

8. THE IMAGE OF GOD

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1. One of the fundamental tenets of Christian faith is that human beings are created in the image of God. The basis for this belief is to be found in few passages from the book of Genesis.

2. Hebrew Bible

And God said: 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.'

And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him, male and female created He them. And 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 fowl of the air, and over every living thing that creepeth upon the earth.' (Genesis 1:26–28)

This is the book of the generations of Adam. In the day that God created man, in the likeness of God made He him. Male and female created He them, and blessed them, and called their name Adam, in the day when they were created. And Adam lived a hundred and thirty years, and begot a son in his own likeness, after his image; and called his name Seth. (Genesis 5:1–3)

One who spills the blood of man, through/by man, his blood will be spilled, for in God's image He made man. (Genesis 9:6)

3. Apocrypha/Deuterocanonical Books

For God created man to be immortal, and made him to be an image of his own eternity. (Wisdom of Solomon 2:23)

The Lord created man of the earth, and turned him into it again. He gave them few days, and a short time, and power also over the thing therein. He endued them with strength by themselves, and made them according to his image, And put the fear of man upon all flesh, and gave him dominion over beasts and fowls. Discretion and tongue and eyes, ears and a mind for thinking he gave them. He filled them with knowledge and understanding and showed them good and evil. (Sirach 17:1–6)

But people, who have been formed by your hands and are called your own image because they are made like you, and for whose sake you have formed all things – have you also made them like the farmer's seed? (2 Esdras 8:44)

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4. New Testament

4.1. Applied to human beings:

And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him. (Colossians 3:10)

For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is God's image and glory; but the woman is the glory of the man. (1 Corinthians 11:7)

"Because those whom He foreknew, He also predestinated to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the Firstborn among many brothers" (Romans 8:29)

But we all with unveiled face, beholding and reflecting like a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, even as from the Lord Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18)

With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. (James 3:9)

4.2. Applied to Christ:

That the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should not dawn on them. For we don't preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake; seeing it is God who said, "Light will shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Corinthians 4:4-7)

God, having in the past spoken to the fathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, has at the end of these days spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom also he made the worlds. His Son is the radiance of his glory, the very image of his substance (Hebrews 1:3)

And transferred us into the Kingdom of the Son of his love; in whom we have our redemption, the forgiveness of our sins; who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. (Colossians 1:13-15)

5. Besides the Deuterocanonical books (written in Greek), the theme of the image of God appears only in the book of Genesis.

5.1. According to the so called "JEDP Source Theory the Hebrew Bible (Christian Old testament) draws from 4 literary traditions. These traditions are known as J, E, D, and P.

- i. **J (the Jahwist or Jerusalem source)** uses YHWH as God's name.
- ii. **E (the Elohist source)** uses Elohim ("God") for the divine name until Exodus 3-6, where YHWH is revealed to Moses and to Israel.
- iii. **D (the Deuteronomist)** wrote almost all of Deuteronomy (and probably also Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings).
- iv. **P (the Priestly source)** provided the first chapter of Genesis; the book of Leviticus; and other sections with genealogical information, the priesthood, and worship. For a time frame for these writings, scholars view P as containing materials written

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prior to the Babylonian exile and during the exile, as well as having some materials written after the exile (6th century BCE).

6. The theme of the image of God belongs to the last of these traditions, P, that is the Priestly source. This source has a lot in common with the second half of the book of Isaiah (chapters 40 to 55) also called the “Deutero-Isaiah”
 - 6.1. the emphasis on creation,
 - 6.2. the universality of vision: Rejecting the idea of Yahweh as a god who belonged only to the Hebrews, Deutero-Isaiah boldly proclaimed Yahweh as the only true God of the entire universe. His conception of the people of Israel was also unique in that he regarded them as Yahweh's servants, whose primary function in the world is to carry religion to the ends of the earth.
 - 6.3. the emphatic monotheism,
 - 6.4. the assurance of the incomparability and uniqueness of the God of Israel.
 - 6.5. hostility to all worship of graven images (idolatry).
7. Especially in its fight against idolatry, the Deutero-Isaiah **denied emphatically any analogy to God from the side of the world**. But if nothing of what exists can represent God, is there anything which is ‘like’ God?
‘With whom, then, will you compare God? To what image will you liken him? (Isaiah 40.18)
8. The authors of Genesis 1 seem to have tried to give an answer to this very question: Human beings are described as having a special role in a very organized vision of the world or cosmos:

And God said: 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.'
And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him, male and female created He them. And 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 fowl of the air, and over every living thing that creepeth upon the earth.' (Genesis 1:26–28)

- 8.1. This resonates with Psalm 8
 - 1LORD, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory
in the heavens.
 - 2Through the praise of children and infants
you have established a stronghold against your enemies,
to silence the foe and the avenger.
 - 3When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
which you have set in place,

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4what is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?

5You have made them a little lower than the angels
and crowned them with glory and honor.

6You made them rulers over the works of your hands;
you put everything under their feet:

7all flocks and herds,
and the animals of the wild,

8the birds in the sky,
and the fish in the sea,
all that swim the paths of the seas.

9LORD, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

9. This is often referred to as the “functional” interpretation of the image of God:
 - 9.1. the image of God consists in human dominion over the animals
 - 9.2. the image of God is attached to humanity only: the animals do not have it.
 - 9.3. Reinforced in Genesis 9, where the killing of animals is sanctioned but the killing of humans is to be punished, expressly because God had made humanity in his own image.

One who spills the blood of man, through/by man, his blood will be spilled, for in God's image He made man. (Genesis 9:6)
 - 9.4. The contrast with the animals was very probably a force that propelled the image of God with great ease into the *intellectual* area.
 - i. How did human beings dominate the animals?
 - ii. Not by sheer strength, for the animals had the advantage in strength, in speed, in adaptation to their environment.
 - iii. Human domination rests upon use of technology and technology rests upon human powers of thought, reason, language, and abstraction
10. Indeed we find this interpretation in the Greek books of the Old Testament
11. For God created man to be immortal, and made him to be an image of his own eternity. (Wisdom of Solomon 2:23)

The Lord created man of the earth, and turned him into it again.
He gave them few days, and a short time, and power also over the thing therein. He endued them with strength by themselves, and made them according to his image, and put the fear of man upon all flesh, and gave him dominion over beasts and fowls.
Discretion and tongue and eyes,
ears and a mind for thinking he gave them.
⁷ He filled them with knowledge and understanding
and showed them good and evil. (Sirach 17:1–6)
12. This encouraged another tendency in the interpretation of the image of God, which we can call “spiritual” or “rational”

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- 12.1. The image of God is related to the spiritual or rational character of humanity, which distinguished it from the animal world.
 - 12.2. As a special case within this category we may mention St Augustine, who explained that the divine image in man consists in a trinity like that in God. The human trinity consists in memory, understanding, and love (*memoria, intellectus, amor*), or the human capacity to remember, know, and love God.
13. At one point the idea emerged that this ‘image of God’ was almost a ‘faculty’, something part of human nature which plays the role of a “point of contact” between human beings and God. Especially on the basis of the beginning of the Gospel of John (“In the beginning was the Word - *Logos*”) and under the influence of Platonism and Stoicism, many Christian thinkers liked to think that
- 13.1. The image of God is the *logos* in us (our reason) which is ‘attuned’ with the *Logos* which is God and also the rational principle that explains the order of the cosmos.
 - 13.2. So in theory our ‘logos’ or reason, because it is the image of God, can give us access to God even independently from revelation – it allows us to create a ‘natural’ theology
 - 13.3. Moreover, our *logos* or reason can give us an idea of who God is – an ‘analogy’ – this was developed especially by Saint Augustine who would say that
 - i. Reason is inseparable from love and memory: we decide to know something only if we love it and store it in our memory.
 - ii. Knowledge, love, and memory are 3 and yet the mind is one, just as in God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are one God.
14. This interpretation of the image of God as a ‘point of contact’ is difficult to square with the way in which God reveals himself in Scripture
- 14.1. Scripture (especially the prophets) states categorically that the initiative of revelation belongs to God alone: if he does not reveal himself, we have no way of knowing him.

