

Introduction

God's creation of human creatures in Genesis 1:26-28 is presented as the grand masterpiece of God's fashioning of the cosmos. From the perspective of the grammatical feature of Genesis 1, the story of creation races along at a fast pace from verse 3 all the way to verse 27. Then in the middle of verse 27 the author seems to slam on the brakes, and everything comes to a screeching halt. What happens in verse 27?

God creates male and female in His image.

Quick Grammar Review.

So you might be wondering, how exactly does the author slam on the breaks? Here's how:

In verses 3-26 the Hebrew author has utilized the *wayyiqtol* chain (pronounced *vye-yick-toll*). We talked about the *wayyiqtol* chain in our discussions of the genre of Genesis 1 as and structure of Genesis 1:1-3. But since repetition is the mother of all learning (at least one of the mothers), let's quickly review.

The *wayyiqtol* verb form grammatically strings together a chain of events or actions serving as the backbone of Hebrew narrative upon which the rest of the narrative is held together and fleshed out. Its purpose is to move the storyline forward marking progressive action. We often translate it in English by adding an "and" before the verb. If we were telling a story in English, we would say, "*And* then this happened...*and* then that happened...*and* then she said this....*and* he said that." A similar thing occurs in the Hebrew story telling.

The *wayyiqtol* chain begins in Genesis 1:3 with, "*And* God said,..." This is where we move from the static opening of Genesis 1:2 and the action of the main storyline rapidly gets underway.

And God said...

And there was...

And God saw...

And God called...

And God separated...

And it was so...

And on and on it goes. This *wayyiqtol* chain continues uninterrupted through verse 26. But then in the middle of verse 27, it halts. The forward momentum of the narrative slows. The storyline pauses. And here's why:

By breaking the flow of the *wayyiqtol* chain in the middle of verse 27, the author is saying, "Slow down! Don't miss this! Take some time to look around and let this sink in!"

What is it the author doesn't want us to miss? Go back and read Genesis 1:27.

No, really. Read it.

This where God creates male and female as His image and likeness. This is what the author doesn't want us to rush past. He's put grammatical signal flares in the text inviting us to slow down and ponder the breathtaking wonder of God's activity in creating male and female as His own image – creating *you* as His own image and after His likeness.

Breathtaking wonder?

Really?

Maybe you've grown up in the church and you've been told about humans as the image of God. Maybe someone held up a mirror and explained you're supposed to reflect God. I always found that to be a curious illustration. I only saw my own reflection in the mirror. Maybe I missed the point. Or maybe I didn't. We should come back to that.

My point now is, the way the image of God gets talked about leaves many of us underwhelmed. Sometimes we talk about the image of God without ever explaining it. We're just told we are His image, as if somehow we're supposed to know what that means and do cartwheels over it.

I'm made in the image of the invisible God, am I?

So, do I get a tax deduction or something?

Maybe you've studied this idea of the image of God. You've read the theologians. You know, the big guns like Tom. Not Cruise. Aquinas. I said big guns, not top guns. Top

Gun is one of the best movies of its time (don't hate, and be honest with yourself, if you grew up in the 80's you are definitely going to see Top Gun: Maverick), but we're not talking films, we're talking about the heavyweights that can throw around Latin in their discussions around the *imago dei* (fancy Latin for "image of God"): Was man created *inferiores vires* and so needed *supernaturalis donum gratiae*?

Huh? Say what?

Exactly.

I'm not saying we shouldn't pay attention to the theologians who came before us and their Latin. We should! They had some important things to say. But for me, those conversations haven't always captured the wonder of human creatures (you and me) being God's image. Whether you've studied the meaning of the image of God or you are hearing about it for the first time, I don't want us to rush by this without recapturing the marvel of what God has done.

I'm willing to bet that the Israelites freshly rescued out of Egypt would have been moved by these words. Let's hear them once again:

So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them

When these words landed in their ears I imagine their response as:

What?!?

Really?

No, you can't be serious.

There was one thing the Israelites would have likely known. It had been driven into them for 400 years. It had probably become part of their DNA. Pharaoh was the image of god.

No one else.

Not every Egyptian.

And certainly not the enslaved Israelites.

Only the king (or queen) of Egypt.

