

## ***Humans in the Image of God and Other Things Genesis Does Not Make Clear***

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*Abstract* — This paper explores the nature and function of the opening chapters of Genesis by way of a focused case study concerning the hermeneutical function of “image of God” language in its canonical setting in Genesis. It pursues a canonically oriented argument that the book of Genesis uses the language of “the image of God” as a relatively under-determined place-holder for something that can only be more clearly defined by seeing how the canonical narrative develops, beyond Genesis, and indeed beyond the OT. The discussion will look first at hermeneutical frameworks for reading the image of God and second at how the language functions canonically as a part of Gen 1–11. A third section explores briefly other substantive issues in Gen 1–11 that might best be understood in this canonical perspective.

*Key Words* — *image of God, Genesis 1–11, canonical reading, J. Richard Middleton, Brevard S. Childs, hermeneutics, ascriptive narrative*

For some time now, I have considered writing a book entitled something like *What Genesis Doesn't Say*. As friends have pointed out, this could turn out to be a rather long book, because its remit appears to cover more or less everything. But it is only partly a tongue-in-cheek project. Genesis 1–11 is a candidate for being one of the most widely misunderstood texts in the whole of Scripture. The problems concern getting the text in the right focus—asking appropriate questions and knowing what to look for in our reading.<sup>1</sup>

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1. See the helpful initial remarks on this topic in R. W. L. Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis* (Old Testament Theology; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 21–41.

In saying this, one need not be thinking primarily of flat-footed, literalistic, or inappropriately scientifically oriented reading strategies. Even sophisticated treatments of Gen 1–11 struggle to engage with the basic framework questions posed by these unique chapters: a story that stands outside the history of Israel, that introduces concepts that are often not taken up again in any depth until the NT, and for which readers of the Bible have very few internal reference points in terms of other scriptural narratives operating comparably. One frequent result of these features is recourse to external reference points: creation accounts from the ancient Near East, to take an obvious example. But the hermeneutical implications of such strategies are often under-explored. In what follows, I want to consider the hermeneutical question of how Gen 1–11 functions as a prologue to the canonical collection of texts that make up the Christian Bible.

In order to make headway with such a vast and complex question, we shall proceed with reference to one particular case-study, the language of human beings being in “the image of God.” In particular, I shall argue that the various profound accounts of being human that Genesis offers do not really add up to an answer to the question “What does it mean to be human?” Nor do they allow us to resolve the question of what it means to be made “in the image of God.” I shall argue that Genesis uses the language of “the image of God” as a relatively underdetermined place-holder for something that can only be more clearly defined by seeing how the canonical narrative develops, beyond Genesis, and indeed beyond the OT. I shall pursue this argument mainly with respect to “the image of God,” but other areas in which the hermeneutical issues raised by Genesis might function similarly shall be considered briefly at the end. The goal of the argument, then, concerns the ways in which Gen 1–11 serves as a prologue to the rest of the canon, and the rest of the canon is the required interpretive context for grasping the substantive matters raised in Gen 1–11.<sup>2</sup>

#### THE IMAGE OF GOD: THE SEARCH FOR A HERMENEUTICAL FRAMEWORK

As is well known, Genesis declares that humans are created in the image of God. The key text, of course, is Gen 1:26–28, beginning with “Then

2. A conceptually somewhat-similar project is undertaken in Andreas Schüle, *Der Prolog der hebräischen Bibel: Der literar- und theologiegeschichtliche Diskurs der Urgeschichte (Genesis 1–11)* (ATANT 86; Zurich: TVZ, 2006). Schüle sees Gen 1–11 as suffused with intertextual awareness of the rest of the canon, a fact he explains by positing a history of redactions and additions to a basic P account to make up Gen 1–11. The result is a plurality of theological perspectives deriving from the composite canonical text of Gen 1–11, as it relates to other aspects of the HB. It is not possible on this occasion to engage fully with Schüle’s work or to explore what is at stake in the question of the plurality of perspectives, or the limitation of the canon in view to the Hebrew Scriptures (which raises questions of the limits of historical explanation of the canonical significance of Gen 1–11), although I hope to address these and other questions elsewhere.

