

# WHAT IS “THE IMAGE OF GOD”?

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The following is an expansion of *The Preeminence of Christ: Part One, To the Glory of God the Father*, 16-19.<sup>1</sup>

Scripture speaks of only one creature as being made in the image of God: Man. Genesis 1:26-28 (AT):

<sup>26</sup>And God said, “Let Us make Man in Our image, according to Our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the cattle and over all the earth and over all the crawlers crawling on the earth.”

<sup>27</sup>And God created Man in His image;  
in the image of God He created him;  
male and female He created them.

<sup>28</sup>And God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it, and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing crawling on the earth.”

Special among all creation, Man is purposed *to show what God is like*, which is language similar to *manifesting God's glory*. Psalm 8, which is commentary on Genesis 1:26-28, opens with Yahweh's transcendence: “You have set your glory above the heavens” (v. 1). Then our Lord's immanence appears through His care for Man whom He has crowned with glory and honor (royal terms, v. 5).<sup>2</sup> The apostle Paul joins the concepts of image and glory in 1 Corinthians 11:7, teaching that Man “is the image and glory of God.” Man was created not simply *for* the glory of God; Man was created *to be* the glory of God!

It is actually quite tricky to pin down what it is about Man that comprises the image of God. Scripture does not break this down categorically.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, some teachers focus solely on the function of Man as what images forth God's likeness. In context, the purposed function is ruling (Gen. 1:26, 28). However, it seems that the grammar<sup>4</sup> and logic should be clear that God's image is what we *are*, and what we *are* as God's image enables us *to do* the function of ruling.<sup>5</sup> We also gain this clarity from the historical context of the book of Genesis.

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<sup>1</sup> Spencer Stewart, *The Preeminence of Christ: Part One, To the Glory of God the Father* (Lawrence, KS: ProjectOne28, 2017), freely available at [ProjectOne28.com/glory](http://ProjectOne28.com/glory).

<sup>2</sup> “... care for him” is lit., “that You visit him” (Allen P. Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, Vol. 1 (1-41), KEL (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2011), 295, also n. 19).

<sup>3</sup> John Piper, “The Image of God: An Approach from Biblical and Systematic Theology.” *Studia Biblica et Theologica* 1:1 (March 1971), available at [desiringGod.org/articles/the-image-of-god](http://desiringGod.org/articles/the-image-of-god).

<sup>4</sup> “The sequence of verbs in [Gen. 1] v. 26 is inadequately represented in most modern translations.... grammarians of Hebrew agree that this particular sequence marks purpose or result. The correct translation, therefore, is ‘let us make man... *so that* they may rule.’ ... the ruling is not the essence of the divine image, but rather a result of being made as the divine image” (Peter J. Gentry, “Kingdom through Covenant: Humanity as the Divine Image,” *SBJT* 12/1 [2008]: 25, emphasis his).

## Ancient Near Eastern Context

The original recipients of the book of Genesis were those who grew up in Egypt and traveled to the land of Canaan after the Exodus. Genesis does not stop to give an in-depth explanation of “image” or “likeness,” because the original readers would have been familiar with these concepts. Peter Gentry teaches:

The epithet or descriptive title of the Egyptian king as a “living statue of such and such a god,” was common in Egypt from 1630 B.C. onwards and, therefore, was well-known to the Israelites. In Egyptian thinking, the king is the image of god because he is the son of god. The emphasis or stress is not on physical appearance, e.g., a male king could be the image of a female goddess. Rather the behavior of the king reflects the behavior of the god. The image reflects the characteristics of the god. The image reflects the essential notions of the god.<sup>6</sup>

Gentry provides an example from an inscription in the Karnak Temple that celebrates the triumph of Thutmoses III (c. 1460 B.C. [the same century as the writing of Genesis-Exodus]). In the poem’s prologue, the god Amon-Re calls the human king his son. In what follows, the “I” is Amon-Re, and the “you” is the king:

I came to let you tread on Djahi’s chiefs,  
I spread them under your feet throughout their lands;  
I let them see your majesty as lord of light,  
so that you shone before them in my likeness.<sup>7</sup>

Gentry summarizes that “image of god,” in the fifteenth-century B.C., “would have communicated two main ideas” to those in the Near East: “(1) rulership and (2) sonship. The king is the image of god because he has a relationship to the deity as the son of god and a relationship to the world as ruler for the god.”<sup>8</sup>

## Biblical Correction

The ancient Near East background is quite instructive because Adam indeed was considered “the son of God” (Lk. 3:38) and was endued with power<sup>9</sup> to rule on God’s behalf (Gen. 1:26, 28; Ps. 8).