Being the image of god demarcated the royal head from the rest of the people. It endowed him with authority to rule. He was the mediator between the will of the gods and the people. What Pharaoh decreed, the gods had decreed. Any attempt to usurp Pharaoh's throne would constitute a coup on the gods themselves. Being the image of god bestowed upon the king this highest honor.

In two short verses to the Israelites in Genesis 1:26-27, God turns the Egyptian conception of image bearing on its ear. The One, True God democratizes it leveling the playing field for every individual – common or noble, male or female, child or adult, Egyptian or Hebrew, priest or laity – all are the image and likeness of God! It's not just the Egyptian Pharaoh. Each individual is conferred with this honor and thus the dignity of each elevated to its highest level. But unlike Pharaoh, who believed himself to be the image of the pantheon of Egyptian gods, who were no gods at all, human creatures are created in the image of *Elohim*, the Creator God who showed the Egyptian gods impotent compared to His power.

This changes everything.

At least, it should.

Hopefully it will for us.

It should come as no surprise, then, that through grammatical features in the biblical text, the author draws our gaze to these verses. They are loaded with meaning. As we'll come to discover, Genesis 1:26-28 perhaps say more about man and woman's identity and our purpose in life than any other verses in Scripture. They answer the fundamental question philosophers, scientists, and artists have tussled with through the ages up to this present day:

What does it mean to be human?

They inform who we are in relationship to God, each other, and the rest of creation. Read in conjunction with their counterpart verses in Genesis 2, they tell us why we are here, what we are to be about, and how we are to be about it. They serve as the fountainhead of biblical ethics cutting clean across social, political, and economic lines ascribing dignity to every individual regardless of age, race, ethnicity, or sex. They tell us that while we are creatures, we are not simply one of the animal species on the planet. As those who are the image of God, we have been invested with God's glory and

entrusted with dominion. We have been set apart from the rest of creation and with that comes great privilege, but even greater responsibility. God's image is not only what you are made as, it's what you are made for.

All of that in these three little verses?

Oh yes. And there is even more.

Imbedded in Moses' teaching that we are created as God's image are key biblical themes of divine sonship (humans as children of God), priesthood (humans as mediators of God's presence), glory (humans as the visible projection of the invisible God into the earthly realm), and, as already hinted at above, royalty (humans as those authorized to rule creation in God's stead).

We may even tell the entirety of the biblical narrative in terms of image bearing. Let's give it a shot: The story begins in Genesis 1 with God creating humans as His image. Badly damaging and forfeiting aspects of that image is the dark twist the story takes in Genesis 3. Though terribly marred, man is still the image of God (Gen. 9:6), just nowhere near to the degree God intended. Throughout the remainder of the story God is concerned with renewing the fullness of the divine image in humanity. This is evident throughout the time periods of Moses and Israel's prophets, and climaxes with Jesus, who is described by the New Testament authors as the image of God (Col. 1:15; 2 Cor. 4:4). Jesus serves as the model to which the believer's transformation into the full image of God ought to conform. We who live today reside in the chapter of the story where the creative work of the Spirit of God is once again active, just as in the first chapter of Genesis, in refashioning and conforming God's people into the image of Jesus to become like God (Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 15:49; 2 Cor. 3:18; Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10), until that day when we are finally and forever like Him (1 John 3:2).

Okay admittedly that was a bit wordy. Let's make telling the Story in terms of the image even simpler: God creates man as His image. Through an act of rebellion, man is still the image of God, but that image is horribly distorted. The rest of the story is about God through Jesus and His Spirit restoring man as His image. (There, was that better?)

Of course, this means none of us have arrived. The fullness of the glory of the image will not be invested in humanity in its entirety until the age to come. But before we start thinking, "Aw, man, I was hoping for the whole thing now, so what's the point if I only get some it," we should by no means underestimate the power of its first installments. While we look forward to the day when we are renewed perfectly and completely in God's image, now is when we can begin to enjoy the fruits, new possibilities, beauty and responsibilities which accompany such a privileged position.

For already, in this present age, we are being transformed from one degree of glory to the next into the Image as God's Spirit is powerfully at work in us (2 Cor. 3:18).

