
In the Image of Marduk? Reconsidering the Influence of Mesopotamian Myths on the *Imago Dei* Doctrine

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*Nothing stamped with the Divine image and likeness was sent into the world to be trodden on and degraded.*¹

I. Why the *Imago Dei* Doctrine Matters

The biblical *imago Dei* doctrine is the bedrock of human dignity. Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, “The Bible makes some quite staggering assertions about human beings which came to be the foundations of the culture of basic human rights . . .”² *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* traces the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights back to the Bible.³ For centuries, human rights and care for the marginalized stood upon the premise that there is in all people something sacred that

¹ Abraham Lincoln, “Speech at Lewiston, Illinois (August 17, 1858) in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*. Vol. 2, editor Roy Basler (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 546.

² Desmond Tutu, “The First Word: To Be Human Is To Be Free,” in *Christianity And Human Rights: An Introduction*, editors John Witte, Jr. and Frank S. Alexander (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2010), 1.

³ Remy Debbs, “Dignity” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, editors Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Stanford: Metaphysical Research Lab, 2023), 1.2.3.
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dignity/#ImagDeiPlat> See also, Kurt Bayertz, “Human Dignity: Philosophical Origin and Scientific Erosion of an Idea,” in *Sanctity of Life and Human Dignity. Philosophy and Medicine*, Vol. 52, editor Kurt Bayertz (Springer: Dordrecht, 1966).

expresses God.⁴ As Nico Vorster says, “Since God created all human beings after his image, all human beings possess an equal worth and an inherent right to be treated as equals.”⁵

Theologians traditionally found the divine image in characterological attributes such as intellect, free will, and moral awareness. But many 20th Century biblical scholars repudiated that tradition, claiming Genesis retells Mesopotamian myths in which humanity physically resembled gods and ruled on their behalf. Physical resemblance to God is our badge of authority to rule the earth.⁶ Hence, the divine image resides not in our *character* but in our authoritative *role*.

Jacques Maritain said that every period of civilization is dominated by “a certain peculiar idea” of human nature. “Our behavior depends on this image . . . which . . . mold[s] after its own pattern the social and political formations that are characteristic of [a] given epoch.”⁷ John Kilner agrees that “How

⁴ John Witte, Jr., “Introduction.” in *Christianity and Human Rights: An Introduction*, editors John Witte, Jr. and Frank Alexander (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 15. John Kilner, “The Image of God and Human Dignity: Recovering a Biblical Treasure” in *Created in the Image of God: Applications and Implications for Our Cultural Confusion*, editors David S. Dockery with Lauren McAfee (Nashville: Forefront Books, 2023), 19, 21. Roger Rushton, *Human Rights and the Image of God* (London: SCM Press, 2010), 287.

⁵ Nico Vorster, *Created in the Image of God: Understanding God’s Relationship with Humanity* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2011), 22.

⁶ J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Ada: Baker Academic, 2005), 131, 145. Zachariah Sotishi, *Enuma Elish Vs. Genesis: The Lost Book on the Creation Story of the Babylonians* (Independently published, 2014), 13.

⁷ Untitled manuscript (Jacques Maritain Center of the University of Notre Dame, 1960) accessed August 13, 2025, <https://maritain.nd.edu/collections/archival-collections/jacques-maritain-papers/>. In “Created in the Image of a Violent God? The Ethical Problem of the Conquest of Chaos in Biblical Creation Texts,” *Interpretation* 58, Issue 4. (2022), 342, J. Richard Middleton says, “Humans reproduce in their actions something of the character of . . . their ultimate point of orientation and value (their god/God).”

people have understood being in God's image has had a 'tremendous impact' on human well-being for better or worse."⁸

In the new view of Genesis, we are God's innately violent minions.⁹ This reading coincided with the most violent century in history.¹⁰ If dignity is an adjunct of power, disempowered people are without dignity or rights.¹¹ Adolf Hitler called stronger members of society "images of the Lord" and weaker members "deformities" to be "cleansed."¹² Was this a coincidence? If not, then biblical anthropology is not just arcane quibbling about Sumerian myths and Hebrew etymologies. Our interpretation of these texts shapes how we regard ourselves and each other.

This article challenges the Mesopotamian-based model. We will see in Section II: The Mesopotamian gods neither created people in their own image nor invested them with authority. Section III: The Genesis terms construed as dominion are better read as the *capax Dei*. Section IV: Genesis democratized royal theology to proclaim the dignity of all people. Section V: In Genesis, God creates by covenant, not combat. Section VI. Earlier "glory" texts are more edifying about the *imago Dei* than are Mesopotamian myths. They portray the divine image in humankind as a covenantal theophany. Considered together,

⁸ John Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 6. There have been various malignant interpretations of the *imago Dei* through the centuries. *Ibid*, 17-37.

⁹ Hermann Gunkel's first published articulation of the theory was *Legends of Genesis* (London: Schocken Books, 1887). His definitive statement is *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit: Eine Religions-geschichtliche über Gen 1 und Ap Joh 12* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1895) trans. Charles A. Muenchow and published as "The Influence of Babylonian Mythology upon the Biblical Creation Story" in *Issues in Religion and Theology 6* editor Bernhard W. Anderson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 25-52.

¹⁰ Niall Ferguson, *The War of the World: Twentieth-Century Conflict and the Descent of the West* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006).

¹¹ Pedro Trigo, *Creation and History* (Nashville: Orbis Books, 1991), 225-226.

¹² Adolph Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock. 1939), 606.

the *imago Dei* is our capacity to reveal the covenantal God, inviting each other into covenant.

II. The Mesopotamian Reframing of Genesis

Three verses in Genesis employ the terms “image” and “likeness”:

Let us make man in our own image, after our likeness ... [so] God created man in His own image. In the image of god (b-tselem Elohim) created he them. Male and female he created them. Genesis 1: 26 – 29 (P Source)

In the day that God created man, in the likeness of God made he him. Male and female created he them ... Genesis 5: 1-2 (J Source)

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

Apocryphal texts related the divine image to our immortality, strength, and importance in creation.¹³ Patristic and classical theologians also saw our likeness to God as “spiritual attributes”¹⁴ -- today, we would say “characterological.” For Augustine, God resides in people as the inner trinity of mind, knowledge, and love; for John of Damascus, as mind and free will; for Thomas Aquinas, as intellect.

¹³ The Wisdom Of Solomon 2: 23; Sirach 17: 32; Esdras 8: 44. Jeremy Waldron says, “Our dignity is associated with our specifically high rank in creation . . . reflecting our likeness to the creator,” echoing the Apocrypha. “The Image of God: Rights, Reason, and Order” in *Christianity and Human Rights: An Introduction*, editors John Witte and Frank Alexander (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 226.

¹⁴ Kenneth Matthews, *The New American Commentary* Vol. 1A (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 164-165, 168. D. J. A. Clines, “The Doctrine of God in Man,” *Tyndale Bulletin* vol. 19 (1968), 54.

In 1872, things took a sharp turn. George Smith discovered that *Gilgamesh* told a story of The Flood 700 years before Genesis.¹⁵ The notion that the Hebrew Scriptures were based on older Mesopotamian myths captured the imaginations of biblical scholars.¹⁶ In 1887, Herman Gunkel argued that the Genesis cosmogony retells Mesopotamian myths in which gods created people as physical replicas of themselves and invested them with authority to rule on their behalf.¹⁷ Hence, in Genesis, physical resemblance to God is our badge of authority.¹⁸ John Skinner directly equated our physical resemblance to God with our mandate to rule.¹⁹ Such a divine image is functional – not characterological.²⁰ Clines says this view “came to the fore and dominated Old Testament scholarship.”²¹

But the Mesopotamian gods did not create physical replicas of themselves. Those myths do not speak of humankind’s “image”

¹⁵ Sophus Helle, *Gilgamesh: A New Translation of the Ancient Epic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 137.