God said, 'Let us make humanity in our image (*bětsalmenu*), according to our likeness (*kidmutenu*),' and going on to include notions of rule over the various other creatures of creation (v. 26), blessing, offspring, and dominion (v. 28), and the central poetic lines that affirm:

So God created humankind (*'adam*) in his image (*bětsalmo*),  
in the image of God (*bětselem 'elohim*) he created them. (v. 27a-b)<sup>3</sup>

Few OT texts have been subject to such intense scrutiny as this one, and hopes are often high among those who come to this text that it shall turn out to unlock at least some of the great mysteries of the human person. Perhaps inevitably, these hopes have often been frustrated. It is hard to avoid something like the conclusion of Albert Schweitzer concerning the quest of the historical Jesus: that when theologians have stared down the well at the possibilities for understanding the phrase "image of God" in Gen 1, they have seen something rather like a reflection of their own image, or rather what they already understand the notion of "image" to be. The point of the passage has in effect been reversed: in the image of their human preunderstanding readers have created the meaning of this text. The hopes and travails of interpreters down through the ages are neatly summarized by Brevard Childs, who writes regarding Gen 1:26-28:

The importance of the passage arises from the impression that the Priestly writer, within the context of creation, is defining the fundamental nature of being human according to a programmatic statement: God created *'adam* in his own image. Unfortunately, this initial expectation has been continually frustrated by the uncertainty of the text's interpretation. The history of modern exegesis demonstrates convincingly how a consensus regarding its meaning only momentarily emerges which is then shortly dissolved into newer forms of dissension.<sup>4</sup>

This process is not difficult to demonstrate from the history of interpretation, especially if one looks for some substantive answer to what in the human person is constitutive of humanity's being in the image of God. One thus finds in the tradition the various claims that the image of God in humanity consists in rationality (most Western theologians up to and including Aquinas), a soul on its way to divinization (many in the Eastern tradition), a soul that distinguishes humankind from other animals (common

3. For a close reading of 1:27, see Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (OBT; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 12-21, though her emphasis is on the male/female element of v. 27c. The detailed discussion of differences between "image" and "likeness" (or indeed the prepositions "like" and "in") lies beyond our purview, but see W. Randall Garr, *In His Own Image and Likeness: Humanity, Divinity, and Monotheism* (CHANE 15; Leiden: Brill, 2003), for full discussion.

4. Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (London: SCM, 1992), 567.

even to the present day), an original righteousness (Luther), an ontological characteristic combined with ethical relationality (Calvin and the reformed tradition), or a summoned relationship before God, mirrored in the male-female relationship that follows it (Barth). All these options are rehearsed in Richard Middleton's fine study of the image of God in Gen 1, *The Liberating Image*, as he proceeds on his way to urging that it has always been a mistake to seek what he calls either "substantialistic" or "relational" interpretations of the *imago Dei*.<sup>5</sup>

It is worth pondering a little Middleton's own alternative proposal, which stands in a long line of mainstream OT scholarship, albeit with an unusual theological sophistication and a fine grasp of the hermeneutical challenges of reading ancient texts as faith documents for our present reality. Middleton argues that "the *imago Dei* refers to humanity's office and role as God's earthly delegates, whose terrestrial task is analogous to that of the heavenly court."<sup>6</sup> This is what he prefers to call a "royal-functional" interpretation, in line with the way in which most ancient Near Eastern cultures reserved "image of God" language for their kings. The polemical point of Gen 1, then, is that it is not just the king who stands in the image of God but all of humanity.<sup>7</sup> Old Testament scholars sometimes like to call this a "democratizing" tendency in P, to be found also in the genealogy of Gen 5, where, rather than kingship being descended from heaven as in the Sumerian king lists and the relevant kings and sons of kings reigning for 21,000 to 72,000 years,<sup>8</sup> we find instead a list of the descendants of Adam, or 'adam, the prototypical ordinary human. He and his offspring live for comparatively paltry periods such as 930 years or (in the case of Methuselah) 969 years. This is the chapter in which we read, furthermore, that God created 'adam "in the likeness of God" (*kidmut elohim*) and that 'adam in turn had a son Seth "in his own likeness, in his image" (*bidmuto kētsalmo*, v. 3), by which roundabout turns of phrase we arguably have here the second reference to the phrase "image of God." In short, Gen 5, like Gen 1, presents a democratized view of who gets to stand in the image of God: not just kings, elevated to a sort of semidivine status, but ordinary 'adam and those in his image.<sup>9</sup>

For his part, Middleton goes on to offer a reading of Gen 1–11 as a counter-ideology pitted against a Mesopotamian world view, noting in par-

5. J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 15–29. A comparable survey from a systematician is Colin E. Gunton, *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Edinburgh Studies in Constructive Theology; Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 193–96.

6. Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 60.

7. *Ibid.*, 93–145, with conclusions clearly stated on p. 145.

