

# “That’s How I Imagine He Looks” The Perspective of a Professor of Religion

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“Images of Christ in Latter-day Saint Visual Culture” by Noel Carmack offers an outline of the history of the Latter-day Saint use of images depicting Christ, pointing out influences and tensions that Carmack argues directed the choice of these images from 1890 to 1999. My own approach to this historical pattern is a simpler one: the selection of images of Christ by most Latter-day Saints today is influenced more than anything else by the Saints’ cultural background, which determines how they think Jesus would look; and the proliferation of these images is largely an economic issue and a result of a visually oriented culture rather than the consequence of a focused effort by leaders to project a certain image.

## **The True Likeness of Christ**

Regarding a true likeness of Christ, the old apocryphal letters that purportedly gave a physical description of Jesus have long since been recognized as inauthentic. Carmack suggests there was a time between 1926 and 1957 when a few people in the Church may have taken these descriptions seriously. Today you probably would not find an informed person quoting those descriptions as anything but an example of fanciful imagination.

As Carmack points out quite clearly, Elder Bruce R. McConkie, Elder James E. Talmage, and other LDS scholars of the life of Christ avoided providing a physical description of Jesus. I disagree, however, that the New Testament writers also “studiously avoided” describing the physical features of the Master. While one can only speculate on this issue, I still suspect it simply never dawned on them to try writing a description. Writers presuppose that certain parts of a culture will be assumed by the reader, and the New Testament writers probably were not envisioning readers thousands of years in the future. I cannot imagine that Mark, Luke, Matthew, or John ever thought that readers in the year 2000 would be saying, “I wish you would have told me his height, the length of his hair, the color of his eyes, and the color of his beard—if he had one.” They probably just never thought about it.

### **The Influence of Individuals' Backgrounds upon Acceptability**

“In the absence of any known portraits of Christ,” Carmack quotes artist Arnold Friberg as saying, “artists have pictured His face and figure in countless ways” (41). Up to a point, this multitude of interpretations does not seem to perturb anyone, since these artists are painting, not the likeness, but an idea—a spiritual concept. For example, an artist might try to portray that Jesus is a commanding presence; the viewer looks in his eyes and then sacrifices everything to follow him.

Furthermore, we each invent our own acceptable version of Jesus. Because there is no known legitimate description of him, we all have to make up what we think he would look like and how he would act. Each individual brings to this process a personal religious, educational, and cultural background. This background, especially the cultural aspects, determines the nature of our own mental images and plays a large role in our response to others' visual images of him. Therefore, some viewers might like a painting of Christ and react positively because that particular image basically fulfills their expectation of what Christ is like. Other viewers with different backgrounds might either reject or be disturbed by that same image, feeling that the artist has crossed over a line.

A related discussion is currently going on in the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Ronald Romig, an RLDS historian, has published a daguerreotype that he thinks is an image of Joseph Smith. Latter-day Saint reaction by and large has been to reject it because the daguerreotype does not look like the paintings of the Prophet we are accustomed to seeing. I do not really know if it is or is not Joseph Smith, but I do question whether we would be able to accept it as Joseph even if we had strong proof that it is authentic. I suspect that, because we have built up a certain image of what Joseph Smith looked like, any discovery in the future almost has to match that image for us to feel comfortable with it.

In the same way, Latter-day Saints would not accept a portrait of Christ if it departed too much from their perception of what Christ must look like. As a minor example, those who have had experience living or traveling in the Middle East might wonder at an image of the man Jesus dressed in clean, white clothing. Could a person dressed in white walk through dusty lanes and not get dirty? Those who have not had that experience might not question white robes as typical clothing.

During the first three decades of the twentieth century, as Carmack notes, Latter-day Saints avoided graphic images of the crucified Christ for their private devotion. However, I do not think the avoidance was purposeful. Basically, nineteenth-century LDS converts came out of a Protestant tradition. Only in the second half of the twentieth century have large numbers of LDS converts come out of a Catholic tradition. The Protestant

reaction against the Catholic Church at the time of Martin Luther was to eliminate some of what we might call the more morbid images of Christ—the cross remained, but the crucified Christ was removed from the cross, identifying the worshiper as a Protestant rather than a Catholic. Mormonism was born in a Protestant tradition in New England and in upstate New York. Latter-day Saints may have avoided images of the crucifix simply because it was part of their culture to do so.