¹⁶ Genesis is essentially different from the diverse Egyptian cosmogonies. Matthews, 90-91. Egyptian creation myths rarely address the creation of humanity. Middleton, *Liberating Image*. 131. The principle myth in point says we are made from the happy tears shed by Atum Ra when his missing children came home. Another says the god Khnum fashioned humanity on a potter’s wheel. Humans did not physically resemble Khnum who had the head of a ram. Nonetheless, Section V will address the claimed influence of Egyptian royal theology on biblical anthropology.

¹⁷ Gregory of Nyssa equated the divine image with humanity’s upright posture. John Chrysostom and Renaissance theology related the divine image to rulership. So the idea is not entirely new.

¹⁸ Hermann Gunkel, “The Influence of Babylonian Mythology upon the Biblical Creation Story” (1895) in *Creation and the Old Testament*, editor Bernard Anderson (London: SPCK, 1984). Middleton, *Interpretation*, 342. Matthews, 166.

¹⁹ John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (Edinburgh. T. & T. Clark. 1910). Daniel Simango, *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, vol. 42, 6. (2016)
https://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?pid=S1017-04992016000100014&script=sci_arttext.

²⁰ Middleton, *Interpretation*, 341.

²¹ Clines, 56. Cf. Maxwell Miller, “In the ‘Image’ and ‘Likeness’ of God,” *Journal Of Biblical Literature* vol. 91 (1972), 293.

at all, but rather of the raw material out of which people were crafted – usually the blood of slain enemies.²² In *The Enuma Elish* (13th Century BCE), supposedly the myth most influential on Genesis,²³ the god Marduk slew the sea monster Tiamat and created the world from her carcass, then killed Tiamat’s consort, Quingo, and made humanity from his blood. Marduk did not fashion humanity to resemble himself. He had four eyes and four ears.²⁴ Marduk tasked humans with maintaining the earth so the gods could rest.²⁵ Humanity was burdened with toil, not invested with dominion.²⁶ Quingo’s name means “toil.”²⁷ Victor Hamilton rightly says, “The anthropologies of Gen. I and *Enuma Elish* could not be wider apart.”²⁸

Kenneth Matthews contends, “The closest (Mesopotamian) compositional example to Genesis is . . . *Ataharsis* (ca 1600).”²⁹ Gunkel did not consider it because nothing like a complete recension appeared until 1965. In *Ataharsis*, intelligence, not physical resemblance, is the divine element in humanity. *Ataharsis* was read in Babylon during the Exile and is more

²² Alexander Heidel, “The Enuma Elish” in *The Babylonian Genesis: The Story of Creation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942), 69. Ira Spar. “Mesopotamian Creation Myths.” in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000), accessed August 15, 2025, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/epic/hd_epic.htm (April 2009). Matthews, 94.

²³ *The Epic of Creation* also recounts Marduk’s slaying of Tiamat to create earth; then, Quingo to create humanity. It is likely older than *The Enuma Elish* and continued to be read through the Seleucid period. Stephanie Dalley. trans. “The Epic Of Creation.” *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1989). Tablets IV-VI, 249-262.

²⁴ Heidel, “The Enuma Elish,” in *The Babylonian Genesis*, Tablet I, ll 93-98.

²⁵ *Ibid*, Tablet VI, ll 1-36; Kacie Klamm, “Enuma Elish and the Bible,” *Bible Odyssey*, 2023 <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/passages/related-articles/enuma-elish-and-the-bible/>.

²⁶ Matthews, 175.

²⁷ Karen Armstrong, *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence* (New York. Anchor, 2014), 41.

²⁸ Hamilton, 140.

²⁹ Matthews, 88.

likely than *The Enuma Elish* to have influenced *Genesis*. But in *Ataharsis* too humankind toils, not rules.³⁰

In no Mesopotamian myth do people physically resemble gods. The gods never invest humanity with earthly dominion. They task humankind with “the opprobrious duty” of earthly maintenance.³¹ Assyriologist Stephanie Dally remarks on “the futility of claiming a direct connection between . . . the Old Testament and any one Mesopotamian account of creation.”³² In *Genesis*, God creates through artistry rather than violence.³³ Humanity is molded not from the blood of slain enemies but rather soil, which God has adjudged “good.” God does not create humanity to work so God can rest³⁴ -- God and humanity share the Sabbath³⁵ -- but rather out of delight in our simple being. Walter Brueggemann says, “God has created for his enjoyment (Ps. 104: 26). All creation is characterized by God’s delight”³⁶

Gilgamesh (12th Century BCE) is the main point of reference for John Skinner, David Cairns, and Cuthbert Simpson, who read “image of God” as physical resemblance. It does speak of a human image. The king, Gilgamesh, was abusing his subjects; so the people complained to the sky god, Anu, who in turn appealed to the creation goddess, Aruru. At Anu’s suggestion,

³⁰ Dalley, trans. “Atrahasis I” in *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 15.

³¹ Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1990), 140. Matthews, 95.

³² Dalley, trans. “Theogony of Dunny,” in *Myths From Mesopotamia*, 278.

³³ Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 74-77. Meredith Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2006), 26-29. Patrick T. McCormick, *God’s Beauty: A Call to Justice* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2012). Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 88-90. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Louisville. John Knox Press, 1982), 37. Matthews, 175.

³⁴ Matthews, 175.

³⁵ Exodus 20: 8-11.

³⁶ Brueggemann, 27, citing Proverbs 8: 8: 30-31; Isaiah 5: 7; and Jeremiah 31: 20. See also, Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 266.

Aruru created Enkidu, a human friend for Gilgamesh to distract him from his misbehavior. Cairns says,

The Genesis story has affinities with the Gilgamesh Epic, which tells how the man, Enkidu was created in the image of the god Anu, while other forms of the story relate that a sketch of the man to be created was made by the god on a tablet. Here indeed a physical likeness is indicated.³⁷

But Alexander Heidel, whose 1946 translation informed Skinner's, Carnes's, and Simpson's exegesis, acknowledged the difficulty of translating tablets in three dead languages.³⁸ N. K. Saunders's better 1960 translation reads that Anu asked Aruru to ". . . create [Gilgamesh's] equal; let it be to him as his own reflection, his second self."³⁹ 21st Century translations read, "his [Gilgamesh's] counterpart,"⁴⁰ or "a double for Gilgamesh, his second self."⁴¹ Enkidu is created in the image of Gilgamesh – not Anu. Aruru grasped and envisioned Anu's suggestion of a Gilgamesh-doppelganger.

Saunders's translation continues, "So the goddess created an image in her mind, and it was of the stuff of Anu of the firmament."⁴² Anu was god of the sky which was considered to

³⁷ David Cairns, *The Image of God in Man* (London: SCM Press, 1953), 32. Cuthbert Simpson, "Genesis," in *The Interpreter's Bible*, editor George Buttrick (Nashville: Abington Press, 1952), Vol. 1, 484. Vorster, 5. Cf. Miller, 292.

³⁸ Alexander Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1946), 13-16.

³⁹ N. K. Saunders. trans. *The Epic of Gilgamesh, Part 1: The Coming of Enkidu* (London: Penguin Books, 1960), 62.

⁴⁰ Sophus Helle. trans. *Gilgamesh: A New Translation of the Ancient Epic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), Tablet I, 1 97.

⁴¹ Stephen Mitchel, trans. *Gilgamesh* (New York: Atria Paperback, 2004), Book 1, 74.