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<sup>5</sup> Gentry, *ibid.*, 25, 32. G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 30-32; Piper (n. 3, above). The image must be *ontological*, because sinners – who have rebelled against the *functional* role of filling the earth with God’s glory and government – are still considered to be in God’s image and likeness (Gen. 9: 6; 1 Cor. 11: 7; Jas. 3: 9). If the imaging was solely functional, sinners would not be God’s image after the Fall.

<sup>6</sup> Gentry, *op. cit.*, 27.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 27. See Gentry’s other examples on pp. 27-28.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 27. Gentry treats the differences between “image” and “likeness” on pp. 27-29, concluding, “‘likeness’ specifies a relationship between God and humans such that *’ādām* [Hebrew for “man”] can be described as the son of God, and ‘image’ describes a relationship between God and humans such that *ādām* can be described as a servant king. Although both terms specify the divine-human relationship, the first focuses on the human in relation to God and the second focuses on the human in relation to the world.... In this sense the divine image entails a covenant relationship between God and humans on the one hand, and between humans and the world on the other” (28-29). “Hence the concept of the kingdom of God is found on the first page of Scripture. Indeed, the theme is kingdom through covenant” (32).

<sup>9</sup> John N. Oswalt defines the Hebrew behind “blessed” (Gen. 1:28): “to endue with power for success, prosperity, fecundity, longevity, etc.” (“*bārak*,” *TWOT*, 132).

Because Man is the Creator's "son," Man's nature is uniquely capable of relating to God the Father. Man can receive the spiritual realities of God, process them with God-like reason, emotions, and will, and then incarnate them into the physical realm with speech and action – glory, the “going public” of God's goodness.<sup>10</sup>

However, to the Egyptians and Mesopotamians, it was only the pagan kings who were images of their false gods.<sup>11</sup> The king was a “living statue” made to resemble and represent the god's presence and power over his territory.<sup>12</sup> In truth, though, *all humans* are images of the one real God. All humans are purposed to be God's royal representatives who manifest His character in benevolent dominion. Therefore, God empowered and commissioned Man to be fruitful, multiply, fill, subdue, and rule (Gen. 1:28). God wanted to fill the earth *with image-bearers* in order to fill the earth *with His glory* (cf. Num. 14:21, Hab. 2:14). Faithful image-bearers in every part of the earth could subdue the enemy and the wasteland by the blessing of God, thereby extending the Garden of Eden so that the whole earth could be a suitable dwelling place for the God of glory.<sup>13</sup>

We can become so accustomed to the teaching about Man in God's image that we lose our sense of its strangeness. Most often in the Hebrew Scriptures, “image” is used of idols! Yahweh expressly forbade His people from crafting images of Him, idols, because He had already made His images – us!<sup>14</sup> We are God's (appropriate) idols! Piper asks well:

What would it mean if you were to create seven billion statues of yourself and put them all over the world? It would mean you would want people to notice you! God created us in His image so we would display or reflect or communicate who He is, how great He is, and what He's like.<sup>15</sup>

Our very existence is preeminently about God. We are purposed to always think, feel, speak, and act in a way that directs everyone's attention to the glory of God the King.

Read more in *The Preeminence of Christ: Part One, To the Glory of God the Father* to consider how the image of God in Man was marred by sin, then perfectly displayed in Christ, and now is being “renewed” in those who receive the Spirit of Christ in repentant faith.

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<sup>10</sup> See *Spirit, Soul, Body: The Blueprint of Man in God's Image*, free at [ProjectOne28.com/spirit-soul-body](http://ProjectOne28.com/spirit-soul-body).

<sup>11</sup> See also Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 31.

<sup>12</sup> Gentry references Pharaoh Ramesses II (thirteenth century B.C.) with his statute in the rock at the mouth of Kelb River: “His image... meant that he was the ruler of the area... since the king is the living statue of the god, he represents the god on earth. He makes the power of the God a present reality” (27).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Gen. 3:8 with Rev. 21:3. See G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, ed. D. A. Carson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004). See also Sam McVay, Jr., and Spencer Stewart, *Introduction to Disciple-making: Obeying the Global Mandate of the Resurrected King Jesus* (El Dorado, KS: ProjectOne28, 2013), 30-31 (free at [ProjectOne28.com/i2dm](http://ProjectOne28.com/i2dm)).

<sup>14</sup> Ex. 20:4-5 in light of Gen. 1:26-27

<sup>15</sup> John Piper, “What Does It Mean to Be Made in God's Image?” Ask Pastor John, Episode 153, 19 Aug 2013 ([desiringGod.org/interviews/what-does-it-mean-to-be-made-in-god-s-image](http://desiringGod.org/interviews/what-does-it-mean-to-be-made-in-god-s-image)).