

# JESUS CHRIST, PICTURES AND IMAGES OF.

## I. The Oldest Views and Data on the External Appearance of Jesus.

The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha (? 1).  
The Church Fathers (? 2).  
Other Data (? 3).

## II. Literary Data on the Oldest Pictures of Jesus.

### III. Extant Pictures of Jesus.

#### 1. Portraits Ostensibly Authentic.

Portraits by Painters, Sculptors, etc. (? 1).  
Alleged Supernatural Pictures (? 2).

#### 2. Pictures of Jesus in Ancient Art.

Symbolical and Allegorical Representations (? 1).  
Representations as Teacher and Lawgiver (? 2).

## IV. Origin of the Pictures of Jesus.

### I. The Oldest Views and Data on the External Appearance of Jesus:

#### 1. The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha.

Neither the New Testament nor the writings of the earlier post-Biblical Christian authors have any statements regarding the personal appearance of Jesus, thus contrasting sharply with the Apocrypha and the Pseudepigrapha and especially with the works of the Gnostics. In the "Shepherd" of Hermas (ix. 6, 12) the lofty stature of the Son of God is emphasized, and according to the Gospel of Peter he even towered above the heaven at his resurrection. Gnostic influence is betrayed by visions in which Christ appears as a shepherd, or the master of a ship, or in the form of one of his apostles, as of Paul and of Thomas, or again as a young boy. In the Acts of Andrew and Matthew he assumes the figure of a lad, and the same form is taken in the Acts of Peter and Andrew, in the Acts of Matthew, and in the Ethiopic Acts of James. Manazara is healed by a youth in the Acts of Thomas, and a beautiful lad appears to Peter and Theon in the *Actus Vercellensis*, which also mentions the smile of friendship in the face of Jesus. A handsome youth with smiling face appears at the grave of Drusiana in the Acts of John, but certain widows to whom the Lord restored their sight saw him an, aged man of indescribable appearance, though others perceived in him a youth, and others still a boy. The youthfulness of Christ is also mentioned in the life and passion of St. C·lus and the vision of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas ascribed to the risen Christ the face of a youth with snow-white hair.

#### 2. The Church Fathers.

The early Christian authors were by no means concordant in their opinions of the personal appearance of Jesus. Some, basing their judgment on Isa. lili. and liiii., denied him all beauty and comeliness, while others, with reference to Ps. xlv. 3, regarded him as the most beautiful of mankind. To the former class belong Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Basil, Isidor of Peluaium, Theodoret, Cyril of Alexandria, Tertullian, and Cyprian. Origen declared that Christ assumed whatever form was suited to circumstances. It was not until the fourth century that Chrysostom and Jerome laid emphasis upon the beauty of Jesus. While Isidor of Pelusium had

referred the phrase, "Thou art fairer than the children of men" in Ps. xlv. 2, to the divine virtue of Christ, Chrysotom interpreted the lack of comeliness mentioned in Isa. liii. 2 as an allusion to the humiliation of the Lord. Jerome saw in the profound impression produced by the first sight of Jesus upon disciples and foes alike a proof of heavenly beauty in face and eyes. From the insults inflicted upon Jesus Augustine concluded that he had appeared hateful to his persecutors, while actually he had been more beautiful than all, since the virgins had loved him.

### 3. Other Data.

The Problem of the life passion of St. C? us, and the external appearance of Jesus possessed but minor interest for the Church Fathers,

■ although the Catholic Acts of the Holy Apostles ascribe to him an olive complexion, a beautiful beard, and flashing eyes. Further details are first found in a letter to the Emperor Theophilus attributed to John of Damascus (in *MPG*, xcv. 349), which speaks of the brows which grew together, the beautiful eyes, the prominent nose, the curling hair, the look of health, the black beard, the wheat-colored complexion, and the long fingers, a picture which almost coincides with a hand-book on painting from Mt. Athos not earlier than the sixteenth century. In like manner, Nicephorus Callistus, who introduced his description of the picture of Christ (*MPG*, cxlv. 748) with the words, "as we have received it from the ancients," was impressed with the healthful appearance, with the stature, the brown hair which was not very thick but somewhat curling, the black brows which were not fully arched, the sea-blue eyes shading into brown, the beautiful glance, the prominent nose, but brown beard of moderate length, and the long hair which had not been cut since childhood, the neck slightly bent, and the olive and somewhat ruddy complexion of the oval face. A slight divergence from both these accounts is shown by the so-called letter of Lentulus, the ostensible predecessor of Pontius Pilate, who is said to have prepared a report to the Roman Senate concerning Jesus and containing a description of him. According to this document Christ possessed a tall and handsome figure, a countenance which inspired reverence and awakened love and fear together, dark, shining, curling hair, parted in the center in Nazarene fashion and flowing over the shoulders, an open and serene forehead, a face without wrinkle or blemish and rendered more beautiful by its delicate ruddiness, a perfect nose and mouth, a full red beard of the same color as the hair and worn in two points and piercing eyes of a grayish-blue. The unauthentic character of this letter is admitted by all.

