

God's Image in Man: A Biblical Perspective

Abstract

Over the years, the nature of mankind portrays that he is implicitly created in a special way. The generally known concept of man depicts a ruler of the universe. Regardless of the race, color, tribe, gender, language and other seeming physical differences of man, man is still rated higher than animal everywhere in the world. This is explicitly seen in the biblical account of Genesis; man is directly referred to as the climax of God's creation (Gen 1: 28-30). The murder of a man is blatantly frowned at (it even attracts 'Capital Punishment'), but the death of any animal is explicitly permissible and not queried. The fact remains that gap of differences exists between man and every other creature God created in the word. Meanwhile, the striking difference that exists brings the argument of God's image to limelight. The research makes a rethink on what 'God's image in man' entails.

Introduction

The Bible reveals that the first act of God in recorded history is creation.¹ More so, two accounts of creation are contained in Genesis; the first account gives the cosmic perspective (Gen 1:1-2:3) but the second account is focused on Adam and Eve (Gen 2:4-25). It is observed that the two accounts are complementary in nature; telling the story of creation from two different perspectives. The creator's interest on mankind is explicitly seen in view of the fact that God made man the crown of all creations and the peak of all living beings.

Therefore, a critical view on man's identity and activities brings a notable reaction of perplexity on the complex nature of mankind. As a result, several individuals have different dispositions concerning the 'image of God in man' as clearly stated in Gen 1:26-27. In view of this, this work presents a rethink of God's image in man.

¹ Timothy Palmer, *A Theology of the Old Testament* (buruku: African Christian Textbooks, 2011), 29.

The Creator

The first person to be mentioned in Genesis was God; and the same God (*Elohim*) who created the heavens and the earth Gen 1:1 was the one in action on man's creation (Gen 1:27).² The word "*Elohim*" comes from two Hebrew words; "*El*" meaning 'strength' or 'the strong one' and "*Alah*" meaning 'to bind one's self with an oath' or 'to swear with an oath'.³ "*El*" is one of the generic Semitic designations of God that has been mostly used on poetic books (Psalms and Job). In its etymology it has the meaning of power and control, hence it is used in the sense of 'Mighty', 'Leader' and 'Governor'. This title suggests the distinctiveness of God and can be compounded in several other descriptions, like: *El-Shaddai*, *El-Elyon*, *El-Olam*, among others.⁴

Even Palmer in his discourse on the 'name of God' asserts that '*El*' is etymologically related to the Arabic and Hausa "*Allah*".⁵ Since the word '*El*' conveys the idea of being powerful, Jacob opined that what is powerful is divine.⁶ It is lucid from the biblical account that *Elohim* was the first name⁷ for God used in the Bible. in *Elohim* Paul Summer, examining ' *Elohim* (אֱלֹהִים - ⁸ the biblical context' observed that:

Elohim was found about 2602 times in the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh, Old Testament). The "-im" ending denotes a plural masculine noun. Most of the time, however, when the noun is used for the true God it has singular masculine verbs. This is contrary to rules of Hebrew grammar. When used of the true God, "Elohim" denotes what is called by linguists a plural of majesty, honor, or fullness. That is, he is GOD in the fullest sense of the word. He is "GOD of gods" or literally, "ELOHIM of elohim" (Deut 10:17; Ps 136:2). In the Greek

² http://www.ancient-hebrew.org/article_image.html (Accessed on 14th Dec, 2018).

³ Norman L. Giesler, *Systematic Theology 4 Vol.* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2004), 189. The 'oath' mentioned in the meaning of '*Alah*' suggests *Elohim* as a covenant-keeping God. Christ in Hebrews 7:17 as constituted '*a priest forever in order of Mechizedek by an oath*' and '*the blood of the eternal covenant*' in Hebrews 13:20 is connected with Revelation 3:8. Therefore, the oath which is embedded in the meaning of '*Alah*' is suggestive of the Trinity as engaged in the eternal covenant regarding the creation and redemption of mankind.

⁴ Biyi Aadewale, *Christian Religious Studies for Undergraduates* Vol. 1 (Ibadan: Baptist Press Limited, 1999), 51.

