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The invisible made visible: Theological and philosophical conceptions of God's image in Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts

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Abstract: This paper examines how the concept of the image of the invisible God was understood in Jewish and Greco-Roman traditions. It explores Jewish theological ideas rooted in Hebrew Scriptures and later Jewish writings, which emphasize a transcendent yet immanent God. In contrast, Greco-Roman thought, shaped by Platonic and Stoic philosophies, conceptualized the divine through reason, *logos*, and cosmic order, often expressed through anthropomorphic deities or philosophical ideals. The study highlights how these differing views intersected, particularly during the Second Temple period, influencing early Christian theology—especially the idea of Jesus as the visible expression of the invisible God. By analyzing religious texts and philosophical works, the paper sheds light on ancient understandings of divinity and their lasting impact on conceptions of the divine-human relationship. By analyzing these diverse perspectives, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the image of the invisible God was perceived and represented across different cultures and epochs. This exploration not only enriches our knowledge of ancient religious thought but also offers insights into the enduring questions about the nature of divinity and humanity's relationship to the divine.

Keywords: invisible God, Greco-Roman thought, Jewish theology

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1. Introduction

The concept of the image of the invisible God is a profound and enduring theological idea that has captivated religious thinkers and philosophers across different cultures and eras. This paper aims to delve into this concept as it was understood in the Jewish and Greco-Roman worlds, exploring the similarities, differences, and intersections between these two rich traditions. In the Jewish context, the idea of God as invisible and transcendent is a foundational belief, deeply embedded in the monotheistic framework of Judaism. The Hebrew Scriptures, particularly the *Torah*, emphasize the uniqueness and incomparability of God, who cannot be seen or represented in any physical form. Yet, paradoxically, these same scriptures speak of humanity being created in the image of God (*imago Dei*), suggesting a profound connection between the divine and human beings. This theological tension has been a subject of extensive

interpretation and debate within Jewish thought, influencing a wide range of religious literature from the Talmud to Kabbalistic mysticism.

In the Greco-Roman world of the New Testament era, the concept of the image of the invisible God holds profound significance, intersecting theological, cultural, and philosophical realms. This abstract delves into a multifaceted understanding of this concept within its historical and cultural context. Drawing upon biblical texts, contemporary writings, and scholarly interpretations, it explores how the New Testament authors utilized language and imagery familiar to their audience to convey the divine nature of Jesus Christ. Moreover, it examines the cultural milieu of the time, where the notions of divine images, gods, and rulers were pervasive, to elucidate the revolutionary nature of the Christian proclamation of Jesus as "the ultimate Image of the Invisible God." Through a nuanced analysis, this abstract seeks to illuminate the theological depth and cultural resonance of this concept, highlighting its transformative implications for both ancient audiences and modern readers alike.

Paul describes Jesus as "*the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation, for in him all things were created*" in Colossians 1:15. Here, Paul situates Jesus in the context of Greek and Roman thought. It's also provocative. What is Paul saying, and what would his audiences think, considering the Hellenistic world's dualism, which holds that material reality and "heavenly" reality never mix? In what ways does Christian theology differ from Hellenistic thought?

In the ancient world of religion, dualism is a considerable relevant phenomenon. This is exactly what the Colossae false teachers were doing. As noted in the introduction of this essay, these false teachers seem to embody an early form of Gnosticism that would later develop into two distinct expressions—one ascetic, characterized by religious self-denial, and the other licentious, marked by moral laxity. This philosophical system reflected a Hellenistic form of dualism, wherein material existence was regarded as inherently evil, while only the immaterial spirit was viewed as truly valuable. The ascetic teachers advocated for self-denial and strict bodily discipline as the most effective means of subduing the inherently corrupt nature of the body.

The Greek language possesses an abundance of verbs that delineate the process of differentiation, rendering it unnatural to see them as denoting separate realities or even the same reality in essentially divergent manners. The differences are merely minor etymological quirks that serve no particular purpose; otherwise, the different names appear to have similar functions. If there are any minor variations, it is due to the specific situations in which they are employed rather than the definitions of the words.[1]

[1] Serafim Seppälä, "The Concept of Deification in Greek and Syriac," *Review of Ecumenical Studies Sibiu* 11, no. 3 (December 2019): 439–55, https://doi.org/10.2478/ress-2019-0031.

