J. Richard Middleton, "Image of God," in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Ethics,* ed. by Robert L. Brawley et al. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

IMAGE OF GOD

In the HB humans are expressly created "in" (*bĕ-*) or "according to" (*kĕ-*) the "image" *(ṣelem*) and "likeness" (*dĕmut*) of God (Gen 1:26-27; 5:1; and 9:6). Because the Hebrew nouns and prepositions in these texts can have diverse meanings, depending on context, lexical data alone are insufficient to clarify the meaning of the *imago Dei*. The syntax of Gen 1:26 connects the *imago Dei* with human rule over animals and the earth; Gen 1:27 specifies that the image applies to both male and female. Genesis 5:1 and 9:6 indicate that humans are still in the image of God after sin; Gen 9:6 uses the *imago Dei* as prohibitive grounds against murder.

The *imago Dei* appears in some Deuterocanonical writings. Wisdom 2:23 equates the image of God with immortality. Closely aligned with Gen 1:26, Sir 17:3-4 notes that humans have strength like God and dominion over animals; in 2 Esd 8:44 *imago Dei* is the basis for petitioning God's mercy to Israel.

In the NT the creation of humans in God's image (*eikōn*) or likeness (*homoiōsis*) is limited to 1 Cor 11:7 and Jas 3:9; in both the *imago Dei* grounds ethical behavior. Other NT texts refer to Christ as the paradigmatic image of God (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15; Heb 1:3) and to the church as the new humanity, conformed to the image of Christ (Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 15:49; 2 Cor 3:18; Eph 5:1-2; 1 John 3:2-3) or renewed in the image of God (Eph 4:22-24; Col 3:9-10).

The lexical ambiguities of "image" terminology in both Hebrew and Greek, the paucity of biblical references to the image of God, and the difference among texts related to creation and those referring to redemption means that any articulation of the meaning of "image of God"

must be a constructive task, coordinating the data by means of an interpretive framework (Middleton 2005, 15-42).

Substantialistic Interpretation: The Classical Paradigm

Historically, Christian interpretation of "image of God" has been dominated by a classical paradigm dependent on Platonism. Beginning in the patristic era and continuing into the twentieth century, the *imago Dei* was understood as the human mind, which reflects or participates in the mind of God. This understanding of rationality as key to the divine image has been called "substantialistic," since the rational soul or mind in Platonic metaphysics is regarded as a separable, immaterial "substance" or essence, like divine reason but unlike bodies or animals. Although rationality is typically the core characteristic of *imago Dei* in substantialism, other qualities such as conscience, spirituality, freedom, or personhood are sometimes added. Augustine (*De Trinitate* 7-15) speculated that an intra-psychic triad of memory, understanding, and will corresponds to God's triune nature.

A second approach to the divine image has been termed "relational," focusing not on what it means to be human in an abstract way but rather on the dynamism of relationship. There are two different types of relational interpretations. One, addressing the ethical dimension of the image, is usually considered an addition to the classical paradigm; the other is ontological and relational in character.

An Ethical Approach

Ireneaus (*Adversus Haereses*, 4.4.3; 5.16.2) distinguished "image" as rationality and freedom (the structure of humanness) from "likeness" as moral similarity to God, corrupted by sin and

restored in Christ. Building on Irenaeus's thought, the Greek Orthodox tradition developed the doctrine of "deification" or "theosis," the soul's progressive conformity to God. Similar to Ireneaus, Calvin (*Genesis* 91-97; *Institutes* 1:55-65) articulated the distinction between *humanitas* and *conformitas*: a "formal" image (constitutive of humanness) and a "material" image (conceived dynamically, as an ethical category). Unlike Irenaeus, he did not associate this distinction with the terms "image" and "likeness." (Contemporary biblical scholarship agrees with Calvin, against Irenaeus, that the terms are virtually synonymous in Genesis). Although Luther ("Lectures on Genesis Chapters 1–5") limited the *imago Dei* to an original ethical righteousness (*justia originalis*) that was entirely lost after the fall but may be restored through salvation in Christ, the *humanitas*/*conformitas* distinction became central to later Calvinist and Lutheran theology.

