

LOGOS QUESTIONS

What's So Unique About Being Human?



University of
St Andrews



LOGOS
Institute for Analytic and
Exegetical Theology

What's So Unique About Being Human?

Introduction

Christian theology has claimed that human beings are unique creatures. This claim is often made in reference to the book of Genesis which describes human beings as made in the “image and likeness of God”.¹ While this approach has great potential for illumination, it also has great potential for confusion. For instance, what does it mean to be “in the image and likeness of God?” Does this mean that we are like God in special ways? What could those be? Or maybe it just means we are different from the animals—but then, how are we unlike animals? Further, in Genesis humans are told to “have dominion” over the created world. What does this mean? Are we the chief species, and does the world revolve around us? Does this mean we can treat the world however we want to since we’re in charge? And how significant is maleness and femaleness for understanding the image? Fortunately, there is enough clarity in Genesis and in the New Testament to make some positive claims about humanity’s uniqueness. This booklet will seek to highlight what those claims are and tease out some of their implications.

¹ Whether one takes the creation narrative literally or literarily, the theological points regarding the nature of humanity still remain.

What Don't These Texts Tell Us?

I think it's important to clarify what this text does not mean since so much speculation throughout church history has taken place regarding the phrase, "in the image and likeness of God" (Gen 1:26). First of all, the text states that humanity is made *in* God's image and likeness, which seems to communicate that humanity is not *the* image itself. In all of the Genesis texts where image or likeness language is used describing human beings, the prepositions, "in," or "according to," are retained (Gen 1:26-27; 5:1-2; 9:6). If the author(s) had wanted to communicate that human beings *are* the image and likeness of God, dropping those prepositions would have made this clear. However, many scholars think these prepositions were kept in place for the very reason of maintaining the gap between God and humans.² In other words, to be God's image itself would elevate humans to a plane of existence too far beyond what creatures can be, thus they are patterned *after* the image.

Secondly, the actual content of the image is left unclear in this text. While the text states that both male and female are created in this image, maleness and femaleness are not explicitly the content of the image.³ In fact, this sexual difference is shared with the animal kinds. Relatedly, even though the text states, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over ...," dominion itself is not explicitly the content of the image either—although it does seem to be a tightly related consequence of humans being uniquely in God's image. Missing from this text is any attribute that we can clearly say is the image of God, be it rationality, creativity, having a soul, etc. So, we are left to wonder what these texts can tell us about human uniqueness, and that is where we will turn now.

² Catherine L. McDowell, *The Image of God in the Garden of Eden: The Creation of Humankind in Genesis 2:5-3:24 in Light of the Mis Pi Pit Pi and Wpt-r Rituals of Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt*, Siphut: Literature and Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures, (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 118, 137. Other scholars who take this view include Wenham, Gunkel, Barr, Trible, Westermann, and Macaskill.

³ The emphasis on maleness and femaleness does not mean that persons born intersex are not in the image of God. Precisely because maleness and femaleness is not the content of the image of God supports this view. See, Megan K. DeFranza, *Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female, and Intersex in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015).

What Do These Texts Tell Us?

We are still able to say something *positive* about this designation. First, humanity must be understood *in relation to God*, as humans are made “in the image of God.” Being in God’s image establishes humanity’s unique identity as they are the only creatures given this designation.

“Being in God’s image establishes humanity’s unique identity as they are the only creatures given this designation.”

