

BEING
HUMAN
IN GOD'S
WORLD

An Old Testament Theology of Humanity



J. GORDON
McCONVILLE

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For my wife, Helen
“Far more precious than jewels”



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Preface

To attempt to write a book with “Being Human” in the title may seem uncomfortably close to propounding a “theory of everything.” If there is a good reason for doing so, it lies in the fact that, both within and outside communities of faith, we are surrounded implicitly and explicitly by concepts of what being human means. What is offered here, therefore, is not some definitive verdict on the subject, but rather an indication of ways in which a biblical theology might bear upon it. The chief weight of the argument falls on the Old Testament, as the title declares. In my attempt to develop an “Old Testament Theology of Humanity” I take this to have a context in a theology of the Old and New Testaments, and in Christian theology more generally. I hope this will be clear from the pages that follow, though it may turn out to be clearer that I am more at home in the Old Testament than in other branches of theology! Yet I think that my interest in the topic has been born of my study of the Old Testament. Because of its rootedness in the history, geography, culture, languages, literature, and wisdom of a people, it is not only an immeasurable resource for the subject but even forces it upon the reader’s attention. By its nature, therefore, I believe it has an indispensable place in Christian theological thinking about being human.

The book has an origin not only in my thinking about the Old Testament in general but also in my particular preoccupation in recent years with “biblical spirituality.” What I mean by this will appear below. In the confines of a preface, I will say about it only that I take the scholarly quest for meaning in the biblical text to be inseparable from the personal engagement of the inquirer in the task and its subject matter. This being so, what follows should be regarded as an essay in reading the Bible in pursuit of a greater understanding

of oneself, individually and in one's various communities, as a human being. As such it seeks to indicate a certain practice of understanding rather than to say all that might be said. Plainly the volume does not do the latter, and another author might well have selected different specific topics from the ones that make up the argument here. Parts of the argument build on essays and conference papers published elsewhere, and these are acknowledged at appropriate places.

Many people have contributed, in various ways, to the making of this book. If it has strengths, I owe those strengths to them. Its weaknesses will mean that I did not learn from them carefully enough. Its immediate provenance is from a project on "Biblical Spirituality" sponsored by Bible Society (UK) and based in the School of Humanities at the University of Gloucestershire. I am grateful to Bible Society for their sponsorship, and especially to David Spriggs, an Old Testament scholar himself, who participated actively with us in the development of the project. My colleagues Andrew Lincoln and Lloyd Pietersen were my chief comrades over the four years or so of the project. Their stimulus and encouragement have been immeasurably important to me, and I owe them an enormous debt. Sheona Beaumont, as a doctoral student on the project, brought important insights from the interface of theology and art.

Among the numerous colleagues from other universities and nations who participated in the project, I record my gratitude to Pieter de Villiers, who took a leading part in two international symposiums on the subject at the University of Gloucestershire in Cheltenham. These resulted in two publications: *The Bible and Spirituality: Exploratory Essays in Reading Scripture Spiritually* and *The Spirit That Inspires: Perspectives on Biblical Spirituality*.¹

I am also grateful to members of the Bible and Spirituality research group within the School of Humanities, which was an important venue for sharing ideas not only from within theology but also from other subject areas, especially English and history. As well as those already named, the group included our colleagues Melissa Raphael, Shelley Saguaro, Anna French, and Hilary Weeks. And the Theology Reading Group, with colleagues Dee Carter and Philip Esler, and coordinator Paul Caddle, has left its mark here in ways that they will recognize.

1. Andrew T. Lincoln, J. Gordon McConville, and Lloyd K. Pietersen, eds., *The Bible and Spirituality: Exploratory Essays in Reading Scripture Spiritually* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013); Pieter de Villiers and Lloyd Pietersen, eds., *The Spirit That Inspires: Perspectives on Biblical Spirituality*, Acta Theologica Supplementum 15 (Bloemfontein, South Africa: University of the Free State Press, 2011).

Finally, my thanks to Jim Kinney and Baker Academic for accepting this volume for publication (and to Tim West for preparing the manuscript so carefully). Jim has been both enormously patient and encouraging, as well as a stimulating conversation partner in matters theological, over a number of years. And I am delighted to be able to join him in offering the pages that follow.

Cheltenham, July 3, 2015

Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible	BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by David Noel Freedman. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992.	ca.	circa, about
AnBib	Analecta Biblica	CBET	Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology
ApOTC	Apollos Old Testament Commentary	CBOQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
ATANT	Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments	CE	Common Era
BBB	Bonner biblische Beiträge	CGLC	Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics
BBC	Blackwell Bible Commentaries	ch./chs.	chapter/chapters
BBR	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>	e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> , for example
BC	Book of the Covenant	esp.	especially
BCE	Before the Common Era	ESV	English Standard Version
BCOTWP	Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms	FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
BETL	Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium	HALAT	<i>Hebräisches und aramäisches Lexikon zum Alten Testament</i> . Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm. 3rd ed. Leiden: Brill, 1995, 2004.
BEvT	Beiträge zur evangelischen Theologie	HBM	Hebrew Bible Monographs
BKAT	Biblicher Kommentar, Altes Testament	ICC	International Critical Commentary
BTAT	Beiträge zur Theologie des Alten Testaments	JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
BWANT	Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten (und Neuen) Testament	JBTh	<i>Jahrbuch für biblische Theologie</i>

<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>	PGOT	Phoenix Guides to the Old Testament
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series	PS	<i>Political Science and Politics</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>	RSV	Revised Standard Version
KJV	King James Version	SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
lit.	literally	SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
LXX	Septuagint	SC	Sources chrétiennes
MS(S)	manuscript(s)	SHS	Scripture and Hermeneutics Seminar
MT	Masoretic Text	SSN	Studia Semitica Neerlandica
NAC	New American Commentary	StBibLit	Studies in Biblical Literature
NASB	New American Standard Bible	THOTC	Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary
NCB	New Century Bible	<i>TZ</i>	<i>Theologische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>NIB</i>	<i>The New Interpreter's Bible.</i> Edited by Leander E. Keck. 12 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 1994–2004.	<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
NIV	New International Version	VTSup	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version	WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
ÖBS	Österreichische biblische Studien	WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology	<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
OTG	Old Testament Guides		
OTL	Old Testament Library		
OTM	Oxford Theological Monographs		

Introduction

On Thinking about Being Human

A Biblical Study of Humanity

The aim of this book is to explore what it means to be human according to the testimonies of the Bible, especially the Old Testament. It is, therefore, a biblical and theological study rather than an “anthropology” in the strict sense.¹ In expressing it thus, I am locating the inquiry about the human condition and experience within a particular context, namely, in a theological tradition in which the Old Testament is taken to be Scripture. As Hebrew Bible, it is Scripture for the synagogue, while for the church it is part of the two-Testament Bible, or differently, the two-Testament witness to Jesus Christ. For myself, the project has its specific context in the Christian theological heritage, as well as in a curiosity that is essentially my own, of which more in a moment.

Theologically speaking, the question about what it is to be human in the context of Christian Scripture is inevitably christological. How can an Old Testament study of humanity relate to the Christian confession of faith in Jesus Christ as the Word made flesh, as God’s incarnate Son, in whom there was no sin? Must not any study of humanity, in biblical perspective, be a study of the humanity of Christ? To this one may respond that the New Testament’s portrayal of the humanity of Jesus, and the church’s confession of Christ as

1. See John Rogerson’s distinctions between German and English usage at this point, where the former is about the nature of the human being, while the latter is closer to ethnography (J. W. Rogerson, *Anthropology and the Old Testament* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1978], 9). Hans Walter Wolff’s classic *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1974), being theological and exegetical, is an example of the German usage.

God the Son, do not foreclose explorations of the limits and possibilities of the lived experience of human beings. On the contrary, it is the belief in Christ's humanity that compels us to keep before us the Old Testament's testimony about God's involvement with human beings, both from the creation and in the specific historical experience of Israel. This is the clear implication of the church's historic creedal affirmation of Christ's true humanity, together with everything that connected him with historical Israel. The Old Testament remains the bulwark of Christian theology against dualisms that undermine its incarnational theology. The present work is not a Christology, yet I take it to be christological, because in attempting to understand how the Old Testament helps us think about being human, we may be better able to understand what it means to confess the humanity of Christ.

