

OT 503: Reading the Old Testament: OA

Research Paper

What Does It Mean to Be Created in The Image of God?

Examining Genesis 1:26

By

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Introduction

The passage of scripture that this paper will investigate is Genesis 1:26 : “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’”¹ It will examine the question: What does it mean to be created in the image of God and what role and responsibilities are endowed to humanity in this world because they are created in this image? The main reason for asking these questions is to determine the identity for humanity. In a world of full of divisions and isms there is a willful ignorance to conceal the identity of human beings – beings that are created in the image of God.

Exegetical Framework

¹ Genesis 1:26 (NASB)

This scripture will be examined using the canonical method which utilizes a synchronic approach to the text where “each passage is read as a part of a biblical book, and the biblical book is seen as a part of the larger biblical canon”², as well as the traditional methodology that analyzes oral and written traditions that are passed on from generation to generation. “Such traditions give expression to peoples’ self-understanding, their sense of their past, their system of belief and their codes of conduct.”³ In using these methods to critically examine the scripture there is an inherent understanding that “in the final analysis, we have to assume the same Holy Spirit who inspired the human authors to write the books also superintended the Hebrew leaders during the canon-selection process.”⁴ The authoritative view of the scripture is most prominently reinforced in Paul’s letter to Timothy “All scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching for reproof for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.”⁵

The Distinctiveness of the Hebrew Creation Story

² Hayes, John H., and Carl R. Holladay, 155.

³ Hayes, John H., and Carl R. Holladay, 115.

⁴ Hill and Walton, 490

⁵ 2 Tim. 3:16 (NASB)

Although there are many Ancient Near East stories of the creation of the world and its inhabitants, the story of Genesis provides a unique theological perspective on the origin of the universe and humanity. It is this theology that shapes and molds the canonical biblical narrative from Genesis to Revelation and makes the biblical origins account distinctive in human history.

If though, you lived in Biblical times, you were probably used to people claiming to be the 'image of god'. Most everyone in those times lived under the rule of a king, and these kings proclaimed themselves to be god's image on earth, having the authority to carry out the will of the gods. These kings would also create idols – statues of wood, stone, or precious metal that were also said to be the physical embodiment of gods on earth or, 'images of god'.⁶

What is unique to the Genesis account is that the image of God is not limited to the representation of a particular king and is not represented in any other form of creation but is impressed upon all humanity both male and female.

In the beginning of the Bible, we see God as the all-powerful creator and king of the earth. As the king and the creator, He has authority over creation. One of the first things He does, though, is to create mankind and give them all authority to rule over creation by making them in His image.⁷

The anthropocentric aspect of the origin account of Genesis places responsibility and stewardship of all creation in the hands of all human beings and requires that each individual person be inherently valuable because they are created in the image of an omniscient, omnipotent and immutable God. The monotheistic belief of the Hebrew people is also in sharp

⁶ <https://bibleproject.com/podcasts/the-bible-project-podcast/>

⁷ <https://bibleproject.com/podcasts/the-bible-project-podcast/>

contrast to the polytheistic creation stories that are found in other Ancient Near East populations (i.e. Babylon, Assyria and Egypt).

These Babylonian and Assyrian (as well as the Egyptian) creation stories are all grossly polytheistic. They usually argue for the preeminence of one of the gods and often reflect conflict or war among the gods. The creation account in Genesis stands in stark contrast to these stories by its simplicity and clarity: 'In the beginning God created...'⁸

Some of the similarities found in the various creation stories can be attributed to geography, political alliances, conquest, trade and similarities in culture. It is also possible that the varying accounts of Babylon and Assyria are degeneracies of the original divinely inspired account.

The Judeo-Christian tradition attributes the authorship of Genesis as well as the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy (known as the Pentateuch) to Moses. The bible references his authorship in Nehemiah 8:1 "And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the Law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel"⁹; and Jesus refers to Moses authorship in Mark 12:26. "Thus, though many critical scholars today reject Mosaic authorship, we have good reason to accept the biblical tradition that Moses wrote the Pentateuch. For Genesis in particular, Moses probably used written sources and put them together to form this book."¹⁰ The book of Genesis and specifically the creation account lays the theological, philosophical and praxis foundation for the Jewish, Christian and Islamic faiths. It is the blueprint that the rest of scripture is based upon and is the beginning of God's revelation to His creation.

