

IMAGE OF GOD (OT). Even though the statement of humanity's creation in the image of God appears to have had less importance in the biblical tradition than it assumed in later theological discussion, this statement clearly constitutes an important and positive affirmation about humanity's place in the created order. Man and woman are said to have been created in the *image/likeness* of God in only three passages in the early chapters of Genesis (Gen 1:26–28; 5:1–3; 9:6), all of which are assigned to the Priestly source of the Pentateuch as proposed by most modern scholars. The positive nature of this description is clear from the contexts in which it occurs, but the contexts are lacking the kind of explicit clues that would remove the ambiguity as to the exact meaning of the terms.

The etymology of the word *šelem*, “image,” is uncertain. Some have suggested that it is related to a verb *šālam*, “to cut off,” which does not occur in the Hebrew Bible. Apart from the “image of God” passages, the word is used twelve times. In ten instances the word refers to a physical representation of something (e.g., golden images of mice and tumors in 1 Sam 6:5, 11; images of Baal in 2 Kgs 11:18 and 2 Chr 23:17; molten images of Canaanite deities in Num 33:52; pagan images in Ezek 7:20, 16:17, and Amos 5:26; painted pictures of Babylonians in Ezek 23:14). *Šelem* has an abstract meaning in Ps 39:7 (—Eng 39:6), where it refers to the insubstantial nature of human life, and in Ps 73:20, where it refers to a dream image that a person retains upon waking. Westermann (*Genesis 1–11* BKAT, 146) is perhaps correct in suggesting that the basic meaning of *šelem* is “representation,” a meaning sufficiently broad to include both the concrete and the abstract aspects of the word. The Akkadian cognate of the word (*šalmu*) is the common Akkadian word for statue/image, and it also includes an abstract aspect. The Aramaic cognate of *šelem* is a common word for image, and the word is used in the Aramaic portions of Daniel for the images/statues described in chapters 2 and 3. The word is also used of the attitude of the king (lit. “the appearance of his face”) toward those who refused to bow down to the image that he was dedicating.

The second word used in these passages is *dēmût*, an abstract noun from the verb *dāmâ*, which means “to be like.” It is generally argued that this abstract term suggests approximation and weakens or blurs the meaning of the previous word *šelem* (Bird 1981: 139, n. 23), and this does seem to be the effect of the term in the visions of Ezekiel (e.g., 1:5, 26; 8:1; 10:1). The similarity indicated by *dēmût* is not necessarily physical, as is clear from its use in Isa 13:4 to describe “the sound of a tumult on the mountains like (*dēmût*) many people.” *Dēmût* clearly refers to a physical likeness in 2 Kgs 16:10, where Ahaz sent a likeness (*dēmût*) and a model of an altar from Damascus to Jerusalem so that he could have a similar altar constructed for the temple. In 2 Chr 4:3, the figures of oxen that supported the molten sea in front of the temple are called *dēmût bēqārîm*, “figures/images of oxen.” The Aramaic cognate of the word *dēmût* is used in a similar way in a bilingual inscription on a statue from Tell Fekheriye (Millard and Bordreuil 1982: 137–38), in which the Akkadian word *šalmu*, “image/statue,” is rendered into Aramaic as *šalma* in lines 12 and 16 and as *dēmûta* in lines 1 and 15. Thus, while the term *dēmût* indicates that the human being is in some sense “like God,” the word seems to be virtually a synonym for the word *šelem*.

Gen 1:26 introduces the account of humanity's creation with God's statement, “Let us make man in our image (*bēšalmēnû*) according to our likeness (*kidmûtēnû*).” Gen 5:1

talks about humanity's creation "in the likeness of God" (*bidmût 'ēlōhîm*), and this suggests that the prepositions used with the nouns "image and likeness" are interchangeable in meaning. It has been suggested by some that the preposition *b* is used as *bet essentiae*, and that it indicates identity. Thus, the meaning is that man and woman were created not "according to" the image of God but rather "as" the image of God. Many have denied that the preposition *k* ever has this meaning, though certain considerations suggest that this may be the meaning intended by the biblical author.