Second, while humans share ‘creatureliness’ with the rest of the world, their unique identity of being “in the image of God” seems to be the reason for being given dominion over the earth.⁴ This kind of dominion is not a harsh rule, but a stewarding of creation toward its maximum flourishing.⁵

Scholars such as Richard Middleton see this dominion mandate as a kind of representation of God. Thus, there is a special kind of representation of God’s presence in the world via humanity.⁶ Notably, the charge of having dominion connects to the divine presence and is given to the man and woman equally. Michael Morales provides helpful insight here as dominion centres on the life-giving presence of God and humanity’s unique fellowship with God:

No doubt this status entitles man (hā’ ādām), male and female, to rule and subdue the rest of creation, but the primary blessing of being created in God’s image is in order to have fellowship with the Creator in a way the other creatures cannot. The ‘rule and subdue’ command, along with the ‘be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth’ blessing, should be directed to this chief end and highest goal—hā’ ādām is to gather all creation into the life-giving Presence and praise of God.⁷

Third, such representation is also meant to be expanded as God charges them to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” (Gen 1:28). Here, maleness and femaleness are prerequisites for humanity to reproduce and extend into the world, but their maleness and femaleness are not prerequisites to being in the image of God. In fact, the capacity to reproduce is held

⁴Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Crossway, 2012), 189.

⁵Richard Bauckham, *Living with Other Creatures: Green Exegesis & Theology* (Waco, Tex: Baylor University Press, 2011); Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading Of The Bible*, 1 edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁶J. Richard Middleton, *Liberating Image, The: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005); J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Baker Academic, 2014).

⁷L. Michael Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord?: A Biblical Theology of the Book of Leviticus* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2015), 46-47.

in common with many other creatures and should not be understood as the content of the image of God.

Fourth, when read in conjunction with Genesis 5:1-2 and 9:6, being in the image of God does not seem to be lost even though humanity sinned. These texts reiterate that humans are still made in God's image and likeness even after humans defy God's command. Genesis 9:6 even uses humanity's being in the image as the rationale for prohibiting murder, implying that humanity is still made in God's image.

Fifth, being in the image of God is not located in any given attribute or embodiment but includes the entire person.

Thus, we see that humanity has a unique identity and function and is meant to expand throughout the earth, and by implication—spread God's presence ever outward. This implication will be strengthened by looking at the context of these Genesis texts.

What Does the Context of These Texts Tell Us?

How Eden was understood will help underscore the dignity of humanity since sacred spaces entailed sacred duties.⁸ Many scholars now think that Eden functioned as either part of God's temple, the temple itself, or was modelled after a heavenly temple. This thinking comes from looking across the Hebrew Bible, and much of this belief comes from comparing Israel's origin story with those of Israel's surrounding neighbours.

In the thought world of Israel's neighbours, the role of the temple was to serve as a place where the god rested and was served by the god's creation. Significantly, this was the localized space of God's presence. Often, in the most sacred part of this temple would be the image of the deity. This image was understood to embody the very presence of the deity. In other words, where this image was, so was the deity's presence. Similarly, Eden was understood to be a sacred space, and creatures made in God's image were meant to represent this presence through their task of dominion. However, in contrast to these surrounding cultures, Eden is where God dwelt with the created world, and the created world then responded in worship to God. God goes to great lengths to provide for the man and the woman, and they are not simply made to serve God's whims. Humanity is charged with a unique function stemming from their unique identity as creatures made in God's image. As such, the man and the woman functioned as priests and representatives of this presence.

Such a reading finds support since the same verb for "walking" that God is doing in the Garden is also used for the presence of God walking in the tabernacle (Lev. 26:12, Deut. 23:14, 2 Sam. 7:6-7).⁹ Further, the duties given to humanity in Genesis 2:15 were the same duties given to the Levites evidenced by the use of "to work" and "to keep/guard" the sanctuary.¹⁰ According to Desmond Alexander, "[b]ecause they met God face to face in a holy place, we may assume that Adam and Eve had a holy or priestly status. Only priests were permitted to serve within a sanctuary or temple."¹¹ Finally, Israel was intended, as a people, to spread God's presence in the world as a kingdom of priests (Ex. 19:5-6). Such a national vocation was analogous to the original vocation of all humanity.

⁸T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*, 3rd edition (Baker Academic, 2012); Gregory K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004); John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One*, First edition (Downers Grove, IL: IVP USA, 2009).