⁴² Saunders, 63. Confusion arises because of overlapping texts from tablets in different languages. Helle's translation reads, "Anu's idea found form in her heart." Helle. trans. *Gilgamesh*, Tablet 1, ll 102-104. Dalley renders it, "She created in herself the word of Anu." Dalley, trans.

be a “firmament,” a domed clay ceiling. “The stuff of Anu” is not Anu’s appearance; his “stuff” is what he rules, the clay sky. Aruru “took a lump of clay and threw it down into the wild. Into the wild she created the hero Enkidu.”⁴³ Gilgamesh dreams that he is walking under the stars, when “a meteor of the stuff of Anu fell down from heaven.”⁴⁴ A meteor was a chip of clay falling from Anu’s firmament to earth. Enkidu was made of sky-rock like a meteor.⁴⁵ Moreover, Gilgamesh is not about the creation of humanity, only one man. Enkidu was neither the progenitor of humankind nor ruler of the earth. Matthews called *Gilgamesh* “radically different from the Bible.”⁴⁶

Simpson also cited *The Descent of Istar (Inanna)* to claim that “image of God” means bodily form.⁴⁷ In that myth, Ea forms two living votive statues from clay.⁴⁸ But they are not human, not in Ea’s image, and not vested with authority. The Mesopotamian texts simply do not support claims that Genesis means our physical resemblance to God is a badge of authority.⁴⁹ But even among today’s scholars who question the Gunkel model, vestiges of dominionism – physical resemblance to God as our badge of authority -- persist in the construction of language.

“Gilgamesh” in *Myths from Mesopotamia*, Tablet 1, 52. But Saunders renders the phrase “the “stuff of Anu” which is the clay sky-dome Anu rules.

⁴³ Saunders,. 62-63. See also, Helle, 6-7 Tablet 1, ll. 100-104.

⁴⁴ Saunders, 66. Cf. Helle, 12, Tablet 1, ll. 249-250.

⁴⁵ Gilgamesh himself is the one with divine elements, being 1/3 god and 2/3 man, having wisdom, beauty, courage, and deep understanding. Saunders, 61.

⁴⁶ Matthews, 96.

⁴⁷ Simpson, 484.

⁴⁸ Edward VanDerJagr, trans. *Descent of Inanna* 2nd edition (London: Phaedon Press, 2015) sec. 47-55, 40-41.

⁴⁹ Matthews, 167.

III. The Language of Genesis

The Mesopotamian-myth paradigm has distorted our construction of Genesis's words "image" and "likeness." The prevailing view reads "image" to mean a statue representing our dominion. But it is better read as the *capax Dei*. Some scholars see authority as "virtually constitutive" of our identity.⁵⁰ But authority is either derivative or separate from "image and likeness." Our authority is not a matter of domination but rather of care.

A. Statues Or Shadows?

1. *The Western Interpretation*

The prevailing Western view is still that the Genesis word *tselem*, rendered "image," signifies a statue.⁵¹ We physically resemble God as statues resemble their models. This connotes rulership because Mesopotamian kings displayed statues of themselves throughout their realms ostensibly to remind people of their authority.⁵² Von Rad says that, just as royal statues represented the king's dominion, we are statues of God

⁵⁰ Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 55. Clines, 96.

⁵¹ Walter Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1968), 76. Hendrik Bosman, "Humankind as Being Created in the 'Image Of God,' in *The Old Testament: Possible Implications for the Theological Debate on Human Dignity.*" *Scriptura* vol. 105, (2010) 562. Clines, 75.

⁵² Pauline Viviano, "The Priestly Creation Account," in *The Collegeville Bible Commentary*. editor Diane Bergant, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1988), 40. Statues of gods commanded similar obeisance. Kilner, "The Image of God and Human Dignity," 26-28. Clines, 87-88. But the authority interpretation is just a modern interpretation, not one attested in ancient literature.

representing God's authority.⁵³ Hence, the divine "image" is our authority to rule.⁵⁴ It is functional, not substantialistic.⁵⁵

The case for the statue reading is that *tselem* is often used to mean a statue.⁵⁶ But Hans Wildberger noted the "remarkable flexibility" of the meaning of *tselem*.⁵⁷ Vorster speaks of Genesis's "multivalented use of ... *tselem* ... and *demut* ..." ⁵⁸ Kilner says,

Why the Old Testament employed the term [*tselem*] . . . most likely has to do, not with the term's precision but its flexibility and . . . range of meaning (which) extends all the way from the very physical to the completely not material.⁵⁹

Moreover, Genesis 1: 26 links *tselem* with *demuth*, rendered "likeness." Western exegetes have regarded *tselem* and *demuth* as synonymous,⁶⁰ and *dumuth* never means a statue.⁶¹ So we must look more closely.

⁵³ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 60.

⁵⁴ Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 48. Matthews, 169. James Hofmeier, "Some Thoughts on Genesis 1 & 2 and Egyptian Cosmology," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* vol. 15 (1983), 47.

⁵⁵ Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 27.

⁵⁶ Clines, 73. Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 45. Middleton acknowledges that the etymology of the word is "shadow," but rests his statue interpretation on the common usage.

⁵⁷ Hans Wildberger, "Tselem/Image" in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, eds. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, trans. Mark Biddle (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997). Vol. 3. 1081.

⁵⁸ Vorster, 2.

⁵⁹ Kilner, "The Image Of God And Human Dignity," 27. See also, George W. Peters, "Image of God" *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abington Press, 1962). vol. 2. 683. Curtis, 389. Today's commentators use the terms "not material" and "abstract" for traits once called "spiritual." I will use the term "characterological."

⁶⁰ Matthews, 167.

⁶¹ Simpson, 447.

The statue interpretation assumes Israel held an anthropomorphic concept of God. That is unlikely.⁶² The Scriptures reject corporeal pictures of God. Isaiah denies that a statue can represent God. Isaiah 40:18-31. Deuteronomy 4: 12 says, “Then the Lord spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form. There was only a voice.” Exodus 3: 20 says, “Man shall not see my face and live.” The Hebrew Scriptures most often portray God as a fire or a luminous glory-cloud.⁶³ Isaac de Hulster says,

In the centuries around the exile (roughly the 7th to 4th centuries BCE), there was a general trend in the Near East toward abstract or symbolic representations of the divine: for example, fire (see Gen 15:17, Exod 3), light (see Exod 25, Exod 37), and an empty throne (compare 1Sam 4:4, Isa 37:16, Ezek 10:18).⁶⁴

Genesis was written during the Exile,⁶⁵ the era of “abstract or symbolic” portrayals of God. Even in the earlier time of corporeal divinities, there is no evidence of anthropomorphism. An 8th Century Samarian vase portrays Yahweh with the head of a bull.⁶⁶ Psalm 91 speaks of God’s wings.

⁶² Clines, 71-73.

⁶³ Kline, 30-32.

⁶⁴ Isaac de Hulster, “What Did Yahweh Look Like?” *Bible Odyssey* (2017) <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/articles/what-did-yahweh-look-like/>

⁶⁵ Brueggemann, 31.

⁶⁶ J. W. Warwick, “YHWH and his Asherah,” *Biblical Archaeology – Avoiding Dogmatic Conclusions* (2024) <https://jwwartick.com/2024/12/02/yhwh-asherah/>

Moreover, the Scriptures take a dim view of statues.⁶⁷ “Graven images” were forbidden. Exodus 20: 4.⁶⁸ Carrying statues of kings and gods was punishable by exile. Amos 5: 26-27. Egypt’s statues were called “abominations,” “detestable images,” or “vile images.” Deuteronomy 29: 16; Ezekiel 20: 7-8. Dagon’s statue fell on its face and shattered before the Ark. I Samuel 5: 1-4. Simpson and Curtis acknowledge that construing the positive word “image” in Genesis to signify the same thing it means negatively in every other biblical passage entails significant contradiction.⁶⁹

Anthony Hoekema says, “The *tselem* is derived from a Hebrew root that means ‘to carve’ or ‘to cut.’”⁷⁰ But the connection of *tselem* to “carve” is tenuous. Some scholars associate *tselem* with the Akadian *salam*. However, *salam* does not mean “to carve” artistically but “to cut off.”⁷¹ The Hebrew for “carve” is *niqev*. Adam was not carved from rock but molded from soil.

