

July 1994

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AN EXAMINATION OF ROMANS 1:23

It has been claimed by some people that Paul's use of the Greek word "eikon" in Romans 1:23 proves that God does not have a form or shape. This claim is without any substance, it is completely wrong! In this article I will examine this verse and show why this claim is wrong.

Let's start off by examining how this Greek word "eikon" is used throughout the New Testament. Here are the facts:

"EIKON" is used 23 times in 20 different verses. In the KJV it is always translated as "IMAGE". These usages make clear that "eikon" refers to something that must have a form and shape. This fact is generally acknowledged.

The argument they have presented goes as follows:

The Greek word 'eikon' refers to something that has form and shape. In Romans 1:23 Paul corrected the non-Israelite nations for having made "eikons" (i.e. images!) of man and birds and animals, all things that have a form and shape. Paul corrected them because God supposedly does not have a form and shape, and therefore there is no such thing as an "eikon" of God.

That's the basis of the argument that has been presented.

THE GREEK WORD "EIKON"

Now let's see how this word "EIKON" is used in the Bible.

Three times it is used to refer to THE IMAGE OF CAESAR on a coin. These three Scriptures are Matthew 22:20, Mark 12:16 and Luke 20:24. Here is Matthew 22:20:

And he saith unto them, Whose [is] this IMAGE and superscription? (Matthew 22:20)

Clearly the word "EIKON" here refers to a picture of what Caesar looked like IN FORM AND SHAPE! This is clear to understand.

Ten times it is used in the book of Revelation to refer to "the IMAGE of the Beast", which people worship. Here are these references:

Revelation 13:14 = the false church urges people that "they should MAKE AN IMAGE (eikon) to the beast ..."

Revelation 13:15 = the false church "gives life unto the IMAGE (eikon) of the beast ..." (used 3 times in this verse!)

Revelation 14:9 = if any man worship the beast and his IMAGE (eikon)

Revelation 14:11 = those who worship the beast and his IMAGE (eikon)

Revelation 15:2 = they had gotten victory over the beast and over his IMAGE (eikon)

Revelation 16:2 = upon them which worshipped his IMAGE (eikon)

Revelation 19:20 = and them that worshipped his IMAGE (eikon)

Revelation 20:4 = which had not worshipped the beast, neither his IMAGE (eikon).

But the word "eikon" is also used repeatedly in reference to God! These uses make very clear that there is indeed such a thing as "in the EIKON of God", but it isn't something that human beings can or should make! Notice the following uses:

Romans 8:29

For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate [to be] conformed to the image (EIKON) of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. (Romans 8:29)

Notice that it is OUR DESTINY to become conformed to "the EIKON of Jesus Christ"! Read it!

1 Corinthians 11:7

For a man indeed ought not to cover [his] head, forasmuch as he is the image (EIKON) and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man. (1 Corinthians 11:7)

Notice that man has been created "in the EIKON of God". Like "the EIKON of Caesar" on a coin shows what Caesar looked like, so also man resembles what God looks like! Man's physical appearance is in the "EIKON" of God.

2 Corinthians 4:4

In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image (EIKON) of God, should shine unto them. (2 Corinthians 4:4)

Notice that just as man is in "the EIKON of God", so, this verse tells us, Jesus Christ is also "in the EIKON of God". That ties in with what Christ said in John 14:9.

Jesus saith unto him, Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? HE THAT HATH SEEN ME HATH SEEN THE FATHER; and how sayest thou [then], Shew us the Father? (John 14:9)

This verse (2 Corinthians 4:4) shows that there is indeed such a thing as "an EIKON" of the Father.

Colossians 1:15

Who is the image (EIKON) of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: (Colossians 1:15)

This verse tells us that Jesus Christ is "the EIKON of the invisible God". This verse says that you CAN have an "eikon" of something that is invisible to HUMAN eyes ... and Christ is "it"! Just because something is invisible to HUMAN eyes, does not mean that it doesn't have a form and a shape!