Paul felt at ease in the three realms described in the chapter of title, which together created a complex and varied whole. Paul gives us a list of his Jewish credentials, including that he is a Pharisee and a Hebrew born to Hebrews. We have no reason to doubt that he was born in Tarsus and went to Jerusalem for his schooling. Even when he reworks that concept considering his new experience in Christ, several features of Paul's theology may be recognized to have arisen from his Jewish framework of thought. Paul's language and thought dimensions can also be understood as reflecting the ubiquitous Graeco-Roman culture of the time, in which Paul was completely at ease. He had acquired some Hellenistic education and was a Tarsus citizen as well as a Roman citizen. When interpreting Paul's letters, we must consider all three contexts, and it would be a mistake to assume that neither one of them dominated his thinking. He was perfectly prepared to bring a Jewish Gospel to the Graeco-Roman civilization at the time. Greek culture and language dominated the New Testament period. Even though Rome governed the physical world, Greek intellectual traditions continued to reign supreme.

Reymand Hutabarat, Franklin, and Deanna argue that one can see "*clearly what is hidden in Genesis 1: namely, what man as the perfect image of God should be like*"[2] in Christ, who is God incarnate. Reymand Hutabarat, Franklin, and Deanna quote Hoekema, recognized that the life of Jesus embodies the flawless image of God that man possessed at creation. Since "*the image of God includes the whole person*," the human form of God must have both structural and functional elements. Whereas the functional aspect refers to "*what man does*," the structural aspect describes "what kind of being man is."[3] According to Hoekema, "*one cannot function without a certain structure*," hence these two facets of God's image in man are intertwined.[4]

This paper will explore these themes through a comparative analysis of primary texts, historical contexts, and theological developments. By examining how the image of the invisible God was understood and represented in Jewish and Greco-Roman thought, we can gain deeper insights into the cultural and religious dynamics of the ancient world. Furthermore, this exploration sheds light on the enduring questions about the nature of God, the role of humanity, and how different cultures seek to understand and represent the divine.

2. Research Method

Hermeneutics, the art and science of interpretation, is crucial for understanding the concept of the "Image of the Invisible God" in Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts. This

[2] Reymand Hutabarat, Franklin Hutabarat, and Deanna Beryl Majilang, "Anthony Hoekema on the Understanding of the Image of God," *Abstract Proceedings International Scholars Conference* 7, no. 1 (December 18, 2019): 2084, https://doi.org/10.35974/isc.v7i1.1707.

[3] Hutabarat, Hutabarat, and Majilang, 2086.

[4] Hutabarat, Hutabarat, and Majilang, 2086.

essay outlines a hermeneutical approach to examining this concept, focusing on historical, cultural, and theological dimensions. By analyzing key texts from these traditions, we aim to uncover how the image of the divine was conceptualized and its implications for early Christian theology. Exploring connections and references between Jewish and Greco-Roman texts highlights the influence of cultural interactions. For example, comparing the concept of God in the Hebrew Bible with the philosophical ideas of Plato and Aristotle. The hermeneutical method provides a comprehensive approach to studying the concept of the "Image of the Invisible God" in Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts. By integrating historical-critical analysis, literary examination, theological exegesis, and comparative analysis, we can uncover the rich and complex interplay of ideas that shaped early Christian theology.

3. Results And Discussion

The Concept of An Invisible God in Jewish Theology

Some theophanic stories found in early Jewish literature present God with another heavenly being those shapes or imitates his qualities. The Apocalypses of Abraham, the Ladder of Jacob, the Exagoge of Ezekiel the Tragedian, the Book of Daniel, the Book of the Similitudes, 2 Enoch, and other biblical and nonbiblical stories all contain this kind of dual imagery. Later rabbinic and Hekhalot two powers arguments frequently used aspects of some of these stories, such as the one recorded in the Book of Daniel, and probably the recollections of others. These references suggest that the rabbinic writers foresaw the two powers' dispute's earliest seeds in these early visionary narratives.[5]

Orlov argues rabbinic traditions gave fresh polemical meaning to the interaction between the two theophanic molds, one visual and the other aural, which were used in early Jewish texts to complement the distinct duties of the various powers. The two theophanic molds were frequently purposefully contrasted in these later stories to highlight the inferiority of the second force and its inauthenticity compared to the genuine deity, who is now described using aniconic aural vocabulary.[6]

One often applies the wisdom tradition of the Hellenistic Jews to the interpretation of Colossians 1:15a. Although most commentators acknowledge that there is a relationship between Colossians 1:15 and Genesis 1:2628, they either ignore it completely or fail to use the explanation of εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ that is provided in the Genesis text.[7] For instance, Sumney maintains that the meaning of ἐικών in

[5] Andrei A. Orlov, *The Glory of the Invisible God* (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 9.