A Relational Interpretation

In the twentieth century two new paradigms arose for interpreting the *imago Dei*, dependent on historical-critical OT interpretation and Christian systematic theology. The most popular, explicitly theological approach is found in the works of Karl Barth (1886–1968), who rejected substance metaphysics and understood both God and humanity resolutely in terms of "relationship." While the early Barth (Barth and Brunner 1948) followed Luther in viewing the image as ethical comportment lost through sin, Barth later came to understand two sets of relationships as ontologically constitutive of humanness and essential to the image of God. Barth claimed that both human relationality with God (the ability to be addressed by and respond to God as covenant–partner) and inter-human relationality (symbolized by "male and female" in Gen 1:27) reflect the intra-divine relationships of the triune God. Suggesting that the plural

formulations of Gen 1:26 ("let *us* make humanity in *our* image") vaguely approximate the later notion of the Trinity, Barth argued that humans are made in the image of this divine prototype, which already involves unity, diversity, and relationship (*CD* 3.1.185; 3.1.192-97).

More recently versions of a "relational" interpretation of the *imago Dei* have been linked even more explicitly to Trinitarian theology, especially the "social" Trinity (Grenz, among others). Beginning with Barth's notion of inter-human, human-divine, and intra-divine (Trinitarian) relationality, Grenz further proposes that the *imago Dei* should be understood Christologically: Christ is the true human, and conformity of the redeemed ecclesia to Christ (a community of persons in relationship, participating in the divine life) is the ultimate goal of the *imago Dei*.

Versions of a Barthian understanding of the *imago Dei* as "relationship" have become so dominant that the majority interpretation of the image among biblical interpreters has often been excluded from consideration. Although there are dissenters (such as Westermann [142-61], who holds a modified Barthian interpretation, and Barr, who reckons the *imago Dei* as intentionally unspecified in Genesis), most biblical scholars approach the meaning of the divine image with what could be called a royal or functional paradigm, which takes into account the OT's ancient Near Eastern conceptual world and socio-historical background.

Royal-Functional Interpretation: The Dominant Old Testament Paradigm

Ancient Near Eastern understandings of images comport with the relationship implicit in Genesis 1, between humans created in God's image and their resulting commission by God to rule the earth (vv. 26-28), and the relationship evident in Ps 8:5-6, where humans are made a little less than *'ĕlohîm* (God/ divine beings) with authority over God's works.

Von Rad (60) suggested that the images or statues that kings erected as symbols of their rule provide the model for Genesis's understanding of humanity as the image of God. Yet this analogy is not the most important; it derives from a more fundamental practice in the ancient Near East concerning images *of the gods*. Various Egyptian and Mesopotamian kings were called "the image" of particular deities. In Egyptian and Mesopotamian royal ideology the king was believed to be the royal representative of the gods on earth, a personal manifestation of divine presence and authority, through whom the gods rule the nation. Likewise, statues of the gods placed in temples were thought to be physical sites of divine power and presence on earth. These royal/cultic practices provide a conceptual background for understanding the human role in the cosmos as analogous to that of a king's ruling over his nation: like a statue in a temple, the king was understood as a visible "image" of the gods, mediating their rule (Middleton 2005, 104-22). By extension, as *imago Dei*, embodied humanity is portrayed as responsible for administering the earthly realm as the creator's authorized representatives, with delegated power.

Ethical Objections to the Royal Interpretation

Ethical objections have been raised against this "royal" interpretation of the *imago Dei*, on the grounds that it might legitimate violent abuse of human power. Because God's exercise of power in the Bible is often violent, such abuse of human power seems validated. Other objections focus on the language of "dominion" and "subduing" in Gen 1:26-28: such language uses characteristically male models of power, is reminiscent of monarchical abuses in earlier times, or reflects a tendency toward authoritarianism among current religious groups. Others argue that a royal understanding of the *imago Dei* places humanity in an adversarial position vis-à-vis the non-human world, with detrimental ecological consequences.