## II. Literary Data on the Oldest Pictures of Jesus:

(1) A handkerchief embroidered with the figures of Jesus and his Apostles, and made, according to legend, by his mother, is said to have been seen by the monk Arculfus during his residence in Jerusalem (Adamnan, *De Locis sanctis*, i. 11 [12]). (2) In his account of his visit to C?rea Philippi, Eusebius mentions (*Hist. eccl.* vii. 18) a group of statuary in brass which consisted of a kneeling woman and a man standing with his hands stretched out toward her. Local tradition saw in this a figure of Jesus and the woman healed of an issue of blood, who was said to have come from C?rea Philippi. This legend was accepted by Eusebius, Asterius Amasenus Photius, Sozomen, Philostorgius, and Macarius Magnes, the last-named calling the woman Beronike. The actual meaning of the group is uncertain. Some have seen in it an emperor and a province, possibly Hadrian and Judea while others have regarded it as Yculapius and Hygeia, a view which is vitiated by the fact that no mention is made of the serpent-staff characteristic of statues of the god of healing. It is entirely possible that the group actually represented Christ and either the woman with an issue of blood or possibly the woman of Canaan who implored him to heal her daughter. (3) According to Iren? (*H?i>.*, I., xxv. 6), *pictures of Christ were possessed by the Gnostic sect of Carpocratians, who crowned them with garlands like the pictures of philosophers--Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, and others--while, according to the Carpocratians, Pilate had a portrait of Jesus painted during his lifetime, and the Carpocratian Marcellina possessed a picture of Christ which she honored, like those of Paul, Homer, and Pythagoras, with prayer and incense.* (4) The Emperor

Alexander Severus had a picture of Jesus; it must have been, however, only an ideal portrait, like those of Apollonius, Abraham, Orpheus, and others, which were also included in his *lararium* (Lampridius, *Vita Alex. Sev.* xxix.). (5) A brass statue of the Savior was erected by Constantine the Great before the main door of the imperial palace of Chalce (Theophanes in MPG, cviii. 817). (6) A picture of Jesus "painted from life" was possessed by the Archduchess Margaret which may be the same one as D<sup>39</sup>'s altar-piece of St. Luke at Brussels (M. Thausing, *D<sup>39</sup>*, p. 420, Leipsic, 1876).

While the portraits just mentioned were prepared by human agency, there were others to which a supernatural origin was ascribed. To this category belong (7) a picture at Camulium in Cappadocia, apparently on cloth and perhaps a copy of that of Edessa (see below). It was mentioned at the second Nicene Council and was carried to Constantinople by Justin II., where it was regarded as so sacred that a special festival was instituted in its honor, and it was frequently carried in war as a potent icon (J. Gretsei opera, xv. 196-197, Regensburg, 1741). (8) In the war against the Persians the General Philippicus had a picture of Christ which the Romans believed to be supernatural in origin, and the same portrait served to quell a mutiny in the army of Priscus, the successor of Philippicus. This icon was apparently on cloth, and was a copy of an original which was frequently confounded with a portrait in Amida, although the latter is expressly said to have been painted, and was, consequently, natural in provenience (Zacharias, MPG, lxxxv. 1159). (9) A Syriac fragment mentions a picture of Jesus painted on linen and found unwet in a spring by a certain Hypatia shortly after the Passion. This portrait left a miraculous imprint on the napkin in which it was wrapped, and one of these pictures found its way to C<sup>32</sup>rea while the other was taken to Comolia (possibly identical with the city of Camulium already mentioned), although a copy was later found at Dibudin (?) (Lipsius, *Die edessenische Abgarsage*, p. 67, n. 1, Brunswick, 1880). (10) About 570 a linen mantle was shown at a church in Memphis which bore the impress of the Savior's face and was so bright that none could gaze at it (Antoninus Martyr, *De locis sanctis* xliv.).

