
FAQ

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Image of God, Rulership

J.K. McKee revised 12 August, 2019

Is it not true that the image of God placed upon humans is just the capacity to rule Planet Earth?

No Bible reader can deny that the human race, different from all other creatures on Earth, bears a unique imprint from its Creator. In Genesis 1:26 we see, “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (NASU). Humankind made *b’tzelem Elohim* (בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים) undeniably involves a special and unique imprint on men and women from another dimension, which the animals most especially lack.

There has been a great deal of discussion, debate, and speculation over the millennia by Judaism and Christianity as to what the “image of God” or *imago Dei* actually is. Because of the image of God granted to humans, men and women have extreme value. James the Just notes how with the tongue, “we bless *our* Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God” (James 3:9, NASU). Cursing the beings who have been created special by God, is something that will surely bring with it penalties if not repented of before Him. It should be most understandable that almost all of today’s discussions in religious philosophy over the value and uniqueness of human life, are to some extent centered around what the image of God is and involves. For the Ancient Israelites hearing Moses’ Teaching, men and women made in God’s image would run entirely contrary to much of the contemporary Ancient Near Eastern thought that only a king and the royalty/aristocracy were given a divine imprint. Victor P. Hamilton observes,

“It is well known that in both Egyptian and Mesopotamian society the king, or some high-ranking official, might be called ‘the image of God.’ Such a designation, however, was not applied to the canal digger or to the mason who worked on a ziggurat...In God’s eyes all of mankind is royal. All of humanity is related to God, not just the king.”¹

Within the Genesis 1 narrative, a major reason as to why humankind has been imprinted with the Divine image is stated: “God blessed them; and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth’” (Genesis 1:28, NASU). Adam and Eve, in particular, were instructed by the Lord to take dominion over the Earth—at least beginning with the Garden of Eden—to tend to it properly, treat it with respect, and serve as the Creator’s designated representatives. Everything God had made was good (Genesis 1:31), and as the man and woman took ownership of what He had made for them, they were to surely enjoy all of what the physical Creation had to offer!

It is not difficult to see how the *imago Dei* is not only a controlling or ancillary theme of much of Scripture—as God’s people try to understand who they are in relation to their Creator—but why discussion about the image of God has to be included as we evaluate the uniqueness of the human race. If human beings were created by God to take dominion over the

¹ Victor P. Hamilton, *New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 135.

Earth and tend to it properly, then it is most reasonable to conclude that if they squander such responsibility, they will have to answer before His justice. This not only includes how people treat the animals or the environment, **but most especially** how they treat other people. Concurrent with this, the image of God placed onto human beings concerns a great deal of our character makeup and morality, as we reflect much of the essential reality of who our Creator is (cf. Romans 2:14-15). The animals, while surely a part of His good Creation, are not among those who will have to one day answer before Him for either the good deeds or bad deeds that they have performed. *Animals operate entirely on instinct*; human beings do not. Murdering a person made in God's image (Genesis 9:6) not only robs someone of all of the good and worthwhile experiences that he or she can partake of *only* on Earth,² but shows complete disregard for the Creator Himself.

Every part of the human being is valuable in the estimation of the Creator. The Psalmist exclaims how "You formed my inward parts; You wove me in my mother's womb" (Psalm 139:13, NASU). Yet, given how the Psalmist declares "What is man that You take thought of him, and the son of man that You care for him? Yet You have made him a little lower than God, and You crown him with glory and majesty!" (Psalm 8:4-5, NASU), it would seem most inappropriate and even degrading, for anyone to suggest that human beings are simply animals with advanced neuroprocesses—namely the ability to speak language, be creative and artistic, and be able to reason through complex ideas. In fact, if there is anything that human history has consistently borne witness to, it is that **we each have questions about death and life after death**. Being made in the image of God, is it at all unreasonable to conclude that each person has a distinct "spark" of life, which not only makes us different than the animals, but assures us that our memories and personality will survive the death process?

Solely looking at the issue of rulership, where does the dominion of human beings begin and end? In Genesis 1, Adam and Eve were to rightfully tend to the Garden. Following the Fall, they were to tend to the ground and grow their own food (Genesis 3:17-19). Beyond this and recognizing that people have been made at a level just below that of their Creator, it is most imperative that we be aware of how the rule of the redeemed indeed does involve a wider scope than just Planet Earth. In Ephesians 2:6, for example, Paul details how God "raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly *places* in Messiah Yeshua" (NASU). The Creation that God intends for human beings to rule **involves much more** than just Planet Earth. However, if people—even those who have been saved from their sins via the gospel—squander their responsibilities in tending to the Earth, it would seem most unlikely that they would be able to rule whatever lies beyond this planet in any great capacity. *God will not grant such individuals much responsibility.*

If the rulership of human beings at all concerns another dimension, then it is quite safe to conclude that the image of God placed upon us involves the survival of our consciousness after death, present in Heaven, prior to the resurrection. The known universe as it stands composes over 100 billion galaxies, and to this we can add at least one other dimension: that of God and His angels (or "Heaven"). Do we honestly think that having been made as His image bearers, to a degree lower than God **and not** higher than the animals, that our existence is really just confined to this universe? There are surely important instances we see of the deceased redeemed existing in Heaven with the Lord (1 Thessalonians 3:13; 4:14; Hebrews 12:23; Revelation 6:9; cf. Acts 7:55-60), as eager as they might be to see the resurrection occur and the Messianic Kingdom on Earth fully commence.

To assert that the image of God placed upon human beings means that when we die, we should expect our consciousness to go to another dimension until the resurrection—in no way implies that we should shrink at the fact that He has given us dominion over Planet Earth and our immediate reality. Although a temporary disembodied afterlife for Believers in Heaven with the Lord will bring joy to us, we are to still take care of our bodies, this planet, and be concerned with not only proper environmentalism and conservation, **but also** social justice *on Earth*. If God's people are at all derelict in their Earthly responsibilities now, then any future responsibilities that await us may be few.

² This would include, among other things, the joys of marriage and pleasures of sexuality as God has intended between a faithful husband and wife.