⁵ Timothy Palmer, *A Theology of the Old Testament*, 17.

⁶ Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament* (New York: Harper, 1958), 44.

⁷ Name is held in high esteem in the ancient world and Old Testament in particular. Name is not solely for identity but it also suggests man character and his nature. The name of God in the O.T therefore tells us about God's nature and characters. Those names are not just coined, but they are based on God's self revelation.

⁸ Also, it is generally thought that *Elohim* is derived from *eloah*, the latter being an expanded form of the Northwest Semitic noun. Timothy Palmer agrees with this opinion in '*A Theology of the Old Testament*'. K. Van der Toom, Bob Becking, Pieter Willem van der Horst, *Dictionary of deities and demons in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Williams B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 274.

translation of the Hebrew Bible (the Septuagint), where elohim refers to the true God, the singular theos is used.⁹

The plural ‘-im’ ending¹⁰ as revealed in the observation of Paul Summer gives greater honor to God. It’s like capitalizing the word, instead of printing “god” or it’s analogous to printing GOD or GOD, though Hebrew has no capital and small letters. The Hebrews believed theirs was the only deity who embodied all definitions of the title God, Deity, Supreme Power. So they amplified the noun.¹¹ Considering the etymology and nature of God as discussed in this part of the research, it is clear that ‘God’ here is capable of the work of creation because of his self-existence. In view of this, the research opines that *Elohim* doesn’t mean “Gods” but something like “the Greatest God of all.” Having ascertained the God (*Elohim*) involved in the creation account as revealed in the book of Genesis, the question of what kind of ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ is actually brought to discourse in the next section of this work.

The Image of God in Man: ‘*Imago dei*’

Adam was the first human being and the progenitor of human race.¹² So far as the history of nations and tribes in both hemispheres can be traced, evidence points to a common origin and ancestors in central Asia.¹³ Having established the fact that God created man; the question of how he did it evolves. “*And God said; Let us make man¹⁴ in our image, after our likeness...So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.*” Gen 1:26 – 27. Out of all the creatures God brought into existence, man was

⁹ Paul Summer, *Elohim in Biblical Context* <http://www.hebrew-streams.org/work/monotheism/context-elohim.html> (Accessed on 15th Dec, 2018).

¹⁰ Some think the plural form of *Elohim* refers to Trinity in the Old Testament, but the biblical usage suggests that *Elohim* reflects a “plural of honor” or “plural of fullness.” This concept and understanding is not farfetched in some African cultures (example of which is the Yoruba culture). When a king or chief (sometimes undoubtedly great individual or important dignitaries speaks, he (being a person) uses the plural “we” referring to himself. It is not only from the person himself; sometimes it is used by people referring to power individuals in the community to dignify them; they cognitively pass the understanding that such people are men of authority, power and influence.

¹¹ E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley, *Genesis Hebrew Grammar* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), 1985.

¹² David Mandel, *The Ultimate Who is Who in the Bible* (Alachua: Bridge-Logos, 2001), 23.

¹³ James Strong, *Strong Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers. 2007), 76.

¹⁴ Although some versions of the scripture used ‘man’ in this text; the actual presupposed meaning is human race or humanity. Cambridge dictionary explains; traditionally, the word ‘man’ is used to refer to all human beings (this agrees with David Mandel’s ‘*Who is who in the Bible*’ use of the word Antediluvian in referring to Adam) male and female, usually in contrast with other animals. However, many people consider this to be sexist, so it is advisable to use a different expression, such as human beings, humanity, mankind or human race. (*Cambridge Dictionary*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/grammar/british-grammar/man-mankind-or-peopl>; Accessed on 15th Dec, 2018).

the only creature in the image and likeness of God¹⁵; no wonder the authority to dominate and rule was given to man from the beginning of creation. This in turn suggests that man is the pinnacle of God's creation and the focus of God's attention.

The fact that man is unique and distinct among all of God's creation cannot be denied. The amount of time required for the process of creating man was not indicated, but the biblical account gives emphasis giving details of how God created man (Gen 1: 26-27; 2:7-8, 21-23). Adam was created (not born) a perfect man in body and spirit, but as completely innocent as a child. The image of God¹⁶ in man is first mentioned in Bible in connection with man's creation on the sixth day of creation. In view of the fact that man was created on the sixth which is the final day of God's work of creation; the research affirms that man is the crown of God's creation.

