**IMAGE OF GOD** A phrase found several times in the book of Genesis (Gen 1:7–27; 5:1–3; 9:6). Distinguishes humankind from the animal and plant kingdoms. Elevates humankind above all terrestrial created things so as to exercise benevolent and ethical stewardship over creation. Image of God language is found in the New Testament as part of the Christian's responsibility to imitate Christ, who is the image(r) of God *par excellence*.

## Old Testament Data for the Image of God

Three Old Testament passages speak to the image of God:

1. Gen 1:26–27: "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them (NRSV).

2. Gen 5:1–3: "This is the book of the generations of Adam. When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created. When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth" (NRSV).

3. Gen 9:6: Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind" (NRSV).

A few observations are evident from these passages:

- The image of God is gender neutral.

- The image of God as a phrase is applied only to humans. Therefore, humanity is to be distinguished from the rest of earthly creation.

- Humanity is, in some way, like God. The copy is like the original Creator in some way.

- There is no hint that humanity grows into the image, or develops the image. There is no "potential" image of God. Whatever the image of God means, it is by definition inseparable from the human species.

- Nothing suggests that the image has been or can be bestowed incrementally or partially. There is no "partial" image.

- Humanity is made the steward-master of creation; the reverse is not the case.

- The "imaging" vocabulary is linked to childbearing. Humans after Adam and Eve are not direct creations of God, but Gen 9:6 recognizes later humans as being in God's image

- The image of God is described with the language of plurality ("Let us make … our image").

The data can be addressed in two lines of inquiry:

1. What the image of God means and does not mean.

2. How the language of plurality is best parsed to inform the meaning of the image.

### Problematic Interpretations of the Image of God

**The Image of God Refers to External, Visible Form.** The view that "Image of God" refers to external, visible form was predominate beginning in the 1940s due to Gunkel's commentary on Genesis and an article by Humbert. The four basic arguments for this interpretation are:

1. "Image of God" is a translation of the prepositional phrase בְּצֶלֶם (*betselem*) (preposition[בּ, *b*] appended to the Hebrew noun [צֶלֶם, *tselem*]. [צֶלֶם, *tselem*] occurs in 2 Kgs 11:18; Num 33:52; Ezek 7:20; 16:17 for idols, statues, and figurines). In view of the visual referent of (צֶלֶם, *tselem*), Genesis 1:26 may have informed readers that human form was similar to the deity's own form (Humbert, 153–175; Gunkel).

2. In Genesis 5:1–3, Seth was born "according to the image" of his father, Adam. The phrase used in this instance is (כְּצֶלֶם, *ketselem*). The Hebrew preposition differs from the phrase in Gen 1:26, having the preposition (כְּ, *k*) instead of (בּ, *b*). These two prepositions, used with (צֶלֶם, *tselem*), are interchangeable. The two prepositions (בּ, *b*, "in"; כְּ, *k*, "according to") are interchanged with the noun (צֶלֶם, *tselem*) and the other noun used in Gen 1:26 ("likeness," דְמוּת, *demuth*).

It is argued that the meaning of (צֶלֶם, *tselem*) is to be informed by (דְמוּת, *demuth*), "likeness." The latter refers to visual likeness or shape, so the former must as well (Ezek 1:10; 1:22; 10:22; Dan 10:16). This argument presumes a synonymy between the two nouns:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **"*in* our image, *according to* our likeness"** | בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כִּדְמוּתֵנוּ (*betsalmenu kidmuthenu*) | Gen 1:26 |
| "*in* his image, *in* the image of God" | בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים | Gen 1:27 |

(*betsalmo betselem elohim*)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| "*in* the likeness of God" | בִּדְמוּת אֱלֹהִים (*bidmuth elohim*) | |
| "*in* his likeness, *according to* his image" | בִּדְמוּתוֹ כְּצַלְמוֹ (*bidmutho ketsalmo*) | |
| "*in* the image of God" | בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים (*betselem elohim*) | |

3. Physical resemblance has something to do with the image in Gen 5:1–3, since the language concerns the physical offspring of Adam. The expression in Gen 1:26 could be viewed in the same way (Gunkel, *Genesis*, 112).

