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**If God created Adam in his own image, in the
image of God created he him, how is Christ The
Image of God?**

J.C.O'Neill

Summary:

The phrase *The Image of God* is shown to be a title for the Messiah, the Son of God, before any of the New Testament was written. The very casualness with which the term is used in the New Testament supports this conclusion, as do references in Philo and a traditional interpretation of the ascent and descent of the angels in the Targums and Talmud.

Gunkel wrote:

Taking the Christology of the New Testament as a whole, the historic person of Jesus and his influence is only one factor among others: indeed, the most important parts of Christology are not derived from the historical Jesus but arose independently of him and before him...

One recalls the many mythical features that we have already [in earlier discussion] found in the Christology of the New Testament. Look at all that has already been identified with Jesus: the enthronement of a new God, the God of the book, in Revelation 5;¹ the rescued child of the Sun and Dragon-slayer of chapter 12; the supernaturally conceived hero of the infancy narrative; the one who travels to Hell and to Heaven! All this is transferred to Jesus because it already belonged to Christ before him. That is, we maintain, the secret of New Testament Christology on the whole. The image of the heavenly Christ must have arisen somewhere, before the New Testament. We now know, from a few

¹ I have interpolated some words here in order to explain the expression *der Magiergott*, relying on pp.60-62.

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traces in Jewish apocalypses, that such a belief existed in Jewish circles...²

A little earlier in the same book, Gunkel said that we have to reconstruct this Judaism out of the New Testament itself.³ This paper will attempt to show that title of *The Image of God* given to Christ in many parts of the New Testament can be seen, from the New Testament itself, to belong to a given Christology that was in existence long before Jesus was born. It is possible, from the scattered references, to reconstruct the well-articulated belief, based mainly on Genesis 1:27, that made possible the casual references in the New Testament to Christ as *The Image of God*.

At the end I shall try to show that Philo of Alexandria has preserved traditions that already express this belief, and that rabbinic sources bear witness to the same theme.

I

We can see that the belief that Christ was the Image of God was already current by the way it is introduced incidentally into a saying that is dealing with another issue. 2 Cor 4:3-4 is arguing that the veiling of the gospel to some hearers is the result of the God of this World who blinds the eyes of unbelievers; the author simply throws in at the end the remark that such unbelievers' blinding means that they cannot behold the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the Image of God. He is not arguing for a new title, simply drawing on a well-known belief.

Similarly, in 2 Cor 3:18 we are all exhorted with unveiled face to gaze on the glory of the Lord—and this *glory of the Lord* is quite unselfconsciously identified as *this same Image*. Christ must be meant, and the readers are assumed to know without telling that *Glory* and *Image* are both titles for him.

A more difficult passage is Rom 8:29, but, however difficult, it shares the same feature of being about something else; the phrase *The Image* as a title of the Son of God is simply thrown in, and the

² Hermann Gunkel, *Zum religionsgeschichtlichen Verständnis des Neuen Testaments* (Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments. I. Band 1. Heft; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1903), pp. 64, 93.

³ Gunkel, p. 64.

readers are assumed to be familiar with the convention. I would translate Rom 8:29: "Those whom [God] has foreknown he has also fore-ordained to be moulded to the likeness of the Image, his Son, so that the Son is to be Firstborn with many brethren."⁴

This presupposed belief that Christ was the Image of God comes to explicit expression in Col 1:15: ὅς ἐστιν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου, πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως, The title is assumed to be well-known, and the bearer of the title is the Firstborn over all creation: *He it is who is the Image of the Invisible God, Firstborn over all creation.* The term *born* excludes the idea in this context that the Image was created, so that it is not possible to maintain that The Image of God was simply part of creation. We must agree with Lindesog that this verse "introduces the great christological section of the Epistle and so stands in a context where no one can deny its pregnant sense." Lindesog has previously drawn the inescapable conclusion that the expression had already entered the common currency of the readers of the epistles. Colossians in particular shows a liturgical or dogmatically settled formulation.⁵