Construing *tselem* to signify a statue denoting authority now seems a dubious proposition. Gerald Bray, after tracing the history of the statue interpretation, says, “It must now be concluded that *tselem* does not by itself imply that the human

⁶⁷ John McKenzie, “Image -- The Old Testament Polemic Against Idolatry,” *Dictionary of the Bible*, editor John McKenzie (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 384-385. There are only two exceptions to this hostility to statues. God commanded Moses to carve a statue of a serpent (Numbers 21: 8-9) and to have reliefs of two cherubim carved on the Ark (Exodus 25: 18—21). Robert Pfeiffer argues that anti-image texts are the work of Ezekiel and the Deuteronomistic redactors. Robert Pfeiffer, “The Polemic Against Idolatry in the Old Testament,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 43 (1924), 229-240. Still, they would precede both the J and E sources in Genesis.

⁶⁸ See also, Numbers 33: 52, Deuteronomy 4: 15-16, and Isaiah 2: 8-9.

⁶⁹ Simpson, 484. Curtis, 390.

⁷⁰ Anthony W. Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), 13.

⁷¹ Edward Curtis, “Image of God.” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* Vol. 3 (London: Doubleday, 1992), 389. *Salamu* was sometimes used metaphorically as opposed to concretely. Clines, 74.

body bears some resemblance to God”⁷² After considering that God’s biblical image is “male and female,” the Akkadian cognate of *tselem* includes “an abstract aspect,” and *demuth* is an abstract noun, Curtis concludes that *tselem* is not physical similarity but rather “focusses on capacities such as personality, self- determination, and rational thought.”⁷³ Without physical resemblance, Gunkel’s claim that the *imago Dei* is our authoritative role stumbles.

2. The Eastern Interpretation

The Eastern Church, from Irenaeus⁷⁴ to Kalistos Ware⁷⁵ has seen “image” as a capacity (*capax Dei*) and “likeness” as the fulfillment of that capacity.⁷⁶ The root of *tselem* literally means a “shadow”⁷⁷ “which has only the shape of the original, an outline.”⁷⁸ James Strong called *tselem* “merely a phantom, representing the original but lacking the essential characteristics.”⁷⁹ Clines and Middleton acknowledge that *tselem* means “shadow” in Psalms 39: 6 and 73: 20.⁸⁰ The literal meaning (and occasional usage) of *tselem* is “shadow.”

⁷² Gerald Bray, “The Significance of God’s Image in Man.” *Tyndale Bulletin* 42.2 (1991) 196.

⁷³ Curtis, 389-390. “Image of God,” in *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, editor Paul Achtemeier (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 418. See also, Simpson, 485.

⁷⁴ St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against The Heresies*, trans. Dominic J. Unger (Pine Beach: Newman Press, 1991).

⁷⁵ Kalistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Yonkers: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995), chap. 2.

⁷⁶ Matthews, 164.

⁷⁷ Annelein Rabie-Boshoff and Johan Bultendag, “Imago Dei: We Are but Dust and Shadow,” 7 *HTS Theological Studies*. (2021), 1.

⁷⁸ Rabie-Boshoff and Bultendag, 7.

⁷⁹ Quoted by Rabie-Boshoff and Bultendag, 5. Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 46.

⁸⁰ Clines, 74-75. Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 46.

Demuth means “identity” or a “plan” – in Genesis, a godly identity, a plan to resemble God.⁸¹ Bray says *tselem* signifies a general shape while *demuth* is actual resemblance or likeness.⁸² Annelein Rabie-Boshoff and Johan Bultendag read “image” as a capacity for godliness and “likeness” as a fulfillment of that capacity.⁸³ They say Exodus 31: 1-10 portrays this movement from shadow to resemblance. God imparts godly traits, “wisdom, understanding, knowledge, and artistry,” to Bezalel (whose name means shadow) so he can fabricate the Tabernacle, the Ark of the Covenant, and holy objects. Rabie-Boshoff and Bultendag relate these godly traits to “likeness” and reason that “special gifts or qualities are conferred to human beings . . . to specifically fulfill God’s purpose.”⁸⁴ Bezalel, God’s shadow, was transformed into God’s likeness.⁸⁵ We become like God in both gifts and mission.⁸⁶ Intertestamental Judaism taught that humans attained to God’s likeness through keeping the Law and adherence to Wisdom.⁸⁷

Post-Vatican II Roman Catholic teachings have endorsed the view of image as a godly potential.⁸⁸ Pedro Trigo says the *imago*

⁸¹ Peters, 683.

⁸² Bray, 96.

⁸³ Rabie-Boshoff and Bultendag, 4.

⁸⁴ Rabie-Boshoff and Bultendag, 6.

⁸⁵ This story may have a Mesopotamian antecedent. When Ea appointed Adapa as the first priest, he gave him the gifts for the job. “(Ea) made broad understanding perfect in (Adapa) to disclose the design of the land, to give him wisdom . . .”. Dalley, trans. “Adapa” in *Myths From Mesopotamia*, 184.

⁸⁶ Middleton sets the “functional” or “missional” interpretation of the divine image against a “substantialistic” interpretation. *Liberating Image*, 27. But in Exodus 31: 1-10 God invests a human with divine qualities (substantialistic) in order to accomplish God’s purpose (missional).

⁸⁷ Bray, 205-206.

⁸⁸ International Theological Commission, *Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created In God’s Image* (The Holy See, 2004); *Gaudium Et Spes, Evangelium Vitae, Caritas In Veritate* and *Laudato Si* (The Holy See, 1965); John J. Coughlin, “Pope John Paul II and the Dignity of the Human Being.” 27 *Harvard Journal of Law And Public Policy*, 65.

Dei makes God our “model . . . our “horizon.” We are called “to come to be as God is.”⁸⁹ Some Protestant exegetes now see the divine image teleologically. Derek Kidner argues our “spiritual likeness” to God is love which can be regained in redemption.⁹⁰ Jonathan Threlfall sees the *imago Dei* as “ontological” in that “humans are . . . fundamentally oriented toward God.”⁹¹ “Image and likeness” are better read not as a function (rulership) but characterologically as our capacity to attain and reveal godly attributes.

B. Authority: Constitutive of, Derivative from, or Separate from the Divine Image?

1. “So That” or “And”

Bill Arnold says, “The image of God is about the exercise of rulership in the world.”⁹² Many scholars agree.⁹³ Granted, Scripture invests humanity with authority. But is that authority constitutive of the divine image, derivative from it (godly traits equip us for authority), or something apart? Aside from the

⁸⁹Trigo, 220-221.

⁹⁰ Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1967), 51.

⁹¹ Jonathan Threlfall, “The Doctrine of the Imago Dei: The Biblical Data for an Abductive Argument for the Christian Faith,” *Journal of Evangelical Theological Studies* vol. 62.3 (2019), 543-544, 551-553. See also, Vorster, 12. Kline, 45. Jerome Bruner, *Man In Revolt* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 92-98. Cf. Kilner, who treats “image” and “likeness” as mere synonyms, ends up with a similar model of capacity and fulfilment. He denies it is possible to see the divine image as “attributes that people have now.” “Image” is our “connection to God” with the “purpose” of someday resembling God and so “reflecting divine attributes.” Kilner, *Dignity And Destiny*, x, 3, 124, 288. Kilner contrasts the Genesis 1: 26 prepositions “in” and “according to,” leading to a model of “growth” from “connection” to “reflection.” *Dignity And Destiny*, 75, 88-94, 281.