⁸ Halley, 88. 89

⁹ Neh. 8:1

¹⁰ Evans, 56

The Unique Attributes of Humanity Created in the Image of God

Theologians, scientist and philosophers have all provided contributions to the idea of humanity being the pinnacle of creation. There are many different methods for defining what it means to be human but for the purposes of this paper the most effective definition of being created and being created in the image of God is the “essentialist definition” that Steve W. Lemke proposes in his paper *The Intelligent Design of Humans*. “The image of God is the reflection/likeness/similarity of God’s essence which He created in human beings, and is reflected most noticeably in the personal, spiritual, relational, rational, volitional, moral, responsible and emotional aspects of human life.”¹¹ Lemke stresses that although the attributes of humanity are endowed by God, humans are not exact replicas of God. The uniqueness of personality and the ability and freedom for individuals to make decisions, create, initiate change in the world and to clearly form objectives or plans are a few of the clearest attributes that reflect God. This definition also defines the role and purpose for humanity in God’s creation. God in essence created humans to fulfill the task of representing His authority in the created order of the universe and provided the attributes that allow humanity to worship and relate to a spiritual, sovereign, holy, loving, relational, wise and all powerful God. Humans are beings that are created with a spirit because God is spirit and provides the ability for humanity to relate to Him in spirit and truth. As Jesus explains to the woman at the well in the gospel of John “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”¹² The relational aspect of God is not limited to God and humanity but is represented in the

¹¹ Lemke, 8.

¹² Jn 4:24 (ESV)

theological doctrine of the Trinity (which is not specifically mentioned in the biblical text but can be inferred by the notable use of the words “Us” and “Our” in Genesis 1:26).

'Let us' is a hint at the Trinity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit agreed together to make the first human family, and that family was supposed to reflect truths about God. Like the Trinity, humanity has unity in diversity.¹³

The idea of unity in diversity is addressed specifically in the New Testament book of Galatians; “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”¹⁴. The perfect image of God is represented in Jesus Christ (the second Adam) and it is through Christ that humanity is redeemed, and the true image of God is revealed. Karl Barth views the relational nature of humans to God through Christ.

The fall or sin concealed man's nature from himself and his fellow human beings, but not from God. According to Barth, man learns about his nature by studying Christ: ‘As the man, Jesus is revealing himself the revealing Word of God, he is the source of our knowledge of the nature of man as created by God.’ This does not mean that we, as human beings, can equate our human nature with that of Jesus Christ, for he is superior to us by far and his humanity is pure in form and he is the full image of God.¹⁵

Theologians like Augustine, Calvin, Luther and Barth have contributed to the definition of man being created in God's image and it is clear that despite nuances in interpretation the likely definition is a combination of the described attributes of humanity (functional, relational, intellectual, substantive ,etc.). The unifying idea is that humans are unique in their relationship to God and His creation and as a result are given the authority and stewardship over the earth.

¹³ Evans, 59.

¹⁴ Gal 3:28 (ESV)

¹⁵Simango, 180.

What are the Roles and Responsibilities of Humans Considering the Creation Account?

It is clear from the Genesis account that humans are created in God's image for a purpose. The subjection of creation to the authority of man is one of the purposes that God intends for humanity. The story in Genesis continues with the role Adam is to have on the earth: to procreate, cultivate and protect the beauty that God created. "God asked Adam to work a specific garden, cultivating it, working the ground, and bringing out the hidden potential of all that God had made."¹⁶ The institutions of heterosexual marriage and family are also relational responsibilities that human beings are to carry out in God's plan. In essence humans find their purpose first in their relationship to God, second in their relationship to each other and third in their relationship to the rest of creation.