[6] Orlov, *The Glory of the Invisible God*.

[7] Christopher S. Northcott, "'King of Kings' in Other Words: Colossians 1:15a as a Designation of Authority Rather Than Revelation," *Tyndale Bulletin* 69, no. 2 (November 2018), https://doi.org/10.53751/001c.27690.

Colossians 1:15 differs from that in Genesis 1:26-28, although he offers no evidence to support this claim.[8] Since no one can see God and yet live, Irenaeus asserts that "*the glory of God is the living human being*." He goes on to add that "*the life of the human being is to see God*." See Ex. 33:20, where he refers to the martyr. Not only is the creation of the human being eschatological rather than protological, but it is realized.[9]

According to Dunn, the idea of an "invisible God" is "*a central Jewish theologoumenon that God cannot be seen*." Thus, "the angel of the Lord" appears in the patriarchal story (Gen 16:7–12; 22:11–12; Ex 3:2–6; 14:19–20), and the prohibition against idolatry (Ex 20:4-6; Deut 5:8–10) is significant. The query is: How can God be known if he is invisible? Colossians 1:15 states that Christ, who is claimed to be His "image," is how He is revealed.[10]

It would have been figured out that Christ is of divine origin and was "brought forth" before the creation of the earth by the statement that He is the "image of the invisible God" (Prov 8:22–26). Furthermore, in addition to reflecting God's goodness, He also embodies God's creative power, which is how the world was created (Wis 7:25–27). William Barclay, a scripture commentator, aptly sums up the Jewish perspective of Wisdom that underlies the idea of "image", when he says, "*All your lives you have been thinking and dreaming and writing about this divine Wisdom, which is as old as God, which made the world, and which gives wisdom to men and women*,"[11] seemed to be Paul's way of turning to address the Jews. This Wisdom has manifested itself in human form for everyone to behold in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the realization of Jewish thought's hopes and desires.[12]

Paul describes Son's nature and mission using language that is reminiscent of sacred writings and formulas of Judeo-Hellenistic philosophy vital. This poem draws inspiration from the early tenets of the Christological religion as well as the biblical paradigm of song wisdom.[13] Gorman offers a few passages from the books of Proverbs and the Wisdom of Solomon, which are canonical and deuterocanonical, respectively. [14] A few of the parallels include:

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[8] Jerry L. Sumney, *Colossians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 64.

[9] John Behr, "Seeing, Embodying, and Proclaiming Christ," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 25, no. 3 (July 2023): 413–24, https://doi.org/10.1111/ijst.12623.

[10] James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 87.

[11] William Barclay, *The Letters of the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians* (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 2003), 117.

[12] Barclay, 117.

[13] José Ramón Villar, "Cristo, Imagen de Dios Invisible (Col 1,15a). Tradición Exegética y Comentario de Santo Tomás de Aquino," *Scripta Theologica* 42, no. 3 (November 2015): 665–90, https://doi.org/10.15581/006.42.3352.

[14] Michael Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters* (Grand Rapids Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 481.

Table 1: Comparation Wisdom and Christ in Old and New Testament

Theme	Wisdom	Christ
Image of God	An aura of the might of God and a pure effusion of the glory of the Almighty (Wis 7:25)	He is the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15)
Firstborn	The Lord begot me, the firstborn of his ways (Prov 8:22)	the firstborn of all creations (Col 1:15)
Creation	Wisdom founded the earth (Prov 3:19)	For in him all things in heaven and on earth were created (Col 1:16)
Re-creation	And she, who is one, can do all things and renew everything while herself during (Wis 7:27)	He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead... and through him to reconcile all things for him (Col 1:18, 20)