(11) Byzantine literature frequently mentions pictures of Christ impressed on bricks. According to a legend which presents several slight variations, the portrait of himself which Jesus had sent to Abgar at Edessa was believed to have been walled up to save it from the attack of

King Ananun and to have been rediscovered in 539 together with a brick which bore a miraculous copy of the original (Georgius Cedrenus, ed. Bekker, i. 312, and others). (12) The patriarch Germanus, when forced to leave Constantinople, is said to have taken with him a picture of Christ which later came into the possession of Gregory II. (G. Marangoni, *Istoria dell' oratorio di San Lorenzo*, pp. 78 sqq., Rome, 1747). (13) The cloth with a picture of Christ presented by Photius to the hermit Paul at Latro in the ninth century was merely a copy of a miraculous original, although only he to whom the gift was made was able to perceive the portrait, others seeing only the cloth (Gretses, *ut sup.* p. 186). (14) More important than all other statements concerning the oldest pictures of Christ is a passage of Augustine (*De trin.* viii. 4), stating that the portraits of Jesus were innumerable in concept and design.

### **III. Extant Pictures of Jesus.**

#### **1. Portraits Ostensibly Authentic:**

##### **1. Portraits by Painters, Sculptors, etc.**

(1) The paintings of Luke, of which the best known are two at Rome. One of these is in the chapel *Sanctus Sanctorum*, although the statement that Luke painted a portrait of Jesus dates only from medieval times, the monk Michael, the biographer of Theodore of Studium, being one of the earliest sources. In the last quarter of the twelfth century the legend of Luke was interwoven by Wernher of Niederrhein with the tradition of Veronica (see below). Luke, in answer to Veronica's entreaties, is said to have made repeated attempts to portray Christ, but his endeavors were unsuccessful. Jesus then impressed the image of his face upon the handkerchief of Veronica. Another picture ascribed to Luke and painted on cloth is in the Vatican library, while a third is said to have been placed in the cathedral of Tivoli by Pope Simplicius. Other pictures are likewise ascribed to a similar provenience, and very late traditions even attribute statues of Christ to the chisel of Luke. [In the

church of San Miniato at Monto, in the environs of Florence, Italy, is shown a portrait of Christ, attributed to Luke.] (2) To Nicodemus is ascribed a statue of the crucified Christ carved in black cedar and preserved in the Cathedral of Lucca. Its design shows that it dates at the earliest from the eighth century, although tradition states that the model of Nicodemus was furnished by the impress of the Savior's body on the linen cloths purchased to cover the corpse at the descent from the cross. (3) A "true and only portrait of our Savior taken from an engraved emerald which Pope Innocent VIII. received from Sultan Bajazet II. for the ransom of his brother, who was a captive of the Christians," frequently reproduced in photograph is in reality the copy of a medal which may have been cut at the command of Mohammed II., and which is, at all events, of comparatively modern date. (4) The mosaic in the Church of St. Praxedis in Rome, which is exhibited on festal occasions, is by no means one of the earliest Christian mosaics, although tradition regards it as a present to Pudens from the Apostle Peter.

## 2. Alleged Supernatural Pictures.

Alleged supernatural pictures may be divided into those which represent the entire figure of Jesus, and those which give only his face. (1) Cloths of medieval date containing more or less clear outlines of the figure of a man, all claiming to be the "napkin" in which Jesus was wrapped in the grave and on which his image was impressed, were formerly found in Chamb · , and until the end of the eighteenth century, in Besan · , while they still exist at Compi · e and Turin, the latter "napkin" being declared authentic by a bull of Sixtus IV. Far more famous, however, are the cloths which bear only the impress of a head or face and of these one of the best known is (2) the picture of Edessa, or the Abgar picture. According to the Doctrine of Addai and Moses of Choren, Hanan, the envoy of the king of Edessa, painted a portrait of Jesus and took it to his royal master. Evagrius, on the authority of Procopius, states that Christ sent to the king a picture of miraculous origin. The legend apparently arose about 350, and may well have been based on an actual painting which remained at Edessa till 944, when it was brought to Constantinople by the Emperor Romanus I. Its subsequent fortunes are uncertain, although various cities laid claim to its possession, especially Genoa, Rome, and Paris, the first-named city advancing the most probable arguments for authenticity and receiving the confirmation of Pius IX.. This picture shows only the head of Jesus, but legend also knows a full-length Edessene portrait on linen produced by contact with the body of Christ. It is mentioned by Gervase of Tilbury in the beginning of the thirteenth century, who bases his statement on ancient sources and says that it was exhibited on festivals in the chief church of Edessa, and that on Easter it shows Jesus successively as a child, boy, youth, young man, and in the ripeness of years. (3) One of the choicest treasures of the Roman Church is the handkerchief of Veronica, which is shown only on special occasions, particularly in Passion Week. This portrait is said to have been transferred in 1297 by Boniface VIII. from the Hospital of the Holy Ghost to St. Peter's in Rome, where it reposes behind the statue of St. Veronica. The picture, which is now much faded, shows an elliptical face with a low-arched forehead, in marked contrast with the long nose. The mouth is slightly open, and the scanty hair is visible only on the temples. The beard on the cheeks is thin, but is stronger on the chin, where it ends in three points, while the mustache is more conspicuous for color than for strength. The eyes arched by scanty brows, are closed, and, combined with features distorted by agony and stained with blood complete the picture of a martyr pale in death. From the point of view of esthetics and the history of art, the picture is probably Byzantine. Although one would expect the picture of Veronica to be regarded as the napkin which covered the head of Christ, there is no tradition as to its origin, although a mess of medieval legends connects it with the name of a woman. These may be divided into two classes. In the older group, apparently written shortly before the ninth