8. The text dates from ca. 2000 B.C.E., and may be read in *ANET* 265–66.

9. For a concise and compelling version of the view that J's account in Gen 1–11 is also democratizing, see, e.g., Israel Knohl, *The Divine Symphony: The Bible's Many Voices* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 37–49.

ticular the themes of the affirmation of human agency, a focus on the ease with which human power is misused, and the symbolism of the Tower of Babel, where “come let us build” (11:4) seems to mimic the divine “come let us make” of 1:26. Cautiously dating the final form of Gen 1–11 to a 6th-century exilic context, Middleton concludes “this unknown author chose to crystallize the central Israelite insight about being human in a term typically applied only to idols, kings, and priests—*tselem elohim*—and thereby profoundly affected the world view and theological imagination of generations of biblical readers.”<sup>10</sup>

So far so familiar, at least to OT scholars, even if Middleton’s presentation is the most subtle and helpful presentation to date of this view. And one might acknowledge that it all preaches rather well. Here from the mists of Mesopotamia emerges a striking theological account of the human person that can be transposed to the pulpit today with a sense of immediate relevance and an existential lifting of the spirits: we, brothers and sisters, stand in the line of a sacred history that begins by incorporating all human beings, male and female, of high or low status, slave or free, Jew and perhaps even Gentile, into esteemed positions of privilege elsewhere reserved only for kings and princes. Yes, this will preach.

So have we then arrived at the end of the hermeneutical process characterized by Childs earlier as the repeated and fleeting emergence of consensus that is always then “dissolved into newer forms of dissension”? Is this the end of hermeneutical history, such that the OT scholar might turn up as the last *’adam*, consign the interpretive traditions of the (various) churches to the metaphysical rubbish heap of history, and bemoan once more how the failure to read the Bible with suitable historical-critical spectacles has simply led us all astray? And was Childs just too early by 15 years or so to realize that one day we would all get it right?

You will gather from the way I have phrased these questions that I do not think so. For all the grace and power of Middleton’s account, it is to be noted that it contains one key feature in more or less direct continuity with those accounts of the tradition that he so swiftly consigns to the status of failed misapprehensions. What his view shares with those of Aquinas, the East, the reformers, Barth, and others is that he resolves the conundrum of the meaning and significance of the “image of God” by referring it sideways, as it were, to a frame of reference extrinsic to the Genesis account. As Childs would have said (and perhaps did, but I have not read him in all the possible places where he might have said it<sup>11</sup>), the recourse to the comparative accounts of the ancient Near East for our understanding of the

10. Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 231. It is impossible here to do justice to the overall richness of Middleton’s reading (cf. pp. 185–231).

11. He usually contents himself with observing that the OT is not very clear on the matter, as in the quotation above or in his *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 97–98.

image of God is all very well on the level of seeing how one ancient culture differs from another, but it is not the same thing as taking the Genesis narrative in its canonical integrity as a suitably theological account of the canonical significance of the image of God in humankind. Now it is true that Middleton, of all people, gets a bad deal out of this analysis, because he himself is keen to insist that we cannot be entirely sure of the appropriate contextual background for reading Gen 1–11, and his own proposal is not entirely dependent on extra-textual reconstructions of this sort.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, I think that much of the rhetorical force of Middleton's case derives from contextualizing it against the background of Mesopotamian language, and in his review of the book Nathan MacDonald makes the same point: "the representational interpretation derives its principal force from an ancient Near Eastern context that lies *outside* the text of Genesis."<sup>13</sup> Perhaps more precisely, one might suggest that the problem is not so much that the driving force of the argument lies outside Genesis but rather that it lies outside the canon of scripture in toto.

At this point a variety of hermeneutical paths open up before us. On one level, it seems appropriate to point out, along with some biblical scholars and surely the majority of contemporary historians, that any notion of "what it means to be human" is always a constructed notion, and that therefore our question with respect to the OT must be something a little more like "how does the OT construct notions of personal identity?" and in this case, "How does Gen 1–11 construct notions of personal identity?"<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, once phrased this way, it becomes much clearer that, with respect to asking the OT text to offer insight into what it means to be human, the hermeneutical frameworks brought to bear actually *generate* (that is, construct) readings rather than simply uncovering them in the text.<sup>15</sup> To come back to the example before us, the decision to read the "image of God" language in Gen 1 against an ancient Near Eastern background

12. Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, esp. pp. 93–94, 136–45, though we may note that at least pp. 93–184 of his book are devoted more or less to this topic, a point made also by Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 122.

13. Nathan MacDonald, "Review of J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1*," *Review of Biblical Literature* 10 (2005): n.p. Online: <http://www.bookreviews.org/bookdetail.asp?TitleId=4737&CodePage=4737>; cited also by Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation*, 124.

14. The best account of this of which I am aware is Robert A. di Vito, "Old Testament Anthropology and the Construction of Personal Identity," *CBQ* 61 (1999): 217–38, who makes telling use of contrasting the OT with Charles Taylor's account of modern Western identity in his *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); see esp. pp. 220–21.

