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Introduction

Does bearing God's image relate to what we are, who we are, or what we do? This paper considers the meaning and significance of humans made in the image of God. Among competing views of the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, each finds some degree of biblical grounding. Each view has something to offer where it arises directly out of the biblical text. Harmonising the main views with one another, however, is a fruitless exercise, as each needs to be evaluated on its own merit to see where it conforms to the text and where it deviates from it. The comparison section of this paper contrasts the three major interpretations of the *imago Dei* in order to discover the value of each perspective or its shortcomings. Only then can a beneficial analysis and worthwhile synthesis take place. The three traditional interpretations do eventually depart from the text or fall short of its complexity at some point which motivates the desire for a synthesis of the views. This paper will examine and compare the major approaches to the question of the meaning of the *imago Dei* doctrine found in scripture and argues that to be created in God's image is a universal human status as royal representatives of God.

A few exegetical and historical conclusions on the key text of the *imago Dei* doctrine will act as the first items for consideration. The smaller linguistic minutiae of the text, as well as the larger ancient context, will offer equally invaluable insights for the interpretive discussion. A brief note on origins will follow by way of introduction, as the meaning of the image cannot be removed from issues of origin. The foremost interpretations under evaluation are the substantive, relational, and functional views of the image of God. All the major views have a long-standing interpretive history and have garnered exegetical and ecclesial support. The approaches and their methodologies are crucial considerations. These will then be considered in light of Jesus, the exact image of God whose life models the archetypal intention of this doctrine and how it applies

to individuals, the Church, and all humanity. Finally, the (in)sufficiency of these standard doctrinal interpretations will reveal that a modified understanding of the functional approach to the image is the most faithful perspective.

The arguments and conclusions made here are necessarily, to use J. Richard Middleton's term, "a *construal*."¹ That is, they represent this writer's subjective and biased understanding of the doctrinal interpretations under inquiry. This is not to belittle the analysis below but to stand in line with others who recognise their work as inevitably biased by known and unknown, personal, cultural, social, ideological, religious, ethnic and gendered factors. It will quickly become apparent that the major proponents of each view are greatly impacted by the social and political environments in which they live and interpret. A biased account is inescapable, but it is not bad. It is a reality of being human. Every picture is taken by a specific person from a specific place; objectivity is not an option.

Exegetical Considerations

Jewish and Christian traditions have afforded special attention to the description of humans in the Genesis creation narrative, and rightly so. Defining what it means to be human carries tremendous implications for human dignity and worth. The number of biblical texts directly related to the image of God is not extensive, which may account for the breadth of interpretations as scarcity has bred speculation. Some scholars have gone so far as to plead the fifth in regard to the meaning of the image, insisting that the content of the image cannot be ascertained based on the biblical account. Occurrent descriptions of humans made in God's image total three in the Old Testament and two in the New Testament: Genesis 1:26–27, 5:1, 9:6;

¹ J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The "Imago Dei" in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005), 37.

1 Corinthians 11:7; and James 3:9. Genesis 1:26–28 is considered the *locus classicus* for the context and teaching of the doctrine:²

Then God said, “Let us make humans 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 humans in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”³

There are other instances beyond the four additional scriptural passages mentioned that refer to the ideas presented in the above passage but never explicitly with regard to creation. For that reason, they will not be marshalled for the purpose of interpreting the image doctrine.

In his work *The Liberating Image*, Middleton notes that the other direct references to the image in the New Testament have “Christ as the paradigm (uncreated) image of God or address the salvific renewal of the image in the church.”⁴ Depending on one’s particular formulation of the image, these three broad elements may either complicate or fill out their doctrine: humans made in the image of God, Christ as the archetypal image of God, and the church’s corporate identity as the image of God. These aspects need to be addressed by each doctrinal interpretation for a sufficient and compelling understanding of the image as they specifically relate to and interact with the substantive, relational, and functional views.

² E. H. Merrill, “Image of God,” in *DOPT* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 442.

³ Biblical quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition unless otherwise noted.

⁴ Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 17.