Since restoring male and female as the image and likeness of God is God's goal for redeemed humanity – since it's God's goal for you – and since image bearing informs the whole of life from the work we do, worship, and the full gamut of our interpersonal relationships, we will look further into the linguistic and cultural background of these three passages to help us grasp what it means to be made as the image and after the likeness of the living God. In other words, we will do the very thing the author invites us to do – pause, look around, and consider the wonder of being the image and likeness of God.

Cultural Background

Our thesis has been that we want to enter into the world of our original author and audience and listen with their ears. We will begin by exploring the concept of “image” and “likeness” in the ancient Near East and then look more particularly at the way the image of god functioned in both Egypt and Mesopotamia. We need to ask, “As best we can tell from the surviving ancient documents, what would the Israelites have heard and understood when met with the language of the image and likeness of God?”

Images in the ANE. Scholars have demonstrated that the belief of those living in the ancient Near East concerning images was that the image's primary purpose was to house the spirit of the being in whose image it was made. We have evidence of ceremonies employing magic tools to touch the mouth, eyes, and ears of an image which had been crafted in order to ritually awaken or bring the image to life. After the ceremony had been completed, the image could no longer be considered a benign piece of furniture or mere pleasant work of artistry, but was approached as a living being linked in spirit to whatever person or god in whose image it was crafted. As such, any crime against the image was punishable as an offense against the one in whose image it was. We also have evidence of statues being treated with the ability to double as the real presence of human rulers. As an example, the Assyrian King Esarhaddon set up a statue of himself before the gods to continually offer supplication for his own well-being. The presence of the statue before the gods was understood as if Esarhaddon was himself present asking for the favor of the gods

This understanding is attested in the Old Testament where the Hebrew prophets Habakkuk and Jeremiah warn against the practice of trusting in these false images and deny their ability to house a spirit (Hab. 2:19; Jer. 10:14; 51:17). This goes to show the prevalence of this belief in the ANE and the temptation it posed to the Israelites. Nevertheless, we can already begin to see how this ANE understanding and the

language of being made in the image of God in Genesis 1:26 would have set up the original audience to anticipate some features of the Genesis account. (For example, Genesis 2:7 where God breathes his breath of life to animate man and man's body becomes a dwelling place for God's Spirit and Genesis 9:6 where murdering a human creature made in the image of God is treated as a capital offense against God himself.)

Egyptian Background.

Since, as I suggested previously, that ancient Egypt is the primary cultural background for reading Genesis 1-2, it will be helpful to further trace the development of the Egyptian understanding of image and likeness. Dating back in the 10th Dynasty (ca 2160-2040 B.C.) the Teachings for King Merikare speak of the first men as created as the images of god. The wisdom letter reads, "He [Re] made the breath of life (for) their nostrils. They who have issued from his body are his images." Later writings refer to the Egyptian rulers of Dynasties 18 and 19 as the image and likeness of a god. King Amosis (1550-1524 B.C.), the first in the kingly line of Dynasty 18, was "the image of Re which he [Re] created." On multiple occasions the female Pharaoh Queen Hatshepsot (1472-1457 B.C.) is referred to as "the daughter of Re, beloved of the gods, superb image of Amon" and "the image of Amon-Re." Tuthmois III (1479-1424 B.C.) was considered the image of Re and Tuthmois IV (1398-1388 B.C.) received the designation as "the likeness of Re." In the time of the reign of the 19th Dynasty Ramesses II (1279-1212 B.C.) is addressed "for thou art Re in thy body, and Khepre in his true likeness; thou art the living image on earth of thy father Atum of Heliopolis."

Re, Amon, Khepre, an Atum were all Egyptian gods. From these excerpts we get an indication that, for the Egyptians, being in the image and likeness of a god has to do with royalty and ruling. As the image of a god, a human individual is invested with the authority to exercise kingship on that god's behalf. While it may be arguable as to whether in the Merikare writings all humans are in the image of God or just the "first men", context would suggest that the text is speaking of the origins of kingship and thus referring to the first human rulers, and not all men. Either way, by the time we reach the 18th Dynasty, image bearing is narrowed and reserved only for the ruling Pharaoh. Pharaoh's kingly privileges and rights are grounded in and extend from his being in the image and likeness of god.