Identity in Crisis

Chapter three of Genesis describes the disruption of the relationship between mankind and God by their direct disobedience to God's command. This disobedience opens the door for sin and corruption to enter the world. "God promised that eating from the tree would lead to death, and he was right. The manifestation of that death was emotional, spiritual, relational,

¹⁶ Evans, 60.

environmental, and ultimately physical.”¹⁷ The beginning of the identity crisis began when sin entered the world and the relationship between humanity and God was distorted. Adam and Eve are immediately ashamed and afraid of each other and God, they find themselves in a crisis of identity. The effects of this identity crisis are generational and are found throughout the bible beginning with Adam and Eve and continuing with their children Caine and Abel. Throughout the biblical narrative is the struggle for humanity to understand its identity in relation to God and to other humans. The manifestations of this struggle still plague humanity today in the forms of nationalism, ethnicity, race and socio-economic status to name a few. Today, the identity of human beings is reduced to simple biology and chemistry and the value of life is determined by the material contributions that can be made to society by that life. The danger of reducing humanity to simplistic scientific observations is that the inherent value of a human being is lost and with that loss of identity come all the exploitations, deprivations and corruptions that exist in the world today. The pain and suffering of war, genocide, slavery, racism, sexism and destruction and decimation of the environment are some of the results of the broken relationship between humanity and God. The fall of mankind represents the disruption of the relationship between God and man and with that disruption is a distortion of the purpose of humanity. “The rupture means that we rattle around in our space, as it were producing disorder within ourselves, with our neighbors, and with our environment, human and non-human.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Ibid, 62.

¹⁸ Berry, 47.

The Solution: Restoration of Identity Through Jesus Christ

God provides the solution to this identity crisis in Jesus the Savior. Jesus is the perfect representation and revelation of the Word of God. The same Word that created the universe and created humanity in the image of God, is the same Word that became flesh and lived among us in this world. “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”¹⁹ Throughout the biblical narrative is the story of God relating to humanity and revealing Himself using several different methods. He spoke through the patriarchs (like Noah, Abraham and Moses), and then through the prophets (like Samuel, Isaiah and Micah), and finally through His Son Jesus Christ. It is through Jesus that humanity is given the example of what the true image of God looks like in the flesh. “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power...”²⁰. The identity crisis that resulted from the distorted relationship of humanity with God is in essence rectified by God Himself in the image of Christ.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities- all were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together ²¹

When we examine that in the creation account of Genesis 1:26 God created humanity in His image and likeness, it is reasonable that God would fully reveal His image of humanity through his perfect Son Jesus Christ. “Thus it is written, ‘The first man Adam became a living being’; the

¹⁹ Jn 1:14 (ESV)

²⁰ Heb. 1:3 (ESV)

²¹ Col. 1:15-17

last Adam became a life-giving spirit.”²² It is the reconciliation that redefines the purpose and role of humanity in creation. When we allow Jesus Christ into our lives, we are allowing the perfect image of God to restore the broken relationship that is caused by sin and willful disobedience to God. The command to love God with all our heart, might and soul (in Deuteronomy 6:5) and Jesus’ command to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:39) can only be achieved if our identity is firmly rooted in the perfect image of God - in Christ Jesus. “And when we are reconciled through faith in Christ, we have a personal relationship to that same creator and an implied responsibility to creation care for Him.”²³

Conclusion

We have examined Genesis 1:26 to determine the human identity in relation to being created in God’s image. The bible narrative describes God’s determinate plan to reveal Himself to the pinnacle of His creation humanity and to clearly provide the ultimate revelation and example of the image of God (Imago Dei). Jesus Christ is the actual definition of the perfect image of God, He is the visible representation of the Trinity and the most humanly relatable member of the Godhead. Unlike the scientific, philosophical, and even theological theories of humanity; Christ sets the standard for all of humanity and it is Jesus that allows for man to find his identity and relationship with God and His creation. Our purpose and definition are found in the example that Jesus set before all humanity.

²² 1 Cor. 1:15

²³ Berry, 48.

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