Since the above passage is the foundation for all discussions of the image of God, a couple of particulars are in order. The literary function of pronouns and the role of prepositions in the above verses have particular relevance for interpretative meaning. These basic points of grammar have become serious areas of contention and misunderstanding. First, the pronouns. Immediately apparent to even a casual reader is the use of plural language: “Let *us* make humans in *our* image” (Gen 1:26).⁵ It is commonly asserted that the plural language refers to being created by the Trinity.⁶ This notion has had considerable support since Augustine affirmed a trinitarian reading.⁷ The textual evidence for this assertion, however, is tenuous and ignores the larger context of the Hebrew Bible. Other possibilities, such as the so-called “plural of majesty,” are even less convincing. The trinitarian option is not viable for the simple reason that it is not proper practice to read New Testament ideas into Old Testament passages for the purpose of interpretation. The Old Testament does not clearly articulate a triune God (while it does portray two Yahweh figures)⁸ and the idea of an ancient author intending that meaning is highly suspect. A more compelling reading has God addressing his heavenly household, the divine council.⁹ God is still the sole creator, as all the verbs for creating in the passage are singular. Michael S. Heiser,

⁵ Emphasis supplied.

⁶ Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears, *Doctrine: What Christians Should Believe* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 114.

⁷ G. L. Bray, “Image of God,” in *NDBT* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 576.

⁸ Alan F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012).

⁹ John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016), Gen 1:26; K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, vol. 1A, NAC (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 161; Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), 39; Middleton, 55; W. Randall Garr, *In His Own Image and Likeness: Humanity, Divinity, and Monotheism* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2003), 17; William David Reyburn and Euan McG. Fry, *A Handbook on Genesis*, UBS Handbook Series (New York, NY: United Bible Societies, 1998), 50.

in *The Unseen Realm*, discusses how the shift in “plurals inform us that both God’s families—the human and the nonhuman—share imaging status, though the realms are different.”¹⁰

Also discussed by Heiser is the significance of the preposition “in.” Humans are created “*in the image of God*” (Gen 1:27).¹¹ What does “in” denote? Heiser suggests that the preposition is being used as a verb. He describes that in Genesis 1:26, humanity “was created *as* God’s image...to be his imagers...The image is not an ability we have, but a status.”¹² D. J. A. Clines, among others, also argues for the translation “as” instead of “in.”¹³ Viewed in this way, with humans as images, as God’s representatives, has both royal and priestly connotations, especially when placed in its ancient context where kings are commonly set up as embodiments of the gods on earth and priests mediate God’s presence. The historical context will further elucidate the meaning of the image.

Historical Considerations

The key terms in the study of the *imago Dei* are the Hebrew עִלְמוֹת and the Greek εἰκών, which become translated as “image.”¹⁴ Similarly, דְּמוּת and ὁμοίωσις are translated as “likeness.”¹⁵ Knowing what עִלְמוֹת refers to is a critical starting point for understanding the doctrine from an ancient point of view. The word עִלְמוֹת is typically used to refer to physical idol

¹⁰ Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 43.

¹¹ Emphasis supplied.

¹² Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 42–43.

¹³ David J. A. Clines, “Image of God,” in *DPL* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 427; Merrill, “Image of God,” 443; Edward M. Curtis, “Image of God (OT),” in *AYBD* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 391.

¹⁴ Bray, “Image of God,” 575.

¹⁵ Bray, “Image of God,” 575.

statues.¹⁶ The purpose of a מַלְאָכָה in ancient Near Eastern religion was to represent a deity. These statues were seen as mediating their god's rule and presence over the land. The semantic range of מַלְאָכָה , according to Westermann, includes "both the concrete and abstract aspects of the word."¹⁷ Statues, as images of God, were not understood as lifeless objects but as representations of and mediators for real deities. The spirit of the deity inhabits the image. Similarly, in Genesis, humanity is set up as a living idol statue in God's cosmic temple. Crispin Fletcher-Louis says that "With this understanding of divine images assumed, [Genesis 1] has a sharply focused theological anthropology: humanity is to be the eyes, ears, mouth, being, and action of the creator God within his creation."¹⁸ Humans are the unique way God chooses to accomplish things in his world. S. Dean McBride says of the "Adam beings" in Genesis that "the peculiar purpose for their creation is 'theophani': to represent or mediate the sovereign presence of the deity within the central nave of the cosmic temple, just as cult-images were supposed to do."¹⁹ The meaning of the image, when positioned in its historical context as an idol statue, sheds light on some essential characteristics of what it means to be human. According to biblical authors, humans are incarnations of God's divine presence that embody God's rule on earth.