There are theological entailments in the study, therefore, that should not be underestimated. The basic question concerns the ways in which the ultimate destiny of human beings in Christ bears upon their existence in the present world. There is no straightforward answer to this question. Both the New Testament and strands within historic Christian theology strike notes that seem negative about the Christian's this-worldly existence, yet can also affirm positive aspects of it. This point undergirds H. Richard Niebuhr's classic work *Christ and Culture*. On the negative side, he finds that "the world" sometimes appears to be entirely opposed to Christ, as in the First Letter of John: "If any one loves the world, love for the Father is not in him" (1 John 2:15 RSV).² Yet Jesus is also shown to have engaged prophetically and sympathetically with the world. He not only forgives sins but also heals the sick in body; he trenchantly criticizes the abuse of the weak by the strong; he employs illustrations from the working life of farmers and fishermen in his teaching, a life that he shares on a basis of friendship; he respects home and family, and even the due ordering of temple life (as when he instructs a man healed of "leprosy" to go and show himself to the priest; see Mark 1:43–44; Luke 5:14); and he recognizes God-given rights of the ruling authorities (in his answer to the question about taxes in Matt. 22:21, and as interpreted by Paul in Rom. 13). Niebuhr sums up this side of his portrayal thus: "The other-worldliness of Jesus is always mated with a this-worldly concern; his proclamation and demonstration of divine action is inseparable from commandments to men to be active here and now."³ Christian theology is bound to grapple with this aspect of the legacy of Jesus.

2. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (London: Faber & Faber, 1951), 60–61.

3. *Ibid.*, 11; cf. 129–30. The examples taken here from the Gospel reports of Jesus' life are partly his and partly mine.

Niebuhr famously detects five models in the history of Christian thought and practice, on a spectrum ranging from outright opposition (“Christ against culture”) to accommodation (“the Christ of culture”). Between these extremes lie three intermediate points, representing attempts to express both the transcendence of Christ’s kingdom and the responsibility of Christians to engage with the life of the world.⁴ For some there is a paradoxical relationship, in which, while all culture is infected by sin, Christians can nevertheless inhabit the world in which it prevails because of the power of Christ to penetrate to the roots of the human heart and mind and “[cleanse] the fountains of life.”⁵ For others, while it is admitted that good things have been corrupted, human culture can be “a transformed life in and to the glory of God.”⁶

Niebuhr knew that his account was, in some measure, an oversimplification of a complicated reality, a point that has recently been stressed again by D. A. Carson in a reevaluation of *Christ and Culture*. For Carson, the questions raised by the concept of culture today are exceedingly complex and are bound to look different depending on where one stands in the modern world.⁷ The point should be taken as a salutary warning against all-encompassing theories. Even so, the question that occasioned Niebuhr’s work remains inevitable because it arises from the biblical legacy. And in fact it surfaces in arenas of theological discussion quite different from his, for example in a recent work of Jürgen Moltmann.⁸ Moltmann finds four approaches to “eschatology,” which are in fact approaches to the challenge of living ethically in the world. His own preferred model is one that he calls “transformative,” a basically hopeful orientation to the possibilities of human action in the world,⁹ not unlike Niebuhr’s fourth model (“Christ the transformer of culture”). Interestingly, Carson points out that Niebuhr too expresses a tacit preference for

4. These are “Christ above culture,” “Christ and culture in paradox,” and “Christ the transformer of culture.”

5. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 188. Niebuhr’s label for this view is “dualist.” He associates Paul and Luther with it, yet calls it merely a “motif” (187).

6. *Ibid.*, 197. Niebuhr associates Augustine and Calvin with this perspective.

7. He wonders, for example, whether Abraham Kuyper, had he grown up in the “killing fields” of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, would have developed the view of Christ and culture that he did (D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012], ix). Carson believes an understanding of Christ and culture requires a much more refined analysis than that offered by Niebuhr.

8. Jürgen Moltmann, *Ethics of Hope*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012). In preparation for his study of Christian ethics, Moltmann offers an analysis of theological orientations to the possibilities of effective action in the world that has some affinities with Niebuhr’s, though using a quite different nomenclature and with no apparent debt to Niebuhr. He identifies four approaches to eschatology—namely, Lutheran (or “Apocalyptic”), Calvinist (or “Christological”), Anabaptist (or “Separatist”), and “Transformative.”

9. *Ibid.*, 35–41.

this model, by virtue of his failure to offer any critique of it according to his otherwise customary pattern.¹⁰

The discussion so far has shown that the challenge bequeathed to us by Jesus and the New Testament calls us to ongoing interpretation of the human condition in the light of the coming kingdom. If analyses of models and approaches must be treated with caution, it is clear that certain false trails are to be avoided. One lies in the danger of allowing our own cultural commitments to overdetermine our view of Christ, who is then wrongly invoked as a sanction for them. And the other is the opposite, namely, the danger of despising God's "good" creation and consigning it to perdition while awaiting eschatological renewal.¹¹ The task of discerning the truth in the relationship between Christ and culture is not one that can be categorically decided by means of certain techniques. Rather, it is a function, on the one hand, of readers' careful understanding of their own situation and prior commitments, and, on the other, of an appreciation of the nature of the biblical witness as a complex dialogue between the work of Christ as finished and as a prophetic call to live constructively in the world. This can be put in more explicitly theological terms as an openness to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.¹² For my part, I embark on the task ahead in a spirit of cautious optimism, broadly sympathetic with the "transformative" approaches just mentioned, while recognizing that such optimism may be chastened in the process.

Transformation, Transcendence, and "Spirituality"

I said a moment ago that the present inquiry has part of its context in a curiosity that is essentially my own. This is not to claim some special privilege or insight, but rather to name a dimension of it that is inescapable. Any theological question put to Scripture is in some sense a question about the self, self-knowledge being inseparable from the knowledge of God. This is more obviously the case when the human person is, as here, the express object of the inquiry. One can put the point logically, or hermeneutically, as well as theologically, because the object of the inquiry is at the same time the subject of it. If I presume to write about "being human," I do so unavoidably as a human being. This means that the manner of knowing that is assumed here is

10. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, 28–29.

11. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 124–25.

12. Niebuhr puts it in trinitarian terms, saying that "the Spirit proceeds not only from the Son but from the Father also, and that with the aid of the knowledge of Christ it is possible to discriminate between the spirits of the times and the Spirit which is from God" (*Christ and Culture*, 116).

not that of a subject gaining knowledge of an object by means of techniques that the subject has mastered, rather as a linguist or an archaeologist might do. I cannot break out of the circle in which I myself am part of the inquiry. None of this means that there is no place here for the ordinary techniques employed in biblical studies. The Bible is in one sense a historical document or set of documents, and it follows that the tools of philology, history, literature, sociology, and other disciplines are relevant by definition. Ultimately, however, the Bible invites the reader to undertake an act of self-involvement, a kind of reading that may be called “performative.” This is no accident; the hermeneutical conundrum is itself an entailment of a biblical view of the self as known only in relation to God. The project, therefore, has been conceived not primarily as an analysis of the sorts of options available in a study of Christ and culture, but as an engagement of a reader with Scripture in a quest for what it means to be human. Put differently, this can be described as an exercise in “biblical spirituality.”

The close involvement of oneself with a work is always true in some measure of anyone who writes. But I want to make a particular point of it. I have used the term “spirituality” in the heading to this section, and I realize that it is a term for which the phrase “scare quotes” might have been invented. For some, it implies a kind of unreality about the tough business of living. But I hope it is clear from the foregoing paragraphs that this is far from what is meant here. I mean it, rather, to refer to the ways in which belief is turned into all the dimensions of the practice of living. Nor is this something that can be worked out in a theoretical way, but rather in the school of life, with its hardships as well as joys. Kees Waaijman, one of the foremost scholar-practitioners of Christian spirituality, sees the discipline of spirituality as addressing “the divine-human relational process as transformation.”¹³ This idea of “transformation” applies to everything that falls within human experience, and is a key concept for the task at hand. Sandra Schneiders sees it as one of the essential objectives of New Testament interpretation.¹⁴ For writers like these, transformation is not a value in itself, but a factor in the human relationship with God. They point to a conception of the human being that is far from “steady state.” Rather, we will reckon with growth and change as of the essence of human being. Such change, furthermore, is not the sort that simply happens, as with age or by accident. Rather it is associated with the orientation of one’s life, or with the discipline of a certain “practice.”

13. Kees Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods* (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 4.

14. Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 14.