These objections should be taken seriously and may be answered. If God is indeed the model for the exercise of human power, we should focus on the portrayal of divine power in the creation account of Genesis 1—the immediate context of the *imago Dei* notion—wherein God creates non-violently, in contrast to the Babylonian gods in *Enuma Elish*. God even shares power with creatures (especially, though not only, humanity), endowing them with blessing and fertility and inviting them to participate in further creative activity (Middleton 2005, 235-97).

The resulting picture of authorized human power, not only in Genesis 1 but also throughout the Primeval History (Gen 1–11), suggests a critique of ancient Near Eastern imperial ideology, whereby kings claimed absolute power. The democratization of power intended by the biblical *imago Dei* grounds the participation of ordinary human beings in cultural development, as they work towards the enhancement of blessing and the flourishing of earthly life (Middleton 2005, 185–231).

The verbs "rule" and "subdue" sound violent to modern ears, because after the seventeenth century such terminology was taken as a mandate for exploiting "nature." However, viewed in its ancient historical context, this language pointed to no more than the strenuous exercise of human power and ingenuity in agriculture, animal husbandry, and other cultural arts, all dignified with a royal hue.

This understanding of *imago Dei* may be further nuanced. In the ancient Near East *imago Dei* was linked to the king's role in developing civilization or culture as builder, lawgiver, and patron of the arts. Mesopotamian kings were even charged with overseeing the irrigation system on which agriculture depended. This ancient connection of dominion with agriculture illuminates the link between the royal function delegated to humanity in Genesis 1 and Psalm 8 and the commission of humans to tend the garden in Gen 2:15 (Middleton 2014).

The Primeval History (Gen 1–11) also connects the *imago Dei* with cultural development. Created in God's image, commissioned to rule the earth and tend the garden, humans build the first city and invent nomadic livestock herding, musical instruments, and metallurgy (Gen 4:17, 20-22): cultural and technological innovations typically ascribed to gods or kings in the ancient Near East.

Further evidence for linking the *imago Dei* with cultural development is found in a summary statement of God's creation of the world in Prov 3:19-20:

> The LORD by wisdom [*ḥokmâ*] founded the earth;
>
> by understanding [*tĕbunâ*] he established the heavens;
>
> by his knowledge [*da'at*] the deeps broke open,
>
> and the clouds drop down the dew.

Later in Proverbs (24:3-4) the same triad of wisdom terms is applied to a human act of cultural construction:

> By wisdom [*ḥokmâ*] a house is built,
>
> and by understanding [*tĕbunâ*] it is established;
>
> by knowledge [*da'at*] the rooms are filled
>
> with all precious and pleasant riches.

This parallel between divine creative activity and human building projects suggests how humans are images of God.

Ancient Near Eastern cosmology typically pictures the cosmos as a building constructed by the gods (Van Leeuwen). As the image of the gods, kings were regarded as preeminent builders on earth: Gilgamesh builds Uruk (*Epic of Gilgamesh*, Tablet 1); Solomon builds palace and temple (1 Kgs 7:1-14). The Bible, however, understands *all* human beings to be created in God's image, thus able to manifest the wisdom of God in their cultural projects.

Theological Objections to the Functional Paradigm

A prominent objection to a royal-functional interpretation of the *imago Dei* has been lodged by Kelsey in three "Codas" of his two-volume work on theological anthropology (895–1050). Exploring the views of representative OT scholars who support the functional paradigm (von Rad, Bird, Middleton), as well as the alternative views of Westermann and Barth, Kelsey argues that these differing proposals for the meaning of the divine image cancel each other out (924-36). (This is a *non sequitur*: disagreement among interpreters does not mean that none is right.) Kelsey dissents from the royal-functional paradigm, as well as the proposals by Barth and Westermann, for a set of complex reasons, related to his basic theological assumptions.