⁹Alexander, *From Paradise to Promised Land*, 123; cf. Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom and Covenant*, 212-213. William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: An Old Testament Covenant Theology*, 2nd edition (Exeter: Paternoster, 2013), 59.

¹⁰See Gordon J. Wenham, "Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story," in *Cult and Cosmos: Tilting toward a Temple-Centered Theology*, 2014, Morales, Michael L. ed., Biblical Tools and Studies, volume 18, Leuven: Peeters, 163-164.

¹¹Alexander, *From Paradise to Promised Land*, 125.

Additionally, in Ancient Near Eastern cultures, the king was often understood as the image of the deity. Thus, contextually, a strong royal undertone to images exists. In the Genesis account, humanity is made in the image of the Cosmos Creator—the highest status creatures could have.

“they are in the image of the Ruler of the cosmos as conduits for God’s rule and presence—they are royal representatives.”

However, here there is a significant difference from Ancient Near Eastern backdrops in that the humans are not the image and are not the presence of God themselves. Humans are distinct *from* God though uniquely related *to* God. They are intended to be in God’s presence, and

part of their dominion mandate is to spread God’s presence into all the earth. This is a life-giving presence of flourishing; man and woman were meant to steward this to see God’s presence fill the earth. As such, they are in the image of the Ruler of the cosmos as conduits for God’s rule and presence—they are royal representatives. Thus, while the content of the image of God is not expressly stated in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), the consequence of being in the image of God seems to involve the expansion of God’s reign in all the earth as royal priests.

Cast against this backdrop of sacred space, the Genesis story is incredibly dignifying to the whole cosmos. This cosmic temple is not a stagnant locale but is intended to expand through the stewardship of the man and the woman, those who are in the image of God. Through their relationship to God, they are meant to see God’s presence increase throughout the entire earth.¹² Through filling the earth, the reign of God was intended to spread throughout the created world as a vocational consequence of man and woman being made in the image of God. This presence-expansion was their act of worship as archetypal rulers and priests.

¹² Alexander, *From Paradise to Promised Land*, 125.

Does the New Testament Add to this Context?

While the Genesis texts and the surrounding context has illuminated the unique identity and function of being made in God's image, the content of the image itself has remained elusive. However, the New Testament provides explicit content to the concept of the image and likeness of God. This content is a person: Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Temple—the presence of God—and the true image. No longer do any prepositions stand before “image of God,” (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15, equiv. Heb. 1:3), since it is in *his* image that humanity was patterned after.¹³

Through the atoning work of Jesus Christ, all humanity is invited into becoming this image, which is the end for which it was already intended (Col. 3:10; Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 15:49; 2 Cor. 3:18). This invitation is enacted by the Holy Spirit and enables becoming more like the true image of God as a member of the royal priesthood and as vessels of the divine presence. Consequently, such an invitation is both individual and corporate as the New Testament Epistles declare that the individual is the temple of God (1 Cor. 6:19), the church is the temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16, Eph. 2:21), and a royal priesthood (1 Pet. 2:5, 9; Rev. 5:10). This vocation is open to all of humanity as we are invited to partner with the Spirit of Christ in expanding the presence of God in all the earth through “making disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19).

Thus, only humans are deemed “in the image of God,” and God's relation to humanity constitutes this identity. This relation includes the divine intention that humankind become like the true image which requires remaining in the divine presence, and eventually, having the divine presence remain in them. This identity also carries with it attendant functions. In consequence, this identity is not a stagnant association since humans are intended to become ever like the true image, through God's Spirit, while inviting all of humanity into this spiritual family.

¹³ The fact that Jesus is identified with the image, and is the original after which all humanity is patterned since the Son pre-existed all creation, is a possible reason that “in” and “according to” are consistently used in talking about humans and the image but why they drop out when speaking of the Son of God as the image.

Why Does This Matter?