As David Ford has it: "The dynamics of Christian life are explored primarily through the worship of God and the transformation of the self before God."¹⁵

Schneiders has also spoken of spirituality as "lived experience," and further defines this as "conscious involvement in the project of life integration through self-transcendence towards the ultimate value one perceives."¹⁶ This definition allows for a range of ultimate values, so that it can apply in principle to the religious and nonreligious alike. Her work as a New Testament scholar, however, is based on a transformative hermeneutic of reading Scripture indebted to Paul Ricoeur. Her idea of "self-transcendence" refers to a person's aspiration to change the condition in which they find themselves.¹⁷ As such it is close to the concept of transformation.

In Christian spirituality, the context within which such concepts become meaningful is the narrative of the Christian life, in which the individual and group participate in the larger story of the church of Christ. The "ordinary" life has thus an eschatological dimension, its transformations experienced in hope as belonging within the ultimate transformation of all things in Christ.

If the present work belongs broadly within spirituality thus understood, it may be thought of as a study of "biblical spirituality" in particular.¹⁸ This is because it will proceed by exegetical and theological study of parts of the Old Testament, within the larger horizon of the Christian Bible. Biblical spirituality, as a self-consciously distinctive aspect of Christian thought, is a relatively recent inquiry into the ways in which the Bible is or may be used in the translation of belief into thought and practice. It draws in principle on all the disciplines of theology and is hospitable to the full range of methods commonly used in biblical studies. It is distinguished from closely related

15. David F. Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 2.

16. Sandra Schneiders, "Christian Spirituality: Definition, Methods, and Types," in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. P. Sheldrake (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 1.

17. John Macquarrie has used it in the slightly different sense of an apprehension of the sublime (Macquarrie, *In Search of Humanity: A Theological and Philosophical Approach* [London: SCM, 1982], 25–37). "Transcendence" can be used in a variety of senses. In the present study I mean it primarily in the sense defined here by Schneiders. It comprises a belief in the possibility of personal change, together with an understanding that resources for such change come from beyond the self. For more on this, see below, ch. 9.

18. The present volume has roots in a project whose aim is to establish biblical spirituality as one of the disciplines of biblical studies. It has so far resulted in two published volumes, each following an international symposium, namely: Pieter de Villiers and Lloyd K. Pieterse, eds., *The Spirit That Inspires: Perspectives on Biblical Spirituality*, Acta Theologica Supplementum 15 (Bloemfontein, South Africa: University of the Free State Press, 2011); and Andrew T. Lincoln, J. G. McConville, and Lloyd K. Pieterse, eds., *The Bible and Spirituality: Exploratory Essays in Reading Scripture Spiritually* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013).

aspects of biblical study, such as biblical theology, or “theological interpretation,” because its specific focus is on the relation between the use of the Bible and human transformation, whether of individuals or groups.¹⁹ As such it opens onto every aspect of human life, including religion and ethics, politics and power, art and science, work and leisure, age and gender. Most of these topics will find a place in the course of our study.

The work at hand, therefore, draws on multiple sources of inspiration. The reader will have noticed that the concept of “transformation” occurred both in the discussion of Christ and culture and in the description of “biblical spirituality.” This may be taken as a guiding motif in everything that follows. I mean by this that the act of Bible reading is self-involving, in the sense that it is existentially open to change. The act of writing this book has been, for me, a performative act of self-involvement, part of my own attempt to discover what it means to be a human being in God’s world. The accent here is on discovery, a pursuit of the possible as well as the mandatory. I believe this follows a stimulus from within the Old Testament, notably the Wisdom literature. There is also in it an aspect of the celebration of humanity, not in a “humanistic” sense, but as a grateful response of the creature for the gift of creation. I want it to express wonder. Part of this is because of the enormous possibilities and diversity of human existence. While there are things that are true of all human beings, and things that are presumably true of all Christian lives, the apparently limitless potential of human living seems to me to be implied in God’s creative purpose. This claim will have to be elaborated in the argument of the book and qualified by taking account of human potential for evil as well as good. But it is an important part of the concept, and in a sense the act of writing belongs, for myself, to the exploration of human possibility.

The Bible on Being Human

The Bible focuses relentlessly on the human being. In biblical terms, it is impossible, of course, to think of humanity apart from its relation to God, just as it is impossible to think about God apart from his relation to humanity. One cannot prioritize one over the other as the true subject of the Bible. The point is reflected, for example, in the title of Robert Gordis’s book on Job, *The Book of God and Man*.²⁰ Gabriel Josipovici calls his book on the Bible *The Book of God* but writes of its narratives: “The same protagonists, God,

19. So Lincoln, McConville, and Pietersen, *Bible and Spirituality*, xii.

20. Robert Gordis, *The Book of God and Man: A Study of Job* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965).

man, and Israel, run through the entire story.”²¹ The life of the human being, in biblical terms, takes form and meaning in God's world and in relation to him. The study of humanity cannot but be theological. This is entailed in the concept of humanity as “image of God” (Gen. 1:26), to which we shall return.

Yet the human being is everywhere powerfully present to the reader, by virtue both of vivid depiction and the reader's own humanity. The genius of the biblical writers in their portrayals of the human condition has been recognized in a huge number of works on biblical narrative and poetic art.²² The Old Testament's most brilliant narratives, such as the stories of Joseph (Gen. 37–50) and David (1 and 2 Samuel), have long fed the religious and literary imagination. Yet the terms “narrative” and “poetry” only begin to indicate the full range of depiction. Sagas, fables, novellas, histories, folklore, laws, instruction, wisdom, introspection, speculation, denunciations, visions, praises, lamentations, songs of love, rage, ecstasy—all together form a dazzling, unbridled array of human depiction.

The Bible is indeed art. It is worth pondering this, especially in relation to Christian interpretation of the Old Testament. There are “big picture” concepts that have played important parts in comprehending the significance of the Old Testament as Scripture. One such is “salvation history,” with its perception that the Bible tells a story of God's personal involvement in the world, in the life of Israel, and, for Christians, in Jesus Christ as son of David and Messiah. In modern idiom, the related idea that the Bible has a “metanarrative” positions it critically in relation to the “metanarratives” of postmodernity. These wide-angle views of the biblical witness are necessarily part of Christian thinking.

But the broad sweep should not obscure the particulars. It is well known that the forms of the Old Testament can resist being forced into overarching schemes. (The Wisdom literature perennially complicates the concept of the Bible as story.) The writing of the Old Testament is known for what it is when the human experience or perception embodied in it is allowed to be heard. Only by listening carefully to the human voices that speak to us from its pages can we appreciate the profundity of the Bible's depiction of the human. The biblical writers wrote with their own purposes, many of which we cannot know with certainty. But we know that they deployed artistic means in order to probe the deepest reaches of the human heart. They knew how

21. Gabriel Josipovici, *The Book of God: A Response to the Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 12.

22. Robert Alter was one of the pathfinders in this endeavor with his *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981) and *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

to lay bare the human soul to their audiences, with all the techniques that critical analysis can name.²³ Their timeless appeal lies in the fact that they do not offer a treatise, but draw the reader into a profound engagement with his or her own humanity.

For at the heart of the Old Testament's depiction of the human is a question, as expressed in the psalmist's cry of wonder, "What is the human being, that you pay attention to them?" (Ps. 8:4[5]).²⁴ The question comes as part of an act of praise and does not expect an answer. Rather it identifies the nature of humanity as belonging centrally to the subject matter of biblical portrayal, functioning in this context to place the nature and destiny of the human in terms of their relationship with God. The same question recurs in other contexts, and so enters into the rich conversation of the portrayal of humanity. Psalm 144:3–4 also puts it in a context of praise, but now touching the chord of human mortality. And Job has his own version of the question (Job 7:17), as part of his sustained complaint that God has "paid attention" to him in a particularly terrible way (7:11–21).

This triptych of variations on a fundamental question discloses a crucial aspect of our study, namely, that it will not simply be a matter of discovering information. We cannot merely interrogate the Old Testament for some fixed and finished portrayal of the human. Rather, we need to hear it in its own terms, and this means listening sympathetically to its many tones. The voices that characterize humanity are themselves, inevitably, human voices, uttering the human experience rather than describing it from some neutral ground. Their experience has in common their faith in Yahweh, the God of Israel, and their sense of who they are is inseparable from the claims that God makes upon them. This faith is manifested in the numerous ways in which the biblical writers and characters discover it for themselves. We as readers come to the conversation out of our own widely varying experiences, but the search for the meaning of humanity may end not only in an encounter with ourselves but also with the sense of a claim being made upon us.