The assertions made about Wisdom in the Wisdom tradition and what is said about Christ in Colossians 1:15–20 have significant similarities, indicating that Paul has interpreted Christ in the context of Wisdom literature's personification of the Wisdom figure. The relationship between Paul and Wisdom—which has already been discussed—might also be considered persuasive in this case. There are several points of convergence between Colossians 1:15–20 and the Wisdom tradition in terms of volume and thematic coherence (see chart above). Additionally, the words "knowledge" and "wisdom" are used numerous times (see Col 1:9, 10; 2:2, 3, 8, 23; 3:10, 16), indicating that the epistle does not only touch on the theme of "wisdom." Lastly, academic scholarship largely acknowledges that the Christological claims in Colossians 1:15–20 mirror the numerous predicates and acts given to Wisdom in the Jewish Wisdom tradition, providing strong evidence for the intertextual reference to the Wisdom tradition.[15]

As is common in early Christian hymns, the opening strophe begins by identifying the Son's status in regard to the Father (Col 1:15a). The Son is hailed as the image of the invisible God (εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου), but this is stated paradoxically. The amazing way that God has shown himself in the person and mission of his Son highlights the Son's superiority. This is followed by an explanation of the Son's higher status in relation to creation (Col 1:15b–16). With a sentence that features remarkable assonance (o-sound) and alliteration (π-, τ-, and ς-sounds) (πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως), he is hailed as the firstborn of all creations. He is

[15] Errol Lobo, "Conformed to the Image of Christ: An Intertextual Study of the Significance of Pauline Image-Vocabulary Passages for Paul and the Gentile Problemof Pauline Image-Vocabulary Passages for Paul and the Gentile Problem" (University of Notre Dame Australia, 2021).

superior to everything produced since he existed before everything else. The first portion of a diaphora that will be repeated in Colossians 1:18 is the use of πρωτότοκος in Colossians 1:15.[16]

Greco-Roman Philosophical Perspectives

The biblical account makes it clear that Paul acquired this doctrine by divine revelation (Gal 1:11-24), and that it was a fulfillment rather than a contradiction of the Old Testament Law (Gal 3:21-25). Paul was a Hellenized Hebrew who interacted with Epicureanism and Stoicism, and the theology he produced represented an outstanding (to say the least) addition to the Law system. Furthermore, on Paul's day, Hellenistic influences were freely available. Plato's, Xenophon's, and other later philosophers' writings were widely circulated across the Hellenistic world, particularly in Alexandria, and many of their concepts.[17] Nonetheless, Paul's idea of the human being is of a soul abiding in or clothed by the body, and the clothing, however lovely, is less important than the one it covers. It is "*the earthly tent in which we reside*," not we. While the body is vital and highly appreciated by Paul, it is not the human being, but rather his or her dwelling or garment, as it is in Philo.[18]

Philo firmly thinks that God cannot be imagined as corporeal, he compares the ideal man with the *logos*, which comes near to identifying man with the image. However, he does not directly link man with the image or *logos*. Philo claims that the image is made up of the mind or reason, which is described as a heavenly spirit that the Creator breathes into each human. Greek philosophy served as the foundation for Philo's understanding of the image and likeness of God found in Genesis 1:26-27. Philo was impacted by Plato, the Greek philosopher.[19]

The endeavor by philosophers like Philo, ben Sirach, and the author of the Wisdom of Solomon to reconcile the God of the Old Testament (OT) with the distant and unknowable god established by the philosophical tradition outlined by Plato and later Greek thinkers is where the question of God's knowability begins. The Platonists and other Hellenistic-oriented thinkers believed that knowledge of the divine was transmitted by an intermediary who served to "image" of God and reflect knowledge about him.[20] "*For the ancients called heroes those who were so strong in body and soul*

[16] Francois P. Viljoen, "Perspectives from the Christ Hymn in Colossians 1:13–20 on Cosmic Powers and Spiritual Forces within an African Context," *In Die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 53, no. 4 (June 2019), https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v53i4.2433.

[17] Daniel Simango, "The Imago Dei (Gen 1:26-27): A History of Interpretation from Philo to the Present," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae (SHE)* 42, no. 1 (2016), https://doi.org/10.17159/2412-4265/2016/1065.

[18] Annette Evans, "Jesus 'the Word' as Creator in John 1:1-3: Help for Evolutionists from Philo the Hellenistic Jew," *Scriptura* 115 (June 2016), https://doi.org/10.7833/115-0-1285.

[19] Simango, "The Imago Dei (Gen 1:26-27): A History of Interpretation from Philo to the Present."