⁹² Bill Arnold, *Genesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 45.

⁹³ E.g. Clines, 96. Matthews, 169. Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 55. Phyllis Bird, “Male and Female He Created Them: Genesis 1: 27b in the Context of the Priestly Account of Creation,” 74 *Harvard Theological Review* (1981), 129-155.

claim of physical resemblance, the argument that the *imago Dei* consists of our authority rests on a narrow grammatical warrant. Genesis 1: 26-28 says,

Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, **so that** they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. [emphasis added] – New International Version

Hence, David J. A. Clines concluded, “[Dominion] is so immediate and necessary a consequence of the image, it loses the character of a mere derivative of the image and virtually becomes a part of the image itself.”⁹⁴ Middleton and Arnold agree that the syntax of Genesis 1: 26-28 makes “rule” the purpose of “image.”⁹⁵

But the translation “so that” is questionable. The first sentence begins, “Let us make.” The second begins, “*we + yiqtol*” – literally, “**and** they may” rule. These could just be conjoined clauses. Admittedly, a Hebrew second clause is often a purpose clause. Custom and usage may suggest “so that,” but the literal meaning is “and.” Hence, the English Standard Version, The New Revised Standard Version, the American Standard Version, the New Jerusalem Bible, The Interpreter’s Bible, Young’s Literal Translation, the New Century Version, the Darby Bible, the Lexham English Bible, and the King James Versions (1611 and 1769) translate Genesis 1: 26:

. . . “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. **And** let them have dominion over the fish

⁹⁴ Clines, 96.

⁹⁵ Middleton, *The Imago Dei In Genesis 1*, 53. Arnold, 45. Robert Alter renders the verse “Let us make a human in our image, by our likeness, to hold sway over the fish, etc.” Genesis 1: 26 in *The Hebrew Bible*. Vol. I. trans. Robert Alter (New York. W. W. Norton & Co., 2019).

of the sea and over the birds of the heavens
[emphasis added]⁹⁶

Even if the v. 26 conjunction means “so that,” purpose is not constitutive. The divine image may encompass attributes that equip us to govern.⁹⁷ Such attributes might include our delight in nature so that we want to save it and our intellectual capacity to diagnose what is killing coral reefs. Brueggemann lists freedom, faithfulness, and graciousness as the requisite attributes for our authority.⁹⁸ Trigo says, “(S)urely this specific mission [rulership] ought to be understood as a consequence, rather than the substance” of the *imago Dei*.⁹⁹ Jurgen Moltmann, Jonathan Threlfall, and Derek Kidner agreed that, in Kidner’s words, dominion is “not the content but the consequence of the divine image.”¹⁰⁰

2. *Image and Authority Freestanding*

Maxell Miller notes “the motif of man’s similarity to God could be transmitted without any reference to his dominion”¹⁰¹ Indeed, Genesis 1: 26 is the only text linking “image” or “likeness” with authority.¹⁰² The P Source speaks of “the image of God” again at Genesis 9: 6 which makes no reference to

⁹⁶ The New King James Version, reads: “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion”

⁹⁷ Waldron, 229.

⁹⁸ Brueggemann, 32.

⁹⁹ Trigo, 227.

¹⁰⁰ Jurgen Moltmann, *God In Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God. The Gifford Lectures 1984-1985* trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985), 224. Threlfall, 545. Kidner, 52. Barthians insist that the relational qualities which equip us to represent God are not intrinsic in our characters. They depend on our relationship with God. But, our relationship with God is our very identity. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III: The Doctrine of Creation* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1960), 319. Vorster, 92-93.

¹⁰¹ Miller, 297.

¹⁰² Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 45.

authority. At Genesis 9: 2, Noah receives authority over nature; but there is no connection to the divine image.

The J Source never links dominion to likeness. Genesis 5: 1 attests to humankind's likeness to God, but there is no mention of authority. At Genesis 2: 19-20, God authorizes humanity to name "each living creature" implying rulership; and, at Genesis 8: 15, God entrusts the garden to human care. But neither mandate refers to God's likeness. Likeness is always separate from authority. The claim that dominion is constitutive of the divine image rests on a questionable translation of a conjunction in one verse. In every other passage "image" and "authority" stand apart.

3. *The Whole Person*

Heinricus Renken, Walther Eichrodt, Pedro Trigo, Gerhard Von Rad, Edward Curtis, Derek Kidner, Helmut Thielicke, and Kenneth Matthews identified the *imago Dei* with the "whole person."¹⁰³ Cairns held that "the essential thing about the image in 'P' is man's personal nature, his dignity, his link with God."¹⁰⁴ Simpson saw *tselem* as physical resemblance, but said, "The image included likeness to God in spiritual powers – the power of thought . . . communication

. . . (and) self-transcendence."¹⁰⁵ Ryan S. Peterson equates the *imago Dei* not with our role alone but with "humanity's identity,

¹⁰³ Heinricus Renken, *Israel's Concept of the Beginning: The Theology of Genesis 1-3* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964), 110. Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament II* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1961). Walther Eichrodt, *Man in the Old Testament* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1951). Trigo, 228. Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1 (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 144-145. Curtis, 390. Kidner, 51. Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics* Vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 159. Matthews, 168.

¹⁰⁴ Cairns, 30. Clines, 57.

¹⁰⁵ Simpson, 485. See also, "Image of God," in *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, editor Paul Achtemeier (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1971), 418.

[which] is basic to all human existence”¹⁰⁶ Even some biblical scholars who link dominion to the *imago Dei* see it as a consequence of the divine image which they find in the whole person.¹⁰⁷

C. Subdue the Earth or Keep the Garden?

Still, Peters says, “Though the image of God may not be defined in terms of the task of ruling over the lower creation . . . , the two are closely connected.”¹⁰⁸ So we must consider the nature of our authority. Genesis 1: 28 (P Source) says, . . . “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” “Subdue” is a hard word, often used in Scripture for the conquest of enemies or the subjugation of territory.¹⁰⁹ This verb, *kabas*, is even harsher than the normal Hebrew verb for exercising dominion.¹¹⁰ Hence, Christianity has been rightly taken to task for treating the world as here for our consumption.¹¹¹

But Genesis 2: 15 (J Source) is gentler: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and take care of it.” Environmental concern has shifted our emphasis from Genesis 1: 26-28 (subdue) toward Genesis 2: 15 (till and care

¹⁰⁶ Ryan S. Peterson, “The *Imago Dei* as Human Identity: A Theological Interpretation” in *Journal of Theological Interpretation. Supplement 14* (2016), 1.

¹⁰⁷ Though Clines called dominion “virtually constitutive” of the *imago*, he also said it is “only part of the image itself.” Clines, 96.

¹⁰⁸ Peters, 684. See also, Threlfall, 548.

¹⁰⁹ Hamilton, 139.

¹¹⁰ Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1996), 5.

