

Face to Face with Moses and Jesus

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A TAU researcher reconstructs faces of the ancient Israelites

What did Moses really look like? Or Jesus? Artists, philosophers, theologians and anthropologists have engaged in centuries-long debates about the appearance of the earliest Jewish people. Now, a researcher from Tel Aviv University, Prof. Eugene Kobylansky of TAU's Sackler Faculty of Medicine, is the first in the world to provide concrete facial reconstructions.

"It's like looking into a time machine, going back 2,000 years, to visit these people," says Prof. Kobylansky. Using bone measurements collected from skulls at Jewish burial sites in Ein Gedi near the Dead Sea and the Jordan River, Prof. Kobylansky created plastic molds on which he based his facial reconstructions. The technique was made possible using a unique forensics lab in Moscow, which recreates facial features from craniums with about 70% accuracy.



A composite facial reconstruction of male Jews in ancient Israel (332-37 BCE)



A composite facial reconstruction of female Jews in the Ancient Roman era (37 BCE-324 CE)

Prof. Kobylansky keeps two busts in his office. One represents the average face of male Jews in ancient Israel from 332 to 37 B.C.E., and the other represents a composite face of Jewish women from the ancient Roman era (37 B.C.E. to 324 C.E.).

An Apparent African Influence

Remarkably, the woman exhibits African characteristics -- a soft mix between Mediterranean features and African ones, such as a widened nose and enlarged lips.



Prof. Kobyliansky, with the two facial reconstructions

Although the busts open a new window onto how Jews looked two millennia ago, Prof. Kobyliansky is careful to say that not all Jewish people looked the same. "This woman certainly had some African intermixture," he says. "We know from history and the stories of King Solomon that there were Ethiopian Jews in Israel. In this particular female, we see some African traits. But maybe she was absolutely white in color. It's impossible to say."

The anthropologist adds, "It's not likely, though, that Jesus was black."

The Scarcity of the Anthropological Record

While Egyptians, Romans and other people in the near Middle East region are well represented in art through painting and sculpture, this is not the case in Jewish culture. Jewish custom, like that of Islam, dictated that human beings especially holy figures not be represented in form or image.

"This study is exciting, because it is really the first attempt to depict what the average Jew looked like 2,000 years ago," says Prof. Kobyliansky. "Jews didn't create sculptures of themselves, or paint pictures of an ideal. It was forbidden to do so." This wasn't true of Christianity, so it's been common for centuries to see idealized portraits of Jesus in Christian churches.

Another obstacle to anthropological studies of ancient Jewish physiognomy has been strict reverence for Jewish burial customs. Jewish law prevents the exhumation of Jewish bones, except under extreme circumstances. In Prof. Kobyliansky's case, he created plastic molds from craniums that were collected over a number of decades.

The first study of its kind in the world, Prof. Kobyliansky's research was published recently in the journal *Anthropology Anz*. Prof. Kobyliansky, who is also director of the Lilian and Marcel Pollak Chair in Biological Anthropology at TAU, compared his composite molds of 2,000-year-old skulls to skulls from 17th-century Prague Jews to confirm his findings.

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