2 Corinthians 3:18

But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image (EIKON) from glory to glory, [even] as by the Spirit of the Lord. (2 Corinthians 3:18)

This verse tells us that we human beings are going to be changed into the same "EIKON" as God, which isn't visible to HUMAN eyes. But it will be a form and shape that spirit beings will be able to see and to identify.

Colossians 3:10

And have put on the new [man], which is renewed in knowledge after the image (EIKON) of him that created him: (Colossians 3:10)

Again this refers to the "EIKON of God".

1 Corinthians 15:49

And as we have borne the image (EIKON) of the earthy, we shall also bear the image (EIKON) of the heavenly. (1 Corinthians 15:49)

Paul is here simply restating what he had said a few verses earlier, in verse 44.

It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and THERE IS A SPIRITUAL BODY. (1 Corinthians 15:44)

Here in verse 44 Paul tells us that there is a "soma psuchikon", i.e. a BODY (soma) that consists of matter (psuchikon); and there is also a "soma pneumatikon", i.e. a BODY (soma) that consists of spirit (pneumatikon).

Understand this: for there to be a spiritual BODY, it simply MUST be something that has form and shape! The Greek word "soma" refers to something that has form and shape, not to something that supposedly exists somewhere "outside of time and space", as some foolish philosophers may have postulated!

So in 1 Corinthians 15:49 Paul explains that when we have this spiritual body, then we will be "in the EIKON of the heavenly". So we can see that "in the 'eikon' of God" refers to THE SPIRITUAL BODY!

We have now examined every use of the word "eikon" except two: the Scripture in question (Romans 1:23) and Hebrews 10:1. In this last Scripture the word "eikon" is used in a figurative sense.

Notice:

For the law having a shadow of good things to come, [and] NOT the very image (EIKON) of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect. (Hebrews 10:1)

Paul uses a figure of speech in the first part of this verse; the law does not have a REAL shadow. Likewise "the real thing to come" doesn't have a real "eikon" either. In these two figures of speech Paul's contrast is between "A SHADOW" (which is flimsy and vague) and an "EIKON", an image which is much more specific and precise than "a shadow".

However, notice that Paul uses this in a NEGATION! Paul is saying: "the law DOES NOT HAVE AN EIKON of 'the things' ..."! It only has "a shadow"! In other words, Paul is saying that the law is, in analogy, more like a shadow rather than like a clear image of the good things to come.

Right, now we have examined every use of 'eikon' except Romans 1:23. The conclusion thus far is that it DOES refer to something that has a form and a shape. This is also in agreement with the premise the above-stated argument is built on. In the process we have also seen that the word "eikon" REPEATEDLY REFERS TO GOD! In the resurrection we will have "the eikon of the heavenly", the form and shape of God the Father and of Jesus Christ.

So even without examining Romans 1:23 we can prove that the whole argument is flawed! But let's move on in our investigation.

THE GREEK WORD "HOMOIOMA"

Next, in the N.T. there are several Greek words which are used for "likeness". The main one which is used in the New Testament is: "homoioima".

The Greek word HOMOIOMA is used six times in the New Testament, and it is used TO EXPRESS ABSTRACT CONCEPTS, rather than things that have a literal shape. This word is never used to refer to any one specific person. In the following verses the translation of "homoioima" is always rendered in capital letters for easier recognition.

Philippians 2:7

But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the LIKENESS of men: (Philippians 2:7)

Romans 6:5

For if we have been planted together in the LIKENESS of his death, we shall be also [in the likeness] of [his] resurrection: (Romans 6:5)

Romans 5:14

Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the SIMILITUDE of Adam's transgression, who is the figure of him that was to come. (Romans 5:14)

Romans 8:3

For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the LIKENESS of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: (Romans 8:3)

Revelation 9:7

And THE SHAPES of the locusts [were] like unto horses prepared unto battle; and on their heads [were] as it were crowns like gold, and their faces [were] as the faces of men. (Revelation 9:7)

Thus this word is used to express:

- THE CONCEPT of "the likeness of men" (Philippians 2:7)
- THE CONCEPT of "the likeness of his death" (Romans 6:5)
- THE CONCEPT of "the similitude of Adam's transgression" (Romans 5:14)
- THE CONCEPT of "the likeness of sinful flesh" (Romans 8:3)
- "The shapes (or likenesses) of the locusts like unto horses" (Revelation 9:7).

