

What can we understand by man being made in the ‘image of God’ in Genesis, and what missiological implications does this have?

Genesis tells us that God created man “in our image, in our likeness,” a striking phrase and one which Schaeffer considers “as important as anything in Scripture” (1972, 46). This essay considers how Genesis’ references to that image/likeness can be understood, by taking the following approach: Section I surveys Old Testament usage of the terms “image” and “likeness”, as well as briefly considering Ancient Near Eastern parallels, in order to set the context for our study.¹ Section II explores the four main interpretations of man in God’s image (*imago Dei*), briefly assessing their relative merits. Section III then broadens the discussion by considering how our understanding of being made in God’s image should influence how Christians conduct mission.

Section I: Usage of ‘Image’

Regarding being made in God’s image, Erickson says that “[t]here has been a great amount of discussion... in fact, some would say it has been discussed too much,” but he continues that, actually, “the concept is critical because the image of God is what makes man man” (1983, 496). Before exploring what is meant by that, we are obliged to survey references to man being made in God’s image. For a concept of great significance within the Judaeo-Christian tradition, it is perhaps surprising that only three Old Testament passages refer to man being made in God’s image.² We examine them below, before considering more precisely the meaning of ‘image’ and ‘likeness’, and looking at a parallel Egyptian account of the creation of man.

Genesis 1:24-27 – where God creates man in His image on the sixth day of creation:

And God said, “Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: livestock, creatures that move along the ground, and wild animals, each according to its kind.” And it was so. God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

Genesis 5:1-3 – where the likeness of God is shared by Adam’s descendents:

This is the written account of Adam’s line. When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. He created them male and female and blessed them. And when they were created, he called them “man.” When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he named him Seth.

Genesis 9:1-6 – where the sanctity of human life, as God’s image, is upheld:

Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you will fall upon all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air, upon every creature that moves along the ground, and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hands. Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything. “But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it. And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man.

Whoever sheds the blood of man,
by man shall his blood be shed;
for in the image of God
has God made man.”

¹ This essay does not explore New Testament instances and interpretations of ‘image’ or ‘likeness’. Also largely beyond our scope is the impact of sinfulness on the image of God in man.

² Berkouwer (1962, 67) found it “rather striking that the term is not used often at all,” arguing that the Bible “never gives us any kind of systematic theory about man as the image of God.” That, of course, was not necessarily its purpose.

These three passages are amongst the most well-known in the Bible but, as Brueggeman laments, “they are frequently the most misunderstood” (1982, 11).³ I have highlighted references not just to ‘image’ (צלם, *selem*) but also to ‘likeness’ (דמות, *demut*) since these terms are often used together, either synonymously or to reinforce each other.⁴ Their subtleties can perhaps best be summarised in that *selem* typically conveys something concrete, while *demut* refers to something more abstract.⁵

It is worth noting in passing that other *selem* references in the Old Testament are variously translated as image, model, idol, phantom, fantasy, vain show, shadow, outward show and dream (and tend to imply either physicality or form); *demut* references appear as likeness, sketch, figure, like that of, looked like, form, appearance – and image (and tend to imply similarity to, or representation of).⁶ It can be seen from these lists that both terms have a degree of flexibility, and there is some ambiguity over their etymology – none of which helps the “highly problematic”⁷ exegesis of the Genesis passages. Perhaps the key point to grasp from this brief philological study is that both words can express a relationship between one thing and another, especially an original and its copy.

Apart from examining the exact words used to study man being created in God’s image, we must also study the concept. Similarities between the Genesis account and other Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) histories have been noted, as von Rad observes, “[w]e learn from a number of ancient Oriental myths that a god makes a man... in his likeness. It is also particularly significant that in ancient Egypt the Pharaoh was regarded as ‘the image of God living on earth’” (1972, 58). Of exemplary note is the teaching of the Egyptian Merikare (circa 2100BC), which claims that men are “images” of “the god”:

Well directed are men, the cattle of the god.
He has made heaven and earth for their sake.
He has driven away the water monster.
He made the air for their nostrils to live.
They are his images, who have come forth from his body.⁸

Whilst these parallels are intriguing, and indicative of general patterns of thought in the ANE, we cannot assume any direct link from one text to the other, especially when important differences remain.⁹ Specifically, ANE mythic histories tend to tell of a king (or, in one instance, a priest¹⁰) being in the image of a god, rather than mankind in general; they also tend to imply such a figure as having divine characteristics.