Kelsey's theological project is predicated on his ability to distinguish, throughout the Bible, between three different narratives of God relating to all that is not-God, each with its own logic: the narratives of God as creator, as the One who draws all to eschatological blessing, and as redeemer of all who are estranged. Correspondingly, Kelsey distinguishes three different anthropological questions: *what* humans are, *who* they are, and *how* they are to live. Kelsey aligns the trinitarian formulations of the Father, the Spirit, and the Son with, respectively, the first, second, and third questions and narratives. Kelsey's substantive claim is that Christian theology should focus on the use of the *imago Dei*, not in the OT. but in the NT (936-56),

especially in those texts that describe Christ as the image of God (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15-20; Heb 1:3; 956–1007). This leads Kelsey to the conclusion that, whereas Christ is simply the image of God, humans are the image of the image of God (1008-50).

Kelsey's approach and argument illustrate a fundamental difference between paradigms employed by theologians and biblical scholars, which may be traced to different kinds of disciplinary training. Theologians, even those engaged in detailed exegesis (as Kelsey is), seem to biblical scholars to soar at an altitude high above the biblical landscape. Biblical scholars, even those interested in theology, seem to theologians to fly low over the textual terrain, building up their theological framework text by text. Because their hermeneutical assumptions are different, there is no neutral, extra-paradigmatic means of adjudicating such paradigms. The best that both biblical scholars, interested in the theology of the *imago Dei*, and biblically informed theologians can do is to build a case for the meaning they discern, then ask readers to judge for themselves.

New Directions in the Biblical Paradigm: The Cultic-Priestly Motif

The unifying function of a royal-functional interpretation of the *imago Dei* across the OT and NT is clarified by the cultic-priestly motif implicit in this paradigm. The image of God, in other words, involves more than the exercise of authority on behalf of God or the gods; it also involves the mediation of divine presence from heaven to earth. Recent scholarship has begun to take greater cognizance of the image's cultic-priestly or sacramental dimension (Herring 2013).

This sacramental interpretation begins by noting that the cosmos was typically viewed in the ancient Near East, not as just any building, but specifically as a temple. This understanding is implicit in Genesis 1, which is structured around the number *seven* (associated in the OT and the

ancient Near East with the building of temples [Middleton 2005, 83-85]), and in Psalm 148, which calls all creatures to praise their creator as a host of worshipers in a cosmic sanctuary. This understanding of cosmos as temple is explicit in Isa 66:1, where YHWH challenges those rebuilding the Jerusalem temple after the exile: "Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool; / what is the house that you would build for me, / and what is my resting place?"

The notion of heaven as the place of God's throne, the cosmic holy of holies where the divine presence is concentrated and from which YHWH rules the earth, is standard in the OT. It is the background of YHWH's hearing prayers offered on earth and coming down to liberate Israel from their bondage in Egypt (as in Exodus) or to deliver individuals in their time of trouble (thus, the Psalms). Within this context the human being may be understood as God's cultic image, located in the cosmic temple as a visible and tangible site of the divine presence on earth. Humanity is God's royal priest in the world, and the task of cultural development is a sacred calling.

Allusion to this cultic or sacramental dimension of the *imago Dei* is found in the account of Bezalel, who is authorized with overseeing the building of the tabernacle in the wilderness (Exod 31:1-5 // 35:30-33). Bezalel is filled with the Spirit of God and with wisdom (*ḥokmâ*), understanding (*tĕbunâ*), and knowledge (*da'at*) "to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, in every kind of craft" (Exod 31:2-5). The triad of wisdom, understanding, and knowledge mirrors God's creation of the cosmos (Prov 3:19-20); moreover, Bezalel's work in "every kind of craft" (Exod 31:5) reflects God's completing "all the work" of creation (Gen 2:2-3). (Despite the differences in translation, the Hebrew wording is identical.) Taken together, these resonances suggest that the tabernacle is a micrcosm of the created order, which is itself a cosmic sanctuary: the tabernacle writ large.