By comparing locusts to horses, this last Scripture is also dealing in abstract terms. It is THE CONCEPT of locusts being like horses that Revelation 9:7 presents to us, and not the actual shape of horses!

Of the six times the word "homoioima" is used in the New Testament, it is used five times by the Apostle Paul, and four of those five uses are in the Book of Romans. So when Paul means A LITERAL COMPARISON, then he used the word "eikon" (as in Romans 8:29, "the eikon of his Son"); and when Paul means A CONCEPTUAL COMPARISON, then he used the word "homoioima" (as in "the homoioima of death, of sinful flesh, of Adam's transgression", etc.).

Now let's look at Romans 1:23.

THE TEXT OF ROMANS 1:23

Here is the transliterated Greek text for this verse:

"kai ellaxan ten doxan tou aphthartou theou EN HOMOIOMATI EIKONOS phthartou anthropou kai peteinon kai tetrapodon kai herpeton." (Romans 1:23, Stephens Greek Text)

The KJV reads:

And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into AN IMAGE MADE LIKE to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things. (Romans 1:23)

The English expression "an image made like" is translated from the two Greek NOUNS "homoiomati eikonos". Thus the KJV translators translated it as:

"an image (i.e. eikonos) made like (i.e. homoiomati)"

These are the two Greek nouns we looked at above.

But notice that in the Greek text "homoioma" is used BEFORE "eikon". The English translators have thus made TWO changes from the Greek text:

1) First, in their translation they switched these two words around, and placed the translation of "eikonos" BEFORE the translation of "homoiomati".

2) Then they translated THE NOUN "homoioma" into the English VERB "made like". A "verb" refers to "doing" whereas a "noun" (in this case) refers to "an object". There is a difference in these things that we should take note of.

The result of these changes is that where in the Greek text the focus is on the word "homoioma", in the English translation the focus has been switched to the word "eikon" (i.e. image). This change in focus is not justified.

Next, in the Greek expression "en homoiomati eikonos":

- the Greek preposition "en" means "in" or "into" in English. This preposition takes the dative case. This is WHY "homoiomati" is in the dative case!

- "homoiomati" is the DATIVE case of the third declension noun "homoioma". This is the case of the INDIRECT OBJECT, and this case has many important uses besides meaning "to or for".

- "eikonos" is the GENITIVE case of "eikon", and therefore this means "OF AN IMAGE", the normal possessive case.

So now we can put the whole picture together!

If we go back to the transliterated text above, we'll see the phrase "en homoiomati eikonos". This means: "IN THE CONCEPT (IN THE LIKENESS) OF AN IMAGE".

This verse is NOT speaking about "an IMAGE", or "eikon" at all! It is speaking about "a LIKENESS"! Or, to be more specific, it is speaking about "the concept of an image".

We are now ready for an accurate translation of the Greek text of Romans 1:23.

And EXCHANGED the glory of the incorruptible God FOR THE CONCEPT (homoioma) of an image (eikon) of corruptible man, and of birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things.
(Romans 1:23)

Notice how this verse is translated in YOUNG'S 1898 LITERAL TRANSLATION.

and changed the glory of the incorruptible God INTO THE LIKENESS OF AN IMAGE of corruptible man, and of fowls, and of quadrupeds, and of reptiles. (Romans 1:23 YLT)

Darby's 1884 Translation of the Bible also has the phrase "into the likeness of an image" in this verse. These translators recognized that the King James translation of this verse is not really an accurate reflection of the Greek text, and that is why they corrected it.