Since the original author and audience to Genesis and their preceding generations spent time in Egypt, these writings help shed light on their understanding of what it meant to be made as the image and likeness of a god. This is especially so given the probable overlap between Dynasties 18 and 19 and Israel's sojourn in Egypt. Since Egyptian Kingship stands to some degree as the interpretive backdrop to Genesis 1:26, then it is worth further surveying the Egyptian belief concerning the Pharaohs.

Egyptian Kingship. From the above it becomes apparent that image bearing is closely tied to a paternal relationship between the gods and the ruler. That is, the king and queens of Egypt as the image and likeness of the gods are also the sons and daughters of the gods. There are two senses in which the paternal relationship was viewed. In the first sense, the Pharaoh was Horus, son of Osiris. When a king died, he joined with and became the god Osiris. The deceased king's son who succeeded him was then recognized as "Horus, son of Osiris." In this sense, physical descent from the gods is recognized and Pharaoh is Horus incarnate. That is, Pharaoh shares identity with and is Horus.

The second sense in which sonship is utilized is a result of polytheism. While the Egyptian king was the direct descendent of his father Osiris, it was also necessary to define his relationship with all the other gods. For this, the language of sonship was also utilized. Only instead of expressing direct physical descent from the god and incarnation, it highlighted the king's relationship of intimacy with and dependence upon the gods. In this sense the king could simultaneously be the son of multiple gods. While physical descent from the gods is not in view here, this form of sonship still stressed the divine nature of the Pharaoh in that it pointed towards something intrinsic which established kingly authority, namely, it placed the king in the succession of the royal lineage established by the gods as part of the created order. In other words, kingship was handed down from heaven. Claiming that Pharaoh is the son of Re placed Pharaoh as a distant successor to Re, the creator god who had been the first king of Egypt, as well as expressed the king's dependence upon Re, as a son depends on a father for guidance. As Re's son and image, Pharaoh was not at liberty to rule according to his own precepts but was to reflect the order established by Re at creation.

In terms of function, the Egyptian king's role extended beyond the mere material world into what we might today call the supernatural. In other words, his reign was cosmological in nature. His primary responsibility was maintaining the harmony of the cosmic order established at the time of creation and holding chaotic forces at bay. This order was known among the Egyptian as *maat*, which we might translate as "right order". Proper maintenance of *maat* was the king's obligation and would result in justice for his subjects, as well as the proper function of nature to perpetually produce bounty for the benefit of man. As part of serving as mediator between heaven and earth, the king was believed to possess power over the natural processes, such as the annual flooding of the Nile, which sustained agricultural practices and the Egyptian way of life (you can start to see why the plagues in Exodus were bad news bears for Pharaoh!) Further, the king's obligation was not only to sustain nature's bounty, but to ensure the distribution of its fruits among the people. This was reflected in the Mystery Play of

Succession enacted at the king's coronation which culminated in the king distributing a bread offering to the gods followed by hosting a feast for the people under his reign.

Mesopotamian Background.

In Mesopotamia the words *image* and *likeness* were used to refer both to statues of gods or kings as well as to living kings believed to be the image of a god. One of the earliest uses of these two words, and one where *image* and *likeness* appear in tandem, is found on a statue from the 9th century B.C. discovered at the edge of the ruins of a city known as Tell Fekheriyeh (Syrian Turkish frontier). The statue is of Hadad-yis'ī, an Assyrian ruler, and contains two sections of text in both Assyrian and Aramaic. The first line of the first section in Aramaic refers to the statue as “the likeness (*dmwt*) of Hadad-yis'ī.” A second section composed when the statue was restored reads, “this image (*slm*) he (Hadad-yis'ī) made better than before.” The Aramaic words *dmwt* (likeness) and *slm* (image) are cognates to the Hebrew *demut* (likeness) and *tzelem* (image) and both are used here interchangeably to refer to the statue of the Assyrian ruler. Such use of statues of rulers and kings in Mesopotamia is well attested. Particularly, Assyrian kings would erect statues of themselves in lands they had conquered representing their presence and authority over the territory. An obelisk commemorating the campaigns of Shalmaneser III in the 9th century reads:

“In the seventh year of my reign I marched against the cities of Khabini of Til-Abni. Til-Abni, his stronghold, together with the cities round about it, I captured. I marched to the source of the Tigris, the place where water comes forth. I cleansed the weapon of Assur therein; I took victims for my gods; I held a joyful feast. A mighty image of my majesty I fashioned; the glory of Assur, my lord, my deeds of valour, all I had accomplished in the lands, I inscribed thereon and I set it up there.”