It is clear that a certain ambiguity is associated with the meaning of the terms "image and likeness of God" in these passages in Genesis. It is difficult to know whether the author of the material used expressions from the tradition that his audience would immediately understand in their cultural context, but which we in a vastly different cultural setting lack the contextual clues to understand precisely, or whether the author deliberately presented these ideas in a somewhat ambiguous way.

Because of this ambiguity, interpreters have had to look for clues in the context of these passages that might be decisive for determining the exact meaning of these descriptions of humanity. Unfortunately, commentators have not been able to agree on what the decisive clues are, and the interpretation of the image of God has often reflected the *Zeitgeist* and has followed whatever emphasis happened to be current in psychology, or philosophy, or sociology, or theology.

The contexts in which the image/likeness of God occur do provide certain clear indications as to the significance of these statements about humanity about which virtually all commentators agree.

The account of creation in Genesis follows a clearly established literary pattern whose general contours are quite evident. Each creative act begins with an announcement ("and God said"), followed by a command ("let there be ..."), a report ("and it was so"), an evaluation ("God saw that it was good"), and a temporal framework ("the *n*th day"). The account of humanity's creation follows this general pattern, but it also departs from the other accounts in significant ways: It is introduced by the words, "Let us make man," and this rather startling statement, whatever its exact meaning, immediately calls attention to the creation of humanity, presumably the climax of God's creative activity. The greater length of the account of humanity's creation in comparison to descriptions of the other creative acts, the threefold repetition (in 1:27) of the word *bārā'*, "to create" (a word reserved in the Hebrew Bible for God's creative activity), the fact that humanity is given dominion over the rest of creation, and the evaluation "very good" that follows the creation of man and woman make it clear that humanity is the climax of God's creative activity. It is man and woman alone who are said to be created in (or as) God's image, and this appears to account for humanity's preeminent position in the created order. The image of God sets man and woman apart from everything else that God made.

This point is also affirmed in Gen 9:6, which is part of the blessing given to Noah after the flood. Unlike God's instruction in 1:29–30, the human is given permission to kill animals for food. In addition to certain restrictions as to how the meat was to be eaten, it is specified that only animals may be killed. The life of another human being is not to be taken because "in the image of God (*bēṣelem 'ēlōhîm*) He made man." Thus, the image of God in man and woman gives dignity and worth to all people; it sets humankind apart from everything else that God made.

Gen 5:1–2 makes it clear that both male and female are included under the designation *'adam* who was made in God's image. Gen 5:3 reports that Adam fathered a son "in his likeness, according to his image," and the verse employs the same nouns used in Gen 1:26–27, though the order of the nouns and the prepositions used with each are reversed in comparison to Gen 1:26. This suggests that the way in which a son resembles his father is in some sense analogous to the way in which the human is like God. Since this passage has made the point that it is both male and female who are in the image of God, it seems clear that the similarity, while not excluding the physical in the broadest sense, focuses on capacities such as personality, self-determination, and rational thought. It is probable that it is the whole person who is in the image of God rather than some specific aspect of that person to the exclusion of others, and this focus on the human being as a whole being is consistent with the way humanity is viewed throughout the Hebrew Bible. Even more fundamental than resemblance between Adam and his son was the relationship between them, and some have suggested that the image of God implies that the human was made with the capacity for relationship with God. It is also possible that the point of this analogy is that the son is the image of his father because he functions both like his father and on behalf of his father.

Apart from the question of what information may have been known to the various sources that underlie the present biblical text, the image of God passages, in their present canonical context, make it clear that humanity even after the Fall is still in the image of God.

The fact that man and woman were created in (or as) the image of God is clearly a positive statement affirming humanity's preeminence over everything else that God created. In view of the strong condemnation of idolatry and the unqualified prohibition of images in the Bible, this positive use of *šelem* is most unexpected, and even though this word is not used in the legislation that specifically condemns the use of images, the same negative connotations are almost certainly associated with the word. There seems to be nothing in the biblical understanding of images that would give content to the meaning of the image of God beyond that which the context of the passages suggests, and it appears that the basis for any further understanding of the image of God will have to be found outside the biblical material. This even raises the possibility that this is an idea that Israel borrowed from another culture.