The ancient use of images for representing kings has considerable value for interpreting the biblical account. Specifically, the royal aspect of ruling on behalf of a higher power is part and parcel of the kingly position. There are plenty of ancient Near Eastern precedents for kings

¹⁶ See Numbers 33:52 or 2 Kings 11:18 for common usages of the term.

¹⁷ Curtis, "Image of God (OT)," 389.

¹⁸ Crispin Fletcher-Louis, "God's Image, His Cosmic Temple, and the High Priest," in *Heaven on Earth: The Temple in Biblical Theology* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster Press, 2004), 83–84.

¹⁹ S. Dean McBride, "Divine Protocol: Genesis 1:1–2:3 as Prologue to the Pentateuch," in *God Who Creates: Essays in Honor of W. Sibley Towner* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 16–17.

as images of gods.²⁰ Mesopotamian and Egyptian creation stories have images (statues) as earthly representations of deities. Their theologies even set up humans (sometimes one human, the king) as their embodied presence in the realms under their control.²¹ In a world familiar with royal images that contain the essence of what they represent, Adam, in the biblical account, would be seen as acting as God’s viceroy over his created order.²² Ruling would be the expected role of such a figure.

This brings us to what is often called the cultural mandate.²³ How are humans to go about ruling on the earth? According to Genesis, it is by tilling it. Anthropology tells us that agriculture is the foundation of human societies and development. Cultures that do not cultivate do not proliferate, which is the precise mandate given to humans in Genesis: “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28). As they live in the garden, they are told to work it and keep it; it needs to be cultivated and protected, as all subsistence cultures know. God planted a garden and asked humans to tend to it. These are the seeds of the civilisations to come as humans participate in their calling as royal gardeners of God. In his *A New Heaven and a New Earth*, Middleton writes, “The royal task of exercising power to transform the earthly environment into a complex sociocultural world...is thus a holy task, a sacred calling, in which the human race as God’s image on earth manifests something of the creator’s own lordship over the cosmos.”²⁴ God wants humans, as patterned after himself, to bring order out of chaos, potential out of dirt, and

²⁰ Curtis, “Image of God (OT),” 390.

²¹ Merrill, “Image of God,” 442.

²² Bray, “Image of God,” 576; Victor Harold Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, and John H. Walton, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), Gen 1:26–27.

²³ Merrill, “Image of God,” 443.

²⁴ J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 43.

flourishing complexity out of simplicity. Many scholars have noted how the status of humanity in Genesis is also a radically democratising idea in a world of kings exercising divine, authoritative power over others. Kings were chosen, incarnations of the gods. But for biblical authors, all humans, male and female, were made to be rulers as images of God. Humans have a very high but also equalising status in a biblical worldview.

One further specification of the image is that it seems to be presented as a corporate identity. Humans are not nearly so atomised in ancient Mesopotamian cultures to consider an individual's status before God. Their identities were always wrapped up in a communal, tribal identity. In a comparative note in *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and The Old Testament*, John H. Walton mentions that "Across the ancient world, the image of God did the work of God on the earth. In the Israelite context...people (corporately) are in the image of God in that they embody his qualities and do his work."²⁵ Humanity was a representation of God's presence in his land. Though ancient Israelite religion departs from their neighbours' religions in significant ways, it still exists in the same cultural environment. Instead of the king, as was commonplace for the ancients, archetypal humanity were the image bearers for the God of Israel.²⁶

The historical context, along with several exegetical notes, has led so far to a plainly royal-functional view of the image of God. Humans are created to co-rule the earth with God. The dimensions of the relational and substantive views will soon be laid out but what is clear up to this point is the indebtedness of the doctrine to the ancient cognitive environment. And while every view has its dissenters, the royal interpretation enjoys the most support in recent Old

²⁵ John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and The Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 184.

²⁶ Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 259.

Testament scholarship.²⁷ This extended historical treatment of the text is a dual attempt to bridge the gap between exegetes and systematic theologians for which intercommunication can seem muted, and to set the stage for a contextual understanding of the three main approaches to the *imago Dei*.