[20] Northcott, "'King of Kings' in Other Words: Colossians 1:15a as a Designation of Authority Rather Than Revelation."

that they seemed to be part of a divine race", according to Lucius Annaeus Cornutus, the Stoic.[21] He continues, referring to the Greek hero of the highest caliber, Heracles (Hercules), saying that "*his services had earned him apotheosis*."[22] At first, this seems to be just a simile. The process by which a human ascends into the divine world is known as apotheosis or deification.[23]

There were also references to the potential for seeing the gods in the mystery religions of the Greco-Roman civilization. These religions rely heavily on the visual arts. Seeing god is the ultimate aim in some of these religions. This is demonstrated at Eleusis by the sighting of sacred deeds or the Isis rites (Apuleius Metamorphoses XI, 23), as well as by the vicinity of worshiping the *dii superi* (gods above) and *dii inferi* (gods below).[24] Although Greek mythology and poetry's anthropomorphic conception of the gods permits the notion that they are visible to human eyes, there are some basic questions about this.[25]

When the author discusses the invisible God, he conceptually departs from the Old Testament. While the Old Testament tradition does affirm that God is unseen, this assertion is rooted in the belief that human beings are incapable of enduring a direct encounter with God's holiness and power (e.g., Ex 33:20; Isa 6:5). This stands in contrast to the notion of God as a purely noetic being, as found in the thought of Socrates, the Platonists, and the Pythagoreans—or in the Stoic perspective, where God is understood as a material cosmological principle that, though corporeal, remains imperceptible to the senses.[26] In Memorabilia 4.3.13–14, for instance, Socrates uses the metaphor of the wind to describe the god who is "unseen" (ἀόρατος), yet whose presence is made known through his activity in the world.[27]

Irvin argues by balancing the idea of an "unseen" God with the Father's visibility that Jesus demonstrates, John's Christology validates the material visibility of God. This assertion is supported by three pieces of evidence. The first is that "invisible" and "unseen" are not interchangeable terms. Not all Hellenized Jews adopted Platonist ideas of invisibility, as may be seen from a study of Second Temple, biblical, and rabbinic literature. Secondly, Jesus portrays the Father as being visible,

[21] Lucius Annaeus Cornutus, *L. Annaeus Cornutus: Greek Theology, Fragments, and Testimonia*, trans. George Boys-Stones (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018), 123.

[22] Cornutus, 123.

[23] Cornutus, 123.

[24] Dirk Van der Merwe, "The (in)Visibility of the Gods in the Greco-Roman World and of God in Hellenistic Judaism: A Comparison," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 71, no. 1 (March 2015), https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i1.2839.

[25] Van der Merwe.

[26] Travis R. Niles, *The Image of the Invisible God* (Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2023), 193, https://doi.org/10.1628/978-3-16-162557-2.

[27] Niles, *The Image of the Invisible God*.

albeit limited to Jesus alone. Third, John's citation of Isaiah implies that God's presence in the theophanies is consistent with God's presence in Jesus.[28]

Christ is initially described as εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου. The concept of an invisible God is a recurring theme in various religious traditions. The word εἰκών has a long history both in the early Greek and Hellenistic world and in the Old Testament.[29] Paul's use of the term "image" would have struck a chord with the Greeks as well, who associated the Word with *eikōn*, in addition to the Jews. According to Barclay, "*It is as though Paul told the Greeks, 'You have dreamed and thought and written for the last six hundred years about reason, the mind, the word, the Logos of God; you called it God's eikōn; that Logos has come plain for all to see in Jesus Christ*.'"[30] In him, all of your ideas and aspirations come to pass.[31] Using the title of *Yahweh*, the one true God, as it is used in the Old Testament, Paul designated Jesus as the Lord. Paul adapted Old Testament passages about *Yahweh* to the Lord Jesus to proclaim his sole rule over him, but he did not see this as a transgression of monotheistic beliefs. He did, in fact, and other early Christians draw a clear parallel between their worship of Jesus and the Old Testament worship of *Yahweh*.[32]

One of the main themes of the Letter to the Colossians is the inclusion of the Gentiles in God's plan of salvation. In addition to describing how the Gospel is received by the Gentiles (Col 1:3-6, 25–27), Paul makes a powerful statement in Colossians 3:11 that a follower of Christ is "*no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free*."[33] It's noteworthy that he employs εἰκὼν twice in this letter. Firstly, he says that Christ is "*the firstborn of all creation*," "*the firstborn from the dead*," (Col 1:15, 18), and the one through whom all things have been reconciled; he is also the image [εἰκὼν] of the invisible God (Col 1:20). Secondly, he describes the "new self" as being "*renewed in knowledge according to its creator's image* [ερκόνα]" (Col 3:10). These remarks, at least on the surface, seem similar to the idea of being or becoming an "image" that was previously discussed in the First Corinthians and Romans.[34]

Paul employs this phrase in Romans 8:29, together with the term εἰκών to convey the simultaneous condition of believers being conformed to the "image of his

[28] Luke Irwin, "Divine Visibility in the Gospel of John," *Harvard Theological Review* 117, no. 3 (July 2024): 417–35, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816024000166.

