



## How Did Jesus Become White?

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## How Did Jesus Become White? (Question)



Plate 1: A white Jesus ascends to heaven

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Doing that is relatively easy since, believe it or not, the Bible contains no description of Jesus' physical appearance. We do, however, know a thing or two about demographics, which means that if Jesus did exist where and when the Bible says he did, he certainly was not white.

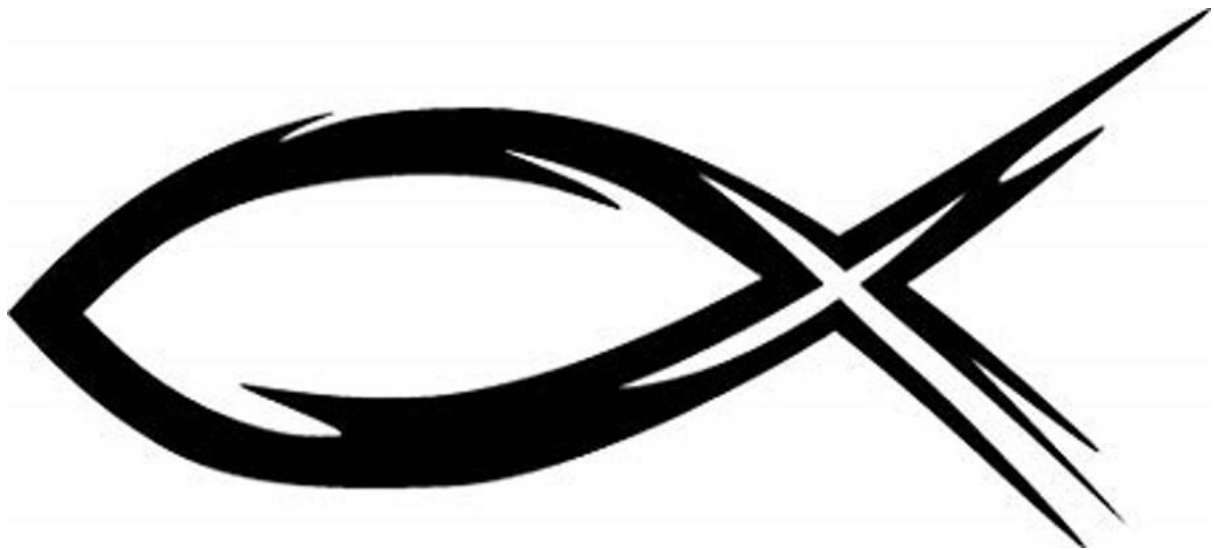
And yet today, we envision him as just that.

As far as anybody knows, not even an amateur attempt to depict Jesus can be found from a time before about the second century.

This has a lot to do with the position Christians held in Roman society at the time: though conditions varied from place to place,

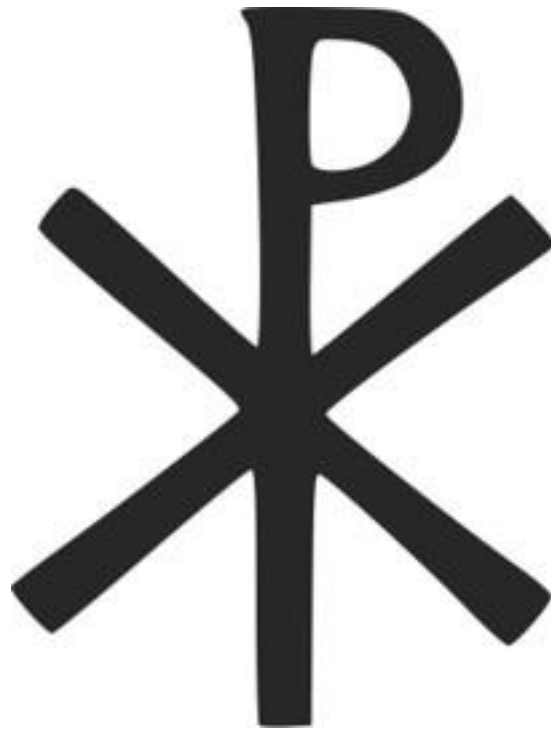
it's fair to say that following Jesus was not a career-enhancing move until sometime in the fourth century.

Prior to that, most Christians depicted their Lord symbolically with the “ichthys”, [\[plate 2\]](#), or the “Jesus fish” you’ve seen on a million hatchbacks.



The first appearances of the ichthys symbol in Christian art and literature date to the 2nd century AD. The symbol's use among Christians had become popular by the late 2nd century, and its use spread widely in the 3rd and 4th centuries. The symbolism of the fish itself may, of course, have its origins in pre-Christian religious imagery.