The Origin Question

There is one final item to consider before diving into the major views. How does the question of human origins relate to being made in God's image? The debate has long raged between theologians and scientists on the origins question. Likewise, defining human has been an equally difficult task between and within each camp and consensus remains elusive. What can tentatively unite theologians, at least, is that humans are made in God's image. For the purposes of this paper, what can be said of the original humans is that they were created by God and in his image. This is purposefully vague and certainly insufficient as an explanation of origins, but it will suffice for evaluating the meaning of humans as God's image.

An account of the biblical and scientific claims of human origins is beyond the scope of this paper but is worth mentioning for three reasons. First, science is part of the matrix of the preunderstandings brought to this interpretation as it is a strong personal preference for understanding the world. Second, it has important implications for human life. Certainly, the form and function of humans is a related matter, inside and outside biblical studies. Theology and science would both be richer with a more open dialogue. With that said, there is, in places, a constructive conversation happening between scientists and theologians such as John Lennox, who, filling both roles, can cross that divide by simply having a conversation with himself. Additionally, as tends to be the case, the different spheres and disciplines are not as diametrically

²⁷ Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 29. Two notable exceptions are Claus Westermann and James Barr who take a Barthian position and no position, respectively.

opposed as is often assumed. Third, *that* God created humanity in his image is different from *how* God created. This paper assumes that God created and does not specify the how. Of concern here is the meaning of God's creation of imagers.

S. Joshua Swamidass, in the introduction to his book *The Genealogical Adam and Eve*, adds a beautiful starting point to his discussion on hotly debated topics saying, "In humility, we recognize that we cannot convince everyone to agree with us. In tolerance, we make space for those with whom we disagree. In patience, we seek understanding, listening to the concerns of others, taking their questions seriously."²⁸ This will be kept in mind as the following perspectives are considered. With these exegetical, historical, cultural, and personal elements in mind, there is now enough ground from which we can begin to view each major interpretation as to the meaning of the image of God.

View 1: Substance

First under consideration is the substantive view which locates the meaning of the image in quantitative terms within the person. Searching for the locus of the *imago Dei* has occupied many Christian thinkers.²⁹ Substantive interpretations of the image are mainly concerned with physical, psychological, or spiritual human qualities: matters of substance. Current versions of this view typically stress cognitive faculties above other human qualities. Whatever the case, the image is seen as something one possesses. This has stood as the prevailing understanding of the image throughout Christian history.³⁰

²⁸ S. Joshua Swamidass, *The Genealogical Adam and Eve: The Surprising Science of Universal Ancestry* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 6.

²⁹ Johnson Jerry A., "Image of God," ed. Chad Brand et al., *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible, 2003), 806.

³⁰ J. Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*. 3rd ed. Grand Rapids, (MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 460.

Within substantive views, some focus on human physical qualities, but more are concerned with rationality and cognitive abilities. As one might expect, the importance of the body in the valuation of the image is undervalued by Platonic influence, and the valuation of reason in the image is overvalued by Enlightenment thinkers. In *The Image of God in Man*, David Cairns says that “in all the Christian writers up to Aquinas we find the image of God conceived as man’s power of reason.”³¹ Aquinas epitomises a huge period of Christian thought concerning the image, saying, “man...is the most perfectly like God according to that in which he can best imitate God in his intellectual nature.”³² He held a strong substantialistic interpretation and further subdivided the extent to which different people retained the image. Categorising people into three possible states, he says there is “a threefold image of “creation,” of “re-creation,” and of “likeness.” The first is found in all men, the second only in the just, the third only in the blessed.”³³ The inclination to individuate *צֶלֶם* and *דְמוּת* as well as to have degrees of “imageness” were common in substantive interpretations, especially prior to Martin Luther.

The meaning of the fall in relation to the image has been another object of much speculation. In his Genesis commentary, K. A. Matthews notes, “The Reformers following Augustine insisted that the ‘image,’ though perfect in humanity’s original state, had been mortally wounded in the fall.”³⁴ This has been a common idea regarded among the effects of the

³¹ David Cairns, *The Image of God in Man* (Glasgow, UK: Collins, 1973), 110.

³² Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 1981), 2016.

³³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2016.