[29] Olimpiu-Nicolae Benea, "Christ, the Image of the Invisible God, the Proscenium of Old and New Testament. Perspectives of Knowing God from Colossians," *Romanian Orthodox Old Testament Studies* 11, no. 1 (August 2024): 116–34, https://doi.org/10.24193/ROOTS.2024.1.8.

[30] Barclay, *The Letters of the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians*, 117.

[31] Barclay, 117.

[32] David K. Bernard, "Paul's Christology in the Corinthian Letters," *Religions* 15, no. 6 (June 2024): 721, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15060721.

[33] Lobo, "Conformed to the Image of Christ: An Intertextual Study of the Significance of Pauline Image-Vocabulary Passages for Paul and the Gentile Problemof Pauline Image-Vocabulary Passages for Paul and the Gentile Problem."

[34] Lobo.

[God's] Son": to the extent that they are, the Son becomes "*the firstborn among many brothers*." Paul, however, limits this idea to "*those whom He foreknew*," which is likely a reference to Christ-followers. In contrast, the author of Colossians broadens the concept of the Son's siblings to encompass all of creation. In the same way that the Son is related to the Father, all of creation, including the people Colossians addresses, is related to the Son and, via him, to the Father.[35] The crucifixion of the Son, the manifestation of the *Deus absconditus* in Christ, and the manifestation of the Father in the mortal body.[36]

Synthesis of Christian Ideas the Visible Image of the Invisible God

The invisibility of people and God is another topic Charles Taliaferro and Jil Evans encourage investigation into and contrast. The notion that God or the holy is invisible does not preclude the experience of God or the sacred in unique or other sensory ways, including the visual arts. On the other hand, the notion that people are fully visible, or observable in every way, ignores how racism and other forms of bias make people invisible to other people.[37] The ontological renewal and sanctifying work of the Spirit is necessary for the community of believers to appropriate the image of God and make it resemble Christ, the Son of God, in the transforming relationship between humanity and God.[38] For those who are linked with him by faith, the image of God in humans is renewed via the action of the creator, Jesus Christ. This renewal must be seen in light of the consummation, when God would make everything perfect in Christ.[39]

Colossians 1:15–20 highlights the intermediary's fundamental nature, role in creation, and ongoing involvement in sustaining the cosmos, but ultimately emphasizes the son's historical and redemptive significance. Although Colossians 1:15–20 has played a role in shaping its Christological perspective and the resulting cosmology, it more closely reflects a Stoic view of the cosmos characterized by cosmic permeation.[40] There is much that is very close to what is found in Philo, such as, "*(i) the image concept; (ii) God's invisibility; (iii) a 'first-born' concept; (iv) causation*

[35] Niles, *The Image of the Invisible God*.

[36] Giuseppe Di Giacomo, "The Icon as the Revelation of Eternity in Time.," *Aisthesis* 11, no. 1 (2018), https://doi.org/doi: 10.13128/Aisthesis-23272.

[37] Charles Taliaferro and Jil Evans, *Is God Invisible?* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 160, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108681001.

[38] Lidija Ušurel, "In His Image," *Kairos* 16, no. 2 (December 2022): 143–53, https://doi.org/10.32862/k.16.2.3.

[39] Vhumani Magezi and Christopher Magezi, "Migration Crisis and Christian Response: From Daniel De Groody's Image of God Theological Prism in Migration Theology to a Migration Practical Theology Ministerial Approach and Operative Ecclesiology," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 74, no. 1 (March 2018), https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i1.4876.