4. Humanity's creation in the image of God may be described in those terms as a basis for the Israelite rejection of making images of their God. Making a graven image is prohibited because humanity already is such an image (Exod 20:4; the word is not [צֶלֶם, *tselem*] in this passage).

This view began to lose consensus with the publication of an article by Clines. (צֶלֶם, *tselem*) is not always used to speak of a physical object. It can be used metaphorically, to speak of nonconcrete objects or attributes (Psa 39:7; 73:20). The most explicit Semitic parallels (for example, Akkadian *tsalmu*) are also used metaphorically (Clines, "The Image of God in Man," 74–75; Bray, "The Significance of God's Image in Man"). In the case of Psa 73:20, a vague notion of "shape" is still present, though not in concrete terms. (צֶלֶם, *tselem*) may speak of some type of "representation" of God without saying that the thing represented (God) must also be concrete or physical (Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 150). This is parallel with John 4:24, which affirms that God has no body, an idea suggested in Isa 31:3 as well.

Anthropomorphisms in the Old Testament also do not argue for understanding God as concrete. Anthropomorphism uses embodied humanity as an analogy toward understanding God. Assuming Yahweh has a physical form requires an explanation for why humanity was created with genders that have absolute physical differences. Rather than enforcing the idea that God inherently possesses

physical form, when Yahweh appears to men in human form, there is no suggestion that this form is anything but a temporary manifestation (Clines, "The Image of God in Man," 72).

Yahweh occasionally assumes a human form in the Old Testament (Gen 18; Exod 24:9–18; Deut 4:12; Ezek 1:26). He is not depicted in human terms because He has a body, but because He is a person. In Israelite thinking, it was impossible to think clearly about personhood without thoughts of embodiment. The Hebrew Bible describes a person in terms of the fusion of material flesh and immaterial inner life (Johnson, *The Vitality of the Individual*).

Recent scholarship has noted logical weaknesses in the idea that "likeness" (דְּמוּת, *demuth*) requires "image" (צֶלֶם, *tselem*) to be understood in visual terms. Since the terms are not always paired, it cannot be said that one is necessary to communicate the other. It also suggests that their meanings are not completely synonymous.

Clines argued that *variation* between the prepositions and nouns might have deliberate intent and communicate something about the meaning of the image of God: "When the reference is to the image of God and not to Adam's image (Gen 5:3), the preposition with צֶלֶם (*tselem*) is always בְּ (*b*). This could be accidental, but we suggest that it is not. Genesis 5:1 and 5:3 do not speak of the transmission of the divine image (for it belongs to man as such, and so cannot be transmitted …) … but of Seth's likeness to Adam.… Adam was made 'in the likeness' (which is the same thing as 'according to the likeness') of God. Thus verse 1 has בדמות (*bdmwt*), and not בצלם (*btslm*). Seth is not Adam's image, but only like Adam's shape; so verse 3 has not בצלמו (*btslmw*), but כצלמו (*ktslmw*). Thus, Genesis 1:26 is not to be interpreted by Gen 5:1, 3, but *vice versa*" (Clines, "The Image of God in Man," 78n117).

There does not appear to be any secure exegetical link between Gen 1:26 and Exod 20:4. The vocabulary differs, and the commandment fails to ground the prohibition in the narrative about humankind's creation.

**The Image as a Physical Attribute.** The image of God is often defined as an ability dependent on the human brain, including:

- Intelligence

- Rationality

- Emotions

- Volitional will

- Consciousness

- Sentience

- The ability to communicate.