³⁴ K. A. Matthews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, vol. 1A, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 165.

fall. But if there was some loss of the image, the Bible nowhere makes the claim.³⁵ Historically, substantive views distinguish between image and likeness, sometimes claiming the loss of one and the retaining of the other. Millard J. Erickson, in his *Christian Theology*, looks at the lengthy discussions that took place in contrasting image and likeness during the patristic and medieval periods, which did not bear much enduring fruit. Martin Luther recognised that the distinction between image and likeness were symptoms of Hebrew poetic style and, therefore, not a real distinction.³⁶ Theologians like Luther and Calvin did, however, make a distinction between degrees of the image before and after the fall. Since the image is something that can be possessed, one can possess it to a higher or lesser degree. If this is the case, the failure in the garden would severely compromise the image of God in humans. The key to the substantive perspective, Erickson suggests, is that the image “is located within humans as a resident quality or capacity.”³⁷ The strength of this view is its focus on what humanity is; humanity, in some forms of the view, *is* the image.

Perhaps the greatest weakness of substantive views is that they use categories unlikely to have occurred to biblical authors.³⁸ Clines once stated in his lecture on *The Image of God in Man* that “It has proved all too easy in the history of interpretation for this exceedingly open-ended term ‘the image of God’ to be pressed into the service of contemporary philosophical and religious thought.”³⁹ Karl Barth was also sceptical of finding much certainty in the doctrine as he

³⁵ Bray, “Image of God,” 575.

³⁶ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 462.

³⁷ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 463.

³⁸ Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 18.

³⁹ David J. A. Clines, “The Image of God in Man,” *Tyndale Bulletin*, 19 (1968), 54.

surveyed the vastness of interpretations.⁴⁰ The appeal to and reliance upon philosophical ideas across different eras not belonging to the original time and place of the biblical authors or redactors shows the tenuous foundation of this long-held interpretative tradition. Further, man's power of reason tends to be lauded as the inherent quality of the image. If reason is the measure of the image, then there is not much hope of receiving or attaining to it for those whose cognitive faculties are diminished.

View 2: Relation

The relational interpretation of the *imago Dei* is far less concerned with human nature and, instead, considers the person's relational position toward God and others. The human capacity for a relationship is the image.⁴¹ Since every person exists at all times in some relationship to God, the image is universal among humans. This reading did not at first engender much support around the time of the Reformation.⁴² However, eventually counted among the proponents of some form of this view are Martin Luther, Karl Barth, and Emil Brunner (and, arguably, John Calvin, though his approach was novel). For the relational interpretation, Erickson asserts, "Humans can be said to be in the image or to display the image when standing in a particular relationship, which indeed *is* the image."⁴³ This understanding of the image makes a dynamic shift from *what* a human is or does to *where* a human is (relative to God and others relationally).

⁴⁰ Clines discusses Karl Barth's historical survey of the doctrine which is worth quoting at length: "For Ambrose, the soul was the image; for Athanasius, rationality, in the light of the Logos doctrine; for Augustine, under the influence of trinitarian dogma, the image is to be seen as the triune faculties of the soul, *memoria, intellectus, amor*. For the Reformers it was the state of original righteousness enjoyed by Adam before the Fall...For the time of the Enlightenment, the seat of the image is the soul," "The Image of God in Man," 54–55.

⁴¹ Curtis, "Image of God (OT)," 390.

⁴² Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 20.

⁴³ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 463.

Defining the image relationally has some interesting implications. Barth and Brunner suggest a number of them: The interpretation is silent on the matter of what a human is; the image is universally and invariably applicable to all humans; the image cannot be possessed; it cannot be given or received, lost or gained; the image is not about what a human does; it is simply the experience of a human in relationship to God.⁴⁴ As noted by Erickson, this perspective has a strong existentialist flavour.⁴⁵

John Calvin attempted a synthesis consisting of substantive, relational, and ethical dimensions in his formulation, which in some ways resembled Irenaeus' much earlier views of the image. Irenaeus preferred to differentiate between these different aspects.⁴⁶ Ethical considerations tend to coalesce with the relational view. The relational-ethical interpretation emerges mainly from the New Testament texts on the image. Middleton states that while this approach is not sufficiently comprehensive, it "can claim some degree of exegetical support."⁴⁷ Luther also had an ethical understanding of the image rather than a substantive one. An important dimension of the image for Barth was in the male-female relationship, which is explicitly named in the text. Males and females image God by standing in relation to him but also by their relation to one another.

The relational reading essentially caught up to and surpassed the substantive understanding of the image by the twentieth century. But, like the substantive view in its era of influence, each of the proponents of this view is clearly swayed by the prevailing ideas of their

⁴⁴ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 464–465.

