



About this Icon

The icon known as Christ the Pantocrator is one of the earliest icons of Christ in existence. It resides in the Monastery of St. Catherine's at Sinai. The icon is believed to have been "written" in the 6th century. Eastern Orthodox Christians say that icons are written rather than painted in that they express the truth written in the Gospels through their theologically dense imagery. Christ the Pantocrator is one of the few early icons to survive the Iconoclast Heresy of the 8th and 9th centuries where many of the sacred images were destroyed in the Eastern Christian Empire.

The term "pantocrater" is Greek and it is used both in the Old and New Testaments as a name for God. When the Hebrew Bible was translated into the Greek Septuagint, the term "pantocrater" was used for *YHWH Sabaoth*, and *El Shaddai*, meaning "Lord of Hosts," and "God Almighty," respectively. Pantocrater is used most extensively in the New Testament Book of Revelations:

⁸ *And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him; and they were full of eyes within: and they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, LORD God Almighty [Pantocrater], which was, and is, and is to come. (Rev 4:8)*

¹⁴ *For they are the spirits of devils, working miracles, which go forth unto the kings of the earth and of the whole world, to gather them to the battle of that great day of God Almighty [Pantocrater]. (Rev 16:14)*

⁶ *And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunders, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent [Pantocrater] reigneth. (Rev 19:6)*

¹⁵ *And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God [Pantocrater]. (Rev 19:15)*

²² *And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty [Pantocrater] and the Lamb are the temple of it. (Rev 21:22)*

A less literal interpretation of pantocrater, yet often understood and accepted by Orthodox Christians are the "Ruler of All," or "Sustainer of the World." Christ the Pantocrator is perhaps the most revered and ubiquitous of all the icons of the East. The cosmology of a Byzantine-styled church always places the icon of Christ the Pantocrator at the highest location on the ceiling usually within the dome. Beneath this icon may be icons of the saints representing the Church Triumphant and then beneath them, in the pews (or standing as most of the Orthodox churches in the East do not have pews or seats), the Church Militant who pray and worship under the watchful gaze of Christ, God Almighty.

The two most striking aspects of this icon are fact that Christ is looking directly at you, the observer, and secondly the asymmetry of His face. I am not expert on art, but I do know that most paintings have a "focal point." The focal point is that part of the painting that draws your attention, that part you "focus" on. The focal point is clearly Jesus' face made even more attention getting by its asymmetry. An Orthodox priest explained to me that there is another "focal point" that exist outside of the icon, and that is the observer. The observer is confronted via the asymmetry with a paradox, or perhaps better, a "coincidence of opposites," the God-man. Christ the Pantocrator is asking,



“Who do men say that I am?”

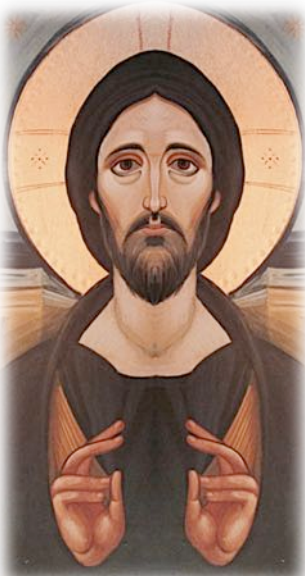
Some may say, Elijah the prophet, others John the Baptist. But the eyes of Christ demand a personal response.

“Who do *you* say that I am?”

“You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God,” (Matt 16:16) responds the believer recognizing in this image that the asymmetry reflects the mystery of the Incarnation: and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). It is generally agreed that the asymmetry depicted in the face of Christ is making the important theological point that Jesus is the incarnate Logos, that He is both fully man and fully God. There is also another interpretation of the icon, not contradictory but complimentary, and that is the asymmetry represents the contrast between Christ in His First Coming as the Suffering Servant, and His Second Coming as the King of kings and Judge of the nations. If one does a little “photoshopping” on this icon one can see why some believe that this too is an appropriate understanding of this icon.



I have a “hand written” icon of Christ the Pantocrater that originated from a monastery in Crete; it is pictured above and on the right. You will note that it is quite similar to the original Christ the Pantocrater at Sinai and it also shares the original’s asymmetry. Not all versions of Christ the Pantocrater have been written to include this asymmetry, mine does and I used Photoshop to demonstrate the images you see when combine mirror images of the left and right sides of the face to create two symmetrical images as shown below:



As you can see two very different depictions of Christ emerge in the process. The image of Christ on the left is the mild and merciful Jesus. He is the “suffering servant” Messiah with His hands raised in blessing.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth. (Isa 53:7)

The image of Christ on the right is the Messiah of His glorious return as Jesus Himself describes in Matthew chapters 24 and 25.

³¹ “When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats...,” (Matt 25:31-32)



The hands of Christ in the image on the right are not raised in blessing, but holding two books, the two Tablets of the Testimony, the Old and New Testament, the Word of God. It is not Christ that judges the world, but the Word of His testimony.

He who rejects me and does not receive my sayings has a judge; the word that I have spoken will be his judge on the last day. (John 12:48)

This icon reminds us that on the day of Judgment we are not standing before either the “merciful” Jesus *or* the “just” Jesus, but Christ the Pantocrater, who is the *Mysterium Tremendum*, the One who exceeds our rational attempts to explain the contradictions between the Transcendence and imminence of the God-man, and the Personhood and Unity of the Logos in the Trinitarian mystery. In Christ, the “coincidence of opposites” finds harmony and asymmetry her beauty. We stand before Christ, God Almighty, the Ruler and Sustainer of the Universe, with fear and trembling (Phil 2:12), yet also with boldness (Heb 4:16) because by faith we know that He is also the One in Whom mercy and justice kiss.