### **Cultural Issues: Let Jesus Be Jesus**

Throughout time and in many cultures, deity has been portrayed as the manifestation of that culture’s view of physical and mental perfection. The same is true of images of Jesus. Carmack has provided an interesting discussion revealing the subtle tension between the idea of Jesus as a model of mental and physical perfection and the idea expressed in Isaiah 53:2 that “when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him.” This passage raises some intriguing issues. Most of us do not think critically about our reactions to an image of Christ. For example, which does a particular painting depict—the resurrected Christ or the mortal Christ? More likely, we blend both and assume that the way Jesus looked when he appeared to Joseph Smith and to the disciples after the Resurrection was the way he looked in his mortal life. We have a popular view based on our culture and our society. Only when we stop to ask questions and to think about issues such as those raised in Isaiah 53 do we begin to adjust our thinking.

As I have talked with students during my almost fifteen years of teaching the scriptures in university settings and in the Jerusalem Center, I have realized that we must consider Isaiah’s meaning. If the mortal man Jesus walked into the room, would you know by his appearance that he is Jesus? Would all the people who encountered Christ in his mortal life have seen immediately that there was a unique presence about him apart from his physical appearance? Or did only those who were spiritually attuned feel his compelling power? Did some people find out later who he was and only then say, “Oh yes, I can see that”?

I have often heard students say, “Jesus would not do that,” or, “I cannot imagine him saying that”—particularly when we talk about the nuances of certain Greek phrases in the New Testament or talk about the historical and cultural background. North American students have a hard time grasping that the Jesus described in the four Gospels cannot be easily understood in the context of a middle-class North American culture.

Several episodes come immediately to mind. Often modern readers postulate that a “perfect being” could not use hyperbole or sarcasm. Some

students who hold this position picture Jesus as a sweet animal lover who was never direct nor confrontational. Nothing could be further from the reality. The Gospels are clear that he often struck out against self-righteousness, harshly rebuking both individuals and groups. In John 5, Jesus confronts a group of Jewish leaders (the usual meaning of John's "the Jews") and states, "Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life" (John 5:29). Jesus' use of sarcasm and irony is strong here. The *Amplified Bible* captures the flavor of this statement: "You search and investigate and pore over the Scriptures diligently, because you suppose and trust that you have eternal life through them."<sup>1</sup> Jesus, in this instance, is deriding the leaders' mistaken belief that one can find eternal life in the words of dead prophets preserved on the hides of dead animals rather than understanding that the scriptures testify of the living Jesus and should lead their readers to accept him as the Son of God.

A second example is found in Luke 15:1–7. In this pericope, Jesus reproves the Pharisees and scribes with a parable dripping with sarcasm and concludes, "I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance" (Luke 15:7). The point is that the Pharisees and scribes think they are righteous and do not need to repent and therefore reject the forgiveness Jesus offers publicans and sinners.<sup>2</sup>

Mark 10:23–25 contains another example of the problems confronting a modern reader who is unprepared to accept Jesus as portrayed by the first-century authors of the Gospels and settles instead for "Jesus-as-I-imagine-him-to-be." My students often repeat things they have heard about the "needle's eye" when discussing this pericope. Either they note that the passage refers to a mountain pass, called the needle's eye, which camels can barely squeeze through if they are not fully loaded, or, more often than not, they tell about a special gate in the ancient wall of Jerusalem through which a camel could pass on its knees without saddle or goods. These are defenseless and misguided attempts to take the sting out of the aphorism and rob Jesus' words of their edge. The disciples are "astonished" at Jesus' words because they know of no caravan pass or special gate (see Mark 10:26). Only in the recent past have commentators proposed such an interpretation.<sup>3</sup>

The fact is that when confronted with Jesus as portrayed in the text without forced interpretations, our cultural views and preconceived ideas are often found hollow and wanting. We are separated by two thousand years of not only history but also cultural and religious development. I try to suggest to my students that they let Jesus be Jesus—if something needs to change, it is probably their view of him.