We need to understand that the words "homoioma" and "eikon" are NOT synonyms. They do not have identical or interchangeable meanings. The intended meanings of these two words really go back to

Genesis 1:26, where God said that He would make man "in the image AND likeness of God". The words used there are obviously in the Hebrew language, but they convey the same meaning as the Greek words "homoioima" and "eikon" in the New Testament.

So it is important to understand exactly what is meant when the Bible refers to "the likeness" in both, the Old Testament and in the New Testament. In the Bible the words translated "likeness" are always intended to convey something different from the words translated "image".

So regarding Romans 1:23 we have seen:

1) Paul did NOT say that they changed God's glory "into an image" (Greek "eikon")! In this verse there is nothing negative said against the Greek word "eikon"!

2) What Paul said was that they changed God's glory "INTO A LIKENESS of an image". That is an altogether different thing! What Paul meant was that they changed God's glory into "THE CONCEPT of using images to represent God".

Thus there is absolutely NO WAY that anyone can correctly draw the conclusion from Romans 1:23 that the Greek word "eikonos", used in the genitive case, proves that God does not have a form or shape!

ONE MORE POINT!

There is one more point we should get very clearly in mind. And that is this:

SOMETHING CAN ONLY BE AN "EIKON" IF IT ACTUALLY LOOKS LIKE WHAT IT IS SUPPOSED TO REPRESENT!

If something does not look like what it is supposed to represent, then it can be a "homoioima", but it can never be an "eikon"! "Eikon's" outwardly look like what they are supposed to represent. "Homoioima's" only represent something CONCEPTUALLY, without actually looking like what they represent.

For example:

If your uncle Charles was a fantastic horseman, a tremendously skilled rider, and if you then had a sculpture of A HORSE made in memory of your uncle, then that horse sculpture could NEVER be "an eikon" of your uncle Charles, though it could perhaps be "a homoioima" of your uncle Charles. The only possible "eikon" that sculpture could be is "an eikon of a horse".

Whenever something does not actually LOOK LIKE what it is supposed to represent, THEN it can never be "an eikon" of that thing; it can only be "a homoioima" of that thing.

When Paul wanted to convey that the pagans had made idols that looked like animals and birds and reptiles and insects, then he could not possibly have used the word "eikon" to describe these, because God simply does not look like any of these things. The only possible word Paul could use to describe this pagan practice was "homoioima", because the pagans used these things to CONCEPTUALLY represent God! Oh yes, the pagans themselves might have thought that they had "eikon's", but all they actually had was "homoioima's". They had "homoioima's OF eikon's".

Similarly, IF somebody had taken a photo of Jesus Christ and that photo was now displayed on the walls of churches, or if people had made accurate paintings from that original photo, THEN they would indeed have "eikon's" of Jesus Christ. However, since Jesus Christ never even remotely looked like the sick

religious pictures prevalent in the churches of this world, therefore all they actually have is "homoioima's", conceptual representations of what they imagine Jesus Christ looked like. But NOBODY ON EARTH actually has "an eikon of God" or "an eikon of Jesus Christ", because nobody has an accurate representation of what either God the Father or Jesus Christ look like. Rather, the earth is filled with "homoioima's of God", pagan objects that supposedly represent deity, but without actually looking like anything that REALLY exists in the realm of deity.

TO SUMMARIZE:

1) The word "eikon" refers to something that has a form and a shape. The usages of this word make this clear.

2) This word "eikon" is repeatedly used in reference to God the Father and to Jesus Christ. This means that they both MUST have form and shape! If this point is contested, then the Scriptures I have listed above need to be explained!

3) In Romans 1:23 the word "eikon" is not really either the subject or the object! A careful examination of the verse shows that what Paul criticized the nations for was that they changed the glory of God into a "HOMOIOMA", into the concept of representing God through idols.

4) This use of "homoioima" is in harmony with the way this word is used in the other 5 Scriptures, which I have listed above. This word is never used to refer to any one specific individual. It is always used to present an abstract concept.

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