One of the most significant ways this understanding of human uniqueness affects how we live is to recognize that we are all patterned after the true image of Jesus Christ and as such share in the dignity of that status. However, this also means that Jesus is the standard for what it looks like to flourish as a human person. Moving toward this standard requires a reliance on God's presence (as the Holy Spirit) as we are simultaneously representatives of that presence in the world. Thus, the gracious gift of participation in the life of God (our identity) invites us into the purposes of God (our function). No longer is the Christian life about holding on until the eschaton, but it is an inaugurated eschatology—a reality and a hope that is accessible and empowering today.

**“ the gracious gift of participation
in the life of God (our identity)
invites us into the purposes of
God (our function) ”**

Further, all human beings share in this status, even if we are not all moving toward becoming like the standard. This enables us to see all other humans as unimpeachably valuable. When we discuss human rights or care for our neighbour, each person's value is grounded in the profound dignity God has

given humankind as uniquely patterned after Christ, related to Godself, and tasked with caring for this world. This value is unchanged regardless of whether a person wants to relate to God in a personal way, or not. It is also not based on intelligence, gender, citizenship, ability, or any other attribute that someone can have in more or lesser degrees.

A third way this affects how we live is that we are meant to care for this world as God would care for it. If we understand dominion as stewardship, then an immediate consequence of being in God's image is to care for the world around us. In fact, based solely on the text, this is the express consequence of being made in God's image. This should raise questions for us on how we are doing at this divinely given function. For instance, asking questions about our consumption habits such as: how did this food arrive on my plate? Was the creature allowed to flourish? How did this clothing get on my back? Were sustainable methods used for its production? are just some of the questions we can begin to ask ourselves. While these questions are challenging, we can start making incremental changes to be better stewards of the world in which we live.

Conclusion: So, What Does it Mean to be Human?

The pressure of interpreting what it means to be human flows from the embodied Logos (Jesus Christ) to the human person, while also recognizing that the true image of God is fully God in a way that humans will never experience. Such a distinction seems evident in that just as Eden was the primordial meeting of heaven and earth, Jesus is the embodiment of heaven meeting earth. Just as humanity was meant to represent God through righteous rulership, Jesus is the true king enacting God's kingdom on earth. Just as humanity was meant to be the priesthood worshipping God and expanding divine presence, Jesus is the perfect high priest and embodiment of the divine presence. Just as the temple was the prescribed space for God to dwell among Israel, Jesus is the new temple who perpetually dwells in his people by the Spirit. Jesus is all of this as the true image of God after whom humanity is patterned and into whose likeness we are all meant to be conformed.

Further Reading

1. Cortez, Marc. *ReSourcing Theological Anthropology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018
2. F. Davis, Ellen F. 2009 *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
3. Kilner, John F. *Dignity and Destiny*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014
4. Peterson, Ryan S. *Imago Dei as Human Identity*. Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2016

For an excellent resource on creation care, see <https://www.becreaturekind.org>

Author Information

Christa L. McKirland (PhD, University of St Andrews) is a Research Fellow in the Logos Institute. Her research proposes a pneumatologically-Christocentric anthropology based upon the significance and uniqueness of the fundamental human need for union with the divine presence. She is also the Executive Director of Logia, an organisation within the Logos Institute that seeks to encourage and equip women across the Divinity disciplines thereby enriching the academy and the church.



The Logos Institute at the University of St Andrews is a centre for excellence in the study of analytic and exegetical theology. It is committed to scholarship that reflects a concern for: transparency; simplicity in expression; clear, logical argumentation; and rigorous analysis. It also reflects a radical commitment to interdisciplinary engagement, particularly between the fields of philosophy, theology, biblical studies, and the sciences. Its faculty consists of world-leading scholars in the fields of biblical studies, theology, and philosophy.

These booklets are supported by generous funding from the Templeton Religion Trust.

You can find out more, and find our regular blog and podcast by searching for us on facebook or at: <http://logos.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk>

Cover image: Thanks to @AlasdairImes for making this photo available freely on @unsplash