Many of these options are coherent, but defining the image of God in any of these ways fails exegetically and creates a problem for beginning of life and end of life ethics:

- All are not equally present among all human beings.

- All are not present in all human beings at all times.

- Some are not unique to human beings.

For example, the fertilized human embryo does not possess these abilities or attributes. To an embryo, they are potential attributes. If the image of God is said to be any of these things, the human only potentially bears the divine image until those attributes are possessed. This means that one must either deny the human personhood of the embryo or produce a more coherent alternative for defining the image of God. Even after birth, these options would mean that a severely retarded or brain-damaged child does not bear the divine image. Such definitions, if held consistently, would result in the loss of the image for some human beings.

Scientific and psychological research question whether some of these attributes are unique to humans. In regard to intelligence, the field of animal cognition has demonstrated that many animals have intelligence that cannot be assigned merely to instinct (Griffin, *Animal Thinking*; Pearce, *Animal Learning and Cognition*). For example, the ability to remember instructions or act contrary to instinct constitutes intelligence. Several species of mammals and birds score higher on simple intelligence tests than human infants or toddlers. Animals have been shown to grieve as well, so human emotion is not unique. Animals also show the ability to communicate (Savage-Rumbaugh, "Language Learning in Two Species of Apes").

Scripture gives no indication that the divine image is bestowed incrementally or intermittently, and demands that the image must be unique to humans with respect to creation.

**The Image of God as the Immaterial Nature of Humans.** Humanity's inner or "spiritual" nature may offer a better strategy for defining the image of God.

**Spiritual Abilities.** "Spiritual abilities" are "God-directed" abilities or spiritual inclinations of the inner life. Examples include:

- The belief in God

- A desire to know God

- Prayer

- Knowing right from wrong

These abilities require cognition. As with the physical abilities that require brain function, spiritual abilities or desires are not possessed equally by all humans. Furthermore, some animals may possess moral awareness (Putz, "Moral Apes"; Griffin, *Animal Minds*).

The faculty of knowing right from wrong is specifically denied as being part of the image of God. Scripture is clear that this sort of moral awareness only came about after humanity's creation in God's image, not in association with it. As Bray points out: "[C]onferred moral awareness is directly contradicted by the narrative in Genesis itself. It is extraordinary that this was never recognized, yet it is plain for all to see that Adam, though he was created in the image of God, was not allowed to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When he did so, God said 'Behold, the man has become like one of us,' implying that in this particular at least, there had been an important dissimilarity between Himself and His human creature" (Bray, "The Significance of God's Image in Man," 207).

**The "Soul".** The image of God may refer to the possession of a soul or spirit. The ancient Israelite believed that a person was the totality of the body and the inner, animate life force. They were not inclined to define the "parts" of humanity.

The Old Testament terms for "soul" (נֶפֶשׁ, *nephesh*) and "spirit" (רוּח, *ruch*) are consistently used to identify that the body is living or attributes dependent on brain function, such as emotions and intelligence. The terms are used interchangeably. Scripture never speaks to the origin of the immaterial part of humans, save for the account in Genesis where God animates the first human, Adam, by breathing into him the "breath (נִשְׁמַת, *nishmath*) of life" (Gen 2:7; Josh 11:11). Animals are described as having the "soul" (נֶפֶשׁ, *nephesh*) and "spirit" (רוּח, *ruch*) (Gen 1:21, 24; Eccl 3:21). "Breath" (נִשְׁמַת, *nishmath*) is also interchangeable with "soul" (נֶפֶשׁ, *nephesh*) and "spirit" (רוּח, *ruch*). The terms also overlap in usage with "heart" (לֵבָב, *levav*/לֵב, *lev*). A sampling of the biblical terminology and its usage:

1.  The life force/that which animates the body

    1.  (נֶפֶשׁ, *nephesh*)—Gen 1:20–21, 24, 30; 9:4–5; 12:13; 19:19; 35:18; Exod 4:19; Job 11:20; 33:22; 33:28; 33:30