Given this correspondence of microcosm with macrocosm, Bezalel's being filled with the Spirit of God (*rûaḥ ʾĕlohîm* [Exod 31:2]) may be read in connection with the presence of *rûaḥ ʾĕlohîm*, hovering over the waters in Genesis 1:2. The presence of the Spirit suggests that God is preparing to breathe the divine presence into creation, much as the tabernacle and, later, the Jerusalem temple were filled with the glory (*Shekinah*) of God after their dedication (Exod 40:34-35; 1 Kgs 8:10-11).

When the cosmos is completed at the end of Genesis 1 and God rests from his work (Gen 2), there is no mention of any filling with the divine presence. Interpreted in its canonical context, the Spirit-filling is delayed until the garden narrative of Genesis 2. There God, having molded the human being from the dust, breathes his breath (*nišmâ*) into the inanimate creature, which results in the creature's becoming a living being (*nepeš ḥayyâ*). Genesis 2 bears many of the marks of the Mesopotamian ritual known as the *mïs pî* or *pït pî*, the "washing" or "opening of the mouth": a ritual, known from various Assyrian and Babylonian tablets, which typically took place in a sacred grove beside a river (cf. Gen 2:10, 13-14; see Schüle; Beckerleg; Herring, 2008). This ritual's purpose was to vivify a newly carved cult statue so that it would become a living entity, imbued with the spirit and presence of the deity of which it was an image. The image was thus "transubstantiated" (Jacobsen, 1987): transformed from an inert object to a living, breathing, manifestation of the deity on earth.

When read against this ancient Near Eastern background, Genesis 1 (P) and 2 (J) demonstrate a profound harmony with each other, despite their genuine differences. In both texts the human being is understood as the authorized cult statue in the cosmic temple, the decisive locus of divine presence on earth, the living image of God in the world. This understanding of humanity's role means that the Creator never intended the divine presence or Spirit to fill the

cosmic temple automatically; rather, that is precisely the vocation of humanity, the bearer of this presence. It was God's purpose, from the beginning, to bring the cosmic temple to its intended destiny by human agency, in cooperation with God. By filling the earth with progeny (Gen 1:28) who flourish in accordance with God's wisdom, humanity brings delight to its maker and extends the presence of God from heaven to earth till the earth is filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea (cf. Num 14:21; Isa 11:9; Hab 2:14)—or, to use Pauline language (1 Cor 15:28), when God will be all in all (Middleton 2014)

The *Imago Dei* versus Violence and Idolatry in the Old Testament

Tragically, humanity has filled the earth not simply with progeny but also with violence (see the ironic comment of Gen 6:11 on the commission in 1:28). In Gen 1:31 God looked at all he had made and saw that it was "very good"; later God sees that the "evil" of humanity has become "great" on the earth (6:5). These ironies build on God's earlier statement that the human being, created to be God's image, has now indeed become "like one of us" (3:22)—though not in the appropriate sense.

From this point the biblical narrative relates a conflictual story: God's purposes for the restoration of *shalom* in earthly life are in tension with human propensity to misuse the vocation of *imago Dei*, including the construction and worship of idols (false images of the divine). Since violence has impeded, but not obliterated, the human calling to be God's image on earth, the OT tells of God's intervention in history to set things right, initially through the election of Abraham and his descendants as a "royal priesthood" (Exod. 19:6) to mediate blessing to all families and nations (Gen 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14). Israel's vocation vis-à-vis the nations is thus analogous to the human calling as *imago Dei* vis-à-vis the earth. The redemption of Israel

constitutes the beginning of God's renewal of the image, a process ultimately spreading to the entire human race.

Significantly, Israel, as representative of humanity, is portrayed in Ezekiel as God's true image in the world, in contrast to idols. Much of the language in Ezekiel 16 describing Israel's turn to idols (vv. 15-19) is first used by YHWH to portray his relationship to Israel: washing them, clothing them, and adorning them with gold and silver (vv. 8-14). Israel is meant to be God's own cult statue in the world (Fletcher-Louis).