We have observed that the Old Testament's own recurring question about the nature of humanity ("What is the human being, that you pay attention to them?") receives no definitive answer in the specific contexts in which it is asked. Rather, an answer should be sought within the biblical discourse in

23. The application of categories from Aristotelian rhetoric to biblical literature is a case in point. See, for example, G. A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); and for an Old Testament study, J. J. Kang, *The Persuasive Portrayal of Solomon in 1 Kings 1–11* (Bern: Lang, 2003).

24. Where verse numbering differs between English versions and the Hebrew Bible, the English numbering is adopted, with the Hebrew following, as in the reference just given.

its entirety. We will, therefore, work toward an understanding of it through our engagement with that discourse, bringing our modern questions and insights to bear. We are pursuing not so much a “doctrine” of humanity as an understanding of it that rests in our own experience as well as our apprehension of the Bible.

Certain texts are, of course, indispensable for our purpose, notably the creation accounts in Genesis 1–3, to which we shall shortly turn. In the first of these (Gen. 1:1–2:4a), we find the powerful concept of humanity as being “in the image of God” (Gen. 1:26), and in the second (Gen. 2:4b–3:24), the story of the first humans in the Garden.²⁵ These not only come first in the Old Testament narrative but have also been so influential in Christian thinking about the human condition that they demand a certain precedence. While they are only a part and not the whole of what the Old Testament has to say about the human condition they will lead us helpfully into further exploration of the topic. This will involve consideration of the nature of Old Testament depiction itself; the range of evidence on the nature of the human person, both individually and corporately; and specific issues that arise from our awareness that our own conceptions of the human person are influenced by the modern settings in which we live, an awareness that must play a part in our attempt to hear what the Old Testament has to say. Having thus laid foundations for the inquiry, we will then go on to consider a number of specific topics in the Old Testament’s depiction of the human condition (chs. 6–10).

25. I thus adopt the common practice of referring to Gen. 1–3 as consisting of two creation accounts. There is a critical discussion about whether the first of these ends at Gen. 2:3 or at v. 4a, turning on whether v. 4a is a conclusion to the first account, as in most classical versions of the documentary hypothesis, or an introduction to the second, as in Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, WBC 1 (Nashville: Nelson, 1987), 5–10, 49–55. In my reading of Gen. 1–3, I take it to be important to read the two according to their canonical sequencing, as I will explain further below. In that case, Gen. 2:4a is a hinge between the two sections.

1

Humanity in the Image of God (*Imago Dei*)

As I indicated in the preceding chapter, the concept of the human being created in the “image of God” has a certain claim to precedence in a study of the Old Testament’s view of humanity. It is often observed that the formula recurs very little after its famous use in Genesis 1. This elusiveness, together with uncertainties about its precise meaning in that chapter, makes it precarious to rest an Old Testament anthropology entirely on it. This point is made at length by David Kelsey in his two-volume theological anthropology,¹ where he claims that Genesis 1:26 cannot be used to structure a theological anthropology systematically. There is indeed no “single plot or narrative logic” to a biblical anthropology; rather, the canon has multiple plots and is “systematically unsystematic.”² In particular, he is unconvinced by renderings of a single, unifying eschatological narrative of the canon in which the “image” is lost, only to be restored through Christ at the end.³

1. David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 2:895–1051.

2. *Ibid.*, 2:896–97.

3. Here he takes issue with, among others, Stanley Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001); Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 2:902–5.

This basic theological position coheres well with my understanding of the role of the “image” in Old Testament anthropology. Rather than assume at the outset that the “image of God” is the key to unlocking the Old Testament’s understanding of the human situation, I propose to consider how far we can understand it in its context, then look for ways in which it might shed light on other facets of the Old Testament’s portrayal of humanity, or indeed have light shed back upon it. This in turn should feed into our broader theological understanding. With John Goldingay, I think that “the expression [“image of God”] is a stimulus to reflection as much as a deposit of reflection.”⁴

The “Image of God” in the Context of Genesis 1:1–2:4a

We begin, however, by considering the “image” in its context. This brings its own challenges. Kelsey’s position, outlined above, rests partly on his belief that the chances of finding firm ground in the exegesis of Genesis 1:26–28 are too slight to allow the text to be used much for theology. For him, the phrase “is so problematic and controversial that the most careful and influential exegeses seem to cancel each other out.”⁵ Goldingay is hardly less pessimistic: “Neither the expression itself nor the immediate context spells out the phrase’s meaning, and answers to the question [wherein lay God’s image in humanity] commonly reflect the prejudgments of the circles where they are propounded.”⁶ We have been warned! Even so, Genesis 1 must be understood somehow, even if only to weigh it carefully as part of the Old Testament’s wider testimony.

Let us observe, then, how the “image” takes its place within that first great biblical statement about the creator and the creation and how they relate (Gen. 1:1–2:4a). I offer here a short account of its features, all widely observed, in order to situate verses 26–28 in a discourse and to illustrate the issues for interpretation. It is a highly structured passage. Most obviously it divides God’s creative activity into the work of six days, followed by a day of rest. This structuring system is underlined by the repetition of certain phrases: “and God said,” “let there be . . . and there was,” “and God made,” and “God saw that it was good.” The seven-day pattern has been analyzed to show how carefully crafted the composition is. In a time-honored and widely followed analysis, the six days are paired, so that days 1–3 correspond to days

4. John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, *Israel’s Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 102.

5. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 2:900.

6. Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:102.

4–6 respectively, as the general to the particular. Thus light is created on the first day and the sun, moon, and stars on the fourth. In this structure, the seventh day, with its Sabbath rest, stands outside the pattern and may be seen as a culmination of the whole.⁷ In an alternative structure, the fourth day is understood as a midpoint. The effect of this is to throw some weight onto the theme of worship, since the fourth day portrays the heavenly bodies not as the objects of worship that they almost universally were in the ancient Near East but simply as parts of the one God’s creative work.⁸ These two patterns, which can be regarded as overlapping, have in common that they portray the creation of all things within a context of the worship of the one God who made everything, in the one case by focusing on the Sabbath, which was a vital part of Israel’s worship (cf. Exod. 20:8–11), and in the other by means of a repudiation of the worship of anything other than the God of Israel.

In addition to these observations, Gordon Wenham has drawn attention to the preponderance of the number seven in the passage: for example, the phrases “God saw that it was good” and “and it was so” each occur seven times. The phrase “And God said” occurs ten times.⁹ Furthermore, the passage is enclosed by statements about God’s creation, with Genesis 2:3–4a echoing chiastically the elements of Genesis 1:1.¹⁰ These features draw attention to leading interests of the passage. The sevens echo the seven-day sabbatical structure, and perhaps in addition express something of the wholeness and orderliness of the creation. The prominence of “and God said,” together with “and it was so,” highlights the powerful, creative speech of God. And the repetition of “God saw that it was good” emphasizes the divine appraisal of the created world as “good.”

To these formal points should be added the observation that the account of the sixth day of creation is substantially longer than those of the other days. In narrative terms, the story slows down and becomes expansive, so that it is not adequate to express the structure of the passage as a neat symmetrical framework. Rather, there is a particular focus on the subject matter of the sixth day, on which God creates humans. The humans do not have this day all to themselves, however, but share it with other land creatures (Gen. 1:24–25).

7. J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 74–75. Middleton traces this observation to Johann Gottfried von Herder, the eighteenth-century German poet and philosopher.

8. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, WBC 1 (Nashville: Nelson, 1987), 7.

9. *Ibid.*, 6.

10. *Ibid.*, 5. Wenham confines the chiasmic relationship to 1:1 and 2:3, but the point can be made so as to include v. 4a, which repeats the verbs *bārā* and *āśā*. On most accounts v. 4a is part of the first creation account, though Wenham prefers to see it as the introduction to the account in the remainder of ch. 2.

In distinguishing the humans from the creatures of both days 5 and 6, one must recognize similarities as well as dissimilarities. As with the humans, God speaks to the creatures of air and sea on day 5, blessing them and commanding them to “be fruitful and multiply” (1:22; cf. 1:28). Humans therefore share the land with the land creatures, and with the nonhuman creatures of the air and sea the capacity both to be addressed by God and to propagate. (It is curious that the latter features occur with the creatures of sea and air, and not with the land creatures, but they are presumably not intended to be exclusive.) In terms of propagation, therefore, humans are part of a created order that is designed for reproduction, as with the vegetation on the third day.