15. I have explored this notion in some detail with respect to the early chapters of Genesis in my "The Hermeneutics of Reading Genesis after Darwin," in *Reading Genesis after Darwin* (ed. Stephen C. Barton and David Wilkinson; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 57–71.

*generates* one way of framing the import of this “image of God” language, and as a result it shapes how one might go on to develop the theological implications of what “image of God” language is about. As I have said, it happens to produce a theologically rich and suggestive account that will preach well in most contemporary pulpits. But this is not really much of a hermeneutical high ground, or perhaps we should say that such theologically persuasive *uses* of Scripture may have a certain heuristic value in the short term, but they fall short of letting Scripture function on its own terms, that is, letting its own canonical presentation of the matter carry the burden of the argument, which is key in the long term to cultivating theological wisdom.<sup>16</sup>

So in short, we have not trumped Childs’ description of a constant process of consensus and dissension, because what we have achieved, if we follow Middleton, is the construction of one more stage in the interpretive tradition, a stage predicated on saying that the historical context of the ancient author is determinative for the theological significance of the biblical text. Biblical scholars are aware, even if they do not always choose to give this impression, that this is just one contested option amidst many in contemporary hermeneutical debate. **In the present case, it is at least as obvious to suggest that the NT use of “image of God” language to describe Christ might in its own way be equally as determinative of the significance of the phrase in Gen 1–11 as any ancient Near Eastern inter-texts.** One can find various stimulating accounts along these lines, such as the discussion by Francis Watson in his book *Text and Truth*, significantly located in the section of the book titled “The Old Testament in Christological Perspective.”<sup>17</sup> Watson tries to harness his theological account to the perspectives offered by Genesis but notes in conclusion that this “has resulted in certain limitations: even in christological transformation, the Genesis image-of-God concept . . . [has] as it were, a finite theological content beyond which [it] should not be pressed.”<sup>18</sup> This is also the place to note Daniel Treier’s discussion of the various possible hermeneutical frameworks for interpreting the *imago Dei*, which admirably makes the



16. This way of putting the matter is consciously indebted to Augustine’s striking characterization of the task of scriptural interpretation as the cultivation of love of God and love of neighbor, which in the short term might overrule the text before us but in the long term, he wagers, is only sustainable by working with the text in its own integrity. See his *De Doctrina Christiana*, book 1, and my account of its hermeneutical significance in my *Virtuous Reader: Old Testament Narrative and Interpretive Virtue* (Studies in Theological Interpretation; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 140–45.

17. Francis Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997), 277–304.

18. *Ibid.*, 300.

point we are considering, that what one brings to the feast is inseparable from what one gets out of it.<sup>19</sup>

Of course, put like this, as a bald hermeneutical axiom, many find a claim such as this problematic and try to shore up the OT text against what they see as undue theological misappropriation by overzealous theologians. But in canonical terms, the image of God in Genesis must be approached with at least due concern to do justice to Christological perspectives drawn from Col 1:15 or 2 Cor 4:4 (where Christ is the image of God, and indeed in the former case the image of the invisible God). If this is the Christ who in the NT is now also revealed to have been present in and integral to the creation of all things, then on theological grounds there is plenty of reason to see Paul's canonical texts as every bit as relevant as, if not more so than, texts drawn from the ancient Near East. One need not posit here two entirely distinct and conflicting contexts for reading: the historical and the canonical. If for no other reason than that the canon is itself something that develops in history, the framing historical and canonical questions that readers bring to bear will always interrelate in hermeneutically productive and varied ways. In the case of Gen 1–11, though, the canonical context is clearly a strong element of how a reader encounters the text, while the historical element is markedly downplayed in the text. Questions about the historical contexts in which the text of Gen 1–11 developed have their hermeneutical place, but in this instance at least they need not be prior to questions of canonical function pertaining to the whole canon relevant to the reader (Christian or Jewish).<sup>20</sup>

Treier admits, "It will be obvious that many Old Testament scholars would find it impossible to respect the integrity of Genesis 1:26–27 while incorporating Christology within its interpretation."<sup>21</sup> And the case is not helped when a subtle and sophisticated theological essay such as Colin Gunton's *The One, the Three and the Many* can repeatedly describe itself as "an extended exegesis" of Gen 1 with apparently no biblical text actually in sight.<sup>22</sup> But on canonical terms, there is no other way to go, if indeed no other interpretive framework is intrinsic to the material of Genesis in the same way as the rest of the OT and (at least for Christians) the NT is. The fact that many OT scholars would disagree could simply tell us more

19. Cf. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation*, which uses the image of God as a case study for considering the merits of various approaches to "theological interpretation," including a discussion of Watson's account on pp. 152–56.

20. Pace Schüle, *Prolog*.

21. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation*, 153.

22. Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 2, 201 n. 31, 215. On the first of these occasions he does describe it, admittedly, as "an inadequate exegesis." My question is in what sense it is an *exegesis* at all.



about OT scholarship than about the hermeneutical merits of the case. If one should take the alternative path at this point and suggest that what we have learned makes us doubt instead that a canonical approach is the way to go after all, then at the very least what we have shown is that every interpretation is relative to some framing set of concerns and that no single framing set of concerns is self-evidently the right one for reading Scripture. As a result, one must take the long slow path of self-involvement, and explore the logic and limitations of any angle of interpretive approach, seeing where and how the text attains purchase in a variety of possible scenarios.

### THE IMAGE OF GOD: WHAT DOES GENESIS MAKE CLEAR?

What then is the contribution of Genesis to our thinking about humanity in the image of God?

The phrase has long been thought to be a marker separating human-kind from other animals. The conviction that humans are in some sense superior to other animals has then been understood in the light of the various suggestions we reviewed earlier: that humans have a soul, or the capacity for rationality, or language, or moral self-reflexivity, and so forth. None of these distinctions really works, as theologians with a concern for the non-human creation have not been slow to point out.<sup>23</sup> Old Testament theologian Erhard Gerstenberger even goes so far as to suggest that “down to our own time the anthropological doctrine of ‘being in the image of God’ and the ‘commission for human beings to rule the earth’ (cf. Gen 1:26–8; Ps 8) has led to remarkably exaggerated views of human beings,” though in my judgment he uses the text of Gen 1:26–28 rather too easily as a springboard to what he calls “the heightened sense of ‘I’ in modernity,”<sup>24</sup> and it is surely somewhat difficult to lay the blame for an overdeveloped sense of human autonomy at the feet of the OT.<sup>25</sup> Most likely, the question of discerning what exactly constitutes the distinction between humans and animals is not in fact on the agenda of Gen 1. There are, in the OT in general, humans, “socially embedded” in kinship networks with all their concomitant moral obligations relating to honor and shame, duty, obligation, and service,<sup>26</sup>

23. I am indebted here to conversations with David Clough and his forthcoming work on this topic, for a taste of which, see his “All God’s Creatures: Reading Genesis on Human and Nonhuman Animals,” in *Reading Genesis after Darwin* (ed. S. C. Barton and D. Wilkinson; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 145–61.

24. Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Theologies in the Old Testament* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2002), 287.

25. See in particular di Vito (“Old Testament Anthropology and the Construction of Personal Identity,” 221–25), who writes of the OT: “Only the socially ‘embedded’ self, identified by membership in a ‘father’s house,’ is a morally intelligible agent” (p. 225).

26. See again *ibid.*

and then there are animals, outside these networks, and this distinction is, I think, taken to be obvious.

The functional interpretation of the *imago Dei* in Gen 1:26–27 relegates the concern for animals to a more incidental point. Rather than seeing the human/nonhuman distinction among animals as being at issue, the functional view is in a sense more occupied with the human/divine distinction: humans are to rule in the image of God, that is, in the place of the deity, though they are not to be thought of as thereby divine (since they are still created). There is still, derivatively, a point about humans and animals: humans are commissioned to have dominion over the animals in v. 28, even if it is difficult to unpick exactly in what sense the text intends this to follow from everything else that is said. Does the dominion follow from humans being in the image of God (v. 27a–b), from their filling and subduing the earth (v. 28b), from their being blessed by God (v. 28a), or from their being male and female (v. 27c), which in some way seems to lead into the blessing and more obviously serves as the basis for the filling of the earth?

The human/animal distinction seems to recede even farther from view as one progresses. Although humans are created on day six, arguably therefore in a more “climactic” position in the creation than the other animals, the logic and thrust of the opening creation account of Gen 1:1–2:3 is that the real climax of creation is day seven, the account of God’s finishing his work and resting (or “sabbathing”; *shabbat*). And it has long been noted that reading significance off the order in which things are created is fraught with ambiguity. Thus, Barth: “When man finally appears at the centre of all the older circle of creation, and when it is shown in fact that everything must serve him, it must not be overlooked that man is thus revealed to be the most necessitous of all creatures.”<sup>27</sup> And furthermore, the relationship of the human to the nonhuman is really no longer the focus of attention in 9:5–6, where we find the third and final “image of God” reference. Here, the royal-functional interpretation attains some purchase in the text, although as far as I can see Middleton makes no use of this text at all in his defense of this position. But Gen 9:5–6 suggests that humanity’s being in the image of God is the reason why God will demand an accounting for the taking of human life. Here the divine prerogative to exercise judgment over the taking of life is delegated to humans, much as the royal-functional

27. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (vol. 3/1; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1958), 143–44. Catherine Osborne makes a similar point regarding Aristotle: “for Aristotle the complexity of human functions reveals that humans are not close to the best, but are very far removed from it, and that the complexity of the human psychological functions is for him the clearest evidence not that humans are at the top of some scale of being, but that they are far down the ladder and struggling with a whole lot of relatively ineffective tasks” (*Dumb Beasts and Dead Philosophers: Humanity and the Humane in Ancient Philosophy and Literature* [Oxford: Clarendon, 2007], 122). I am indebted to David Clough for these two references.

interpretation might envisage. On the other hand, some factors in the passage complicate the possibility of affirming something specific about the *imago Dei* here. One may note that the reckoning that God requires for the taking of human life (v. 5) is from every living thing (*chayyah*, “animal” as the NRSV has it), not just humans, suggesting some sort of equality of responsibility before God (though admittedly with respect to the taking of human life and not other animal life). Elsewhere in this passage we find the nonhuman creation living in “fear and dread” of humanity (v. 2) and the various constraints on what humans can and cannot eat from among their coinhabitants of the planet. All this suggests that the demarcation of the human and the nonhuman is still in some sense on the agenda of this passage but that in fact it is not the focus of the “image of God” language in this case.

There is no space here to explore more fully the issues of human/non-human in Genesis or the other possible scenarios that all invite profound hermeneutical engagement: the question of the image of God as male and female (1:27), which seems to invite all manner of gender-related reflection; or the point that the image of God seems to mandate the retributive justice of taking the life of a killer (9:6) with all that that might imply with regard to various forms of social ethic. If one day extraterrestrial life should arrive among us, then doubtless it will seem self-evident to future interpreters that the text will speak of the difference between those of this earth (the ‘*adam*’ from the ‘*adamah*’) who bear the image as against those of other worlds.

This is also the place to acknowledge that, beyond Gen 1–11, we find no further use made of the concept in the OT. When it reappears in Wis 2:23 (“God created us in the image of his own eternity”) and in the discussion of Ben Sira 17:1–13, it is perhaps (especially in the latter case) drawing its significance derivatively from Genesis.<sup>28</sup> Now one could overplay this observation. The absence of the phrase *tselem elohim* after Gen 9 must be balanced against the observation that clearly one of the functions of these opening chapters of Genesis is precisely to set up various kinds of frameworks for reading the subsequent canonical narrative, regardless of how exactly we came to have Gen 1–11 in its final form and as the opening section of the finished OT. We shall return to the implications of this point below. But even so, taking this broader view, might one argue that the significance of the *imago Dei* has been somewhat overplayed in the interpretive tradition? To put the question bluntly, what might we learn from the fact that the OT does not seem to worry overmuch about the subject?

28. With a focus in each case on the question of how the *imago Dei* can relate to mortality or immortality, see Michael Kolarcik, “Book of Wisdom,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (vol. 5; Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 435–600 (quotation on p. 465).

For Walter Brueggemann, one implication of this observation is that we should follow the contours of the OT's own treatment and similarly focus less on the general anthropological question of what it means to be human. He writes:

*the Old Testament has no interest in articulating an autonomous or universal notion of humanness . . . because its articulation of what it means to be human is characteristically situated in its own Yahwistic, covenantal, interactionist mode of reality, so that humanness is always Yahwistic humanness or, we may say, Jewish humanness.*<sup>29</sup>

There is an important point here. The reasons we today might have for emphasizing the image might turn out not to be too helpful for seeing its own particular function in the OT. The longer-term agenda of Scripture is more interested in exploring the "anthropological question" not in terms of what it means to be a human, but in terms of what it means to be a worshiping human, or one who praises, laments, longs, hopes, prays, complains, or trusts the God of Israel. As Patrick Miller puts it in his discussion of the "anthropology of the Psalter," "the question is never simply 'What is a human being?' . . . The question is never asked abstractly. . . . It is always asked in the dialogue with God."<sup>30</sup> Most likely, this insight can be transferred to the OT as a whole, where we need to combine attention to Gen 1–11 with due recognition of the broader canonical sweep that will not further discuss the image as such. It is striking in this connection that in his otherwise somewhat-epic treatment of OT theology, John Goldingay can deal with the topic almost in passing. He says the image of God *alone* "distinguishes humanity from the rest of creation," but that said, one must then also note that it is "an allusive statement and not one to which the Old Testament returns, and it is thus unlikely to provide the key to understanding the Old Testament's view of humanity."<sup>31</sup>

In the light of these observations, which seem to me to be on the right track, I think our conclusion should be along these lines: the notion of humanity as being in "the image of God" in Genesis is one that consists in giving to humans a significant place in the narrative that follows, not just in Genesis but in the whole of the OT (and, for Christians, the NT too).

29. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 450.

30. Patrick D. Miller, *The Way of the Lord: Essays in Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 228; and see his three essays on "OT anthropology" in this volume (pp. 226–36, 237–49, 310–18).

31. John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, vol 2: *Israel's Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 518, though where I have him saying "Old" Testament, he speaks of a "First" Testament. It is worth noting that the topic occupies him for all of about four pages out of the 1,800+ pages of his two volumes thus far: see *Old Testament Theology*, vol 1: *Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 102–3 also.

It functions as a placeholder, designed to mark out the human as the focus amidst all creation of the succeeding narratives. It sets us reading the (finished) OT wondering what it will turn out to mean that humans bear the image of God, so that as we come to narratives such as Abraham's opposing God's plans for Sodom (Gen 18:23–25) or Moses' arguing with God to try to hold him to his own promises (Num 14:13–19), we have a sense that here we read examples of how a human being can stand before God and aspire to God's justice and compassion, attempting even to argue before God by grasping God's own perspective on human affairs. Moments such as these suggest all manner of characteristics of humans at their best, as they image God: rationality perhaps, compassion, moral reflectiveness, concern for others—indeed, all the characteristics that in other times have been thought to constitute the image of God in humanity but in and of themselves are not the image so much as characteristics that are seen mainly when humans most fully attain to the life to which God calls them. As Brueggemann suggests, Genesis and the OT that follows it offer no general answer to the question “What does it mean to be human?” (or perhaps “What does it mean to do—or to live—humanly?”) beyond the Yahwistic categories germane to ancient Israel. But by way of the phrase “image of God” in Gen 1–11, these questions are foregrounded for our subsequent reading of the OT. Although her concerns lie elsewhere, with the implications for the rest of creation in fact, Ellen Davis makes something like this point in passing in her rich reading of Gen 1:

Its usage suggests that the notion of *imago Dei* is inherently both powerful and open-ended; its meaning cannot be fully grasped within the first chapter of the Bible, even by the most thorough exegete. Rather, one must keep reading, and living in biblical faith, in order to know what our creation in the image of God yet might mean.<sup>32</sup>

The reasons why this is true, I am suggesting, lie with the canonical function of Gen 1(–11) as prologue to the canon of Scripture.<sup>33</sup>

To sum up, Genesis uses the phrase “image of God” to set us reading the canonical narrative with certain questions in mind, or, as one might say, “the image of God” serves as a hermeneutical lens through which to read the OT's subsequent narratives. But of what that image consists Genesis is

32. Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 55–56; cf. pp. 42–65 for her reading of Gen 1.

33. One may contrast the suggestive study of J. W. Rogerson, *A Theology of the Old Testament: Cultural Memory, Communication and Being Human* (London: SPCK, 2009), 171–95, where he writes that “being made in the divine image is essentially an ‘empty’ concept, one which has to be filled with meaning in the light of human history and what can be learned from it” (p. 192). Rogerson's view agrees that Gen 1 needs a “supplement” regarding the *imago Dei* but differs concerning what that supplement might be.

not overly concerned to make clear. One can achieve passing clarity by postulating the phrase as polemic set against other potential ways of understanding the image of God, but in my judgment this is worth less than the longer-term project of seeing how the canonical narrative will in the end fill out what is left of the anthropological question after it has been transferred into the scripturally primary categories of Israel and the church, and the God behind them who summons us to be readers who are disciples.

#### OTHER THINGS GENESIS DOES NOT MAKE CLEAR

If there is anything in this analysis, then it should prove helpful for many of the other topics that I might have been able to work into a book entitled *What Genesis Doesn't Say*. So, briefly, what else does Genesis not make clear? I suggest that the concerns of the argument presented here might militate against, for example, seeing overarching significance in categories such as "the fall" or the "days of creation" or matters of chronology or historical reference, to take just a few well-known examples. In these too, Gen 1–11 functions more like a question-setting prologue than a series of assertions.

As is well known, there is no Hebrew term for "fall" at any point in Gen 3, and only slightly less well known is that the language of "sin" is held back a chapter to 4:7, lurking at the door of a very angry Cain, and indeed about to ensnare him into the murder of his brother Abel. Genesis 4 certainly feels more like a narrative of sin than the eating of the fruit in the garden of Eden, which is a tale that has every bit as long a history of various options for interpretation as does the *imago Dei* clause.<sup>34</sup> There is certainly a long tradition of interpreters trying to find ways of using the text's reticence about fall or sin to find in Gen 3 some kind of narrative of maturation or "fall upwards," to the opened eyes of the knowledge of good and evil.<sup>35</sup> To my mind, such a reading has little chance of getting us to the heart of the logic of a text that sees cursing as the appropriate result of the tale (3:14–19), but it persists at least in part because of the presenting problem of trying to account for how evil has successfully entered God's good creation. Although there is no space to set out here a coherent reading of the narrative, it seems that Gen 3 is not an *explanation* of fallenness at all or yet a mysterious demonstration that the fall turned out to be a good thing really, but rather it is the simple yet profound *affirmation* that the world in which we live is caught between the tension of being the good