In addition to kings setting up statues in their own image, there is also some evidence in Mesopotamia of the understanding that kings were the image of gods. In the 7th century B.C. the Assyrian king Esarhaddon is addressed by a court-official as “The father of the king, my lord, was the very image (*salmu*) of Bel, and the king, my lord, is likewise the very image of Bel.” Here again, just as in Egypt, being the image of a god is linked to the king's divinely sanctioned authority to rule. In contrast to the Egyptian usage, however, there is less indication that the Mesopotamians equated being the image of god with being a god incarnate.

Putting It Together: *Some Conclusions & Implications*

Being the image and likeness of God has primarily to do with the function of ruling. Based on the ANE context, especially in light the Egyptian data, one can hardly ignore the royal connotations wrapped up in being made as the image and likeness of God. To be the image of God means we have been given authority to rule creation on God's behalf. In effect, we are God's kings and queens here on earth.

That this stands in the forefront of the Hebrew account is evident both with the royal language of "subduing" and "dominion" that follows immediately in verse 28 and the garden imagery in Genesis 2. To subdue and have dominion is the work of kings and rulers. Further, it has been well attested that gardens in the ancient Near East were associated royal palaces and were the work or hobby of kings (Simkins 181; Wiseman 137-44). Further, when the psalmist reflects on the creation account, he praises God for crowning man with glory and honor, giving him dominion over creation, and putting all things under his feet (Ps. 8:5-8). To be the image of God is to be, what many scholars call, God's "vice-regents" here on earth. Human creatures have been given the grand privilege and responsibility of ruling over creation on God's behalf. You have been given this privilege.

Only just as with the Egyptian Pharaoh, we are not granted free license to rule *carte blanche*. Yes, we have freewill and can abuse this privilege, but as "vice-regents", we are not the head honchos. Proper rule will reflect the character and attitude of the God in whose image we are made and involve observing and maintaining the order established at creation. And as image bearers who are sons and daughters of God, we will rely on His provision and guidance in all that we do, just as a trusting child to a loving parent.

Image and the Spirit. Just as those of the ancient Near East created images to house the spirits of the god in whose image it was made, so God created human creatures to be inhabited by His Spirit in a personal way. As image bearers we have the special capacity and potential to connect and experience God's Spirit in a way not enjoyed by the rest of creation. True spirituality will include our spirits reconnecting and being linked with God's Spirit letting Him permeate our whole being and working Himself out through us as we interface with the rest of creation.

God's real presence. As image bearers with God's Spirit we are to be representative and mediators of God's presence into the world. When someone has an encounter with us, they should be confronted with God's attributes – through the way we love, serve, care, celebrate, grieve, work, rest, play, etc.

From this survey we can conclude based on the cultural backdrop that image bearing has to do with function, that is, what we do. This begins to answer a prominent question often posed by theologians:

In what sense are we the image of God?

Is it our *inner self*? This would include our minds, intellect, emotions, souls/spirits, rationality, consciousness, freedom of will, and moral qualities, such as love and justice.

Is it our *material bodies*? This would refer to our physical features and appearance.

Or, are we the image of God only in terms of *functionality* and what we do, such as in exercising dominion?

We could perhaps frame the three question this way: Is the image of God...

Who we are?

Or,

What we look like?

Or,

What we do?

We now know that the image of God has to do with what we do, namely, ruling over God's creation on God's behalf as His representatives. But what about the other two options: our inner self and our material bodies, are these the images of God?

A brief study of the words *image* and *likeness* suggest that the answer is "yes."

Let's start with the word *image*. The Hebrew word translated as "image" in our English Bibles is *tselem* (pronounced *tzell-em*). It comes from a root word meaning "to cut" or "to cut out."¹ Have you ever made cookies using a cookie cutter? If we spoke ancient Hebrew and happened to cut out some cookie dough with a cookie cutter, we could refer to the cookie, that resembled the mold from which it was cut, as a *tselem*.

¹ Delitsch 99; BDB 853

This is similar to how the word *image* is used in the Bible. Outside of Genesis it is often used to describe a material representation or copy of an original – like a cut out. It's used this way in 1 Samuel when God commands the Philistines to make golden carvings resembling the mice and tumors that He had sent upon them as plagues (1 Sam. 6:5, 11).