Humanity is nevertheless distinguished from the other creatures in important ways. It is only in the case of the humans that God deliberates with himself before acting, and only the humans are said to be made “in our image and according to our likeness” (Gen. 1:26). They are further marked out, first, by a triple use of the verb *bārā* rather than the more regular *āśā*; second, by being specified as “male and female” (v. 27; this is evidently assumed of the other creatures, since they too “multiply,” but passed over in silence); and third, by assigning them “dominion” over the other creatures of both the fifth and sixth days (v. 26b). The command to have dominion is then repeated and elaborated in verses 28–30, extending the vegetable creation to them for food, with the further addition that this was also given to the other creatures. There is a certain progressive structure to the sixth day, which may be expressed as four stages in the development of its thought:

1. Creation of the land creatures (vv. 24–25);
2. Creation of humans in the image and likeness of God (v. 26a); human dominion over the creatures of days 5 and 6 (v. 26b);
3. Creation of humans in God's image, *male and female* (v. 27); *command to multiply* and to have dominion over the creatures (v. 28);
4. Plants as food for humans (v. 29); plants as food for other creatures (v. 30).

The immediate corollary of this structure, itself part of the larger composition of this creation narrative, is both that humanity is unique in certain respects, and also thoroughly integrated within the created order with the nonhuman population of days 5 and 6.

We may draw certain preliminary inferences from this survey of the structure and discourse of Genesis 1:1–2:4a. The idea of humanity as being in the “image of God” has its context in a depiction of the interrelationships of

God and all created things. This depiction is not merely descriptive, but calls for worship of the one God, the creator. The text expresses the activity of God in several important ways. The phrase “and God said” with its regular consequence “and it was so” shows that acts of creation originate in God’s speech, or indeed his thought,¹¹ which has the effective power to produce the world. This effectiveness of God’s mere thought belongs to the writer’s strategy to demonstrate the unrivaled power of God over against other gods, or indeed the creation itself. It may be called a “fiat” view of creation, which, as Robert P. Gordon has pointed out, is also found, for example, in Psalms 33:6, 9; 148:5–6.¹²

God is also said, however, to “create” and to “make.” The verb *bārā* (to create), as in Genesis 1:1, 21, 27 (3x) and 2:3–4, only ever has God as subject when referring to making something, and so has often been claimed to express the uniqueness of God’s creative activity; that is, it is deliberately nonanthropomorphic. However, this may not be its intended effect in the chapter. Significantly, it is used seven times in 1:1–2:4a, of which three occur in the bracketing introduction and conclusion, and three in a single verse (v. 27) of the creation of the humans. It is thus employed overwhelmingly in relation to the act of creation as a whole and that of humanity in particular. This suggests a stylistic, rhetorical purpose, as one of the ways in which the text accords a special status to the humans. (The seventh occurrence in v. 21 relates to the creatures of sea and air.)¹³ If the use of *bārā* has this rhetorical purpose, it may not in itself imply a kind of creative activity unique to God. Indeed, as Gordon points out, *bārā* can bear the sense of “cut,” and a nonanthropomorphic meaning of it may not have been obvious to the biblical writers.¹⁴ Gordon assigns the verb to God’s activity in “fashioning” the world, along with the more regular word for “making,” *āsā*, which is used throughout the passage. This language suggests some commonality between the creative acts of God and human beings.¹⁵ Gordon also points to the analogy

11. Speech and thought are closely associated in the Old Testament; the verb *āmar* can often be translated either way.

12. Robert P. Gordon, “The Week That Made the World: Reflections on the First Pages of the Bible,” in *Reading the Law: Studies in Honour of Gordon J. Wenham*, ed. J. G. McConville and Karl Möller (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 231.

13. Perhaps this is merely to achieve a sevenfold usage of the term or to distinguish another pressure point on the view of creation advocated—namely, the force of mythological thought behind the great sea creatures.

14. Gordon, “Week That Made the World,” 233.

15. A similar point is made by Karl Möller: “It would be a dogmatically inspired overstatement to claim that [the biblical writers’] aim was to portray [God’s] activity as Creator as being entirely without analogy (Möller, “Images of God and Creation in Genesis 1–2,” in *A God of Faithfulness: Essays in Honour of J. Gordon McConville on His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Jamie

between the fashioning work of God in Genesis 1:1–2:4a and the completion of the construction of the tabernacle in Exodus 39:32–43, which reinforces the idea of God as “builder.”¹⁶ The language for creation in Genesis 1:1–2:4a, therefore, is not significantly different from 2:4b–25 in this respect, with its use of *yā ar*, “to form” (2:7–8), as well as *āśā* (2:4b, 18), though the two creation accounts have often been thought to differ in precisely this way. The point may appear to run counter to the concept that God produced the world merely by his thought or speech, but it is not necessary to suppose that the two ideas are incompatible. The unity of God’s conception and production is one aspect of the total picture, while his “creating” and “making” focus on a kind of purposeful activity; the former speaks of his separation from the world, his being independent of it, while the latter puts him in close and intimate touch with it. For Richard Middleton too, Genesis 1 portrays God as “artisan.” The literary structure of 1:1–2:3 testifies to God’s forethought, care, and delight in constructing the cosmos.¹⁷

God not only conceives and constructs the cosmos but also “sees that it is good.” God appraises his work by looking at it, and makes a value judgment about it. The verdict of “good” (*ôb*) means not only that the finished product is worthy and well executed but also that it is beautiful. The artisan is also an artist who creates something aesthetically admirable.¹⁸ These anthropomorphic aspects of God’s creative activity will play a part in our understanding of the meaning of the “image.”

Humanity as “Image of God”

So far we have observed the place of humanity as the “image of God” in the conceptual structure of Genesis 1:1–2:4a, but we have not begun to explore what the phrase might mean. We have seen that it is part of the narrative’s strategy to focus on the special importance of the humans, a strategy that is put into effect partly by simple expansiveness. For example, God’s deliberation (1:26) merely rehearses beforehand what he is then said to do. And the specification “male and female” adds nothing substantive to what was said to the creatures of air and sea, who were also “created” (*bārā*), blessed, and

Grant, Alison Lo, and Gordon J. Wenham [New York: T&T Clark, 2011], 25). Möller argues also that the verb *bārā* may be capable of describing human activity.

16. Gordon, “Week That Made the World,” 234–35.

17. Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 74; cf. Möller, “Images of God,” 27–28, who argues for a nuanced view of God in Gen. 1–2, incorporating aspects of transcendence and immanence.

18. On the aesthetic vision in Gen. 1, see Melissa Raphael, *Judaism and the Visual Image: A Jewish Theology of Art* (London: Continuum, 2009), 43–64.

commanded to “be fruitful and multiply” (1:21–22). Our analysis of the structure of verses 26–30, above, showed that the human creation is deeply involved with the nonhuman. Humanity is by no means unique in all respects, but has a profound fellowship with the other parts of God’s total work.

However, by virtue of the same literary structure, it is clear that the trope of the “image of God” also serves the literary strategy of marking out humanity as distinct within the whole picture. The immediate way in which the significance of the “image” is developed in the discourse is in terms of “dominion” over the other creatures. The point is evident not only in the structure of verses 26–28 but in the syntax of verse 26, which should be read, with Wenham: “Let us make [humanity] in our image, according to our likeness, *that they may rule* the fish of the sea . . .”¹⁹ The purpose clause “that they may rule” is supported by the form of the verb *rdh*, “rule” (a simple *waw* followed by the imperfect). In terms of the discourse, this is the only way in which the meaning of the “image” is developed, and it is bound to play a part in how the concept is to be understood.

Yet this does not explain why the specific expression “in our [God’s] image [*elem*] and according to our likeness [*dēmût*]” should be chosen, or what kinds of connotations it may have evoked. The idea that God should have an “image” at all is striking, in view of the Old Testament’s prohibition of the making of images of God (Exod. 20:4–5a). The terms there are different (*pesel*, *tēmûnâ*), but the word *elem* evidently refers to some physical form, and can denote idols (Num. 33:52). The addition of *dēmût* (“likeness”) in Genesis 1:26 does little to lessen the impact of the strongly physical implication in *elem*, though it has sometimes been taken to do so. The pairing of *elem* and *dēmût* appears not only in a ninth-century Aramaic inscription relating to the statue of a king²⁰ but also in Genesis 5:1–3; in 5:1 *dēmût* occurs alone by way of a back-reference to Genesis 1:26, and in verse 3 the two terms appear in a note that Adam transmitted the “image” to his son Seth, now with *dēmût* in the first position. This pattern of use makes it unlikely that *dēmût* is introduced in 1:26 to diminish the physical force of *elem*.