Truly you are a God who has been hiding himself,
the God and Savior of Israel.
All the makers of idols will be put to shame and disgraced;
they will go off into disgrace together.
But Israel will be saved by the LORD
with an everlasting salvation;
you will never be put to shame or disgraced,
to ages everlasting. (Isaiah 45.15ff)
 - 14.2. The only way God reveals himself is in the **history** of the people which he has chosen – he speaks to them and expects a response from them
“The great achievement of Israel is not to have taught the one true God, who is the only God, the source and end of all that is; it is to have shown that it was possible in reality to speak to Him, to say ‘Thou’ to Him, to stand upright before His face.” “It was Israel who first₅

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understood— and much more— lived life as a dialogue between man and God.” (Martin Buber)

- 14.3. The religiosity of Israel does not try to know the divine ‘being’ or ‘nature’, but welcomes the revelation of the plan, the designs of God revealed to the prophets and pointing to the fulness of revelation in Christ.
- 14.4. Even the **tetragrammaton** of Exodus, the name of God, says nothing about the divine Being, about God considered in His nature.
 - i. When God says to Moses “I am who I am” he is not saying something about his ‘being’. In fact this expression should be translated as “I am he who remains faithful.”
15. In many ways this points to another understanding of the image of God, namely the ability to be *in relation* with God: the difference between human beings and God can be infinite and yet we were created to be in relation with God, to be able to worship him, listen and respond to him.
16. Some of the references to the image of God in the New Testament point in this direction

"Because those whom He foreknew, He also predestinated to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the Firstborn among many brothers" (Romans 8:29)

But we all with unveiled face, beholding and reflecting like a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, even as from the Lord Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18)

And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him. (Colossians 3:10)
17. The image of God in these verses appear as
 - 17.1. something through which we are “conformed” to God, “transformed”, and “renewed”
 - 17.2. at the beginning it is a potential and it grows as we know and love God more and more, that is as we grow in the relation with God.
18. St Augustine explains that
 - 18.1. only the Son is ‘*the* image and *the* likeness’ of God;
 - 18.2. we are ‘*to* the image and *to* the likeness of God’ (*ad* plus the accusative in Latin) in the sense that we are not eternally equal to the Father like the Son
 - 18.3. but we are called to grow in the image and in the likeness of the Father by knowing and loving him through the Son and the Holy Spirit.
19. There is sense in which the image of God is more like a yearning, something which sets us in motion, and prevents us from finding satisfaction in anything other than God himself.
20. The image of God is similar to what Augustine describes in the *Confessions* when he talks about ‘restlessness’:

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'You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you'¹

Things which are not in their intended position are restless. Once they are in their ordered position, they are at rest. My weight is my love. Wherever I am carried, my love is carrying me. By your gift we are set on fire and carried upwards; we grow red hot and ascend. We climb *the ascent of the heart* (Psa 83.6), and sing *the song of steps* (Psa 119.1). Lit by your fire, your good fire, we grow red-hot and ascend, as we move upwards *to the peace of Jerusalem* (Psa 121.6).²

- 20.1. We can interpret being made in the image of God as being “made *for* God”
 - 20.2. “restlessness” here does not mean anxiety – but “search for the place where we belong”
 - 20.3. And that which brings us to our intended place is our *weight* – which is not just that which brings us down by gravity, that that which pulls us to our intended place.
21. This is a vision of created reality as moved by a universal desire which in human beings takes the form of *love and of knowledge* – hence the sentence “My weight is my love”.

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¹ *conf.* 1.1 (CCL 27, 1. Trans. Chadwick, 3): ‘fecisti nos ad te et inquietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te’.

² *Confessions* 13.9–10 (CCL 27, 246 f. Trans. Chadwick, 277 f.), ‘Pondus meum, amor meus’. 7