[40] Matthew Colin Burow, "Colossians, Cosmology and Christ: A Study into Colossians 1:15-17 with Insights from Plato's Timaeus, Philo of Alexandria and Middle Platonism" (Australian Catholic University, 2018), 26, https://doi.org/10.4226/66/5b21f5a5c554e.

language associated with Greek prepositions; (v) the contrast between visible and invisible; and (vi) the pre-existence of an intermediary (the Logos)."[41] This study considers how Hellenistic philosophical thought may inform the distinctive language of Colossians. Specifically, it centers on Colossians 1:15–17, the hymn's opening strophe, which encapsulates the author's theological vision of Christ, the cosmos, and the ontological foundations of reality. Timaeus of Plato, Middle Platonism, and Philo of Alexandria are all thought to be useful in understanding the Colossian 'hymn' as well as the letter.

There are two non-Christian examples where Romans considered Jesus to be a god according to standard Greco-Roman classifications. The first is brought to us by Tertullian and Eusébius, who relate a fascinating tale concerning Tiberius' desire that Christ be made a god to the Roman senate. Persuaded by "*information from Palestine demonstrating the veracity of Christ's divinity*."[42] One more from the correspondence between Governor Pliny the Younger and Emperor Trajan. He discovered that "*they had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately amongst themselves in honor of Christ as if to a god*" after looking into some individuals who had been accused of being Christians (Letter 96). From the perspective of an external imperial observer such as Pliny, Christians believed in a man who had triumphed over death, worked miracles, and was now a heavenly resident. Speaking of him as a god seemed to be the appropriate approach to describe someone like him. Pliny would never have believed that Jesus was greater than Zeus or the Olympian gods, much less the deified Roman emperors.[43]

Images and statues make an effort to depict a concept or a person. Paul informs us that Jesus Christ is the unseen God's reflection in a mirror. It is translated as "*the visible image of the invisible God*" in one version (NLT). Jesus is the ideal human representation of God. Jesus reveals God to us. In Jesus Christ, we see God revealed in human form. In his Gospel, the apostle John stated as much (John 1:14a). "*And the Word took on flesh and lived among us, revealing His glory to us.*" Through the life, ministry, miracles, and teachings of Jesus Christ, the Bible—and particularly the gospels—allows us to experience God manifest in the physical world. Jesus perfectly conveys to us the essence of God. Through His Son, God, who is by nature wholly transcendent and incapable of being seen by finite men, has revealed His qualities, nature, will, power, and deeds.[44]

Norman Russell in his book The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition argues its inception as a metaphor for its development as a spiritual

[41] Durand et al., "Stoicism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford, 2023).
[42] Eusebius, *The Church History* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 59.
[43] Pliny the Younger, *The Letters of the Younger Pliny* (London: Penguin, 1969), 294.
[44] Chuck Swindoll, *Swindoll's Living Insights-Colossians* (Illinois: Tyndale House Publishing, 2017), 124.

concept, Christian deification. Immediately, Russell outlines for the reader the three distinct approaches to deification that he observes in the fathers: nominal, analogical, and metaphorical. The final group is separated into two further categories: ethical and realistic. Realistic is further separated into ontological and dynamic categories. The ascription of the title "god" to humans as a mark of honor constitutes the nominal use. The analogy just expands on the nominal by drawing parallels between Christ's status as the Son of God ("by nature") and ours as "gods by grace." The realistic method "*assumes that human beings are in some sense transformed by deification*," whereas the ethical approach "*takes deification to be the attainment of likeness to God through ascetic and philosophical endeavor*."[45]

Paul was an ardent Pharisee who became a Christian after having close contact with Jesus, so he must have been aware of the idea that since God is invisible, no one has ever seen him. Thus, Paul's assertion that the invisible God is now visible and no longer a mystery—that is, "the image of the invisible God"—is forceful. Christ is an invisible God's likeness.[46] Paul's Adam-Christology is based on the portrayal of Christ in Colossians 1:15 as the "image of the invisible God," which has frequently been connected to the story of Adam's creation. There appears to be a relationship between the two passages, but Adam is not the image of God; rather, he was created in or after that image.[47] The Christ hymn in Colossians 1 is typically interpreted as evidence of *Sophia*-Christology, and exegetes cite Wisdom of Salomon 7.26. to support the notion that Christ is the image of God. However, it is not the same thing because *Sophia* is stated to be an image of God's (perfect) goodness. The commentators indeed draw comparisons between this portrayal and Philo's depictions of *Sophia* and the *Logos* as the image of God.[48]

According to Fossum, the word *phōs* in Genesis 1:3 (LXX), might be used to fuse the glory of God on the heavenly throne with the Hellenistic Jews.[49] This man was not a perfect shape. The same identity seems to be claimed when Christ is described as the "image of the invisible God" in Colossians 1:15. Here, Christ is God manifest in the material world. This concept is not the same as the idea of the image of God in gnosticism, where the image was hypostasized as a Celestial Man, but it is distinct from the idea of *Sophia* or the *Logos* as the divine immanence.[50]

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[45] Daniel A Keating, "The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition (Review)," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 14, no. 3 (September 2006): 389–90, https://doi.org/10.1353/earl.2006.0051.