It is fairly simple to reconstruct the exegetical basis of this title for Christ. In Gen 1:27 it is said that Adam was made *according to the image of God*. This was taken to imply that God had an Image according to which Adam was made. This Image is the *Image* explicitly referred to in Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18; 4:4 and Col 1:15. Adam is not *the image of God* but is *made* according to *the image of God*, on this understanding. The phrases *the old man* and *the new man* do not refer to Adam and Christ, for the *new man* is *humanity renewed in knowledge according to the image of him who created the new humanity* (Col 3:9-10). Notice the important *κατά*, according to. The *Image* is the being who can create the new humanity, a new humanity renewed according to the Image. This clear distinction between Adam and his descendants who share his image, and the possibility of humanity being renewed so that it again exists according to the Image in heaven holds good for 1 Cor 15:49 as well. "And as we bore the image of the earthly one, we

⁴ The phrase πρωτότοκον ἐν πολλοῖς ἀδελφοῖς cannot mean *firstborn of many brothers*; ἐν probably means *with*, as in 1 Cor 15.18.

⁵ Gösta Lindesog, *Studien zum neutestamentlichen Schöpfungsgedanken I* (Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis 1952:11; Uppsala: A.-B. Lundequistska Bokhandeln, 1952), pp.226-230 at 228.

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shall bear [or let us bear] the image of the heavenly one", that is, live *according to* the heavenly model. In Eph 4:24 the new humanity is created not *according to the image of God* as in Col 3:10 but *according to God, for righteousness and true holiness. God and the Image of God* are interchangeable.

There does seem to be one exception to this general rule, the rule that *The Image of God* is the title of the heavenly being, and humanity is *according to* the image, living or not living *according to the Image of God*. In 1 Cor 11:7 a man, as opposed to a woman, seems to be called *the image of God*: "For a man ought not to cover the head, being the image and glory of God." We should leave out of account the rest of the verse which says that the woman is the glory of the man, since it is impossible to make *the glory of God* and *the glory of the man* correspond: a woman can hardly be the glory of her man in the same way as the man is the glory of God, for surely the woman is someone the man is proud of and the man's action of covering his head can hardly have anything to do with God's being proud of man. The whole passage seems to be a collection of originally independent sayings, linked by catchwords; here the catchword is δόξα, glory. This is evident if we plot the varying senses given to the word κεφαλή. ⁶

When we take the first part of the verse by itself, we are still confronted by great difficulties. As Jervell notes, we would expect the author to say that Christ was the image and glory of God, according to the argument in verse 3 that the head of every man is Christ.⁷ Perhaps we should take *the image and glory of God* indeed to refer to Christ, and understand ἀνδρῶν as the unexpressed indirect

⁶ For evidence that Paul's epistles contain collections of aphorisms linked together by catchwords, see J.C.O'Neill, *Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), pp. 192-207 on Rom 12; "Adam, who is the figure of him that was to come: A Reading of Romans 5:12-21" in Stanley E. Porter, Paul Joyce and David E. Orton, *Crossing the Boundaries: Essays in Biblical Interpretation in Honour of Michael D. Goulder* (Biblical Interpretation Series, 8; Leiden: Brill, 1994), pp. 183-199; "The Holy Spirit and the Human Spirit in Galatians: Gal 5,17", *Ephemerides Theologicae Louanienses* 71 (1995), 1107-120.

⁷ Jacob Jervell, *Imago Dei: Gen 1,26f. im Spätjudentum, in der Gnosis und in den paulinischen Briefen* (Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments, N.F., 58; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960), p. 298.

object of the verb ὑπάρχω: “For a man ought not to cover the head, the Image and Glory of God being present for that man.” If that is at all possible, then we have found a general rule in the New Testament that *The Image of God* is a title for Christ, and humanity was made, and should be remade, *according to him*.

In 1 Cor 15 there are two passages that refer to Adam as the first man and to Christ either as the last Adam (1 Cor 15:45) or as the second man (1 Cor 15:47). The use of two different terminologies so close, and without any authorial explanation, alerts us to the fact that here we have another collection of traditional sayings. Each must be taken by itself; and, though the terminology is different, the underlying theology is likely to be the same.