    2.  (רוּח, *ruch*)—Gen 6:17; 7:15, 22; 45:27; Zech 12:1; Psa 135:17; Job 7:7

3. Both terms are combined with "breath" (נִשְׁמַת, *nishmath*) to convey this idea as well:

   (נִשְׁמַת, *nishmath*) + (רוּחַ, *ruch*) ([Gen 7:22](); [Job 27:3](); [32:8](); [Isa 42:5](); [57:16]()); (נִשְׁמַת,

   *nishmath*) + (נֶפֶשׁ, *nephesh*) ([Gen 2:7](); [Josh 11:11]())

2. The "inner life" of a person

   1. The seat of emotions

   2. (נֶפֶשׁ, *nephesh*)—[Lev 26:15](); [30](), [43](); [Jer 13:17](); [14:19](); [Lam 3:17](); [Gen 34:3](), [8](); [42:21](); [Exod 15:19]();
      [23:19](); [Num 21:4](); [1 Sam 1:10](), [15](); [2 Sam 5:8](); [17:8](); [2 Kgs 4:27](); [Job 14:22](); [Pss 6:3](); [13:2](); [23:3]();
      [35:25](); [42:1–2]()

   3. (רוּחַ, *ruch*)—[Num 5:14](); [5:30](); [Eccl 10:4](); [2 Chr 18:22](); [Isa 54:6](); [57:15](); [Prov 14:29]()

   4. (לֵבָב, *levav*/לֵב, *lev*)—[Gen 6:6](); [Gen 34:3](); [Judg 16:25](); [1 Kgs 21:7](); [2 Kgs 6:11]()

   5. Internal dispositions, attitudes, and abilities

   6. (נֶפֶשׁ, *nephesh*)—[Lev 26:16](); [Judg 16:16](); [1 Sam 2:33](); [Pss 42:6](); [107:26](); [Deut 4:29](); [6:5](); [10:12]();
      [11:13](); [11:18](); [14:26](); [21:14](); [23:24](); [1 Sam 23:20](); [Prov 19:2]();

   7. (רוּחַ, *ruch*)—[Isa 19:3](); [29:24](); [57:15](); [61:3](); [Jer 10:14](); [51:11](), [17](); [Hag 1:14](); [Pss 34:19](); [51:19]();
      [76:12](); [Job 32:18](); [Prov 15:13](); [16:19](); [17:22](), [27](); [18:14](); [29:23](); [Ezra 1:1](); [Exod 6:9](); [Num 14:24](); [Josh
      2:11](); [5:1](); [Ezek 11:19](); [18:31](); [21:12](); [36:26](); [Eccl 7:8](); [Dan 5:12](); [6:4](); [1 Chr 28:12]()

8. (לֵבָב, *levav*/לֵב, *lev*)—Gen 6:5; 8:21; 31:20; 42:28; 1 Sam 10:26; 17:32; 24:6; 2 Sam 15:13; 24:10; Exod 28:3; 35:34; 31:6; Num 16:28; Ezek 13:1–3; 1 Kgs 3:9; 2 Kgs 12:5; Eccl 1:16; 2:10; 1 Chr 12:34; Psa 12:3; Lam 3:33

Hebrews 4:12 refers to the Word of God's ability to "divide the soul and spirit," but this does not point to an actual division of those two terms—it claims the word of God could penetrate the inner person in such a way, not that such a division already exists before the word of God works its power. The point is actually the hard fusion of the two, separable only by the supernatural empowerment of the word of God. As in the Old Testament, soul and spirit are two ways of referring to the same immaterial nature. 1 Thess 5:23 may support a separation: "Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." Paul is probably expressing his wish for believers to be sanctified as completely as possible. He uses the word ὁλοτελής (*holotelēs*) to express his wish for complete sanctification, a term that means "in every way complete." Although Scripture is clear that humans have an immaterial existence outside the body at death (2 Cor 5:8), that reality cannot be decisively connected to any biblical term for the inner life.