century, Veronica appears as the woman afflicted with an issue of blood, who had a portrait of Jesus either painted by herself or at her bidding, or else impressed by Christ himself upon a piece of cloth. The second form of the legend sprang up in France and Germany in the course of the fourteenth century and superseded the older version before 1500. According to this tradition, Veronica gave the Savior a handkerchief on his way to Golgotha, and received it back impressed

with his features. Further amplifications of the tradition stated that the napkin was brought to Rome by John VII., or even during the reign of Tiberius, while it is certain that Celestine III. prepared a reliquary for it. At all events, what is clear is that during the medieval period Rome possessed a cloth picture of Christ, which was apparently supposed to be the miraculous impress of the head of Jesus in the sepulcher. It is significant, moreover, that it bore the name sudarium before the rise of the legend of the handkerchief given Christ to wipe his face on his way to the cross, nor was it until the twelfth century that the name of Veronica even began to form a part of the tradition, a connection suggested by a popular etymology of Veronica as Vera \*?\* ("true image"). This legend of Veronica gave rise to a tendency of art which reached its culmination in D<sup>o</sup> who represented the napkin of Veronica and the Savior with a crown of thorns, combining the suffering in the face of Jesus with the loftiness and the majesty of the Son of God, (4) The picture of Christ in the apse of St. John Lateran at Rome is supposed to have been miraculously produced when the church was dedicated by Pope Sylvester, although it is in reality a mosaic of recent date.

## **2. Pictures of Jesus in Ancient Art:**

### **1. Symbolical and Allegorical Representations.**

In the course of time pictorial representations of Jesus became either real or symbolical and allegorical, the latter tendency gradually giving way to the former. To the category of symbols belong the fish, the lamb, the various monograms of Christ, and the Good Shepherd, the last-named leading to representations of Jesus in human form. As early as Tertullian the Good Shepherd adorned chalices, and it was a favorite form of decoration in the catacombs, where the figure usually carries a goat or a wether. In these pictures, often adorned with other animals, trees, and shrubs, and based on Luke xv. 5; John x.; and Ps. xxiii., the Christ appears only in youthful guise, although the Shepherd is usually clad in garments of a higher rank and wears the Roman tunic and the pallium as well as sandals. The figure, moreover, is Latin instead of Oriental in type, and represents a youthful and beardless sometimes even boyish, figure, a round head with curling hair, and a frank face with regular features. This type of picture, purely ideal as it was, underwent evolution in the course of time. In the third century the face grew more oval, while the unparted hair grew slightly over the forehead in the center and flowed on the sides in wavy or curly locks.

### **2. Representation as Teacher and Lawgiver.**

The first real impulse, however, to artistic representations of Jesus was given by his miracles, though the risen Lord as a teacher and a lawgiver became more and more a subject for pictorial representation. In the midst of all or a part of his disciples, including Paul, Christ appears either on a plain, as in Spain and southern France, or standing on a mountain either within or without the four rivers of Eden, or sitting on a throne with his feet on a footstool or on the clouds while mosaics represent him as seated on the celestial globe. As a teacher, he is depicted as speaking and as holding a book or scroll either in his hand or on his bosom, while as a lawgiver he proffers the Gospel to Peter or Paul. In both of these latter categories the beardless, youthful type gradually grows less frequent, so that on Roman, Upper Italian, and French sarcophagi the central Christ appears bearded, although in the reliefs on their sides he wears no beard, the former representing the risen Lord and the latter the earthly Savior. Originally a characteristic of the ascended Christ, the beard was attributed to Jesus during his earthly ministry after the end of the fourth or the beginning of the fifth century. The struggle between the two types is seen in the mosaics of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo at Ravenna and of St. Michael, but the earliest specimen of the bearded Christ is generally believed to be the so-called Callistinian mosaic which was found in the catacomb of St. Domitilla. In conformity with the manhood implied by the beard, the body increased in height and breadth, while the features became more sharply defined as the bones gained in accentuation over the flesh. The nose became longer and more prominent, and the eyes were deeper and their pupils enlarged, while the angles of the nose and mouth were more sharply outlined. The hair,

while frequently less curling than hitherto, was now represented as falling to the neck and shoulders, and was often parted in the middle. The color both of the hair and of the beard varied through all shades from yellow to gray and black. The upper lip was never clean-shaven, and the beard was sometimes close and sometimes either pointed or rounded, the parted type being found only in rudimentary form in early Christian art.