In 1 Cor 15:45 the author cites Gen 2:7, the passage about how God breathed into the face of the man he had made out of dust the breath of life and he Ἐγένετο εἰς ψυχὴν ζῶσαν. Notice that the Spirit is already mentioned. The midrash in 1 Cor 15:45 continues: Ἐγένετο ὁ ἔσχατος Ἀδὰμ εἰς πνεῦμα ζωοποιοῦν. The adjective *last* here cannot mean last in time, since there is no particular eschatological matter under consideration; it must have its common meaning of *ultimate* or *highest*. Nor can the ultimate Adam become anything, for all interest is concentrated on the state of the first Adam, not the state of the ultimate one. It seems that the literal translation of the Hebrew by Ἐγένετο εἰς must mean something like *was there as*: the first man, as a result of God’s breathing the breath of life into him, was there as a living soul; and the ultimate Adam was there as the life-giving Spirit.

Again, in 1 Cor 15:47 we have a midrash on the first man and the second man. Who can the second man be? It is likely that this is the man referred to in the messianic prophecy of Gen 3:15, Eve’s seed that would bruise the serpent’s head and whose heel the serpent would bruise. If that is so, then the second man is to be the heavenly Image of God who would be born of a later Eve. That seems to be the exegesis behind Gal 4:4-5.

The same underlying Adam—Christ typology is to be found in Rom 5:12-21 and 1 Cor 15:21-22.

There are other New Testament passages that belong to the same scheme of interpretation of Gen 1. 26 and 27, for, as Jervell notes, the double phrase *image and glory* probably corresponds to the double expression in Gen 1.26 בצלמנו כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ. The

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reference back in 2 Cor 3.18 from τὴν αὐτὴν εἰκόνα to τὴν δόξαν κυρίου supports the suggestion. If there is anything in this, then all the references to *The Glory of God* are potentially references to Christ in the old set of beliefs we are uncovering. In John 1:14 the glory seems to be simply the quality of the incarnate only Son, but in 2 Cor 4:6 the phrase is more likely to be a title: "For it is the God who said, Let light shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of *The Glory of God* in the face of Christ."⁸ Similarly Heb 1:3 seems to call the Son *the radiance of the Glory and the imprint of the Being* of God.

Finally, an *image* of someone could be said to be ἐν μορφῇ in the likeness of someone. The figure in Phil 2:6 who is *in the likeness of God* is probably rightly seen as The Image of God.

II

Are there any traces in Jewish writings of the time of such a settled reading of Gen 1:26-27 according to which God always had with him a being that was named *The Image of God*? Are there any traces in Jewish writings of the time that such a being could have been thought of as coming down from heaven and living as a man on earth?

Philo of Alexandria has preserved many traditions, not all of which fit neatly into one system. Among those traditions there is abundant evidence for the exegesis of Gen 1:27 that we deduced from the scattered New Testament passages.

In *de somniis* i.239 Philo gives a tradition that says that, just as those who cannot see the sun itself see the rays of the sun, and just as they see the halo around the moon as the moon itself, so they comprehend the Image of God, the Word his messenger, as God himself. Similarly in *de confusione linguarum* 97, those who choose Moses to be their guide, and to see (Ex 24:10), desire to see God; if they cannot see God, they see his Image, the most holy Word.

In a complicated set of traditions in *de fuga et inventione* 100-101 the words of Exodus 25:21, *I will speak to you above the mercy-seat, between the two cherubim*, are interpreted allegorically. The two cherubim are the two Powers of God, the Creative Power and the Royal Power. He who speaks from above the mercy-seat is the divine Word which is invisible yet is called The Image of God,

⁸ Omit *Jesus* with A B 33 Tert.

the most ancient of the objects of the intellect, the one who is nearest to the Only One. Finally, the Word is the Charioteer of the Powers.

In *de confusione linguarum* 146 anyone who is not yet worthy of being called one of the sons of God should labour earnestly to be adorned according to his Firstborn, the Word, the eldest of the angels, as it were Archangel, bearing many names, for he is Beginning and Name of God and Word. (I think we should stop here, because the next tradition describes not the Word but the faithful seeker, who is to be named "The man according to the Image, the One who Sees, Israel.")