In contrast, the three Biblical passages above appear in the context of man being created by God, without being equal to Him. The implication of his having an image-likeness to God is that man has similarities to God, as well as differences from Him. We turn now to the ongoing debate as to how this is the case.

³ Many of these misunderstandings can be traced back to Origen who, writing in the third century, claimed that ‘image’ relates to humanity after the fall, whilst ‘likeness’ relates to perfection at the final consummation. It has been convincingly demonstrated by Kidner (1971, 50ff), and others, that the two terms cannot thus be divorced.

⁴ As Kidner explains, the two words “reinforce one another... Scripture does not use them as technically distinct expressions,” (1971, 50) and Hughes agrees that they are often used “synonymously” (1989, 7). Both Luther and Brunner saw image/likeness as an example of Hebrew parallelism.

⁵ Hamilton (1990, 136), amongst others.

⁶ These terms are taken from the NIV, Amplified, and King James (Authorized) Bibles, from various passages in 1 Samuel, Ezekiel, Psalms, 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Isaiah and Daniel, which we are not able to consider in any depth here. Erickson (1983, 497) observes that two apocryphal passages (Wisdom of Solomon 2:23 and Ecclesiasticus 17:3) also specifically refer to the image of God in man.

⁷ Wenham (1987, 29) stresses the problem of etymological uncertainty here, and the caution with which we must draw any conclusions based on word definitions.

⁸ Beyerlin (1978, 46) details this extract from three papyrus manuscripts from the New Kingdom, translated by A. Volten (1945).

⁹ Clines (1968, 93) correctly asserts that “[w]e can hardly suppose that there is any direct relationship between this isolated reference to mankind as the image of God and the biblical text.”

¹⁰ Detailed in Clines (1968, 84), who stresses the uniqueness of this particular reference.

Section II: Interpretation of 'Image'

It is possible to identify four categories into which interpretations of 'image-likeness' fall, which I have labelled constitutional, physical, functional and relational. We look at each separately, although this is not necessarily to disagree with Blocher's claim that "[m]ediating solutions or partial combinations can be imagined" (1984, 81).

(a) Constitutional

This first understanding of being created in God's image has been tremendously important in post-Reformation theology. Since Calvin, and especially up until the Second World War, it has been popular to conceive of God's image in man being based upon his constitution: that which he is, or is capable of doing. Specifically, man has certain 'structural' qualities that define him, and these are variously listed as moral, spiritual, mental or ethical capability. As such he is clearly distinct from the rest of creation. According to Henry (in Elwell 2001, 593), this view remains popular (although by no means unchallenged) amongst evangelicals today, and it is not difficult to see how this theory arose: both God and man are capable of reason, spiritual awareness and creativity; man is made in God's image; and so, the logic suggests, the definition of being made in God's image is that he is endowed with "intelligence, will, [and] emotions" (Erickson 1983, 514).

Whilst it is evident that man *is* blessed with such qualities, it is still something of a supposition to say that these qualities *define* man as in God's image.¹¹ From a logical point of view, it cannot be argued that all differences between man and fauna are the result of his being in God's image – they may define a secondary or consequential characteristic of man, rather than relating directly to his being created in God's image. This crucial point has been overlooked by much of the literature in this area. Further, there is little evidence in Genesis itself to support such a constitutional interpretation, one that might indeed seem alien to its author.¹² As such, this argument may well serve as an example of what Hamilton meant that most thoughts on Genesis 1:26 "are based on subjective inferences rather than objective exegesis" (1990, 137).

