

What did people in the Bible look like?

There are a few basic descriptions of some people in the Bible. There are several women, for example, who are called “very beautiful”: Sarah, Rachel, Rebekah, Bathsheba, Abishag, Tamar, Vashti, and Esther. Leah is described as plain-looking, in contrast to her sister Rachel, who “had a lovely figure and was beautiful” (Genesis 29:17).

There are physical descriptions of men, too. We have descriptions of Elijah’s and John the Baptist’s clothing in 2 Kings 1:8 and Matthew 3:4. Esau is described as hairy and red-haired (Genesis 25:25). David is described as “glowing with health and [having] a fine appearance and handsome features” (1 Samuel 16:12). Samson and Absalom had long hair (Judges 16:17; 2 Samuel 14:26). Paul’s appearance was “unimpressive” (2 Corinthians 10:10). Saul was tall (1 Samuel 10:23); Zacchaeus was short (Luke 19:3).

Of course, all of these descriptions are quite basic and do not give a detailed picture of the person being described. The Bible provides a general description at times in order help explain something else in the narrative (e.g., it is important for us to know that Zacchaeus was short, so we understand why he climbed a tree). The Bible’s focus is always on the heart of man, not his external appearance.

The main character of the Bible is Jesus Christ, but the only thing we know about Jesus’ appearance is that “He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him” (Isaiah 53:2). Very nondescript. There is a nonliteral description of Jesus in Revelation 1:12-16, but it is obviously figurative. The eyes of blazing fire, the feet of glowing metal, and the sword proceeding from the mouth are suggestive of omniscience, power, and judgment.

It is good that we do not know what Jesus looked like. God, who does all things well, chose not to inform us of Jesus' physical appearance.

If we had an actual description of Jesus' human appearance, and with human nature being what it is, we would face many other spiritual dangers. We would see rampant idolatry—people would be making images of Jesus in order to better “worship” Him. We would see rampant body modification—people would be changing their skin color and having plastic surgery to have Jesus’ nose, chin, etc. What’s worse, these cultic behaviors would be done in the name of “Christianity.” (Some religious people already struggle with idolatry, praying to images of Jesus, even without knowing what He looked like.)

We humans tend to focus on externals (1 Samuel 16:7) and to miss the main point of knowing God. We live in a world that places a high premium on appearances, but the Bible warns us that “charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting” (Proverbs 31:30). The Lord is looking for a “contrite and lowly” spirit (Isaiah 57:15), and we are called to “live by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7).