



IN HIS IMAGE

By Trent C. Butler

CREATION WAS complete. Daily life was ready to roll. But who would be in charge? Earth needed a management system, a caretaker who would govern creation according to the Creator's will. In such a system, would all creatures maintain a direct line to God? Or should one branch of creation bear greater responsibility for the other creatures and thus require more direct access to the Almighty?

Genesis deals directly with this issue. God chose to rule His world through one responsible only to Himself.¹ He thus created humans, who would have one major earthly

responsibility, to rule over or administer His creation. "God is committed to humanity, and humanity is under obligation to God, to serve God and serve God's world."²

Two Terms for Image

By nature the first human pair differed from all other creatures. Two Hebrew terms describe this human difference. All humans bear God's "image" (Hebrew, *tselem*) and "likeness" (*demut*). Describing either or



Above: Carved ivory plaque depicts a pair of winged griffins before a sacred tree. Worshipping

at a sacred tree supposedly helped people connect with the deity. Late Assyrian; 8th–7th centuries B.C.

both terms proves most allusive. The word pair appears only in Genesis. These two words, especially when

used together, though, open the way to understanding the relationship God desires with people.

Genesis 1:26-27 introduces the two terms for “image” or “likeness” of God, leading us to ask: Are they synonyms equal in meaning? Does one emphasize a quality of the other? Does one term remove connections the other might have with pagan gods and their temples and idols? A brief investigation into the scriptural occurrences of the two terms may help us decide.

Genesis 5:3 extends the image language to new generations. Adam sired a son in his likeness, according to his image. The first burials did not eliminate the image of God relationship between succeeding generations and God.³ The divine decree in Genesis 9:6 maintains the connection between human life and God’s

image (*tselem*) by declaring a death penalty for a murderer, the strict sentence based on a person’s being in God’s image.

Beyond Genesis

Other Old Testament appearances of *tselem* (image) reflect human constructions, especially buildings designed for worship.⁴ For instance, Daniel uses *tselem* to refer to large statues the pagan kings constructed, demanding people worship them.⁵

Demut (likeness) is related to building altars. “King Ahaz went to Damascus to meet Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria. When he saw the altar that was in Damascus, King Ahaz sent a model [*demut*] of the altar and complete plans for its construction to Uriah the priest” (2 Kings 16:10, HCSB). Most often, however, *demut* appears with visions,

showing resemblance or comparison but not exact likeness or sameness.⁶ The emphasis is on difference, not sameness. This is evident precisely in the comparison with God (Isa. 40:18). Describing his visions, Ezekiel went overboard to ensure his readers did not think he

Right: In this episode of the Babylonian creation myth, the god Anshar summons the gods together for a banquet, to celebrate Marduk’s appointment as champion of the gods following his defeat of Tiamat, primeval Chaos. The tall narrow shape is characteristic of tablets in this series.

The Euphrates in Babylon. On the other side of the river are several reconstructed

buildings, the originals of which would have dated to the time of Nebuchadnezzar.



EUPHRATES: ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ COURTESY OF CAPTAIN AMY KELLSTRAND (3/2/43) TABLET: ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRITISH MUSEUM/ LONDON (3/19/67)





ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ (11/13/12)

Left: The omphalos at Delphi. Omphalos meant "navel," but the term came to refer to the central location of an object in relation to its environs. Greeks believed the omphalos of Delphi marked the center of the world.

Right: Close-up showing the Greek goddess Artemis wearing a 3-tiered headdress. The original statue from Ephesus dates to 1st cent. A.D. The Temple of Artemis at Ephesus was considered one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/TOM HOOKE (6/5/14)

had seen something concrete as he described a sacred object. See for example Ezekiel 1:26-28 (HCSB):

The shape of a throne with the appearance of sapphire stone was above the expanse. There was a form with the appearance of a human on the throne high above. From what seemed to be His waist up, I saw a gleam like amber, with what looked like fire enclosing it all around. From what seemed to be His waist down, I also saw what looked like fire. There was a brilliant light all around Him. The appearance of the brilliant light all around was like that of a rainbow in a cloud on a rainy day. This was the appearance of the form of the LORD's glory.

Even when Daniel described a heavenly messenger, he could only refer to one according to the likeness of the sons of man (Dan. 10:16). Artwork in the temple produced only the likeness of oxen (2 Chron. 4:3).

Certainly Ezekiel and Daniel stepped back from using concrete language where God was concerned. Genesis utilizes the same theological tendency. *Tselem* (image) is the concrete term of human handiwork,

especially of building idols and pagan statues. *Demut* (likeness) modifies pagan concreteness, and in doing so, provides a comparison of less concreteness and a bit more sense of personal relationship. In other words, the combination of the two terms in Genesis intentionally modify each other. A person still maintains a concrete representation of God in one's life before humans. Yet a person cannot claim equality or complete likeness with God. Instead, one must modify to speak of inability to compare, inability to use artistic skill to produce a full representation, lack of regal authority or power.