Often the word *image* shows up in the context of idolatry. In Numbers 33:52 it refers to metal figurines which were idols of the Canaanites. These likely would have been made by the lost-wax process where images were first formed and shaped using wax. The wax was then covered with a layer of clay and fired. As the clay was fired, the wax melted dripping out of the clay leaving behind a hollow terracotta mold. Molten metal was then poured into the mold and, once cooled, the mold was broken away leaving behind the metal figurine or *image*.² Quite the extensive process.

Later in the history of God's people, as part of a covenant renewal ceremony led by the chief priest Jehoiada, the southern kingdom of Israel destroys the *images* of Baal (2 Kgs. 11:18; 2 Chr. 23:17). Judah, however, returns to her idolatry and through the prophet Ezekiel is condemned for making abominable images, including images of the male deity Baal (Ezek. 7:20; 16:17). Then, reaching the height of idolatry, by merely seeing bas-relief carvings with images of the Babylonians, Judah lusts after the Babylonian's military might depicted in the carvings and seeks an alliance with them, which is an act of adultery against the faithful God of Israel (Ezek. 23:14). These *images* of the Babylonians would have been carvings on a wall of a structure or cave and then colored red using a dye from a dried insect native to the Mediterranean region.³

From our brief survey of the occurrences of the word “image” (*tselem*) outside of Genesis, we may conclude it is used in reference to a visible, material representation (or what many of us would call a “physical” representation), of either a thing, animal, person, or god. Often the image was produced by molding or carving.

The Greek text of the Old Testament also affirm an image as a material representation. The Old Testament was translated into Greek around 300 BC (often called the Septuagint or LXX). The Greek word most often used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew word *tselem* is *eikon*. It shouldn't take you too long to guess what English word we get from that. The Greek word *eikon* can refer to an artistic representation, reflection, image, or copy.⁴

² Benzel: Art of the Ancient Near East p46; Dictionary of the Ancient Near East 197

³ BDB 1059

⁴ TDNT 2:388, Kleinknecht

Likeness. The Hebrew word translated as “likeness” in our English Bibles is *demut*, which is a noun. When studying the meaning of the word, it is often helpful to also look at the different forms in which it occurs, or its root from which it is derived. Think of the English word “decision,” which is a noun. If we wanted to better understand its meaning, we would also want to look at the meaning of the verb “to decide.” Similarly, to better understand the meaning of “likeness” (*demut*), it’s helpful to first survey the meaning of its verbal form “to be like” or “to liken” (*d-m-h*).

When we study the Hebrew verb “to liken” (*d-m-h*) in the Bible, we find it may be used to describe thinking or contemplation about what something or someone is like (Ps. 48:9[Hb. 10]; Ps. 50:21; Esth. 4:13). It may also be used to describe an intention to subsequently act in the same or a similar manner as originally planned (Nu. 33:56; Judg. 20:25; 2 Sam. 21:5; Is. 10:7; 14:24). In this sense it expresses continuity. Its greatest use, however, is to make simple comparisons. It is used this way at least 19x. About a fourth of those occurrences are in the context of expressing the incomparability of God and the shortcomings of any human analogy to fully describe what He’s like, especially in terms of His greatness (Is. 40:18; 40:25; 46:5; Ps. 89:6 [Hb. 7]). Speaking through His prophet Isaiah God declares, “To whom will you *liken* me and make me equal, and compare me, that we may *be alike* (Is. 46:5)?” In a similar use in Ezekiel, the king of Egypt is chastised for his arrogance and folly in *likening* himself to the God of Israel (Ezek. 31:2; 31:8, 18). (Do you feel the tension (and perhaps wonder)? God has no comparison, but we are made after His *likeness*.)

The remaining uses of the verb *d-m-h* occur in contexts of what we would call simile. The judgment brought on Jerusalem for her wickedness is likened to God’s judgment on Gomorrah (Is. 1:9). The Psalmist compares the shortness of man’s life to that of a passing breath (Ps. 144:4). The young lovers in Song of Songs utilize this word 5x in their pining for one another as they hopelessly grasp for poetic imagery to translate into words their love and adoration for each other (Song 1:9; 2:9, 17; 7:7 [Hb. 8]; 8:14). The young shepherd likens the stature of his lover to that of a palm tree and her breasts its clusters (Song 7:7 [Hb. 8]). The young shepherdess in turn likens him to the beauty and agility of a gazelle or a young stag (Song 2:9, 17; 8:14). Did I mention, the Bible keeps it real?