Or the Chi-Rho, [\[plate 3\]](#), which combined the first two letters of the Greek Christos as a kind of secret shorthand to help believers find each other and their places of worship.



The Chi Rho, (also known as chrismon or sigla), is one of the earliest forms of christogram, formed by superimposing the first two (capital) letters—chi and rho (XP)—of the Greek word ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ (Christos) in such a way that the vertical stroke of the *rho* intersects the centre of the *chi*.

The Chi-Rho symbol was used by the Roman emperor Constantine I (r. 306–337) as part of a military standard or vexillum. Constantine's standard was known as the Labarum. Early symbols similar to the Chi Rho were the Staurogram and the IX monogram.

In pre-Christian times, the Chi-Rho symbol was also to mark a particularly valuable or relevant passage in the margin of a page,



abbreviating chrēston (which means “good”). Some coins of Ptolemy III Euergetes (r. 246–222 BC) were marked with a Chi-Rho

Given this environment, it’s perhaps understandable that what is arguably the first depiction of Jesus Christ, Lord and Saviour, is a bit of satirical graffiti scratched in plaster by a second-century Roman dudebro giving his friend a hard time:

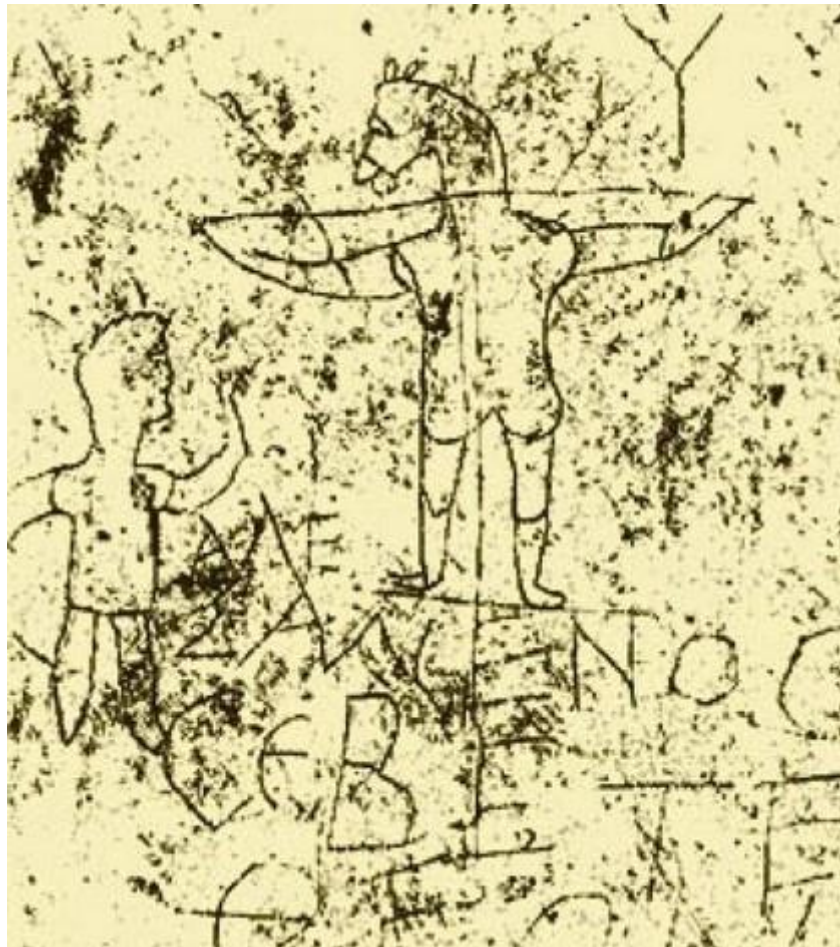


Plate 4: Alexamenos Worshiping God

This is in the Palatine Antiquarium Museum, a museum dedicated to the history of the Palatine Hill. Rome is the city built upon seven hills and the Palatine Hill is at the centre of them all, rising up above what remains of the Roman Forum on the one side and the Circus Maximus on the other.

It has been the context for many of history's most significant moments. Some of the museum's exhibitions display models of the early villages that predate the founding of Rome while others hold relics of ancient temples and other buildings that used to adorn the hill. Among the relics, secured high on one wall, this curious piece of graffiti.

This graffiti, carved into plaster, was discovered in 1857 during archaeological excavations and was soon dubbed Alexamenos graffito. It is old and faded and the original design is difficult to discern, yet a careful tracing reveals two roughly drawn figures and a string of Greek characters.