John Walton, professor of Old Testament, offers a highly nuanced distinction. According to his understanding, *tselem* (image) contains something's essence. *Demut* (likeness) is connected to substance and expresses resemblance.⁷

The Hebrew Bible offers no other descriptions of humans being in God's image. Further information comes from studying passages like Psalm 8. There we find amazement at the status of humans over against God but no direct definition of humanity or mention of image language.

In Near Eastern Sources

Speaking of the image of God is not unique to Israel. Near Eastern peoples believed an image contained the true essence of that which the image represented. When they worshiped sacred idols, trees, stones, and water, they thought their actions allowed them to

communicate with the inner nature of the divine.

One Near Eastern document—*The Instructions of Merikare*—democratizes the language and expands the image of god to all people. In that document the Egyptian god tends people as his cattle, creates sky and earth for their needs, gives them breath for their noses, hears their weeping, knows their names, feeds them, and lets them come from his body as images.⁸

Outside this one document "image language" among Israel's neighbors applied to victorious kings who set up markers that celebrated their own accomplishments. The king's image received the same respect as did the king himself.⁹

Modern Interpretations

Christopher J.H. Wright, a leading scholar in the field of biblical ethics, explains that two biblical concepts set humans apart from all other creatures: image of God and mission of dominion. These phrases represent man's divine definition and mandate.¹⁰

Walter Bruggemann, an Old Testament theologian, connects five realities with God's image: (1) affirmation of both female and male as bearers of His image; (2) kingly authority over the earth and its creatures that God delegated to humans; (3) representative role God has developed for those made in situations of presence and of absence of God; (4) exclusive role as image of God that cannot be assumed by any type of image humans may set up; and

(5) humans retaining the “image of God” even after the fall.¹¹

In the New Testament

The New Testament provides a better understanding of man being in the “image of God.” Jesus defined his earthly limits through reference to Caesar’s image on the coin (Matt. 22:20-21; Mark 12:16; Luke 20:24). God cannot be identified as the result of human art and imagination (Acts 17:29). For example,

people living in Ephesus claimed to worship an image that fell from heaven (the Greek goddess Artemis; see 19:35). In contrast, God called His people to be conformed to Jesus’ image (Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18) and to God the Father’s (Col. 3:10). For believers, being in God’s image has an eternal component. Paul wrote that believers, who bear the image of dust (Adam), also bear the image of Christ, the heavenly man (1 Cor. 15:49).

Concerning Jesus, Paul explained to believers at Colossae, “He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born over all creation” (Col. 1:15, HCSB; cf. 2 Cor. 4:4). Indeed, He, the “incarnate deity,” is the perfect and ultimate manifestation of being in God’s image. Of Himself Jesus even said, “The one who has seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14:9, HCSB). Jesus is the image of the invisible God (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15). In light of all these truths, the Christian believer has the goal of shaping personal belief and practice by looking to Jesus as our example and trusting in Him as our perfect example of man made in God’s image. 📖



Above: The Case of the Silent Wife. This tablet, inscribed with a court record of a murder trial, was used in the schools of Sumer in ancient Mesopotamia as a case study; the tablet dates to 1850 B.C.



Right: The Stele of Victory of Naram-Sin. Akkadian; dated about 2250 B.C. The scene shows King Naram-Sin of Akkade standing before a stylized mountain, after his victory over the Lullubians. The stele, though found at Susa, was originally from Sippar.

1. Eugene H. Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 136.
2. John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Vol. 2, Israel's Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 517.
3. Compared to 1:26-27, the Hebrew nouns switch positions. Genesis 1 reads in His image, according to His likeness. Now Genesis 5 reads in his likeness, according to his image. The comparison also shows that the prepositions appear to be interchangeable, attaching to either noun. This appears to indicate a basic synonymous relationship between the two nouns *image* and *likeness*.
4. See Num. 33:52; 1 Sam. 6:5,11; 2 Kings 11:18; 2 Chron. 23:17; Ezek. 7:20; 16:17; 23:14; Dan. 3:18; Amos 5:26.
5. Dan. 2:31-35; 3:1-18.
6. Model or prototype: 2 Kings 16:10; Comparison: Ps. 58:4; Isa. 13:4; 40:18; Ezek. 1:22,26; 8:2; 10:1,10,21,22; 23:15; Form, Appearance, Likeness: 2 Chron. 4:3; Ezek. 1:5,10,13,16,28; 8:2; 23:15; Dan. 10:16.
7. John H. Walton, “Genesis” in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, gen. ed. John H. Walton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 1:21.
8. Walton, “Genesis,” 1:20-21; translation of Merikare from M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature* (Berkeley, 1971-1980): I:106; compare translation by R. O. Faulker in *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, ed. William Kelly Simpson (New Haven and London, 1973), 180-92 at Ancient Egypt [online; accessed 23 October 2014]. Available from the Internet: www.reshafim.org.il/ad/egypt/merikare_papyrus.htm.
9. See Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion*, 170.
10. See Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 118-26.
11. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 452.

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