⁴⁵ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 465.

⁴⁶ Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 164.

⁴⁷ Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 21.

time.⁴⁸ The Reformers pushed back against dominant Catholic theology. Barth and his contemporaries reacted to ideologies present in German National Socialism. As mentioned at the outset, preunderstandings and biases are inevitable and the only point from which to write. But this view unnecessarily suffers the same fate as many others with its reliance on textually foreign sources and paradigms for interpreting a wholly biblical claim.

View 3: Function

With neither qualities nor relational standing in focus, the functional position sees human agency as the image. Humans have dominion over other created things. This unique position of humans as earth-rulers endowed with the ability to choose is the meaning of the image. Humans, ideally, in their likeness to God, participate with him in governing the land. The functional view is concerned with what one does or was made to do. This interpretation emerges from the context of the creation narrative in conversation with its competing contemporaneous origin stories. As suggested by Edward M. Curtis, humanity “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.”⁴⁹ Commonly cited support for a functional view comes from Gerhard von Rad’s commentary on Genesis. He asserts, “Just as 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, so man is placed on earth in God’s image as God’s sovereign emblem.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Curtis, “Image of God (OT),” 389–390.

⁴⁹ Curtis, “Image of God (OT),” 391.

⁵⁰ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis, Revised Edition: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1973), 60.

The royal quality of the image as function is supported by Psalm 8, which reflects on the Genesis account:

And you made him a little lower than heavenly beings,
and with glory and with majesty you crowned him.
You make him over the works of your hands;
all things you have placed under his feet.⁵¹

In his translation and commentary, Robert Alter mentions, “All these terms appropriate to royalty establish the image of man ruling over nature, with all things ‘under his feet,’ a common ancient Near Eastern image of subjugation.”⁵² The exercising of dominion is essential to the image for the functional view.⁵³ Being so far removed from the originating context, this reading may seem non-intuitive, but that would not have been the case for ancient hearers, who were more likely to have understood it in royal terms.

Speaking of the connection between the passages, Middleton says that in “Psalm 8 and Genesis 1, humans (like the angelic heavenly court) have been given royal and thus godlike status in the world.”⁵⁴ The functional interpretation is favoured by Old Testament scholars⁵⁵ because of its faithfulness to the text and is thus more secure from extrabiblical pressures outside of the text’s originating context. This does not mean that these scholars are more objective but speaks to the soundness of their method of interpretation. Middleton quotes Abraham Joshua Heschel, who talks about the necessity of thinking biblically and letting the Bible “teach us its

⁵¹ Lexham English Bible.

⁵² Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, vol. 1 (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 39.

⁵³ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 467.

⁵⁴ Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 28.

⁵⁵ Allen Ross and John N. Oswalt, *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: Genesis, Exodus*, vol. 1 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2008), 40.; Merrill, “Image of God,” 443; Curtis, “Image of God (OT),” 390; Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 166.

own essential categories; and then for us to think *with* them, instead of just *about* them.”⁵⁶ As the image, function is about what humans are called to do.

The functional interpretation, though popular in some scholarly circles, has not experienced widespread influence, which might be the result of the challenge of translating the Genesis text to the modern mind. Like each view we have considered, many who hold a relational view may have a particular bias that can be easily named. In this case, functionalists often draw support from philosophical functionalism.⁵⁷ Common criticisms of this perspective deal with the order in which God acts in the Genesis account and discount the importance of the context for the meaning of the image as extraneous. This view does not presently hold the most sway among the views.

Comparisons

Viewed atomistically, each of the three major interpretations of the *imago Dei* doctrine, while offering something valuable, also falls short of a satisfying explanation of the meaning of the image of God. Each equally claims biblical support, but they are not all equally biblical. The next task will be to compare each view and consider whether any are worth undertaking or should be left to the undertaker. It will become evident that, like Calvin, a compelling interpretation may require some degree of synthesising. But for now, comparisons.

The first comparison is between the substantive and relational views. Is the image a quality or a relationship? Humans are clearly meant to commune with God in the storyline of scripture. Being rightly related to him is of the utmost importance in that they share some

⁵⁶ Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 33.