¹¹¹ Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Science* vol. 155 (March, 1967), 1203-1207; James Nash, *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility*. (Nashville: Abington Press, 1991), 68-74. Kidner attributes exploitation of the world to fallenness. Kidner, 52, 100.

for), construing the former text in light of the latter.¹¹² Brueggemann says authority derived from the *imago* must be exercised in God's way of creating, which "invites, evokes, permits."¹¹³ Rabie-Boschhoff and Bultendag argue that, given the creativity of the previous three instructions of Genesis 1: 28 – "be fruitful, increase in number, fill it"-- "subdue" means continuing God's creative ordering process rather than as domination.¹¹⁴ Genesis 1: 26 has been read as a mandate to "develop all the potentialities found in nature and humankind . . ." ¹¹⁵

Bearing the image of a God who cares for people and the earth entails responsibility for creation stewardship.¹¹⁶ Anatheia Portier-Young interprets the *imago* texts to prescribe human rule via "wisdom and artful construction . . . fundamentally concerned with justice and the well-being of creation."¹¹⁷

IV. Egyptian Royal Theology

It is commonly claimed the *imago Dei* texts adopted Egyptian royal theology.¹¹⁸ Ancient Egyptians believed their kings bore the likeness of gods. Moltmann says that Egyptians regarded Pharaoh as ". . . the reigning copy of God on earth, his representative, his deputy, his reflection and his mode of

¹¹² Hamilton notes that *kabas* (subdue) generally connotes violence but here it is a "semantic parallel to 'till and keep' the land . . ." Hamilton, 140. But the "till and keep the ground" language is part of the Genesis 2 (J Source) account of humanity's creation. It does not refer to the divine image and emphasizes humanity's status as creatures. John Sailhamer, "Genesis" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1990), 40-41.

¹¹³ Brueggemann, 32.

¹¹⁴ Rabie-Boschhoff and Bultendag, 5.

¹¹⁵ Threlfall, 548.

¹¹⁶ Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 67, 204.

¹¹⁷ Anatheia E. Portier-Young, *Apocalypse Against Empire* (Grand Rapids: William B. Publishing Co., 2014), 170-171. See also, Waldron, 239. Vorster, 10, 12, 92-93. Kline, 69-70.

¹¹⁸ E.g., Bosman, 562.

appearance in the world.”¹¹⁹ Around 770 BCE, an Egyptian priest, Adad-Shumu-usur, wrote a letter to his son, Esarhaddon, saying, “The well-known proverb says, ‘Man is a shadow of God,’ but is man a shadow of man too? The king is the perfect likeness of God.”¹²⁰ All people were “shadows of God,” but only the king bore God’s “likeness.”

The claimed Egyptian influence has been questioned. Israel’s captivity in Egypt had ended long before Genesis was written. Bray said,

At most there may be faint echoes of a royal ideology which would strike the hearer as an enormous contrast to the Israelite conception of the image of God.¹²¹

If royal theology influenced Genesis, Israel democratized the anthropology of their taskmasters. Likeness to God does not depend on enthronement.¹²² Clines said, “Genesis affirms the dignity and worth of man and elevates all men – not just kings and nobles – to the highest state conceivable, short of complete divinization.”¹²³ Curtis calls the *imago Dei*, “the uniquely Israelite idea that all persons, not just the king, occupy a preeminent place in the created order.”¹²⁴ Anyone could attain

¹¹⁹ Moltmann, *God In Creation*, 219. See also, Clines, 81-85, 92. Some scholars say Mesopotamian kings were images of their gods. Freiderich Preisigke, *Von Gottliche Fluidum Nach agyptischer Ajschaung* (Cairo: Papyrusinstitut, 1920), 11 cited by Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 105. See also, Miller, 294. But Curtis says, “In Mesopotamia . . . there was little basis for referring to the king in such a way. . . . and those references ended long before the Exile.” Curtis, 391. So, any influence of royal theology on Genesis would come from Egypt.

¹²⁰ Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 116.

¹²¹ Bray, 197.

¹²² Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 88. Peters, 683.

¹²³ Clines, 53. See also, Matthews, 169.

¹²⁴ Curtis, 391. In the context of Egyptian and Babylonian patriarchy, Genesis 1: 27 and 5: 1-2 are a shocking attribution to women of equal dignity. Kidner, 52, 80. Eichrodt. *Man in the Old Testament*, 35.

to God's likeness through the gifts of God's spirit.¹²⁵ Bezalel was a craftsman, not a king. Royal theology makes dignity an adjunct of power. Covenant theology understands dignity as beauty manifest in a just society.

V. Creation by Combat or Covenant

A. Creation-By-Combat

Middleton observes that Gunkel's *Enuma Elish* model portrays humanity as the image of a God who "found(ed) the cosmos through an act of primordial violence. . . (which) seems to enshrine violence as the quintessential divine action."¹²⁶ Paul Ricoeur said, "human violence is thus justified by the primordial violence."¹²⁷ Ricoeur demonstrated that "the primordial act of violent cosmos-making in *The Enuma Elish*" legitimized Mesopotamian expansionist despotism.¹²⁸ Karen Armstrong calls it a "sacred sanction to the structural violence of Babylonian society."¹²⁹ Such propaganda is even more explicit in *Erra And Ishun*. Referring to Ashurbanipal, the ruthless god, Erra, proclaims, "The king who magnifies my name shall rule the world."¹³⁰ Mesopotamian gods were

¹²⁵ Claus Westerman, *Genesis 1 – 11: A Continental Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion, S.J. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 151-154. Yair Lorberbaum, "Blood and the Image of God: On the Sanctity of Life in Biblical and Early Rabbinic Law, Myth, and Ritual," in *The Concept of Human Dignity in Human Rights Discourse*, editors David Kretzmer and Eckart Klein (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 55.

¹²⁶ Middleton. *Interpretation*, 342. Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 237. Matthews, 93.

¹²⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism Of Evil*. trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969) Part 2. Ch. 2, 194-198.

¹²⁸ Ricoeur, Part 1. See also, Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 252.

¹²⁹ Armstrong, 40-41. See also, Middleton, *Interpretation*, 349. Walter Wink, "The Myth Of Redemptive Violence." in *The Bible In Transmission* (Spring, 1999).

¹³⁰ Dalley, trans. "Erra and Ishun," in *Myths from Mesopotamia*, Tablet V, 312.

arbitrary and violent. The Sumerian poet, Enheduana, praised Inanna, the goddess of Ur, saying:

. . . .In
her happy heart,
. . . she
washes her weapons
with blood and guts. . . .
When your love for
a land has run its
course, you crush
it, and the earth
shakes, for nothing
can resist your rule. . . .¹³¹

Mesopotamian rulers were likewise arbitrary, violent tyrants. Mesopotamian cosmogonies portray humanity as inherently violent because we are made from the blood of slain enemies. Ovid interpreted comparable Greco-Roman myths,

“(S)he gave (the rebel giants’) shape
to humans whom she fashioned from their blood.
but even this new race . . .
were keen for slaughter, bent on force.
It’s clear to see that they were born of blood.”¹³²

Violent humans are designed to fight the king’s wars.

¹³¹ Sophus Helle, trans., *The Complete Poems of Enheduana* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023), 10, 40, 42. In “The Theogony of Dunnu.” Dalley, trans., in *Myths from Mesopotamia, 279-280*, generation after generation of gods slay their parents to seize power.

¹³² Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (Boston: Harcourt, 1993). Book 1. Part 9.

Then, a remarkable aberration occurred in Near Eastern religion: In Exodus, Yahweh said of Egypt's slaves, "I have surely seen the oppression of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters . . ." Exodus 3: 7. This was revolutionary -- a god of slaves, not of kings, saying to the Domination System, "Let my people go." Exodus 8: 1. Pharaoh was Egypt's dominator god. Exodus sets Yahweh, the liberator god, against him.¹³³

The Exodus story is likely rooted in historical events around 1300 BCE. The Amarna Letters reveal that the Egyptian army struggled to suppress uprisings in northern Canaan by the *apiru* (rabble – etymon of Hebrew) farmworkers. A band of *apiru* may have escaped to the surrounding hills to form an egalitarian pastoral society. Armstrong says, "When they defected from the Canaanite city states, the Israelites had developed an ideology that directly countered the systemic violence of agrarian society."¹³⁴ Genesis 1: 26-28 was likely written by a slave composing verses for his fellow slaves to recite in worship.¹³⁵ At Genesis 2: 15, joining of the names of El, the creator God, with Yahweh, the liberator God, into Yahweh-El, "The Lord God" identifies the liberator with the creator of the cosmos.¹³⁶ Genesis extends the Exodus revolution.