Images were used in both Mesopotamia and Egypt, and the literature of those countries provides a basis for determining how those people understood images. Egyptian texts make it clear that images were not meant to depict what a god looked like, but represented attempts to describe certain qualities or attributes of the deity. The primary purpose of the image, though, was not to describe the god; rather, the image was one of the primary places where the god manifested himself. The presence of the deity in the statue was magically effected through a ceremony called the "Opening of the Mouth," and perhaps there are reflections of this in the description of humanity's creation in Genesis 2, where God forms a figure of the man out of dust from the ground and then animates that figure by breathing life into it. The significance of the image did not lie in the way it described or depicted the god (though that was not totally unimportant); rather, it lay in the fact that the statue was a place where the deity was present and manifested himself. Thus, the presence of the god and the blessing that accompanied that presence

were effected through the image. It was the function of the image rather than its form that constituted its significance.

In both Egypt and Mesopotamia, people were sometimes referred to as images of god, and while there are occasional exceptions, it was usually the king who was referred to in this way. The focus for this seems to be Egypt, where, beginning with the New Kingdom, there are numerous examples of the king described as the image of a particular god; in contrast to this, only five examples are known from Mesopotamia (four of which date to the neo-Assyrian period). The pharaoh was described in these terms because he was believed to be the earthly manifestation of the deity, and thus he functioned on earth exactly as the image functioned in the temple. In Mesopotamia, where the idea of the deified king made a brief appearance in the Ur III period but died out thereafter, there was little basis for referring to the king in such a way. There are indications in Gen 1:26–28 that the “image of God” terminology perhaps had its origins in the royal ideology of the ancient Near East. The idea of dominion and the idea of subduing are most appropriate in the context of kingship. Psalm 8 uses similar royal terminology in its description of humanity’s place in the created order, though it does not use the term “image of God.”

It seems likely that the image of God idea was introduced into Israel through her contacts with Egypt, and the idea was emptied of content that was incompatible with Israelite theology and used to express the apparently uniquely Israelite idea that all persons, not just the king, occupy a preeminent place in the created order. There are several periods in Israel’s history when this influence was possible, though the period of the Egyptian bondage and the Exodus would have provided a context where the Israelites would have taken great delight in affirming that the pharaoh, as magnificent and impressive as he may have been, was not the one who rightly deserved the title “image of god”; rather, all persons as the special creatures of God are made in/as His image. It should be noted that the fact that the “image of God” passages are all a part of what most modern biblical scholars identify as the Priestly source of the Pentateuch, which is normally assumed to date to the period of the Babylonian exile, does not preclude the possibility that the image of God idea had its origins in Egypt at a much earlier time, since scholars are becoming increasingly aware of ancient traditions that are a part of that material.

The image of God terminology clearly affirms the preeminent position of humanity in the created order and declares the dignity and worth of man and woman as the special creations of God. The ANE background that appears to stand behind the biblical idea provides an appropriate base for such a declaration about humankind. It is not as clear whether other elements of the Egyptian understanding of images are implied through the figure as well. Perhaps the image of God idea suggests that humankind is the primary place where God manifests Himself; perhaps the figure implies that it is humanity that stands in a special relationship to God and that should function both like God and on His behalf; it does seem clear, in the light of the Near Eastern parallels, that the term has less to do with form and appearance than with function and position in the created order of things.

This suggestion as to the origin of the image of God terminology suggests that a term that entered Israel’s tradition at an early date remained somewhat isolated in that tradition without being developed elsewhere in the preexilic literature. It seems likely that the

danger presented to Israel's religion by idolatry precluded that use until after the Exile had eliminated idolatry as a major problem. In the new religious context created by the Exile and return, the "image of God" motif was again taken up and developed both in the intertestamental period and in the NT.

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