To the left is a man raising his hand in adoration, in worship or prayer. To his side, rising above him, is a second man suspended from a cross. Crucifixions were commonplace in ancient Rome and this man looks like we would expect: His arms are outstretched, pinned to a crossbar, his feet are planted upon

a platform, he is wearing some kind of a garment that covers his lower body.

What distinguishes him from any other crucified criminal is that while he has the body of a man, he has the head of a donkey. The inscription says, "Alexamenos sebetai theon," "Alexamenos worships his God."

Positive depictions of Jesus date from around the third century. In this fresco, found in the St. Callisto catacomb in Rome, Jesus is shown as a Good Shepherd with olive skin and totally contemporary dress for the time and place.





Plate 5: Jesus as “good shepherd.

Jesus is even shown without a beard, which was common among Romans at the time, but unheard of for Judean men.

These are the largest and busiest of Rome’s catacombs. Founded at the end of the 2nd century and named after Pope Calixtus I, they became the official cemetery of the newly established Roman Church.

In the 20km of tunnels explored to date, archaeologists have found the tombs of 16 popes, dozens of martyrs, and thousands upon thousands of Christians.

The catacomb where it was found probably began as a Roman family tomb but expanded into a place of burial and secret worship after the family converted to Christianity. It may also have served as a convenient bolthole during the Great Persecution of Diocletian in the late third century.

The patron saint of music, St Cecilia, was also buried here, though her body was later removed to Basilica di Santa Cecilia in Trastevere.

When her body was exhumed in 1599, more than a thousand years after her death, it was apparently perfectly preserved, as depicted in Stefano Maderno's softly contoured sculpture, a replica of which is here.

Already in this image, possibly the oldest surviving attempt to represent him, Jesus is clearly being depicted as if he had been a Roman of Italian or Greek extraction.

While the modern concept of representational art might look askance at this sort of thing, remember that Jesus had previously

been depicted as an abstract symbol or arcane combination of letters.

In a real sense, what Jesus would have actually looked like in life was irrelevant to the people who met under this fresco. What was important was the connection they felt to him and to each other.

With the conversion of Constantine in the early fourth century, Christianity was free to come out of hiding. More than that, with a friendly emperor and extremely devout queen mother (St. Theresa), being a Christian was suddenly the path to power and influence in an economy that ran mainly on sucking up to wealthy patrons. Artists were then free to express themselves with some license:



**Plate 6:** A fresco of Jesus during the age of Constantine.

This image was painted for a villa that belonged to Constantine himself, and it was presumably painted by a well-connected and highly regarded artist.

Showing Christ seated on a throne between Peter and Paul, most elements of traditional Christian iconography are already present.

Jesus has a halo, he's in the top-center of the composition, his fingers are held in a benediction, and he's clearly European.



Everybody is wearing Greek dress, and Jesus has the wavy, flowing hair and beard that he still has in every movie today, 1,700 years later

Here's a detail of his face:

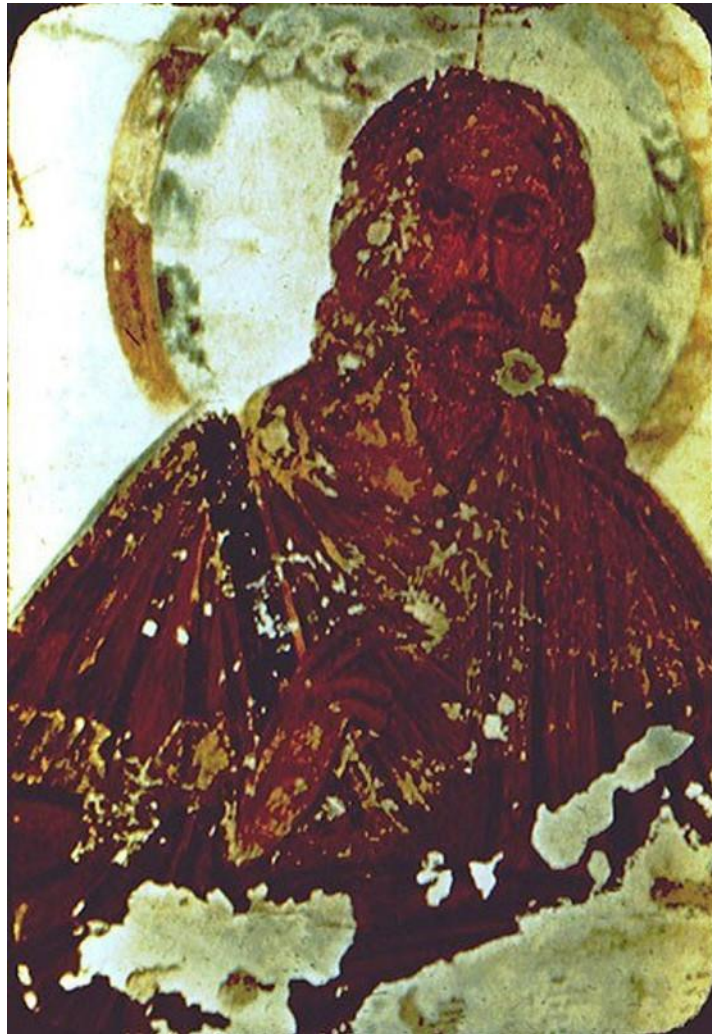
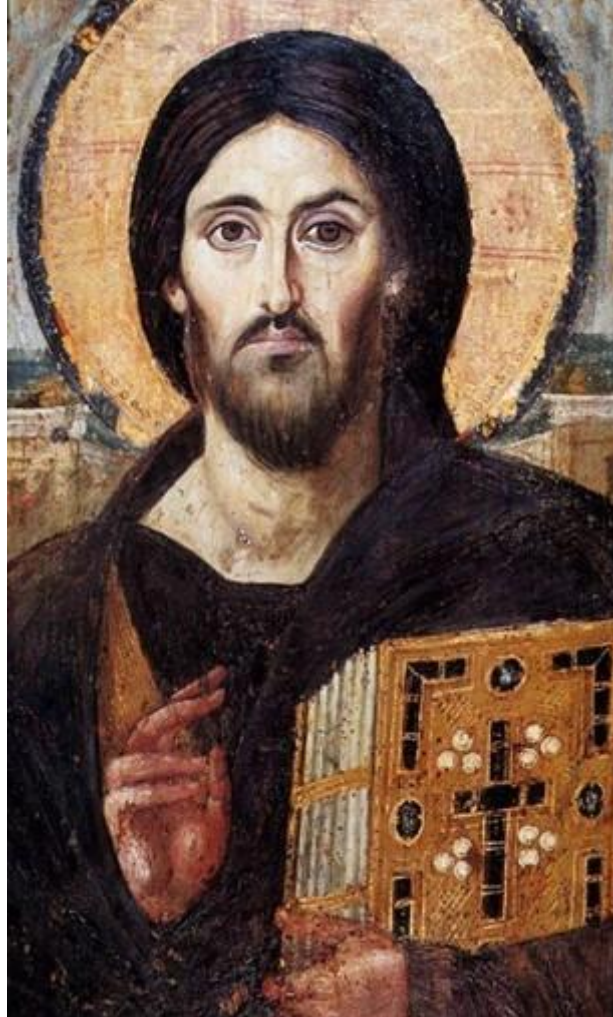


Plate 7: Jesus' Face

This set of features — halo, benediction, white as snow — became so firmly established in both the Roman and Byzantine churches that it then spread back into the Middle East as Jesus'

official portrait, even among brown-skinned people whom you would expect to revere a more Mediterranean-looking saviour.



**Plate 8:** White Jesus Sinai Portrait

This image, for example, is from a sixth-century church in Egypt.

Pictures of a white Jesus cropped up all over the Empire around this time. In this one, etched into a glass plate and found in Spain, Jesus is again depicted as beardless – common in Iberia,



but rare by this time in the Greek parts of the empire – and carrying a cross.

Again, all of the common elements are here: the halo, the central placement, and the instruction of apostles.



**Plate 9:** Early Image of Jesus glass plate

This is a fourth century glass plate depicting Jesus, found in the Iberian Peninsula.

The generally accepted (white) appearance of Jesus was firmly established by the reign of Constantine.

Unlike other images of, for example, Constantine himself, the template for depicting Jesus barely changed in the 18 centuries after it took shape.

This is almost certainly the result of two pressures: religious conservatism and artists' desire to actually sell their work.

Regarding the former, church authorities have historically been resistant to any kind of change — especially throughout most of the period we're dealing with (think crusades and burnings).

This tendency exerted tremendous pressure on ambitious young artists who probably didn't want "burned for heresy" to appear in the footnote to their entry in an art history textbook.

Second, and less morbidly, artists have always wanted to reach the public and tell a story with their work — it makes for a more effective painting and thus a longer-lasting, more successful career.

Whether it's a quick sketch, a mosaic floor, or the Blessing Christ by Raphael, using an agreed-upon likeness of a powerful figure like Jesus just made it easier to reach a mass audience, especially in a time of general illiteracy.



Plate 10: Christ Blessing by Raphael.