(b) Physical

The second interpretation of being made in God's image finds few advocates today. According to this 'anthropomorphic' understanding, there is a physical resemblance of man to God. Theologians such as Ryder Smith, Gunkel and, especially, von Rad are associated with this argument, which stresses the physical or plastic emphasis of the word *semet*, and claims that the original readers (listeners) of the passage may well have understood it 'at face value'. For von Rad, "the marvel of man's bodily appearance is not at all to be excepted from the realm of God's image" (cited in Hughes 1989, 12). Further support for this argument is found in the second of our passages above, Genesis 5, where Adam is described as having "a son in his own likeness, in his own image" (v.3) which, it is claimed, stresses the corporeality of the image.

Few commentators today are prepared to fully support this line of thought, and especially its naïve literal interpretations of (metaphorical) references to, for example, the 'arm of the Lord.' It also dangerously limits God to human dimensions, and even our level of conception. Despite these objections, some have questioned whether man was of necessity created with a physical resemblance to God "to facilitate the incarnation which would someday take place" (Erickson 1983, 737). Such discussion unjustifiably limits God's omnipotence, however, and changes the direction of the debate unhelpfully.

¹¹ Also, this division of man spiritual from man physical is a concept alien to Jewish thought in Old Testament times (Westermann 1984, 150).

¹² Erickson notes Barth's claim that it is odd the Genesis author "makes no mention of man's particular intellectual and moral talents and possibilities, his exercise of reason, if those characteristics do indeed constitute the image of God in man" (1983, 505).

(c) Functional

The third interpretation of being made in God's image is functional, that is, it relates to God ordaining a specific role or set of roles for man to carry out; according to this theory, it is what man *does*, rather than what he *is*, which is the key issue. Specifically, much attention has been given to the proximity in Scripture of man's creation in God's image and man's dominion or rule over the earth. For example, Genesis 1:26 records God as saying "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule... over all the earth," and it has been argued that this is a direct association, i.e. that likeness is defined as ruling. In this way, man on earth "represents God" (Grudem 1994, 442), the universal ruler; this theme is developed in Genesis 2 where Adam names all of earth's creatures (vv.19-20).

Apart from this abstract discussion of rulership, there is also historical and archaeological debate, since research on the Ancient Near East has claimed to shed light on this issue and the context in which Genesis was written.¹³ In his thorough and ground-breaking study *The Image of God in Man*, Clines argues that "[i]t is very likely that the Ancient Near Eastern description of the king, especially in Egypt, as the image of God, formed part of the background to the phrase in Genesis 1:26," so that man is "described in royal terms" (1968, 97). Von Rad develops this theme by arguing that history has shown that "powerful earthly kings, to indicate their claim to dominion, erect an image of themselves in the provinces of their empire where they do not personally appear"¹⁴ and that likewise "man is placed upon earth in God's image as God's sovereign emblem" (1972, 60).

Such influences on Genesis are by no means improbable, although it is difficult to demonstrate a direct and indisputable link. Two problems remain, however: firstly, it has not been demonstrated that rulership *defines* man's being in God's image, rather than being a *consequence* of it; and secondly, as Westermann observes (1984, 151-3), such ANE regal imagery invariably pertains to a solitary ruler, rather than the whole of mankind.¹⁵ Whilst there may well be something in the argument that reads Genesis as deliberately and polemically democratizing this divine rulership,¹⁶ it is by no means clear that the author of Genesis sought to define man in purely functional terms. The question remains that, even if this literary device were borrowed from contemporaneous cultures, what theological truth was it employed to show?

(d) Relational

The fourth and final interpretation of man being made in God's image focuses on the relationship between man and God: man is not to be primarily understood by what he can do, or what his role is, but by his relationship with God – which is unique within creation. There are several different strands to this argument (not all of which are accepted by each of its advocates), which has become increasingly popular since the 1980s.

As Schaeffer (1972, 47) pointed out, man's "basic relationship is upward rather than downward or horizontal." Man has a personal relationship with God, and fellowship with him, irrespective of whether an individual acts upon it or is even aware of it. Man was created as a 'counterpart' to God and, whilst it may well be true that a consequence of this fact is his dominion over earth, the prior and greater truth is that man corresponds to God on some level. Westermann put it thus: God wanted to create something "analogous to himself, to whom he can speak, who will listen and speak to him" (1987, 10). Others have sought to compare God's trinitarian nature ("Let *us* make man...") with man's social relationships, and Barth controversially interpreted this sexually, whereby the image of God was specifically in our being created male and female, a view that has won little support.