This Word is said, in another tradition reported by Philo, to be the Image of God through whom the world was all at once made (*de specialibus legibus* i.81). In *legum allegoriarum* iii.95-96 Philo reproduces an ancient tradition about the meaning of the name Bezaleel (Ex 21:2). It means *In the shadow of God*. The Shadow of God is his Word by which, as with an instrument, he made the world. This Shadow or Model is the archetype of others. As God is the paradigm of the Image (which is now called Shadow), so the Image becomes the paradigm of others. As the beginning of Genesis says, And God made man according to the Image of God.

The idea that the Word was the agent of creation is, of course, found in Wisdom 9:1 and many other places, but can we find in Jewish writings any inkling of the notion that the Word or the Image of God might be born as a man and live in this world? In *de agricultura* 51, Exod 23:20, *I will send my messenger before your face*, is interpreted of the Right Word and the Firstborn Son. In *de praemiis and poenis* 95, the important messianic prophecy of Balaam in Num 24:7 is referred to in the following words: *There will come forth a Man, says the oracle, and leading his host and fighting he will subdue great and populous nations*. This corresponds to the tradition in Wisd 18:15-16 which tells of the all-powerful Word leaping from heaven out of the royal thrones, a stern warrior in the midst of the doomed land bearing as a sharp sword God's unfeigned commandment, filling all things with death. This Word touches heaven while treading on earth: a tall one, like the

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Son of God in 5 Ezra 2:43 and the Best of the Hebrews in SibOr 5.256-259.⁹

Professor C.C.Rowland has drawn attention to rabbinic traditions that bear witness to the same theme.¹⁰ The angels who ascended and descended on Jacob's ladder were said to be the angels who had accompanied Jacob into exile. They ascended to heaven to summon other angels, who desired to look on the features fixed on the throne of glory [but could not], promising them that they would be able to see them reflected in the features of the pious Jacob on earth.¹¹ In another version, in the Babylonian Targum, it is reported that a *tanna* taught: They ascended to look at the image above and descended to look at the image below (b. Hullin 91b). It seems that The Image of God was fixed on the throne of glory, and reflected in the features of the righteous man, Jacob, on earth. Jacob may, perhaps, be another type of the Messiah.¹²

Conclusion

The New Testament suggests, by the very casualness of the references, that there was already in existence an old Jewish Christology that saw The Image of God, according to which Adam was created, as a heavenly figure. The Image of God was God's agent of creation, who was to be born and live on earth in order to redeem humanity and restore it to its lost glory. The scattered references in Philo, in particular, supported by later (but ancient) rabbinic traditions about the angels who ascended and descended on

⁹ On 5 Ezra as a Jewish source, see J.C.O'Neill, "The Desolate House and the New Kingdom of Jerusalem: Jewish Oracles of Ezra in 2 Esdras 1-2", in William Horbury (ed.), *Templum Amicitiae: Essays on the Second Temple presented to Ernst Bammel* (JSNT Supplement Series, 48; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), pp. 226-236; on SibOr 5.256-259, see "The Man from Heaven: SibOr 5.256-259", *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 9 (1991), 87-102.

¹⁰ C.C.Rowland, "John 1.51, Jewish Apocalyptic and Targumic Tradition", *NTS* 30 (1984), 498-507. See also C.F.Burney, *The Aramaic Origin of the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922), pp. 115-117.

¹¹ The Targums Pseudo Jonathan, Neofiti I, and the Fragmentary Targum to Gen 28:12, reproduced by Rowland, pp. 501-502.

¹² On the types of the Messiah, see J.C.O'Neill, *Who did Jesus think he was?* (Biblical Interpretation Series, 11; Leiden: Brill, 1995), pp. 63-64 *et passim*.

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Jacob's ladder, show that we are not far wrong in suspecting that
some Jewish exegetes had already worked out this understanding of
Gen 1:27 long before Jesus was born.

J. C. O'Neill
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