Christ Blessing (Italian title: Cristo benedicente) is a painting by the Italian Renaissance artist Raphael. It was painted c. 1505/1506 with oil paint on panel.

Since 1851, it is located in the Pinacoteca Tosio Martinengo, Brescia, Italy. The features of Christ bear some resemblance to a self-portrait of Raphael's.

Today, Jesus is most likely to be depicted in iconography and film. The icons, which are usually smallish cards that can be

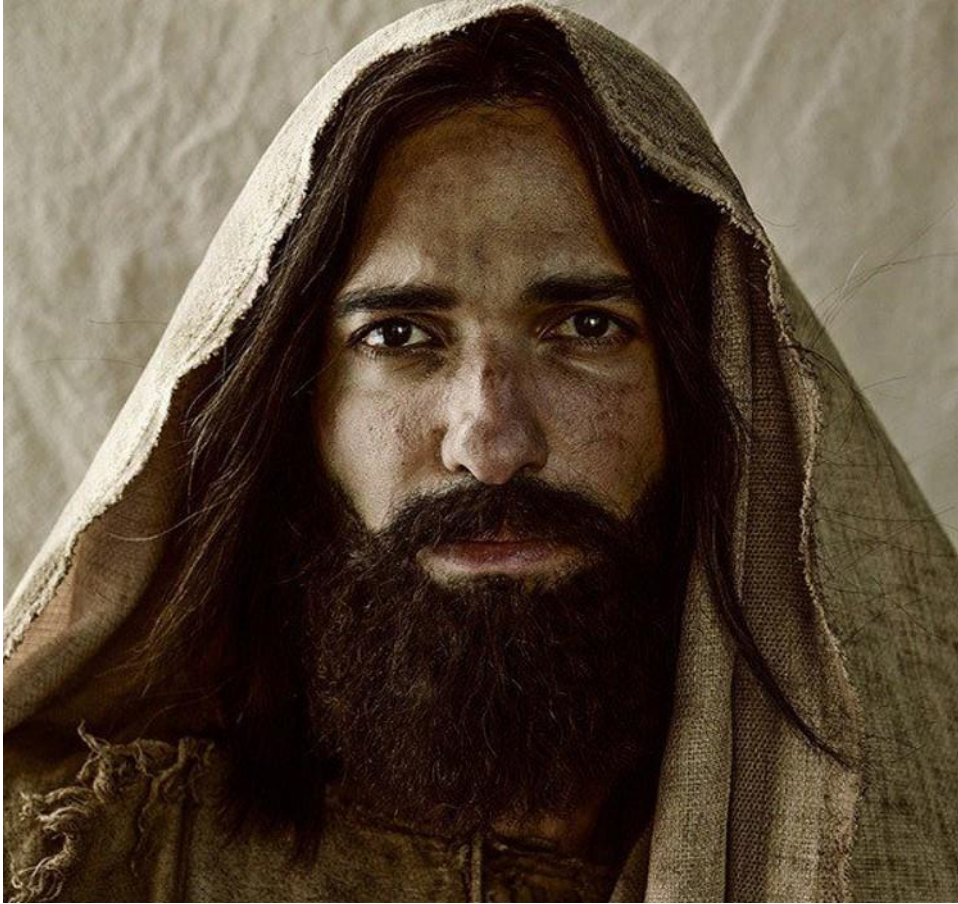
carried or displayed in the home, mostly follow the old artistic conventions of the late Roman Empire, with few changes since the era of the Council of Nicaea.

The film depictions are a little looser – as befits a much newer medium, of course – but still the actors chosen for the role of Jesus are about as white as it gets.

Jim Caviezel, (in Mel Gibson's; *The Passion of the Christ*), Jeffrey Hunter, (the *King of Kings* from 1961), Ted Neely, (the 1973 film version of *Jesus Christ Superstar*), Robert Powell, (of course, in the TV series *Jesus of Nazareth*), and Haaz Sleiman have all played Jesus in film; of the aforementioned only Sleiman is even remotely from the same region as the story was set.

Even so, behold – the Lebanese actor who played Jesus:





**Plate 11:** Haaz Sleiman as Jesus of Nazareth in National Geographic Channel’s “Killing Jesus.”

While it can be annoying for purists who like to point out that Jesus of Nazareth probably bore a closer physical resemblance to Osama bin Laden than his flaxen, lily-white depiction today, every culture that received a visit from missionaries has been guilty of doing the same thing — they just weren’t as influential as the Christian powers that be.

While the Empire eventually faded, one of its most wildly exaggerated and appropriated offerings — a white Jesus — stuck around.