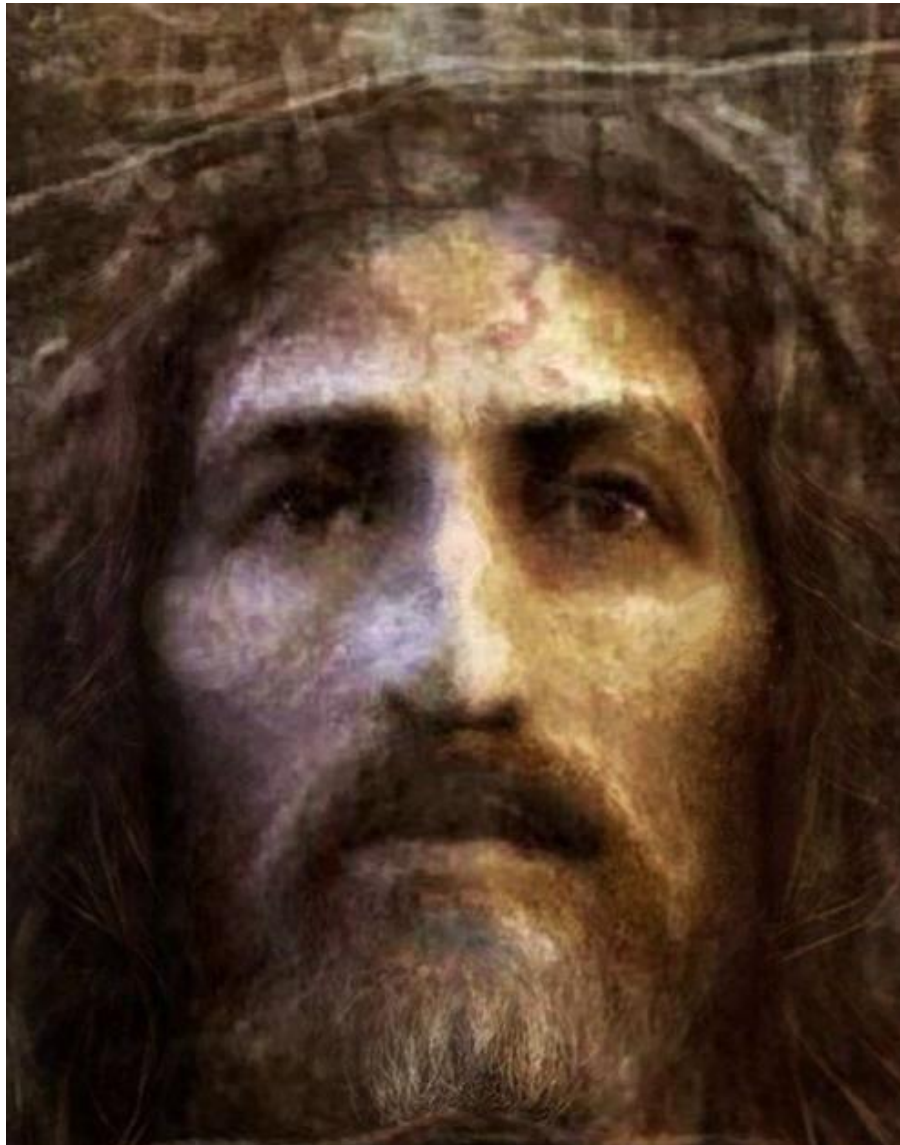


# The Face of God

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*A speculative image based on the Shroud of Turin*

## The Face of God

What does God's face look like? The above picture is a rendition of the face of Christ based on the Shroud of Turin which is how Jesus may have looked as a man. But what does he look like now? Does the Triune God of the Bible have a face?

There are many artistic works from antiquity depicting of the gods of Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Greece, Rome, etc.

There were over 2,000 gods in the Egyptian pantheon... They evolved from an animistic belief system to one which was highly anthropomorphic and imbued with magic... These gods all had names, individual personalities and characteristics, wore different kinds of clothing, held different objects as sacred, presided over their own domains of influence, and reacted in highly individualistic ways to events ([Mark, 2016](#)).