¹³ Specifically, Brueggeman (1982, 24) has proposed a realistic final date of composition of the 6th century BC during the exile, and many scholars suggest the earliest written material pre-dates 1000BC.

¹⁴ In an interesting Biblical example of this practice, Daniel 3 describes how King Nebuchadnezzar made a large image of gold, set on the plain of Dura in Babylon, which people were instructed to worship on certain occasions (Hoekema 1986, 67).

¹⁵ Although Wenham (1987, 31) maintains that this can, innovatively, be the case in Genesis.

¹⁶ See, for example, Blocher (1984, 87f) and, especially, Hamilton (1990, 135).

Of the four interpretations of what it means to be made in God's image, this relational aspect seems closest to the intent of what the author of Genesis is trying to express: he stresses man's special relationship with God in many ways in chapters 1-2, and being created in God's image should be read in that context.¹⁷ Whilst it may be true that man has particular physical or spiritual properties, that does not appear to be the concern of those passages where man is referred to as being in God's image. Instead, the emphasis is on relationships – between man and God (both Adam and, in Genesis 5:3, his descendents). One consequence of man's relationship to God is that he is appointed His representative (which is described in a typical ANE manner); but this is not actually definitive of being man in His image.

Section III: Missiological Implications

This final section briefly considers some of the missiological implications of being made in God's image. These are merely preliminary sketches of ideas, intended to provoke thought about the direction and nature of Christian mission.

It is a universal characteristic of man that he is in God's image, and capable of relating to Him. From this, several points follow:

1. All humans should be seen as of great value since they all reflect something of their Creator.¹⁸ This axiom is behind the decree against taking human life in Genesis 9:6, "for in the image of God has God made man."
2. Consequently, as being of great worth, each human deserves the opportunity to understand and develop his or her relationship with God. Whilst this may well pre-exist through general revelation, there is here both a justification and an imperative for evangelistic mission to take place.
3. Since *all* humans are created in God's image, mission should seek to emphasize the unity, common origin and common purpose of mankind.¹⁹ Mission should therefore be global in ambition, and intercultural and interdenominational in practice.
4. Just as the triune God is Himself relational, human relationships are blessed and endorsed by God. It is deliberate that man is a social being. Christian mission – and indeed all Christian living – is intended to be both in communion with God and in communion with fellow man. Christian missionaries are therefore called to participate wholly in the social contexts they live in, in order to relate fully to those they witness to.
5. Human life, as bearing God's image, is deserving of dignity and esteem and Christians must speak out against social, economic or political practices that undermine this fact. As Gushee (2006, 35) succinctly argues, it is easy but always wrong for some people to be labelled 'subhuman' as a justification for their maltreatment, social exclusion or even torture.²⁰

¹⁷ Boice describes man's special relationship with God thus: "God loves men and women, as He does not and cannot love the animals, plants, or inanimate matter" (1982, 78). We might draw further conclusions from the fact that men and women love God in a way that the animals, plants, and inanimate matter cannot.

¹⁸ Whilst it is true that the fall of man has distorted and diminished his imaging of God, that impaired image remains nonetheless (even though in the form of what Blocher calls merely a "caricature" (1984, 94)). We should be wary, therefore, of thinking bodily, human, or earthly things as necessarily 'bad'.

¹⁹ As Hoekema says (1986, 98), in one sense, "the image of God in its totality can only be seen in humankind as a whole."

²⁰ Gushee believes the value of man should be explicitly taught: "Christians, at least, should be trained to see in every person the imprint of God's grandeur" (2006, 35).