From this we glean that that the verb *d-m-h* (“to be like”) may be used to contrast and compare. It is especially used to express similarities between events, experiences, actions, and people, including their physical features and appearances, and being.

Now let’s turn to the noun “likeness” (*demut*), which appears in Genesis 1:26. It too is used throughout the Old Testament to make simple comparisons. Often, it’s used in the same way as its verbal form just described. This is most evident in Isaiah 40:18

where both the verbal and nominal forms occur in parallel: “To whom then will you *liken* (*d-m-l*) God, or what *likeness* (*demut*) compare with him?” Looking at other uses, Isaiah describes the sound of the Babylonian army gathering on the mountains to attack Judah as being *like* a great multitude (Is. 13:4). In Psalm 58:4, the word appears exactly as in Genesis 1:26 with the preposition *kei* (as), where the lies of wicked tyrants are *like* the venom of a serpent. The author of 2 Kings 16:10 uses “likeness” to describe what we might call a schematic, blueprint, or model. When King Ahaz wants an altar built in Jerusalem patterned after the one he saw in his travels to Damascus, he sends a “likeness” of the Syrian altar “exact in all its details” to the priest Uriah.

Perhaps, though, one of the more fascinating and informative uses of “likeness” is by Ezekiel in describing his audiovisual experience of the glory of God when receiving his call (Ezek. 1). Ezekiel introduces his vision by stating that “the heavens were opened” (Ezek. 1:1). While this phrase can describe a torrential downpour (Gen. 7:11), more often it is used to describe a peeling back of the barrier between the visible and invisible heavens such that one is given a glimpse into or allowed access to the realm in which God’s unique and awesome presence dwells (Lk. 3:21; Acts 7:56; Rev. 4:1). In attempting to give earthly words to the heavenly reality to which Ezekiel has been made privy, he uses the word “likeness” 10x. Specifically, he uses it in describing the manifestation of the glory of YHWH (Ezek. 1:28). A few chapters later Ezekiel again uses the word “likeness” in describing his vision of the glory of God, only this time describing God’s glory departing from Jerusalem (Ezek. 8:2; 10:1; 10:10, 21, 22).

Here’s why this is so fascinating: there are multiple parallels between Ezekiel’s vision and the creation account. Both the Spirit and cloud are once again present in Ezekiel’s experience (Ezek. 1:4, 12, 20). Also in Genesis, the inbreaking of light is associated with the projection of God’s glory into the earthy realm of creation. When Ezekiel is witnessing God’s glory, the inbreaking of light is here too present, only now described as “brightness,” “fire”, and “gleaming metal.” (Ezek. 1:4, 13-14, 27-28). And included in both accounts is a figure. In Genesis, the earthly is described in terms of the heavenly and man is the “likeness” of God (Gen. 1:26-27). But Ezekiel reverses the concept and portrays the heavenly in terms of the earthly describing the enthroned divine figure as the “likeness” of man (Ezek. 1:26).

Ezekiel’s use of the word “likeness” to describe his vision may help us further understand the use of “likeness” in the context of Genesis 1:26-27. Ezekiel is relaying the audio and visual experience of his encounter with the glory of YHWH. As he’s reeling to harness language for the multimedia experience of the very presence of God, he repeatedly, almost frantically, employs the word “likeness”.

The sound was the *likeness* of...

The sight was the *likeness* of...

With the word *likeness* Ezekiel appeals to human sensory perceptions, especially vision. Notice the word “appearance” or “sight” (*marel*) occurs 15x in Ezekiel 1, often in tandem with “likeness. Interestingly, this word “appearance” also occurs another 5x in Ezekiel’s vision of God’s glory in chapters 8 and 10, as well as in other manifestations of God’s presence, such as the burning bush (Ex. 3:3) and the appearance of His glory on Mt. Sinai (Ex. 24:17). Seemingly then, when one is grasping for language to describe manifestations of the invisible heavenly reality and inbreaking of the very presence and glory of God into our 3-dimensional plus time earthly reality, “likeness” is the choice word. We may, then, initially conclude that while all creation gives witness to the attributes of God, male and female, as God’s likeness, are a more unique revelation of the glory and presence of the invisible God. In simpler terms, if you want to know what the invisible God is like, and something about His glory, look at human creatures.