In agreement with the view of man as the crown of God's creation is the corroborating statement of Hoekema which says; "the image of God is the key to man's identity, in other words, man is a representative of what it means to be the image of God"¹⁷ In the same vein, Awokoya asserts that man is a picture or better still resemblance of God in some respects.¹⁸ There are several arguments on what the image and likeness of God in man actual entails.¹⁹ In other to come up with a viable analysis and rethink of what the 'image of God' in Genesis 1:27 implies, the research observes the need to take the etymology of "image" and "likeness" into consideration.

¹⁵ Although some asserts that Genesis does not provide the full-details of creation; yet, the Bible makes it clear that evolution was not a part of the process and in particular man did not evolve from other creatures.

¹⁶ Although "image of God" has become ubiquitous in Christian literatures in recent years, it has not been robustly defined. This is probably due to the lack of agreement throughout church history on what exactly constitutes image of God, which no doubt stems from the fact that Bible declares but not in detail. "*Imago Dei*" is the Latin word for image of God, a theological doctrine common to Jews, Christians, and Muslims that denotes humankind's relation to God on the one hand and all other living creatures. Traditionally, only human beings are in the image of God, and it is by virtue of this image that human beings are moral and spiritual creatures. Because the image of God is ultimately a doctrine of human nature, it has also been inappropriately used historically to justify racism and sexism. (<https://www.encyclopedia.com/philosophy-and-religion/christianity/christianity-general/imago-dei>; Accessed on 15th Dec, 2018). Therefore, the image of God imparts special meaning, harmony, design and intelligence to human life. In other words, humanity mirrors God's divinity in their abilities to actualize the unique qualities which they have been endowed.

¹⁷ Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 264.

¹⁸ S.O.D Awokoya, *The Pentateuch: Studies in the Old Testament* (Ibadan: Master Piece Prints, 2014), 79.

¹⁹ Several philosophers and theologians have argued on the issues of the image of God for years; ranging from the fact of seeming differences that exists between the word 'image' as the same with 'likeness'.

A Re-assessment of the Etymology of ‘Image’ and ‘Likeness’

עִלְמָן *selem*: is a Hebrew masculine noun meaning an image, a likeness, a statue, a model, a drawing, a shadow.²⁰ In view of this, Holladay and Kohler argues that the word relates to physical form.²¹ Although, scholars like P. Humbert in their conclusion have argued that *selem* is solely in the sense of a material image and a concrete representation. The meaning is more that of concrete representation; the word does not have to be restricted to ‘material form,’ but it rather means a ‘representation.’²² In response to the likes of Humbert, the research argues that there is more than just a concrete representation embedded in the meaning of ‘*selem*’. This is explicitly affirmed in the words of *F.K. Schumann had*:

*The Imago Dei does not consist in any particular detail of the person but describes the human being as a whole without limiting itself to anything taken in isolation.” The discussion whether the image and likeness of God referred to the corporeal or the spiritual aspect of the person has brought the conclusion that the question has been placed incorrectly. Gen 1:26 is concerned neither with the corporeal nor with the spiritual qualities of people; it is concerned only with the person as a whole.*²³

More so, דְמוּת *demut*: a feminine noun meaning likeness. This word is often used to create a simile by comparing two unlike things.²⁴ In other words, *demut* can mean something being approximately like an original. Although, Iraeneus argued that *selem* and *demut* are two different words²⁵ the research posits that there is need to be cautious in seeking for distinctions between the words. The contribution of ‘*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*’ is noteworthy:

The interlacing and substitution suggest that very little distinction can be made between the two words. This dovetailing opposes too strong a differentiation between demuth and tselem (Gen 5:1; 9:6], Ezk. 23:14f). It also opposes an overemphasis on the use of the words with prepositions in contrast to their use alone. Instead, the juxtaposition of the two words in Gen. 1:26 suggests that the writer is making a statement about the dignity of man, which he intensifies by

²⁰W. Baker, and E. E. Carpenter, *The complete word study dictionary: Old Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers. 2003), 952–953.