The bearded Christ represents the climax of the art of early Christianity, and the fifth century ushered in a period of decay marked by all manner of exaggeration. Majesty became stiffness, exaltation unapproachability, and earnestness gloom. Thus the Christ of Saints Cosmas and Damian (q.v.) in Rome, dating from the sixth century, is a figure with, long face, projecting cheek bones, ashen complexion, attenuated nose, mane-like hair, and scanty beard.

It was the task of the Middle Ages to reduce the multiplicity of concepts of the likeness of Christ to unity, a task which required centuries for its completion. The Carolingian period saw a sort of fruitless recrudescence of the process of evolution of the early Christian Period. Even during the Renaissance the beardless type struggled for supremacy with the bearded, especially in miniatures and ivories, but the former steadily lost ground, so that its last sporadic occurrence is a Scandinavian Christ in glory of the thirteenth century,

■ such pictures as the Pietà of Botticelli at Munich being mere anachronisms.

#### **IV. Origin of the Pictures of Jesus:**

While the theory may be advanced that the oldest pictures of Christ were based either on works of art still more ancient or on tradition, it is practically certain that they are not real portraits but ideal representations. This is clear both from their extreme diversity and from the words of Augustine: "What his appearance was we know not." The most primitive type, wherein early Christian and Gnostic documents agree, is that of a boy or youth. The youthful vigor of the early Church in religious and in moral thought, sustained by the belief in the second coming of the Lord and strengthened by persecution, inspired the artist to depict the Christ as the incarnation of undying youth, even as Noah, Job, Abraham, and Moses were represented as beardless boys. Herein, too, lay the genesis of the concept of the Good Shepherd.

With the fourth and fifth centuries the bearded type was evolved side by side with the beardless. The explanation of this change lies in the perfection, strength, and manliness implied by the beard. The parted hair, on the other hand, which is characteristic of the pictures of Christ in this period, especially in the mosaics, typifies his earthly lineage and designates him as one of the children of Israel, since of human beings only Jews and Judeo-Christians are represented with parted hair in early Christian art. The theory, advanced by many scholars, that Greek religious art influenced the various early Christian concepts of the personal appearance of Christ seems to lack sufficient evidence to be in any wise conclusive.

(NIKOLAUS MULLER.)

BIBLIOGRAPHY: W. Bayliss, *Rex regum. A Painter's Study of the Likeness of Christ from the Time of the Apostles*, London, 1903; A. N. Didron, *Iconographie Chrétienne. Histoire de Dieu*, Paris, 1843; W. Grimm, *Die Sage vom Ursprung der Christusbilder*, pp. 121-175, Berlin, 1844; Mrs. Jameson, *History of our Lord as Exemplified in Works of Art*, 2 vols., London, 1872; A. Hauck, *Die Entstehung des Christustypus in der abendlichen Kunst*, Heidelberg, 1880; T. Heaphy, *Likeness of Christ*, New York, 1886 (illustrations valuable); H. M. A. Guerber, *Legends of the Virgin and Christ, with Special Reference to . . . Art*, ib. 1896; E. M. Hurl, *Life of Our Lord in Art*, Boston, 1898 (valuable); E. von Dobschütz, *Christusbilder*, Leipsic, 1899; F. W. Farrar, *Life of Christ as Represented in Art*, London, 1900; J. L. French, *Christ in Art*, Boston, 1900; F. Johnson, *Have We the Likeness of Christ*, Chicago, 1903; J. Burns, *The Christ Face in Art*, New York, 1907; J. S. Weis-Liebersdorf, *Christus- und Apostelbilder*, Freiburg, 1902; J. Heil, *Die fröhtlichen Darstellungen der Kreuzigung Christi*, Leipsic, 1904; K. M. Kaufmann, *Handbuch der christlichen Archäologie*, Paderborn, 1905; G. A. Müller, *Die liebliche Gestalt Jesu Christ, nach der schriftlichen und monumentalen Urtradition*, Styria, 1909.

This document is from the [Christian Classics Ethereal Library](#) at [Calvin College](#). Last modified on 10/03/03. [Contact the CCEL](#).