## The Meaning of the Image of God

A more coherent understanding can be found by appeal to Hebrew syntax with respect to the prepositional phrase בְּצֶלֶם (*betselem*). The preposition (בּ, *b*) should be understood as what Hebrew grammarians variously refer to as:

- The "*beth* of essence (*beth essentiae*) or equivalence" (Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 2:487).

- The "*beth* of identity" (Waltke and O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 198).

- The "*beth* of predication" (Gordon, " 'In' of Predication or Equivalence," 612–13).

The preposition "in" should be understood as meaning "as" or "in the capacity of." Humanity was created "as" the image of God. The concept can be conveyed if we think of "image" as a verb: Humans are created as God's imagers—they function *in the capacity of* God's representatives. The image of God is not a quality within human beings; it is what humans *are*. Clines summarizes: "What makes man the image of God is not that corporeal man stands as an analogy of a corporeal God; for the image does not primarily mean similarity, but the representation of the one who is imaged in a place where he is not.… According to Gen 1:26ff, man is set on earth in order to be the representative there of the absent God who is nevertheless present by His image (Clines, "The Image of God in Man," 87)"

Every human, regardless of the stage of development, is an imager of God. There is no incremental or partial of the image via some ability, physical or spiritual. No member of the animal kingdom,

regardless of any cognitive ability it might have, is an imager of God. The same goes for any intelligent life form, artificial or the hypothetical extraterrestrial.

This understanding lends clarity to the Old Testament passages. Being created as God's imagers means we are His representatives on earth—the only qualification for this is that we are human. This is why the creation of humankind as God's image in Gen 1:26–27 is immediately followed by the so-called dominion mandate of Gen 1:28. Humanity is tasked with stewarding God's creation as though God were physically present to undertake the duty himself. Genesis 9:6's requirement of capital punishment for murder is because the intentional killing of an innocent human was tantamount to killing God in effigy. Clines argument with respect to Gen 5:1–3 is also brought into sharper focus: "Seth is not Adam's image, but only like Adam's shape" (Clines, "The Image of God in Man," 78n117). Seth resembled Adam, but he was not Adam's representative on earth. The prepositional changes in Gen 5 serve to distinguish the point of Gen 1:26–27 from Gen 5:1–3.

This view means that all human endeavor and enterprise has spiritual meaning—work is a spiritual exercise. Vocation is worship, no matter how mundane. Any task performed to steward creation, to harness its power for God's glory and the benefit of fellow imagers, and to foster in the harmonious productivity of fellow imagers, is imaging God. This application of the image has been referred to as the "cultural mandate" or the vocational view of the *imago Dei* (Sands, "The *Imago Dei* as a Vocation").

### The Plural Language Associated with the Image of God

**Problematic Interpretations of the Plurality.** The plurality in the expression "let *us* create humankind in *our* image" may points to plurality *within* God. Christians see the Trinity in this language. However, an ancient Israelite or Jew never would have presumed this (Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 27–28; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 133–34). This option reads the New Testament back into the Old—the language does not specify (or limit) the plurality to three persons. The Old Testament uses the language of divine plurality in contexts that, were the Trinity to be imported into the passage, would result in its members being corrupt and wicked (Psa 82; Heiser, "Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism?").

Plurality may be an example of the "plural of majesty," a grammatical use of the plural to point to "a fullness of attributes and powers" (Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 28). However, the plural of majesty is not used with pronouns or verbal forms, the latter of which is present in Gen 1:26 and 11:7.

In reference to Isaiah 6:8, the plural language in Gen 1:26 may be a self-deliberation or self-encouragement. This perspective is akin to the "editorial we." The plurality describes how people deliberate with themselves. However, it is difficult to see how this view can work with the meaning of the image as God's representative. It is also difficult to cohere this view with Psa 8, in which humanity is said to have been created a little lower than *elohim* (Psa 8:5). That the word *elohim* is to be taken as a plural is evident from its citation in Heb 2:7, where the writer quotes the passage from the Septuagint, which renders *elohim* as "angels."