²¹ W.L. Holladay and L. Köhler, *A concise Hebrew and Aramaic lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill. 2000), 306.

²² C.A. Westermann, *Continental Commentary: Genesis 1–11* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 146.

²³ C.A. Westermann, 146.

²⁴ C.A. Westermann, 151.

²⁵ Iraeneu’s proposition on the image of God apparently shaped the theology of the Catholics and some Orthodox churches (C.A. Westermann, 148).

combining similar concepts. Thus 'kidhmuthenu'; after our likeness in Gen. 1:26, no matter how it may be elucidated by the otherwise predominant and characteristic use of demuth, can only correct a too direct understanding of tselem, which has a strongly concrete and plastic reference. This in turn paves the way in for the recognition that in respect of an analogy no identity of God and man can or should be asserted, but only a similarity ("something similar to us"). At the same time, what the author of Gen. 1:26 has concretely in view cannot be determined simply by investigating these related ideas. It emerges only from the broader context (v. 28) and is explained as a cooperative sharing in dominion''²⁶

In view of the above quotation, the research posits that *demuth* and *tselem* can be logically interpreted as corroborating descriptions used by the author of Genesis in relating the account of how man was formed in God's copy; which has to do with man as a direct and original representation of God.

Since God is a Spirit (John 4:24); the research argues that the emphasis of the likeness in question is stressed on the spiritual. In view of this, Tunde Aremu and Emmanuel Malomo opined that the likeness here does not suggest corporeity because God is incorporeal. In other words, that making man in God's image connotes God endowing man with those attributes which belongs to his own nature as a Spirit.²⁷

Thus, the research argues that the explanation above is logical. Paul Enns in his book explained that the image and likeness of God in man is in three folds: mental, spiritual and moral.²⁸ Although several other scholars have come with divisions like; "emotion", "will" and "intellect"; one of which is notable is Francis Piepper in *Christian Dogmatic* uses "intellect", "sensibility" and "volition".²⁹ A critical evaluation and study reveals that Enn's divisions and Piepper's division as well as many other scholars are relational and arguably the same from their explanations. Interacting with a sharp lens on the book of Genesis, the researcher posits that the job description of man corroborates Enns' and Piepper's opinion.

The mental likeness has to do with the intellect of man. Thus, the ability to know and communicate with God who is a rational being makes man a rational being. As a result man

²⁶ H. D. Preuss, G. J. Botterweck & H. Ringgren, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 259.

²⁷ Tunde Aremu and Emmanuel O. Malomo, *Christian Theology in African Context* (Ilorin: Amazing Grace Print Media, 2016), 130.

²⁸ Paul P. Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1989), 303. Although the social likeness sometimes is differentiated which makes the folds four (4); the research argues for the embellishment of the social likeness in the sense that emotion, spirituality and sensibility are grossly connected and intertwined.

²⁹ Francis Piepper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Cconcordia Publishing House, 1924), 144.

(Adam) was given responsibilities only rational being could perform, they include: to work and take care of the garden (Gen 2:15), to rule over all creations (Gen 1:26-28), to name all animals³⁰ (Gen 2:19-20). Far beyond that Adam recognized³¹ his wife as a helper suitable for him (Gen 2:22). The fact remains that only an intellectual and a mentally inclined being can perform and be saddled with these responsibilities.

Also, the spiritual likeness has to do with emotions (which brings relationship and reaction); Adam and Eve had fellowship with God, they feared God after the fall (Gen 3:10). In view of this, Tunde and Malomo argued that; “the fact that God is a Spirit is undeniable but God’s consciousness is the human soul/spirit.”³²

Furthermore, the moral likeness has to do with the will of man.³³ Theissen posits:

*Every one of these attributes reflects self-consciousness. A person has the power of standing up and saying “I know”, “I love” or “I will”. These are all denied to brute creations of blind force. One cannot rationally ascribe them to the laws of nature or forces of nature or plants or animals. Plants have life and a degree of sensibility. The brute has some perception and motion exhibiting some crude mental workings, which denotes low intelligence.*³⁴

³⁰ The researcher asserts that it cannot be wrong to say that Adam was the first ‘Zoologist’; this is because zoology is a wide, complex and sub-division of biology which relates to the animal kingdom, including the structure, embryology, evolution, classification, habits and distributions of all animals, both living and extinct. (Wicktionary: Accessed on 14 Dec, 2018). Viewing zoology as the scientific study of animals is correct and this can be implicitly applied to the work God committed to Adam in Genesis 2:20.