[46] Chandra Han, "Christ's Supremacy: Colossians 1:15-20 and Its Implication in Education," *Diligentia: Journal of Theology and Christian Education* 1, no. 1 (September 2019): 1, https://doi.org/10.19166/dil.v1i1.1887.

[47] Jarl E. Fossum, *The Image of the Invisible God* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995), 15–16.

[48] Fossum, 16.

[49] Fossum, 17.

[50] Fossum, 17.

According to St. Paul, Christ is the fullness of God's divinity residing bodily in Him (Col 2:9), the image (*eikōn*) of the invisible God (Col 1:15),[51] the impress of his Father's hypostasis (*Charactēr tes upostaseos autou*, Heb 1:3), and we see God in Him. The glory of God is revealed in Him (cf. also John 1:14), shining in the face (*en prosopo*) of Christ (2Cor 4:6), the Lord of glory (1Cor 2:8). Jesus Christ is acknowledged as being equal to God and in the form of God in the hymnic language of Philippians 2:6–11.[52] Due to Jesus Christ's unique humanity, the *Logos*' incarnation takes over all of material and biological reality.[53]

Jesus Christ is described in the New Testament as "the image of God" (2 Corinthians 4:4), "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15), and "*the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being*" (Heb 1:3). The Greek words *eikōn* (image) and *apaugasma* (radiance, reflection) appear in the first two verses, while character (imprint) appears in the third. The premise is that Jesus Christ embodies the image of God in his persona, character, and deeds. "No one has ever seen God," reads the prologue to John's Gospel. As Jesus says, "*Whoever has seen me has seen the Father*" (John 14:9), "*It is God the only Son…who has made him known*" (John 1:18). These clearly assert that God and Jesus Christ are similar. Christians are changed into the image of God since they are changed into the image of Christ (2Cor 3:18, Rom 8:29, *eikōn*).[54]

4. Conclusion

The study of the "Image of the Invisible God" within Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts reveals a profound and multifaceted theological dialogue that spans cultures and epochs. By employing a hermeneutical approach, we have been able to delve deeply into the historical, literary, and theological dimensions of this concept, uncovering the rich interplay of ideas that influenced early Christian thought. The Jewish texts, particularly the Hebrew Bible, emphasize the absolute transcendence and invisibility of God, contrasting sharply with the anthropomorphic depictions of gods in surrounding cultures. The notion of humans created in the image of God (*imago Dei*) in Genesis underscores a unique theological perspective where the divine image pertains to moral and spiritual likeness rather than physical resemblance.

In the Greco-Roman world, philosophical traditions such as those of Plato and Aristotle offered sophisticated metaphysical frameworks. Plato's theory of forms and

[51] Hutabarat, Hutabarat, and Majilang, "Anthony Hoekema on the Understanding of the Image of God."

[52] Iaan Mihoc, "Christ - Image of God, A Chapter of Pauline CHristology," in *International Symposium on Science, Theology and Arts (ISSTA)*, 2017, 70–81.

[53] Tumpal Samuel Silitonga and Ricky Pramono Hasibuan, "Humans, the Ad Imaginem: A Constructive Study in Building Human Relations with Other Created Beings," *The American Journal of Biblical Theology* 24, no. 3 (2023).

[54] Goran Medved, "Theosis (Deification) as a Biblical and Historical Doctrine," *Kairos* 13, no. 1 (April 2019): 7–38, https://doi.org/10.32862/k.13.1.1.

Aristotle's concept of the unmoved mover presented abstract, non-anthropomorphic understandings of the divine that, while different, paralleled Jewish theological concerns with transcendence. Early Christian writings, particularly in the New Testament, reflect a synthesis of Jewish and Greco-Roman ideas. Christological interpretations identify Jesus as the visible image of the invisible God, blending the Jewish emphasis on monotheism and transcendence with the Greco-Roman philosophical conceptions of divine mediation.

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