Some look to humanity as the referent of the plurality. Bray writes, "A more awkward question is raised by the use of the plural in Gen 1:26, implying as it does that man, as the image of God, somehow reflects a plurality in God" (Bray, "The Significance of God's Image in Man," 197).

**An Announcement to the Heavenly Host.** In Genesis 1:26, God, the lone speaker, is probably announcing His intention to create humankind to the members of His heavenly host (Psa 82; 89:5–8). Wenham writes, "From Philo onward, Jewish commentators have generally held that the plural is used because God is addressing his heavenly court" (Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 27).

As humans, we use this sort of language with regularity. A mother could announce to her family, "let's make dinner"—and then proceed to do so herself, for their benefit, without their involvement in the event. This is more coherent than a mere rhetorical self-reference since it involves the audience, though without necessarily requiring their active participation. This is also the most coherent explanation for the other plurality language we have touched upon (Gen 11:7; Isa 6:8). God among his heavenly host is a familiar biblical description (Deut 33:1–2; Psa 68:17; 1 Kgs 22:19–23).

Bray notes: "More probable is the idea that God is here speaking to the heavenly hosts, though this raises such questions as whether angels are also created in the image of God, whether angels took part in the work of man's creation" (Bray, "The Significance of God's Image in Man," 198). Clines asserts that this view "would imply that man was made in the image of the *elohim* as well as of God Himself ('in *our* image'); it would mean that the *elohim* shared in the creation of man ('let us make')" (Clines, "The Image of God in Man," 66).

The text is clear that the angels did not participate in the creation of humankind. The singular suffix ("so God created humankind in His image") makes that point as well. There is no contradiction if "let us create" is taken as an announcement of the single Creator to a group.

Angelic beings are also divine imagers—representatives of their Creator. While humans image God on earth, angelic beings image God in the spiritual world. They do God's bidding in their own sphere of influence. The Old Testament and New Testament describe angelic beings with administrative terminology, such as:

- "Prince" (Dan 10:13, 20–21)

- "Thrones" (Col 1:16)

- "Rulers" (Eph 3:10)

- "Authorities" (1 Pet 3:22; Col 1:16)

First Kings 22:19–23 illustrates the heavenly bureaucracy at work. Angelic beings were created before the earth, and therefore before humans (Job 38:7–8). The notion that God decided to make humans to represent Him and His will on earth mirrors what God had already done in the spiritual world. God announces that, as things are in the heavenly realm, so they will be on earth. Humanity is lesser than

angelic beings. However, humans are not their representatives, but are destined to rule over angels and to inherit the nations ruled by some of the sons of God (1 Cor 6:3; Rev 2:26).

**The Image of God in the New Testament**

The functional view of the image described argues that the phrase means humans are created as God's image. Taking that understanding to the New Testament's image of God language brings the meaning and importance of the image doctrine in New Testament theology into clear focus.

Paul argues that believers are destined to be conformed to the image of Christ (Rom 8:29). We are to live as God would, to represent him and his character. Paul elsewhere refers to Jesus as the image of God (2 Cor 4:4). The writer of Hebrews uses the same verbiage, calling Jesus "the express image of God" (Heb 1:3). As humans gave visible form to God, so Jesus is the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15). Jesus was truly incarnate, becoming human to atone for humankind, but also an example for humankind (Phil 2:6–10; 1 Pet 2:21).

These New Testament passages convey that Jesus was the imager of God. As Jesus imaged God, we must image Jesus. In so doing, we fulfill the rationale for our creation. This process is gradual: "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:18). Paul also links our resurrection to Jesus as the image of God in 1 Cor 15:49.

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