Accordingly, the biblical creation story involves no violence, no slaying and dismembering of primordial sea monsters, and no bloody corpses as raw materials for humankind. Middleton says,

Beyond providing an alternative to the devaluation of human status as found in Mesopotamian ideology,

¹³³ Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

¹³⁴ Armstrong, 105-106. The ensuing oral tradition was the context of *imago Dei* texts which were written during or after the Exile. Curtis, 391.

¹³⁵ Brueggemann, 14.

¹³⁶ Kline, 22.

then, Genesis articulates an alternative to the violent cosmogony of the chaos-cosmos schemes.¹³⁷

Middleton and Wink argue that the first 11 chapters of Genesis are a polemic against the monarchical religion of the Empire.¹³⁸

Though Jon Levenson and John Day find no creation-by-combat in Genesis,¹³⁹ they purport to find it in Isaiah 27 and Psalms 74 and 89 in which God slays Rahab, Leviathan, serpents, and sea monsters.¹⁴⁰ Stephany says of Psalm 74, “The cosmic sea was then populated by Leviathan and . . . other denizens from which the world was fashioned by God, just as it was with Marduk’s creation found in the *Enuma Elish*.”¹⁴¹

But Middleton notes “the tendency of biblical scholars to see creation-by-combat in texts where it obviously is not present . . . [texts which] include combat but not creation.”¹⁴² Heidel himself debunked such claims in 1942,¹⁴³ explaining that Rahab, Leviathan, etc. were derogatory terms signifying hostile nations¹⁴⁴ -- not primordial forces of chaos but military threats of oppression. Such texts are derived from Canaanite stories of

¹³⁷ Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 266. See also, Ndikho Mtshiselwa and Lerato Mokoena, “Humans Created In Their Image? An Anthropomorphic Projectionism in the Old Testament,” *HTS Journal Of Theological Studies* vol. 74. no. 1 (2018.)

¹³⁸ Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 235-269. Wink’s full argument is set out in *The Powers that Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Harmony Press, 1999) and *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992). See also, Kline, 28-29.

¹³⁹ John Day, *From Creation to Babel: Studies in Genesis 1-11* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014). Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence*, revised edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 127.

¹⁴⁰ Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 240-241.

¹⁴¹ Timothy Stephany, *Enuma Elish: The Babylonian Creation Epic*. (Independently Published, 2013), Introduction ii.

¹⁴² Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 240-250.

¹⁴³ Heidel, “Old Testament Parallels,” in *The Babylonian Genesis*, 112—115.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 108.

Baal, which do not portray the creation.¹⁴⁵ God certainly does not fashion the earth from marine corpses. Job 26: 7-4, Pss. 74: 12-17, and 89: 6-15 do juxtapose acts of creation and combat. But they do not portray combat as the means of creation. Rather they express God's power alternatively to create or destroy.¹⁴⁶

Genesis recounts no cosmic battle with a pre-existent chaos monster.¹⁴⁷ Yes, "the earth was without form and void and darkness covered the face of the deep." But God does not attack the deep.¹⁴⁸ "The spirit of God hovered over the face of the deep . . ." (Genesis 1: 2) suggests caress, not combat. God "fixed securely the fountains of the deep, when he gave the sea its boundary." Proverbs 8: 27-29. "Fixed securely" is stabilizing, supporting – not an attack. At Genesis 1: 20, God creates – not slays -- "the great creatures of the sea." and Psalm 148: 7 invites them to praise God.

B. Creation-By-Covenant

Genesis portrays creation as an act of covenant, not combat. Kline details how in Genesis 1 the naming, the fiats, and the final robing of humanity with God's image are the form of a covenant ritual.¹⁴⁹ The chiasmic structure of Genesis 1, a poem for antiphonal chant, further implies covenant. Brueggemann says:

¹⁴⁵ Middleton, *Interpretation*, 343 -- 344. Matthews, 94. Kline, 29.

¹⁴⁶ Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 244 – 250.

¹⁴⁷ The connection of *tehon* (the deep) to Tiamat "is superficial." Matthews, 94.

¹⁴⁸ Bernard Batto claims that "the deep" in Genesis 1: 2 is "the personification of evil." Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 240-241. See also, Stephany, Introduction. ii – iii. But the deep' in the Hebrew Scriptures is never Batto's "personification of evil." It is sometimes a place of encounter with God. "If I make my bed in the depths you are there." Psalm 139: 8.

¹⁴⁹ Kline, 15-16.

The text, then, is a *proclamation of covenanting* as the shape of reality. . . . The relation of creator and creation in Genesis 1: 1 – 2: 4 is not one of coercion. It is, rather one of free, gracious commitment and invitation.¹⁵⁰

The God whose image we bear invites rather than compels relationship, eschewing even the imperative mood in favor of the jussive, “Let there be” Middleton says that God “does not so much command as *invite* creatures to respond to his will.”¹⁵¹ Eugene Roop says, “Creation comes by divine direction not by a dictator’s command.”¹⁵² In creating Adam, God speaks in first person¹⁵³ cohortative mood, “Let us make,” carrying the feel of encouragement or invitation. These linguistic moods reveal a covenantal divine nature that creates a personal humanity for volitional relationship. God’s purpose for and means of creation are both covenant relationship.¹⁵⁴ Threlfall reads the *imago Dei* texts to say humanity’s very existence is constituted in relationship with God and the rest of creation.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁰ Brueggemann, 17, 27.

¹⁵¹ Middleton, *Interpretation*, 353.

¹⁵² Eugene Roop, “Genesis,” in *Believer’s Bible Commentary* (Harrisonburg: Herald, 1987), 27.

¹⁵³ Sailhamer calls this language “more personal” than “Let there be” Sailhamer, 37.

¹⁵⁴ The analogy between creation and covenant recurs in Psalms 33, 148 and 147. Covenantal terms express God’s care for creation at Proverbs 8: 27, 29; Job 38: 33; Psalm 119: 91; Genesis 9: 11-17; Jeremiah 33: 20-21. Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 65-70, 72.

¹⁵⁵ Threlfall, 546-549.

VI. The Glorious Covenant

Hans Urs Von Balthasar opines that the *imago Dei* “does not play a significant role in the Hebrew Scriptures.”¹⁵⁶ Clines speaks of “the laconic treatment (the *imago Dei*) receives in the Old Testament.”¹⁵⁷ Only three canonical verses refer to “image” or “likeness” of God. Since the Scriptures do not define either *tselem* or *demuth*,¹⁵⁸ it is difficult to formulate a doctrine from just two words in three verses.

But G. C. Berkouer reminds us, “[T]here is the possibility that Scripture often deals with the concept of the image of God without using those exact words; we surely should not *a priori* limit our investigation . . . to considering only those places where the term itself is used.”¹⁵⁹ The Genesis “image and likeness” texts date from the Exile and Restoration eras.¹⁶⁰ Maxwell Miller says Genesis “incorporates many old traditions”¹⁶¹ such as the egalitarian covenant. Those “old traditions” in the Scriptures are more edifying than Mesopotamian myths. Pre-exilic and later Scriptures are replete with references to “the glory of God,” which inform our reading of “image and “likeness.” The “glory” texts portray our identity as manifesting godly traits in order to invite people into covenant.

¹⁵⁶ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Dramatis Personae: Man and God*, Vol. 2, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 317-320.

¹⁵⁷ Clines, 53.

¹⁵⁸ Paul Wells, “In Search Of The Image Of God: Theology Of A Lost Paradigm,” *Themelios*. Vol. 30. Issue 1 (2004). Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 40-43.