³¹ Another closed word to be used here is ‘a judge’. Adam was discretionary and logical in his conclusion about the suitable help meet God made for him. Upon seeing the product of God’s work and labor (Genesis 2:21-22), he made a logical comment and passed judgment aligning with God’s statement in vs. 18; which could interpretatively mean God has done what he said and purposed. Therefore, Adam is seen as a being that possesses thinking faculty, conceptual understanding and abstract reasoning.

³² Tunde Aremu and Emmanuel O. Malomo, *Christian Theology in African Context*, 130.

³³ The concept of man’s free-will has been a hot debate among different scholars for several decades contesting on the reality of man’s will before and after the fall. It is clear from the Genesis account that man was given an instruction and the consequence, the research posits; the scene is like a scenario of the common expression ‘the ball is in your court’. Thus, the truth that man’s decision was foreknown by God, influenced (serpent) and consequential in nature, does not negate the fact that they were absolutely free in their decision making. Since man is a rational and logical being with thinking faculty; it means man is accountable and should be held responsible for his actions. Also, man’s presence on earth (a place where other creatures inhabit (Gen 1:20-25) suggests that man cannot be divulged from environmental influence since he resides with other creatures bearing in mind that God relegated those creatures to man’s dominion (Genesis 1:28-29; 2:15; 19-20); this implicitly, is the key in truncating the serpent’s deceit. Meanwhile, the foreknowledge of ‘God’ – “Elohim” the previously discussed character in this research possesses the attribute on the other hand has nothing to do with man’s action; rather knowing every cause of action before hand. In other words, that God knew man will yield to the serpent’s deceit doesn’t mean God turned man in.

³⁴ Henry C. Theissen, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Williams B. Eerdmans, 1949), 125.

Self-consciousness is the true reflection of Theissen's statement as quoted rightly quoted above and this differentiates man from animals. The self-consciousness in man is a sense of responsibility of right or wrong, which has to do with choice of moral ends; these gives man the ability to say "I", "me", "myself" and other personal pronouns. Thus, throwing away the self consciousness of man will make killing him no more serious than killing a dog or chicken.

Although they can be mistaken; it is important to note that there is a sharp difference between the mental and moral likeness. While, mental likeness has to do with thinking faculty, moral likeness of God in man deals with the decision making phase. The moral likeness of God in man is the ability to choose between possible courses of action unimpeded.³⁵ This suggests a voluntary decision and action without any force or form of compulsion. God gave man a moral command (Gen 2:7) and man had a sense of moral rectitude (Gen 2:25); that was why Adam and Eve felt guilty after they have sinned (Gen 3:17).

In view of the established premise on God's image and likeness in man, the research asserts that the explanations here gives answer to why men are consciously or unconsciously religious everywhere in the world. Erickson's observation agrees with this assertion; "there seems to have been a concept of the Supreme Being 'God' even in the societies that are polytheistic in nature."³⁶ Where did this concept come from? How come animals do not have it? It's obvious that all men by their nature are 'worshipping creatures' because the image of God is stamped on their hearts.³⁷

Conclusion

The above discourse establish the fact that God's love for man is outstanding compared to other creations and His sovereignty is revealed in the course of the creation story; creating a replica of himself in some respects in other to worship and obey him. The argument concerning the image of God as discussed in this work is ascertained to be a blunt truth of the scripture, from the fact that it was God's statement about the man He created. Conclusively, since God is a Spirit and cannot be seen; it is logical and reasonable to say his image in man, although real is explicitly abstract in nature.

³⁵ J. Omoregie, *Freewill: The degree of freedom within* (UK: Author House, 2015).

³⁶ Maillard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 54.

³⁷ Henry C. Theissen, *Systematic Theology*, 125.

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