The *imago Dei* theme recurs in Deutero-Isaiah (Isa 40–55), where the presence of God's *rûaḥ* on the servant of YHWH enables him to accomplish justice for the nations (Isa 42:1-4), in contrast to the images of the nations, which are impotent, "empty wind" (*rûaḥ vatohû*: Isa 41:29). YHWH is identified as the one who gives "breath" (*nišmâ*) and "spirit" (*rûaḥ*) to humanity (42:5). This contrast between idols and humans in Isaiah recalls the statement in other prophetic texts that the images of the nations are false precisely because they have no *rûaḥ* in them (Jer 10:14; 51:17; Hab 2:19); thus, unlike humans, they are not living images and have no power to act in the world (Janzen).

The *Imago Dei* in the New Testament

A cultic-priestly understanding of the *imago Dei* not only completes the meaning of the human vocation, both in its dignity and in its tragic corruption; it also provides a basis for understanding the NT claim that Jesus is God-with-us (Matt 1:22-23), the paradigmatic *imago Dei* (Col 1:15; Heb 1:3; 2 Cor 4:4-6). Humanity as God's image clearly failed in its priestly vocation to be the bond between heaven and earth. This vocation was faithfully fulfilled by Jesus, the second Adam (1 Cor 15:22, 25), the one who completely manifested God's character and presence in his life

(John 14:9). Through the obedience of Jesus, even to death on a cross, humanity's tragic failure has been reversed (Rom 5:17-19).

This interpretation grounds the Pauline notion that the risen Jesus has become the head of an international community of Jew and Gentile, reconciled to each other and to God and indwelt by God's Spirit. The church is thus the "new humanity" (a better translation than the NRSV's "new self"), renewed in the image of God (Eph 4:24; Col 3:9-10) and called to live up to the stature of Christ, whose perfect imaging becomes the model for the life of the redeemed (Phil 2:5; Eph. 4:13-16, 24; 5:1-2; Col. 3:13). Indeed, the church will one day be conformed to the full likeness of Christ, which will include the resurrection of the body (1 Cor 15:49; cf. 1 John 3:2).

Whereas the church is now God's temple (1 Cor 3:16-17; 6:19; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:21) indwelt by the Holy Spirit as a foretaste of that promised future, the day will come when the curse is removed from the earth—a reversal of Gen 3:17—and God's dwelling will no longer be confined to heaven. Instead, God's throne will permanently be established on a renewed earth (Rev 21:3; 22:3), and those ransomed by Christ from all tribes and nations will reign as priests forever (Rev 5:9-10; 22:5). This climactic fulfillment of the *imago Dei* is portrayed through the figure of the New Jerusalem, which comprises both redeemed people and holy city, and is described as a cube (Rev 21:16): the distinctive shape of the holy of holies in the Jerusalem temple (1 Kgs 6:20; Ezek 41:4). Thus the city-as-people is the center of God's presence in a renewed cosmos (Middleton 2014).

While there remain conflicting interpretations of the *imago Dei*, the cultic-priestly understanding presented here provides an interpretive lens that unifies the entire canonical story from creation to eschaton.

See also Adam, Last; Adam, Primeval Man; Adoption; Anthropology, Biblical and Theological; Authority and Order; Blessing and Curse; Call; Christology; Creation; Cult and Worship; Deutero-Paulije Letters, Theology of; Ecclesiology; Eden; Election; Escahtology; Ethic, Biblical; Ezekiel, Theology of; Genesis, Theology of; Glory; God and gods; Heaven and Earth; Historical Narratives (Joshua–2 Kings); Holiness; Holy Spirit; Idol, Idolatry; Isaiah, Theology of; Jeremiah, Theology of; King, Kingship; Knowledge; Nature and Natural Resources; Paul, Letters of, Theology of; Priest(s), Priesthood, Theology of; Psalms, Theology of; Redemption; Sin; Theology, Biblical; Trinity; Wisdom Writings, Theology of.

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