The Greek word used in the Septuagint to translate “likeness” is *homoiosis*. This word shows up on the New Testament when James affirms humans are the *likeness* of God. Plato used it in his *Theaetetus* where Socrates addresses Theodorus, “Therefore, we ought to try to escape from earth to the dwelling of the gods as quickly as we can; and to escape is to become like God, so far as this is possible; and to become like God is to become righteous and holy and wise.” (*Theaet.* 176a-b). For Plato, the word *likeness* has primarily to do with one’s inner nature, taking on the meaning “like nature” (cf. Plato *Rep.* 545b).

From our survey of “likeness” we may conclude it often pertains to some sort of material or visual representation. But the word is not restricted to only the material. It is also used to make conceptual or functional comparisons where no material likeness is in view. This is the case in Psalm 58:4 where “likeness” is used to equate the function of lies of the wicked to that of the deadly venom of snakes. It also seems to be an apt word for describing and comparing the heavenly and earthly realities, especially with respect to visible appearances of God’s glory. The word “likeness,” however, does not necessarily mean “exactly identical” or “the same in every way to an original.” Even in Ezekiel, when “likeness” is used to convey the meaning of being identical in appearance, it is qualified by *echad* (“same”), such as in Ezekiel 1:16 where the wheels have the “same likeness.” We are left to determine the level of correspondence between two things that are alike.

In determining correspondence, we are asking in what ways and to what degree are the two things being compared alike or dislike. There can be nearly a one-to-one correspondence, as when Isaiah prophecies that “the sound of a multitude on the

mountains is like a great number of people (Is. 13:4).” Or there may simply be a high level of correspondence, as is the case with the replica of the altar (2 Kings. 16:10). Or, there may be a lower level of correspondence where there are limited points of comparison. For example, in Psalm 58:4 we invited to ask, in what ways are the lies of the wicked like venom?

We may ask this same question of correspondence when considering our likeness to God: in what way are we like God? We may talk about uniquely human attributes such as our abilities to contemplate and plan of the future, and even fear and plan for death, our faculty of speech, etc. These are, arguably all part of the image of God in us. This begins to answer another of our questions above as to whether our inner self is the image of God. The answers s yes.

So far we have looked at the meanings of the words “image” and “likeness” in the Old Testament outside of Genesis. Before moving on, we need to look at their use in Genesis. In addition to Genesis 1:26-27, the word image occurs by itself in Genesis 9 where murder is prohibited since God made man as His own image (Gen. 9:6). We will address this passage in greater detail below. “Likeness” occurs in Genesis 5:1 at the introduction of the genealogical line of Seth, which begins with the restatement from Genesis 1 that God created man “in the likeness of God.” But even more pertinent for our study is Genesis 5:3 where Adam’s son Seth is described as Adam’s own “image” and “likeness.” This suggests that these two terms communicate similarities inclusive of more than just physical qualities and are apropos for describing the familial relationships.

Linguistic Conclusions. Based on the biblical use of the words “image” and “likeness” we may conclude that they are both used to express comparisons or similarities. The comparisons may have to do with physical appearances, functionality, or being. These two words have a high degree of semantic overlap, that is, they are quite similar in meaning and how they are used. So much so that some scholars maintain they are synonymous and interchangeable. If we were going to be finely nuanced, we may say that if there is any difference between the meanings of these two words it is this: an *image* almost always functions as a copy or replica of some sort of original. Likeness, on the other hand, simply makes comparisons between two things or ideas without one necessarily being the original or prior to the other.

Implications. There is much we can talk about here, but I’d like to suggest two preliminary thoughts. The first is that all of you is the image of God, even your body. Your body itself, its intricacies, complexities, and beauty, are all visible manifestations of the invisible God. Second, others are also the visible projection of attributes of the invisible God. What would it be like to look at each other’s difference and see the wonder and

beauty of God in one another? What would it be like to see the beauty and wonder of God in yourself?