The Greeks suppose the gods to be like men in their passions as well as in their forms... In the words of Xenophanes, Ethiopians make their gods black and snub-nosed, Thracians red-haired and with blue eyes; so they conceive the spirits of the gods to be like themselves ([Clement, c. 200](#)).

But the God of the Bible forbade the Israelites from making images of Him in the 2<sup>nd</sup> commandment (Exodus 20). Why was this command given? For at least two reasons:

1. It is impossible for an image to adequately represent God, and therefore it would deceive people into thinking that God was like or could be reduced to the image.
2. People focus on tangible things which they can see and touch and tend to worship images of what they think is a representation of God. But God is beyond the physical so that such worship is not devotion to God – it is the worship of idols and fetishes.

In Exodus 33 and 34 Moses saw God but was not permitted to see His face, and this prohibition against “graven images” was followed into New Testament times and beyond. Constantine's Edit of Milan in AD 313 and the later actions of the emperor Theodosius making Christianity the state religion brought many pagans into the church which created tensions about images and worship practices. Later in the same century Augustine indicated that many so-called Christians were “superstitious,” leading them to be “worshippers of tombs and pictures.” ([Augustine, c. 400](#)) The empress Constantina wrote to Eusebius, the bishop of Caesarea, asking for “an image of Christ.” He responded,

To represent the divine was to follow the pagans... to fulfill the empress's request would mean that we appear like idol worshippers, to carry our God around in an image ([Eusebius, c. 313](#)).

It was not until the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries and the iconoclastic controversies that the debate was more-or-less settled, and Christian art was created in abundance.

Having a tangible object of anything helps us to understand and come to grips with it, as well as perhaps appreciating its meaning and implications. So it is with all artistic objects – we gain insight into the thinking and motives of the artist. This was what Jesus Christ was all about. In effect he was a divine work of art meant to show the face of God to everyone, not simply by his appearance, but also by his words and deeds. This is explained in John 1: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory.” Jesus is described as the “Word” or the communication from God to people.

Should we therefore be apprehensive about seeing the face of God? Some conceive of God in Buddhistic terms as an impersonal “spirit of nature,” as a distant uninvolved deistic being who wound up the universe but is no longer active in the affairs of men, or as an angry, judgmental Allah. But the reality is that we will then be looking at the face of our Father who like the best of human fathers is both merciful and tough – who understands our frailties but who also doesn't suffer fools gladly. We will then be looking into the eyes of someone who knows everything we have done, but not merely that. He will also know why – what our real motives were in doing everything we did, and everything we even thought. Furthermore, we will suddenly realize and be pierced with the understanding that this being is the One that formed our minds and brought us into existence, and therefore to whom we are accountable for how we used the time and resources that were given to us.

Years ago when one of my sons was around eight years old, we had a guy staying with us who participated with our kids. One day they were late for soccer practice, and he was trying to hurry them along, when my son, whose video game had been interrupted, said to him: “You're not my dad – you can't tell me what to do!” What will it be like to look into the face of God who is our ultimate Dad – the One who designed our minds and bodies, and who created everything? Will we be able to look Him in the eye? Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Moses was not allowed to see God's face – it was done for Moses' sake because he wouldn't have been able to bear it.

In the end that Face which is the delight or the terror of the universe must be turned upon each of us either with one expression or with the other, either conferring glory inexpressible or inflicting shame that can never be cured or disguised. I read in a periodical the other day that the fundamental thing is how we think of God. By God

Himself, it is not! How God thinks of us is not only more important, but infinitely more important. Indeed, how we think of Him is of no importance except in so far as it is related to how He thinks of us. It is written that we shall “stand before” Him, shall appear, shall be inspected. The promise of glory is the promise, almost incredible and only possible by the work of Christ, that some of us, that any of us who really chooses, shall actually survive that examination, shall find approval, shall please God ([Lewis, 1941](#))

At the end of the age, perhaps in the near future, there will be a time of both judgement and rewards. Like what happened with Willie and Carl in the movie *Ghost*, the end may come sooner than we imagine. Everyone wants justice and fairness to prevail, and in the end it will be so. In the words of the apostle John, this is what will take place:

Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, both the small and the great, standing before God. The books were opened. and another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. The dead were judged according to their works, by the things that were written in the books. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to their deeds (Revelation 20:11-13).

For better or for worse we will then see the Face of God.

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