### **Ethnicity: Christ Is beyond Race**

Since the majority of Latter-day Saints in the nineteenth century and through the twentieth century have been western Europeans or descendants of western Europeans and since Church leaders, with some exceptions, have been from northern European backgrounds—Great Britain and Scandinavia—the images of Christ in Latter-day Saint visual culture need to be seen in the larger context of these cultures. We paint Jesus as we think he would look—so he looks like us. Doing this is natural. I feel comfortable with myself, so I paint him my height or that of someone I know; I may paint his hair the color of my hair, his eyes the color of mine. In most of our newer art, Christ looks as if he came from Northern Europe. I think we need to be careful in drawing conclusions about this phenomenon: we cannot tell if a depiction of Christ with northern European racial features is the artist’s conscious choice based on belief or if it is related simply to the artist’s ethnic culture and time.

Nevertheless, too much is made of the notion that the Book of Mormon says that Jesus looked like the gentile Europeans—a European from southern Italy may be much darker skinned than someone from northern Italy who, in turn, would look different from a Scandinavian. Additionally, all the terms describing the gentile Europeans in LDS scriptures are relative—Nephi wrote that they were “white” and “fair” like his people (Jews) were before they were slain. What seemed white or fair to Nephi might be different from what seems white or fair to someone from Scandinavia.

Of course, another important concept must enter in—the idea that the resurrected Christ is probably beyond race. As is his resurrected Father, he is neither European, Asian, nor African. Paul states that God “hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth” (Acts 17:26). Humankind came from one divine source before there was race. Racial differences that humans tend to emphasize may be, in reality, only superficial and a result of mortality (the Fall).

### **Economic Influences and the Increased Demand for Art**

In 1971, a shift in the LDS culture occurred. Some of the official publications of the Church were discontinued and the look of the new publications was changed. More and better reproductions of art are now incorporated, providing a significant outlet for religious art. Carmack mentions that in the entire year of 1971, only five images of Christ were reproduced in the *Ensign* in contrast to a total of 119 in 1999. I believe portraits have appeared more frequently since 1985 in part because the Church has grown, providing a larger base of people interested in purchasing religious art. Members have more buying power, and they like the art they see in the Church

publications. This demand produces more artists. They like Gary Anderson's pieces. That means he is going to be successful. The vote is at the cash register.

Carmack also suggests that there is a growing interest in the fine arts among LDS people. I think sophisticated LDS people who have either been trained or exposed to fine art have always been attracted to it. Therefore, the trend might be simply numerical—the growing interest in fine art may simply represent the growing number of members of the Church. It would be interesting to see more data.

One aspect of the increased demand for visual images of Christ that Carmack mentions I concur with: the claims of would-be critics that Mormons are not Christians have forced us to reexamine the public image we project. We have always known we are Christians, with Christ at the center of our beliefs, but we seem to have done a poor job of letting others know that. As a result, we have taken specific steps to ensure that people understand our Christianity. Just as the logo of the Church was changed to emphasize the name of Christ by increasing the size of the letters, we have in fact tried to project our belief in Christ by displaying more visual images of him in our homes and meetinghouses, thus increasing the demand for more art.

During the pioneer period, Latter-day Saints could not afford the luxury of art. Members of the Church in North America are richer today. I can buy things to put on my wall that nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints could not. Newspapers from the 1870s carry advertisements for prints of Brigham Young's likeness. Relatively few prints were purchased, perhaps not from lack of interest but from lack of means. If forced to choose between a loaf of bread and a painting, most people in pioneer Utah would have picked the bread. We have to be careful when we compare the nineteenth-century Church with its limited number of members and limited resources with the modern Church with millions of members, many of whom have surplus resources to purchase items that seemed out of reach to a generation born a hundred years ago.

When money becomes more available, we purchase more art. The art also becomes more a part of our religious instruction because it is readily available. We have more pictures, we use them more, our manuals are better, paper quality is better, we can afford colored prints—we are able to do things that we could not have done a hundred years ago. The popularity of the Gospel-in-Art series was probably just part of this natural economic development rather than a specific effort to accomplish a certain end. As money became more available for religious images, artists were able to provide more art.