6. As Schaeffer has said, “[n]o matter who I look at, no matter where he is, every man is created in the image of God as much as I am” (1972, 51), and this should deter Christians from holding a loftier view of themselves than those they seek to save or aid.
7. Since it is a consequence of man’s image that he is given dominion over the earth, mission must consider the environmental impact of its actions and strategies.
8. The New Testament reveals that Christ “is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4) and that Christians “are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory” (2 Cor. 3:18) – so the key to being both fully human and fully in God’s image is to be Christlike. For this to happen, the Good News about Jesus Christ must be shared with all. A person can only experience the fullness of their humanity through relationship with Christ.²¹

Conclusion

Erickson rightly observed that “[o]ur understanding of the image will affect how we treat our fellow humans and how we minister to them” (1983, 496). My conclusion that the image should be primarily (but not exclusively) understood in terms of man’s relation to God suggests that mission should strive to be relational. As such, it should recognise people’s existing relationship with God *prior* to their encountering the Gospel; it should recognise the fundamental goodness of their relationships with each other; and it should recognise their dignity before God, and essential equality on earth.

All have something to learn from dwelling upon the fact that we are made in God’s image. In these postmodern times, people often struggle to understand their identity and who they are; Genesis teaches us that such questions can only be answered *in relation to God*. This truth ought to humble and inspire us, and Grudem is therefore right to say that “[i]t would be good for us to reflect on our likeness to God more often. It will probably amaze us to realize that when the Creator of the universe wanted to create something ‘in his image’ he made us” (1994, 449). This scriptural truth must be shared globally by Christians, who in doing so would do well do consider the eight missiological principles outlined above.

Christopher Ducker
March 2006

²¹ A similar logic led Hughes to assert, profoundly, that to deny God is to “dehumanize oneself” (1989, 4).

Bibliography

- Arnold (2002): Arnold, Bill T. and Bryan E. Beyer (Eds.), *Readings from the Ancient Near East: Primary Sources for Old Testament Study*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002
- Atkinson (1990): Atkinson, David, *The Message of Genesis 1-11: The Dawn of Creation [BST]*, Leicester: IVP, 1990
- Berkouwer (1962): Berkouwer, G.C., *Man: The Image of God*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962
- Beyerlin (1978): Beyerlin, Walter (ed.), *Near Eastern Religious Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, London: SCM Press, 1978
- Blocher (1984): Blocher, Henri, *In the Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis*, Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984
- Boice (1982): Boice, James Montgomery, *Genesis: An Expository Commentary, Volume 1: Genesis 1:1–11:32*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982
- Brueggeman (1982): Brueggeman, Walter: *Genesis: Interpretation – A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982
- Cairns (1973): Cairns, David, *The Image of God in Man*, London: Fontana, 1973
- Clines (1968): Clines, D.J.A., 'The Image of God in Man' in *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968), pp.53-103.
- Elwell (2001): Elwell, Walter A. (ed.) *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, 2nd ed.*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001
- Erickson (1983): Erickson, Millard J., *Christian Theology*, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983
- Ferguson (1988): Ferguson, Sinclair B. & David F. Wright (eds.), *New Dictionary of Theology*, Leicester: IVP, 1988
- Grudem (1994): Grudem, Wayne, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, Leicester: IVP, 1994
- Gushee (2006): Gushee, David P., 'Why Torture Is Always Wrong' in *Christianity Today* 50:2 (February 2006), pp.32-7.
- Hamilton (1990): Hamilton, Victor P., *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1-17*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990
- Hoekema (1986): Hoekema, Anthony A., *Created in God's Image*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986
- Hughes (1989): Hughes, Philip Edgcumbe, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ*, Leicester: IVP, 1989
- Johnson & Johnson (2001): Johnson, Richard and Tricia, *Discovering Genesis: Crossway Bible Guide*, Leicester: Crossway Books, 2001
- Kidner (1971): Kidner, Derek, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, London: Tyndale Press, 1971
- Pritchard (1958): Pritchard, James B. (ed.), *The Ancient Near East, Volume 1: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958
- Schaeffer (1972): Schaeffer, Francis A., *Genesis in Space and Time: The Flow of Biblical History*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1972
- Von Rad (1972): Von Rad, Gerhard, *Genesis: A Commentary*, London: SCM Press, 1972
- Wenham (1987): Wenham, Gordon J., *Genesis 1-15 [World Biblical Commentary]*, Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1987
- Westermann (1987): Westermann, Claus, *Genesis*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1987
- Westermann (1984): Westermann, Claus, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* [Trans. John J. Scullion], Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984