⁵⁷ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 467.

authority with the one they image.⁵⁸ In this way, the relational view has some support. Substantive views are right in their affirmation of the image as what humanity is but gravely err when attempting to locate it in any particular human quality. Genesis is at most reticent on the “ontological content, and therefore to develop an anthropology rooted in this phrase is speculative.”⁵⁹ If being made in the image is what makes a person human, and that humanness is dependent on a skill, quality, or task that some humans are not capable of achieving, then their humanness becomes compromised. This could and has jeopardised the sanctity of human life, with devastating results. The relational interpretation is correct in its assertion that the image in humans does not vary by degree but does not locate the image within the person. Yes, every person is related (positively or negatively) toward God, but so is everything else in creation. This view is unable, as the substantive view is, to locate the image.

Next is a comparison between substance and function. As previously mentioned, the substance of the image cannot be in any way conditional. A valid substantive view must have humans as image-bearers simply by nature of being human. The ability to reason, as is often claimed, cannot be the measure. For the same reason, the functional view of the image as what humans do cannot exclusively be the image since it is vulnerable to the same objection of variability. Granted, imaging is about what a human is; it is also about what a human does: the task given exclusively to humans made in the image, as earlier argued, is to rule. The substantive view is insufficient as an explanation in that it does not speak to the role of the image.

Finally, the role and the relationship as image. What humanity is and what it is for is further wrapped up in the relational aspect of being an image of the Creator. Humans can choose

⁵⁸ Douglas Mangum, Miles Custis, and Wendy Widder, *Genesis 1–11*, Lexham Research Commentaries (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012), Gen 1:1–2:3.

⁵⁹ Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 168.

to be in a fruitful relational standing before God, or they can choose to stand far off. This affects how they stand in relation to other humans and the rest of God's creation. This is the great tragedy of images of God who concoct other images (idols) in place of God. Not understanding their own identity as God's living-idol-images, humans, ironically, create the very thing they are supposed to be. The traditional relational interpretation is perhaps the most deficient view since it largely ignores what humans as images are teleologically intended to be and do.

The Exact Image of God

Jesus' life displays the true way to be human. How does his way of ruling on the earth speak to the human status as imagers? Erickson mentions Barth's suggestion that "humanity is understood by understanding Jesus."⁶⁰ Jesus lives and is what all humans were intended to do and be. He is the human image humans are made to be but fail to be: achieving what humanity could not.⁶¹ Jesus is the ultimate paragon of what it means to be human.

The New Testament confirms that Christ is the image (2 Cor 4:4; Phil 2:6; Col 1:15); and one of the main contentions of the book of Ephesians is that people need to be "in Christ" (1:3). This point offers significant weight to a relational understanding of the image. Those in Christ, who is the image, must also be said to be in the image. Though the image is never used to imply ontological equivalence, it is about likeness to God. In the words of E. H. Merrill, "to be like God is to be patterned after him but, at the same time, to be qualitatively inferior to him."⁶² Whatever the image means presently, it is incomplete before the return of Christ, especially as it relates to human function. Believers await their final transformation into the image.⁶³

⁶⁰ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 464.

⁶¹ Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 172.

⁶² Merrill, "Image of God," 443.

⁶³ Jerry, "Image of God," 170.

When the image refers to Christ, it speaks of more than his being; it also “denotes his function as an expression of the divine.”⁶⁴ The image is primarily what he does. Erickson offers three helpful implications on the meaning of humans made in God’s image as patterned by Jesus: Fellowship with the Father, obeying the Father’s will (as tested in a garden), and love for others.⁶⁵ Jesus’ life shows us the true way to be human and have dominion. He fulfils the relational, substantialist, and functionalist impulses and patterns a proper human life for God’s imagers on earth. On his return, “Jesus will establish dominion over all...and we will reign with him on earth (Rev 5:10).”⁶⁶ Ruling with God is the imager’s vocation and destiny.

Conclusion

We began by asking the question of what bearing God’s image relates to or consists of: is it what we are, who we are, or what we do? The answer, as has hopefully become clear by now, is yes. Humanity is the image of God. Humans collectively and individually image God as his royal representatives who rule on the earth. Christ, as the quintessential example of God’s image, gives humanity a standard by which to rule. The three traditional views each carry part of the essential nature of the meaning of the image, but a form of functional interpretation has the most biblical support.

⁶⁴ Clines, “Image of God,” 427.

⁶⁵ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 471.

⁶⁶ Ross and Oswalt, *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: Genesis, Exodus*, 40.

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