The increase in the demand for visual images of Christ might spring not only from economic development, but also from our increasingly

visual culture. In the first century, Jews had an aversion to portraying human images. The earliest Christians, among whom were a significant number of Jews, would not have felt the desire for a physical image of Christ. It would take a new generation of Christians who did not come out of that background to begin to depict images for devotional worship. These images begin to appear in the catacombs only in the third and fourth centuries. Today we are bombarded with visual images in newspapers, magazines, billboards, movies, and particularly television. The faces of political figures, sports heroes, and media stars are all part of our everyday lives and decorate the rooms of our young people. We surround ourselves with the images of those who represent that which is important in our lives.

### **Art as a Didactic Tool**

Art may be “an effective didactic and inspirational mechanism” (20) in reinforcing and strengthening LDS belief in the plurality and corporeal nature of the Godhead, as Carmack asserts. However, art does not seem to create such beliefs. While going through museums in Moscow just before the fall of the Soviet Union, I was struck by the fact that there was so much religious art. My guide was not a Christian, did not own a Bible, and had never gone to Sunday School, yet she knew the stories of the Bible as well as if not better than the average American knows them. When I asked her how she became so familiar with the stories, she said, “Russian kids are exposed to the museums, so we see the art.”

Here was a person who had been exposed to the art and knew the stories but did not assume, because of that art, that God exists, that Jesus is separate and distinct from God, and that the Father and the Son have corporeal natures. People may see religious art and not see or accept the theological interpretations in it. I do not think a Protestant or Catholic would look at a painting of the resurrected, embodied Christ and suddenly assume that the three members of the Godhead are separate beings and that God has a body.

Carmack argues that the Latter-day Saint visual perception of Christ throughout the last century was born out of a form of biblical literalism and that “Mormon literalism disregarded the skepticism of textual scholarship. . . . Consequently, official Latter-day Saint publications adopted images from a large body of Western art that substantiated Christ’s ministry as a historical reality” (20). Carmack has carefully documented which images were selected for publication, but I am not convinced that officialdom chose these images specifically to support biblical literalism. Certainly there have been LDS scholars interested in these issues, but I think the vast majority of Saints and those who were reproducing art for LDS audiences were simply part of a larger culture—Mormons have shared with evangelical

Protestants and many faithful, conservative Catholics a belief in the relative consistency of the biblical narrative. From the nineteenth century well into the twentieth century, Catholics, Protestants, and Mormons basically could not be segregated on the issue of literal interpretation of biblical text. They all accepted the consistency of the Bible and believed it was the word of God.

As part of this culture, Mormons use art to portray Christ in a real rather than a symbolic way. They believe the Bible stories; they depict the stories. For example, the painting *Christ and the Rich Young Ruler* has been reproduced numerous times. But it has hung on walls in seminaries and in church buildings more because people liked it, not because they wanted to declare their belief in the historical reality and literal divinity of Christ.

## Conclusion

Images of Christ—what we think Jesus would look like, what he would wear, or how he would act—reflect more than anything else our general western culture. One young woman is quoted by Carmack as saying of a particular image of Christ, “I’ve seen this one so much that that’s how I imagine him to look” (61). I believe that people generally do choose images of Christ that they are familiar with because of their culture and experiences. If one were to talk with this young woman, read some scriptures with her, and read about antiquity, she might have a different response to a visual image of Christ—a more complex view of things. What we bring to the image basically will determine how we react to the image. Within the Church, then, the distribution and proliferation of images of Christ become primarily a matter of economics and the expectations inherent in a visual culture.

Because Christianity has had a long history of depicting images of Jesus Christ, Christian art can be discussed in terms of development, styles, and popular trends. Mormon culture, however, has existed less than two hundred years, and Mormon art much less than that. The Church is just emerging from the dominance of North American, Western European culture. The real issues involved in LDS choices of images of the Savior might be apparent only after we have a longer history ourselves. Five hundred years from now, we could look back and realize that not much change occurred in our first one hundred or one hundred fifty years. It will be intriguing to see what happens.

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1. John 5:39, from the *Amplified Bible*, in *The Precise Parallel New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 504.

2. See Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1977), 277–78.

3. See Hugh Nibley, *Approaching Zion* (Salt Lake City and Provo: Deseret Book and Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1989), 315.