34. Among the massive literature, I have benefited most from Gary A. Anderson, *The Genesis of Perfection: Adam and Eve in Jewish and Christian Imagination* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

35. A good (indeed elegant) modern representative is Ellen van Wolde, *Stories of the Beginning: Genesis 1–11 and Other Creation Stories* (London: SCM, 1996), 34–73.

creation of God and also the fractured world that we experience. Genesis 3 does not so much *explain* this as it presents it, illustrates it, explores it even, in a narrative form designed to probe what is really at stake in our world. *Why* our world is this way is something Genesis does not make clear. *That* it is this way—this is its quite literally world-shaping claim, which carries consequences for every part of the canonical narrative that follows, all the way through to the end of the book of Revelation. So Gen 3 is a fall story of sorts, narrating the downward spiral of human relationality toward sin, death, and the distrust of truth represented by the serpent, but as Terence Fretheim suggests, it might be that the best way to handle the “fall” metaphor is in terms of its being a “falling out.” This seems more likely to get at the heart of the relational concerns of the narrative than trying to view Gen 3 as marking some primal moment of ontological fall.<sup>36</sup> And it is a mistake to think that Genesis makes clear how or why this is our human condition.

Regarding the six days of creation, it is really not clear in what sense the word *day* has currency here. On the one hand, it looks like a good argument that it cannot mean what we typically mean by “day” because the solar system as we know it is not in place until day four (1:14–18), but on the other, it seems entirely plausible that this is a story of God creating the world in six days—evenings, mornings, and all—and the fact that this is not what we would now say happened is really neither here nor there in reckoning what the text thought it was about. More generally, the chronologies of Genesis function in that wondrous hermeneutical space that Hans Frei characterized as ascriptive and realistic narrative, but not descriptive or historical as we now use those terms.<sup>37</sup> It is of course hard for many today to hear this as anything but a debate about whether Genesis is true or false, on the one hand, or literal or metaphorical (or schematic or whatever) on the other. Frei has, if you like, a third hand: (1) the text really means what it says, but (2) it has no interest in whether this makes it true (or literal for that matter) on anyone else’s terms than its own, and (3) those terms are not the ones we use most naturally today to talk about history, science, or truth. Hence Frei’s notion of realistic and history-like narrative, which was, nevertheless, not historical in the modern sense of the word.<sup>38</sup> And if we then ask what is at stake in Methuselah’s living to the ripe old age of 969 or Enoch’s being translated to heaven at a sprightly 365 (Gen 5:24), then the answer is that Genesis does not make this clear.

36. So Terence E. Fretheim, “Is Genesis 3 a Fall Story?” *WW* 14 (1994): 144–53, esp. p. 153.

37. For Frei the fateful shift in interpretation from seeing the biblical narrative function ascriptively to descriptively was *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, as the title of his major work had it (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

38. *Ibid.*, 10–12.

Is the flood “really” over all the earth? (And is it the same flood that gave rise to the Gilgamesh epic?) Or does the phrase “the waters swelled above the mountains, covering them fifteen cubits deep” (Gen 7:20) mean that the flood was “really big,” rather as if the narrator were some ancient television commentator forever reaching for world-beating superlatives: the greatest touchdown of all time, the biggest album in history, a flood that covered the whole earth, etc.

There is little profit in these questions because they all essentially ask, if Genesis were the kind of text that we could subsume to our own criteria for reading history-like texts, then how would it match up to what was historically or scientifically possible? But Genesis is not that kind of text. It is a unique canonical text, the only one ever to be the opening text of the collected Scripture of the God of Israel. It sets running all manner of interpretive hares that we must chase down through the long canonical journey from Eden to the new Jerusalem. We cannot run these hares to ground in the kind of soil we know today, as we wend our muddy way through the fields of the 21st century. We can only run them down in the *'adamah* of Genesis, a soil from which, uniquely, the Lord God fashioned the first *'adam*, in ways to which we know, if we are honest, that soil is not on the whole amenable. But this first *'adam*, male and female, was made in the image of God, and though Genesis does not make clear what this means, it invites us to take up and read a (canonical) narrative that will, in due course, reveal more than we could ever ask or imagine, as it paints rich and complex narrative portraits of life lived in the image of God.



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