¹⁵⁹ G. C. Berkouer, *Man: The Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962), 67.

¹⁶⁰ Curtis, 391.

¹⁶¹ Miller, 289.

A. “Image” As “Glory”

Kavod, rendered “glory,” means beauty, weight, and praiseworthiness, “holiness manifest,” and revelatory light.¹⁶² Cairns calls glory “God in his revelation.”¹⁶³ The Scriptures attest that people can manifest God’s glory. “You have made [humanity] a little lower than God (*Elohim*) and crowned [them] with glory and honor.” Psalm 8: 5. “In Israel [the people] God shows forth his glory.” Isaiah 44: 23. The Israelite ancestors bore “the abounding glory of the Most High’s portion.” Sirach 44: 1–23. After Moses met with God, his face shone with God’s glory. Exodus 34: 29–35.

Western exegetes like Hoekema identify “glory” with the “image of God.”¹⁶⁴ Von Rad also equates “image” with “glory.” Speaking of “the glory of God” in Ezekiel’s vision,” he calls Ezekiel 1: 26–28 “the theological prelude to the *locus classicus* of the *imago* doctrine in Genesis 1: 26.”¹⁶⁵ Kilner observes that “The biblical image of God is consistently in terms of a glory like the glory of God.”¹⁶⁶ Kline says “. . . (C)onsistently the image of God is identified in terms of glory . . . ,”¹⁶⁷ and calls God’s clothing humanity with glory a theophany to creation.¹⁶⁸

B. “Likeness” As “Glory”

Exegetes who see “image” as “shadow,” relate “glory” and “light” to “likeness.” More than half the Scriptural usages of *demuth* refer to the glory of the Lord.¹⁶⁹ Clines said, “(T)he image of glory

¹⁶² John McKenzie, “Glory.” in *Dictionary Of The Bible*, editor John McKenzie (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 313.

¹⁶³ Cairns, 32.

¹⁶⁴ Hoekema, 18. See also, Clines, 47, 54. Waldron, 239. Vorster, 10, 12, 92–93.

¹⁶⁵ Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 146. See also Threlfall, 559.

¹⁶⁶ Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 30.

¹⁶⁷ Kline, 44.

¹⁶⁸ Kline, 43.

¹⁶⁹ Bosman, 563.

is a spiritual and moral likeness . . . [M]an's splendor is his likeness to God."¹⁷⁰ Thomas Dubay calls God's glory "the supereminently luminous beauty of divinity" which is manifest in the human body and the "still more awesome mind."¹⁷¹ Kline says, "Another promise of man's image status was that of transformation into epiphanic light"¹⁷²

The God whose likeness we bear manifests beauty. God is an architect,¹⁷³ an author,¹⁷⁴ the primal artist.¹⁷⁵ Patrick T. McCormick says, "(H)umans fashioned in the image and likeness of the Creator of a world of beauty are . . . cocreators of beauty or artists."¹⁷⁶ God invests humanity with creativity, such as Bezalal's, in order to reveal glory.¹⁷⁷ God's glory often manifests as a radiant cloud.¹⁷⁸ Just so, glory shines into the human shadow. *Demuth* / likeness is the light shining in the shadow. God's primordial "Let there be light" recurs in us whenever we manifest God's goodness and beauty.

C. Covenant and Glory

As some of us create sonnets, sonatas, and frescoes, we all create a social order. Scarry equates the order which is constitutive of beauty with the symmetry of a just society.¹⁷⁹ Beauty, corresponding to glory, manifests as covenant. Our

¹⁷⁰ Clines, 47.

¹⁷¹ Thomas Dubay, SJ., *The Evidentiary Power of Beauty* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 33-34, 45.

¹⁷² Our "imitation of God" leads to epiphany. Kline, 45, 62-67.

¹⁷³ Kline, 26-29.

¹⁷⁴ Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 65 – 66.

¹⁷⁵ Viviano, Introduction, x.

¹⁷⁶ McCormick, Introduction, x. Scarry, 88-90. See also, Matthews, 196.

¹⁷⁷ Rabie-Boshoff and Bultendag, 5. Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 89. Threlfall, 548.

¹⁷⁸ McKenzie, "Glory," 313.

¹⁷⁹ Scarry, 88-90, 93-98, 104, 109-119. See also, Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

light, our likeness to God, is our capacity to invite the world into covenant. At Isaiah 60: 1-3, we read:

Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. . .
Nations will come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

God appoints Israel “a light to the nations,” to “release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.” Isaiah 42: 6-7. God promises the blessings of the Covenant to foreigners “who hold to my Covenant.” Isaiah 56: 6-7. God’s Covenant is *with* Israel but *for* the world in the hope that the world will join the Covenant.¹⁸⁰ One does not extend the Covenant by conquering one’s neighbors, but rather by inviting them into a relationship of rational care, as God invites the world into being. Moltmann and Vorster say our *raison d’etre* is to represent God’s relationality.¹⁸¹ As Aristotle called humankind “political animals,” the Bible portrays us as covenantal persons

Brueggemann called covenanting “the basic shape of reality.”¹⁸² Karl Barth said God’s likeness appears only a little in individuals, more fully in covenant.¹⁸³ Kilner agrees God manifests in our relationships more than in our individual identities as God is just and loving,

. . . God intends that divine attributes be reflected in humanity corporately and not just in particular people. For example, God intends justice to be a hallmark of human society, just as it is of God’s own character Love is God’s ultimate intention for relationships of people with one another and with the

¹⁸⁰ Isaiah contains domination passages but they are not associated with glory.

¹⁸¹ Moltmann, 217-224. Vorster, 92-98.

¹⁸² Brueggemann, 17, 27. Cf. Barth, 245 ff.

¹⁸³ Barth, 195-206,

natural world as well. Love . . . generates true solidarity, interdependence, inclusive community, and unified mission.¹⁸⁴

The divine image is not top down rulership but a godly light shining in a just community. Isaiah 58: 6-8 says that if Israel will “loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke , . . . set the oppressed free . . . , share your food with the hungry . . . , provide the poor wanderer with shelter”, and clothe the naked, “then your light will break forth like the dawn”

VII. Conclusion

20th Century exegesis cast us in the image of Marduk, not Yahweh of the Covenant. A fresh view of the *imago Dei* texts leads to a few broad suggestions for a better anthropology.

1. The *imago Dei* is missional. That mission is two-pronged. First, it is covenantal, living in God’s covenantal way of revelation and invitation – welcoming others into a covenant of mutual care. Second, it is ecological, tending the garden, caring for creation.
2. The *imago Dei* is characterological. It takes relational qualities of character to reveal God, inviting the world into a covenant community, then to build and maintain that community. It takes qualities of character to be responsible stewards of the earth.
3. The *imago Dei* is aesthetic. It includes but is not limited to our mission and the character to fulfill it. “Glory” is first and foremost aesthetic, manifesting holiness which evokes reverence. Might we revere the holy in one another?

¹⁸⁴ Kilner, 40.

4. The *imago Dei* is teleological. “It does not yet appear what we shall be.” 1 John 3: 2.

We should interpret the *imago Dei* texts in light of the question: How did the authors intend their words to shape our attitudes toward one another? When we seek God in our neighbor’s face, do we think, “Look how powerful that person is”? Does Scripture teach us to reverence each other’s capacity for dominance?

Rather, the *imago Dei* and glory texts invite us to marvel at the miracles of consciousness, vulnerability, creativity, the capacity to love, and at the mystery of another person. Archbishop Desmond Tutu said that, in light of the “staggering assertions” the Bible makes about human nature, “We should strictly genuflect before such an august and precious creature”¹⁸⁵

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¹⁸⁵ Tutu, 2.

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