The notion of human “likeness” to God, as postulated by the Genesis narrative, is therefore problematical. One indication of this lies in the further account of beginnings in Genesis 2:4b–3:24, where the notion of likeness to God also plays a central role, namely, in the temptation of the human pair in the garden of Eden to become “like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:5). The point depends on the recognition that Genesis 2:4b–3:24 should indeed be read as

19. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 3–4.

20. *Ibid.*, 29.

part of an integrated whole along with Genesis 1:1–2:4a.²¹ But the echo is unmistakable and forcefully demonstrates the theological danger that is courted by the notion of godlikeness. The aspiration to it, at least under the conditions in play in Genesis 3, is shown here to be at the root of the human experience of alienation and of mortality itself. Behind the desire for godlikeness lurk the ever-present possibilities of tyranny and idolatry. The sequel to Genesis 1:1–2:4a in 2:4b–3:24 highlights precisely this dilemma of the human condition—namely, how to understand and inhabit godlikeness in a properly human way.

Interpreting the “Image of God”

In early Christian theology, the “image of God” in Genesis was often taken to refer to the spiritual and moral or rational capacities of the human.²² As generally recognized today, such readings tended to be influenced by prevailing philosophical categories and thus have little or no warrant in the text of Genesis.²³ Rather, as has been shown by the exegesis above, the “image” applies to the human as such.

Modern interpretations of the “image” look not only to exegesis of Genesis but to the wider context of the ancient Near East as the religious and cultural matrix of biblical thought and imagery. It is by now well known that the book of Genesis, especially in its accounts of the origins of the world, speaks pointedly into a specific world of ideas: Canaanite, Mesopotamian,

21. Karl Möller rightly takes issue with Dale Patrick and Allen Scult, who argue that the Priestly source's view of God as creator in Gen. 1:1–2:4a “forecloses any significant story that might follow” (Patrick and Scult, *Rhetoric and Biblical Interpretation*, JSOTSup 82 [Sheffield, UK: Almond Press, 1990], 117). Möller rejects this on the grounds that it forecloses any interplay between the two accounts (“Images of God,” 28). While it may be that Gen. 1–3 comprises originally separate accounts of creation, we have no access to the putative original forms or their contexts. If they do derive respectively from the pentateuchal sources P (Priestly) and J (Yahwist), then it seems that P (or a redactor) has prefixed its account (1:1–2:4a) to the already-extant J account; see Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 306. As Terence E. Fretheim puts it, “Genesis 1–2 together constitute the only perspective on originating creation of which we can be certain” (*God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* [Nashville: Abingdon, 2005], 33).

22. For accounts of theological interpretations of the “image,” see Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 17–24. See also Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, trans. John J. Scullion (London: SPCK; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 148–49, for early Christian interpretations, and 147–58 for an overview of ancient and modern readings.

23. One version of this was a distinction between “natural” human qualities reflected in the “image” (*elem*) in contrast to the “supernatural” (or “gratuitous”) ones denoted by “likeness” (*dēmūt*). This was already seen to be untenable by Calvin. See John Calvin, *Genesis*, trans. and ed. John King (1554; Calvin Translation Society, 1847; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 93–94.

and Egyptian.²⁴ There is a marked contrast, for example, between the dignity ascribed to humanity in Genesis 1, by virtue of their elevation above other parts of the creation and the “dominion” given to them over their fellow creatures (Gen. 1:28), and the status of humans in the Mesopotamian stories of *Enuma Elish* and *Atrahasis*, in which they come low in the creation’s pecking order and are little better than slaves of the gods.²⁵ The idea of the “image of God,” or *imago Dei*, as applied by Genesis to all of humanity, is part of a critical dialogue that Genesis is undertaking over against these concepts.

This point has been thoroughly demonstrated by Richard Middleton, who locates the *imago Dei* in the “symbolic world” of Genesis and over against its ancient Near Eastern background. The concept of the “image” in the sphere of the divine-human relationship is known in Mesopotamia and Egypt. In Egypt the idea of the king as the “image” of a god was frequent and applied to a large number of pharaohs in relation to several different gods.²⁶ In Mesopotamia there are fewer texts, but significantly the Akkadian term *almu*, cognate of the Hebrew *elem* (image) used in Genesis 1:26, occurs in all but one of them.²⁷ In both places, while images may have had several symbolic functions, the concept forms part of those nations’ respective royal ideologies. In Egypt the king as divine image was a cultic intermediary who guaranteed the cosmic order, natural and social, on earth; in Mesopotamia the concept was that of a more active, functional representative.²⁸ This could explain the practice of erecting statues of kings in places far from the king’s heartland, probably to represent the power of the king, and so that of the god, in the king’s absence.²⁹

24. See Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, xlvi–l, 5–10, for mainly Babylonian parallels to Gen. 1; also Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East*, 3rd ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 2006).

25. For annotated texts of this Babylonian literature, see Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

26. Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 108–9. He cites the work of Edward M. Curtis in an unpublished dissertation and in “Image of God (OT),” *ABD* 3:389–91. Curtis counts at least eighteen pharaohs, but this may not be the total figure (Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 108n56).

27. Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 111. This point was noted already by Gerhard von Rad in “Vom Menschenbild des Alten Testaments,” in *Der alte und der neue Mensch: Aufsätze zur theologischen Anthropologie*, by G. von Rad et al., BEvT 8 (Munich: Lempp, 1942), 5–23; and established by W. H. Schmidt, *Die Schöpfungsgeschichte in der Priesterschrift*, 2nd ed. (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1967), 127–49; and Hans Wildberger, “Das Abbild Gottes: Gen. 1,26–30,” *TZ* 21 (1965): 245–59, 481–501. See Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 108n54. I have also noted the connection in McConville, *God and Earthly Power: An Old Testament Political Theory, Genesis–Kings* (2006; repr., London: T&T Clark, 2008), 26n61.

28. Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 110, 119–21.

29. *Ibid.*, 104–7. Middleton notes two Egyptian texts in which the “image” is applied to human beings in general, but thinks these are too early to be relevant to a discussion of the background of the biblical usage (99–104).

These comparisons between Genesis 1:1–2:4a and Egypt and Mesopotamia have introduced the ideas of both “representation” and “rule” to our inquiry. We have noticed above that the function of “ruling” was the only connection with the “image” that could be drawn directly from the text of Genesis 1 because of the syntactical relation between “image” and the verb *rdh* in 1:26.³⁰ The commission of the humans to “rule” over creation therefore reflects an underlying metaphor in which the creator God is himself king. This is manifested in the ordering and commanding aspects of his creative activity in Genesis 1, which are then conferred upon the humans. The conferral of a ruling function on the humans as such, of course, is what is strikingly different about the vision of Genesis 1:26–30 in terms of the nature and place of humanity in the cosmic order. The ancient Near Eastern royal ideologies enshrine views of humanity as a whole, tending to rigidly hierarchical sociopolitical structures. In Mesopotamia, rooted in myths of creation with life-and-death conflicts between deities, they embody religio-political policies of perpetual war.³¹ In this context, the Old Testament’s idea that the human being as such is created “in the image of God” is part of the reconceiving of the place of the human expressed by Genesis 1:1–2:4a as a whole. It is not only that, in Middleton’s terms, a “genuine democratization” of the image has occurred, conferring enormous dignity on human beings as such, but the whole idea of the human relationship to God and the natural and social orders is transformed, in a way that might be called an “ideology critique.”³² There will be more to say below on what kinds of things this might entail in contemporary appropriation of the idea.

The function of “ruling,” however, does not constitute or exhaust the meaning of the “image,” but is better regarded as a consequence of it.³³ If the human “represents” God somehow, this too needs to be carefully considered rather than simply equated with “ruling.”³⁴ Does the idea of the “image” point to a kind of representation that is based on some intrinsic likeness to

30. Westermann notes the royal connotations of the verb *rdh* in the OT (*Genesis 1–11*, 152).

31. This is argued by Eckart Otto, with special reference to Assyria, in *Krieg und Frieden in der Hebräischen Bibel und im Alten Orient: Aspekte für eine Friedensordnung in der Moderne* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1999).

32. Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 121, 185–231. I have explored the idea of the Old Testament as cultural critique, including a consideration of the “image,” in *God and Earthly Power*, 12–29. Wenham too thinks that Genesis appears to “democratize” Egyptian and Assyrian royal concepts (*Genesis 1–15*, 31).

33. Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 153, 155. Karl Barth also sees dominion as a consequence of the “image” and rejects what he calls a “technical connexion” between the two concepts (Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/1 [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958], 194).

34. Westermann thinks that the extension of the idea of representation from the king to humanity as a whole was impossible, since humanity was by definition the species as a whole;

God? The question arises from the terms we have been discussing, that is, the use of *elem* in Genesis, with its echo of the Babylonian *almu*, and also the term *dēmūt*, with its inescapable connotations of “likeness.”

Image as Representation

We have seen that the idea of the “image of God” in Genesis implies an aspect of human “rule,” whatever that entails. Yet the occurrence of the concept in other passages in Genesis suggests that it cannot be construed in functional terms alone. In Genesis 5:1–3, at the head of the genealogy of Adam, God is said to have created Adam “in his likeness” (*dēmūt*). The allusion to Genesis 1:26–28 is evident, especially in view of 5:2, which repeats the terms “male and female,” “bless,” and “create” (*bārā*), the last again occurring more than once in specific connection with the creation of the human. In 5:1, however, the idea of “likeness” is led by the expression *dēmūt*, not *elem*, and is not attended by the mandate to “rule.” Adam then procreates, begetting Seth “in his likeness, according to his image,” thus with both the terms from 1:26, now in reverse order. The distribution of terms in this passage, which tells against any sharp distinction between *elem* and *dēmūt*, suggests that the humans bear the “image” of God not only in terms of a mandated function but in some sense intrinsically.

Genesis 5:1–3, therefore, takes a cue from 1:26–28 but goes beyond it. It affirms not only that Adam, now a named individual following the story in chapters 2–4, bears the likeness of God but also that the next generation inherits the “likeness and image” of Adam. This implies that the “image” of God is now borne also by that generation.³⁵ It further suggests that the human bearing of the divine “image” entails procreation, the human part of the divine intention to “fill the earth.” Here, in addition to “ruling,” is another way in which the humans are like God.

The “image of God” occurs again in Genesis 9:5–6, where it is predicated of humanity as such, here too in the context of “being fruitful, multiplying and filling the earth” (9:1, 7). The passage therefore reaffirms this fundamental requirement of the humans after the devastation of the flood, along with a primacy among the creatures, which now inspires the creatures’ dread of humans (9:2). The new element in the created order, the availability of animals as food for humans, gives rise to a distinction between the slaughter of animals

and he rules out the notion that they are portrayed here as representing God to the creation (*Genesis 1–11*, 153).

35. Cf. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 127.

and that of humans, with the penalty of death for the latter on the grounds that “God made humanity in his own image” (9:6). Once again, the “image” is more than a role, but says something about the very identity of the human.

I have been suggesting that there are aspects of both function (“rule”) and intrinsic nature in this likeness of humans to God. In fact, it is difficult to separate these two aspects of the “image,” as Middleton has rightly argued. For him, the exercise of divine rule on earth cannot be entirely understood as delegation of a task, but rather supposes an actual likeness of the human to the divine.³⁶ Human representation of God is to be understood in this sense, that only one who is like God can represent him. Middleton sees not only the function of rule, but also the “artisan” metaphor, as forming this picture of human godlikeness. God has begun a task of artful construction by his twofold activity of separating and filling (the activities of days 2 and 3 in Gen. 1:6–13), and humans are now called to continue both these aspects of his work by procreating—that is, “filling” the earth and “subduing” or “organizing” it (corresponding to God’s activity of “separating”).³⁷ Middleton argues that the created world is like a cosmic temple, and just as no ancient Near Eastern temple would be complete without the installation of the image of the deity, so God’s creation of the world is not complete without the creation of humanity “in his image.” He goes on to draw attention to the work of Bezalel, who was filled with the spirit of God and wisdom in order to accomplish the fine craftsmanship involved in making the tabernacle (Exod. 31:1–11): “Bezalel’s Spirit-filled craftsmanship, which imitates God’s primordial wise design and construction of the cosmos, is functionally equivalent to the *imago Dei*.”³⁸ The point is, importantly, not only about function, but about imitation.³⁹

The human being, as “image of God,” may be said to be the place where God is present in the creation. In support of this point, Middleton again turns to the Mesopotamian royal ideology, and especially the practices relating to the consecration of cult images, in ceremonies known as “mouth-washing” (*mīs pī*) and “mouth-opening” (*pit pī*). By virtue of these ceremonies, the statue was ritually transformed to become, in some sense, the god. He expresses carefully the sense in which this should be understood: “The result of the *mīs pī* is that the carefully carved and decorated statue is said to be born of the gods and becomes the living presence of the deity on earth. The mode of this presence . . . was distinct from either a merely symbolic reminder of

36. Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 88.

37. *Ibid.*, 89.

38. *Ibid.*, 87.

39. We return to Bezalel and other dimensions of human creativity in ch. 9 below.

deity, or the actual, literal god.”⁴⁰ Middleton notes how some attempts to conceptualize the presence of the god in the statue have reached for language from the Christian theology of the Eucharist, such as “transubstantiation” and “real presence.”⁴¹ The suggested analogies indicate at least that the ancient attempts to conceive of the relation of the god to the world were theologically sophisticated.

The perception that the Mesopotamian royal ideology had a sophisticated concept of the relationship between the “image” and the divine presence has been strengthened by further recent research. Stephen Herring, in a work on “divine substitution,” argues that Mesopotamian conceptions of image and presence are significant for understanding Genesis 1. Genesis 1 does indeed have a polemical thrust in relation to Mesopotamia, since in its case the “image” takes the form of the human being as such, but nevertheless the nature of the polemic requires an understanding of the Mesopotamian concepts.⁴² Herring argues that a proper understanding of representation in Mesopotamia is not mimetic; that is, the image does not function by simply picturing a reality outside itself, but rather “the real presence of the entity represented participates in the representation.” The image therefore becomes a “mode of presencing” the deity.⁴³ In a discussion of the human king or priest as divine image in Mesopotamia (*almu*), he concludes that it does not function as a replica but “is more like a repetition or extension of the referent’s [that is, the god’s] very presence.”⁴⁴

The point is highly suggestive for the concept of the human as image of God, because it offers a way of thinking about the relation between function and intrinsic likeness. The functional aspect of humanity’s status as “image” depends here on the “presencing” of the deity. Power and presence belong together.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the crucial point that the image is not merely a replica suggests that there is a necessary aspect of freedom, on the part of humanity, to explore and enact what it means. These essential points are also supported

40. Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 127–28. Middleton refers here to the work of Christopher Walker and Michael B. Dick, *The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mesopotamian Mīs Pī Ritual*, State Archives of Assyria Literary Texts (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Corpus Project, 2001).

41. Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 128.

42. Stephen Herring, *Divine Substitution: Humanity as the Manifestation of Deity in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, FRLANT 247 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 21. He also refers for theoretical support to Zainab Bahrani, *The Graven Image: Representation in Babylonia and Assyria* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

43. Herring, *Divine Substitution*, 18–19.

44. *Ibid.*, 47. For his description of the “washing of the mouth” ritual (*mīs pī*), see 26–37.

45. *Ibid.*, 48, 124.

by the important recent thesis of Annette Schellenberg on the uniqueness of humans as divine image in Genesis.⁴⁶

Image as Relational/Trinitarian

This approach to the “image” draws attention to the relation of the human being to the divine presence in the creation. Human likeness to God tells us something not only about the humans but also about God. What is it about God that leads him to place his “image” within the creation? The question touches on a strand in the interpretation of the “image” that emphasizes relationality. The idea of the “image” as the human capacity to relate to God is proposed by Karl Barth, who thinks that in humanity “God created the real counterpart to whom He could reveal himself.” For him, the point of the “image” language is to express, not inherent qualities of the human or even his superiority over other creatures, but rather the fact that in humanity God created “the future partner of the covenant, the kingdom and the glory of God.” This partner exists with him in an “I-Thou” relationship from creation to the end of time.⁴⁷ Barth also lays strong emphasis on the human “image of God” as “male and female.” God as the free creator relates to a counterpart who also is free and whose freedom consists in his relating with other humans, as instanced in the marriage relationship.⁴⁸ The human communion corresponds, further, to a communion within God, signaled in self-deliberation, “let us make.”⁴⁹ Barth’s interpretation thus focuses sharply on the relationship between God and humanity; the embeddedness of humanity in the nonhuman and inanimate creation plays only a small part in his analysis. For him, humanity as part of the creation is “the seeing eye at which all creation aims.”⁵⁰

46. She too sees that images in the ancient Near East are not replicas (“Abbildungen”) of the form of the god but “Repräsentationen dieser Gottheit selbst,” such representation, furthermore, being “powerful” (“machtvollen Repräsentation”). See Annette Schellenberg, *Der Mensch, das Bild Gottes? Zum Gedanken einer Sonderstellung des Menschen im Alten Testament und in weiteren altorientalischen Quellen*, ATANT 101 (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 2011), 86. Her question is whether human beings have a unique status compared with other created beings in the ancient world. In the Old Testament, one of the ways in which humans are distinct from animals is in the absence of internal divisions among them, since they are not created “according to their kinds”; rather, the ascription of “brotherhood” to them, in connection with the “image” (Gen. 9:5), signifies that their equality (“Gleichheit”) is definitive for their humanness (“Menschsein”) (ibid., 141–42).

47. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/1, 194–97. See also Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 22–23.

48. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/1, 195. Barth acknowledges both Wilhelm Vischer and Dietrich Bonhoeffer as his sources for this interpretation.

49. Ibid., 196.

50. Ibid.

A “relational” concept of creation has been taken up by a number of writers,⁵¹ notably Terence Fretheim, with some differences from Barth. Fretheim sees the issue in interpreting the “image” as the need to understand the manner in which God makes himself present within the created order. Theologies of creation can err either by making God a kind of absentee landlord or by conceiving of his presence in the world as overwhelmingly commanding.⁵² There is an issue, then, of divine power in relation to human freedom (thus in a point of contact with Barth). This is evident in the manner of God’s creating, for God creates not only in an originary but also in a continuing way, and in doing so he has committed himself to a kind of power sharing with the human creature. God really has entrusted the care of the creation to the human, and he will remain faithful to that decision that he has made.⁵³ Fretheim’s view of relationship in the created order, however, extends beyond the one between God and humanity, to that between the human and the earth. In Genesis 2:15, God puts the man in the garden “to till it” (as the older translations have it). But following Ellen Davis, Fretheim points out that the verb is *abad*, which elsewhere in the Old Testament regularly means to “serve” or “worship.” The human may thus be said to “serve” the earth, a notion that is entirely in line with the interdependence of the human and the earth that we noticed in Genesis 1:29–30.⁵⁴ This view of the human as “image of God” finds deep interconnections among God, the human, and the nonhuman creation. It is a refinement in the understanding of relationship in the creation that corresponds well with the embeddedness of humanity within creation that we observed in our reading of the text.

The concept of relationship is therefore fruitful in our attempt to answer the question put at the outset of this section: What is it about God that leads him to place his “image” within the creation? We now see that the “image” implies the presence of God within the creation through humanity, in a way that affirms his ongoing intimate involvement with it. At the same time, the image depicts the human in a relationship of freedom with the creator and in intrahuman relationships. It also draws in the indispensable third dimension of the nature of humans’ presence within the creation. The idea of relationality enables an approach that affirms both godlikeness in itself and a dimension of actualizing this in human living.

51. For an account of some of these, see Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 150–51.

52. Fretheim, *God and World*, 13–14.

53. *Ibid.*, 49.

54. *Ibid.*, 53, 274. He refers to Ellen Davis, *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 2001), 192. See also her *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 29.

The question about humanity has led back to the nature of God. Indeed, the light on the “image” cast by the notion of relationality also leads to reflections on God as Trinity. This is not by way of God’s self-deliberation in the words “Let us make” since those words can be explained in other ways.⁵⁵ Rather, there is a trinitarian shape to the theological structure in which God originates all things (God the Father) and also participates in the created world through the one made in his “image” (God the Son). The presence of God the Spirit need not be directly inferred from the reference to the “spirit of God” in Genesis 1:2, which does not necessarily imply a hypostasis. Yet the idea of God the Spirit can be aligned with the sense that the creation now awaits development.⁵⁶ This is true in spite of the idea that it is “finished” (Gen. 2:1), for it is a “finished” work that has established a new reality, a world in which a creature has been made “in the image and likeness of God” and charged with being “fruitful” and with having dominion over the creation. What this might mean remains to be unfolded. But there is a tension in the concept that God is present in the world by means of his “image” and the fact that the image-bearing creature is other than God, having freedom and responsibility. God has chosen to be involved with his creation in a way that rests much on this human creature. The nature of God’s precarious involvement is illuminated in the preamble to the book of Job, where God delivers to the Satan the challenge: “Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?” (Job 1:8 RSV). It matters enough to God that a human should be just that he is prepared to expose him to the power of an enemy in order to demonstrate it. The project turns on Job’s willingness to bear suffering and yet remain in his innocence. The tension involved in human image-bearing is also unbearably clear in Genesis 3. It is in this space, where the humans discover and live what is entailed in their bearing the “image of God,” that the depiction in Genesis 1 has room for God the Spirit.

To put the point differently, godlikeness is not a status that has been achieved and now merely needs to be enjoyed. Rather, it commits both God and humans to a life together, the story of which will occupy the pages of the Old Testament and the New. It includes the narratives about worship, in which God chooses

55. These include self-address itself, in a kind of plural of majesty or “royal we,” and God’s address to the heavenly council, in accordance with other depictions of God in the Old Testament (e.g., Job 1). The latter is handicapped by its possible suggestion that God did not create alone, which would be out of kilter with the rest of Gen. 1.

56. These intimations of the Son and the Spirit have evident echoes in New Testament texts such as Col. 1:15–16 and Rom. 8:19–23. These have their own christological and eschatological implications, which are absent in the Genesis text, though it lays groundwork for them.

to dwell among his people Israel and to seek their love and devotion.⁵⁷ And it includes those strands of the Old Testament that call the human partner to imitate God in his fundamental orientation toward the world—that is, in his justice and righteousness, faithfulness, holiness, compassion, and truth. Prophets and psalmists both attribute these qualities to God and hold them up as true marks of the life of humans.⁵⁸ Human godlikeness is also imprinted on the Old Testament’s pages in the many anthropomorphic depictions of God, in the gamut of emotions that he exhibits, from compassion to wrath, in his baring of his “mighty arm” to deliver Israel from oppression in Egypt (Deut. 4:34), in his guise as husband or parent (Hosea 1–3; 11), and when he appears in humanlike forms, as “the angel of Yahweh” to Gideon (Judg. 6:11–12), or even as three men to Abraham (Gen. 18:1–3).

This godlikeness is not mere imitation, for in the presencing of God in the human there is also, I believe, an aspect of relationship characterized by desire, or even passion.⁵⁹ The passion of God for humans is nowhere more clearly expressed than in Hosea 11, which portrays God’s love for humans in strongly emotional terms; his “heart” recoils from coming in anger against his people Israel because of his compassion for them, and this emotional attachment even seems to define his holiness (Hosea 11:8–9). The human partner longs correspondingly for God, as in the vivid physiological metaphors of Psalm 42:1–3.

The basis in Genesis 1 for this dynamic understanding of godlikeness is in God’s appraisal of the world he has made as “very good.” Now he invites the humans not only to admire it with him but also to share his vision and intention for it. Godlikeness is a commission to accept, with an element of exploration. It is not simply an aspect of being human, nor a fixed quality, nor a (mere) function; rather, humanity both *is* the “image” and finds its true self in living it. It entails an element of the unknown, corresponding to the fundamental fact that God has created one other than himself to be and function in ways resembling God. The account of the creation of humanity in God’s “image and likeness,”

57. Middleton draws attention to God’s indwelling of the cosmos, in which creation is seen as a “cosmic sanctuary” (*Liberating Image*, 81–88).

58. All of these qualities are predicated of both God and humans. An obvious example is the command in Lev. 19:2: “You shall be holy as I Yahweh your God am holy.” Note also Deut. 32:4; Ps. 119:137; Jer. 23:5–6. On the imitation of God as one important category in the Old Testament’s ethical thought, see John Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics: Approaches and Explorations* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

59. The category of desire is adopted by Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay ‘On the Trinity’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). In my reflections on the Trinity in relation to the “image,” I found stimulating her section entitled “A Prayer-Based Model of the Trinity” (111–15).

therefore, invites us to read on, not only into Genesis 2:4b–3:24, but further into the biblical story. The “image” initiates a story of the human participation in the life of God. This involves traits that we have observed in Genesis 1 itself: God’s gift of life, his ordering of the world, his delight in it, his labor over it, his requiring refreshment. It also involves the life of humans with each other, not just in coexistence but also in the desire for the other that is most keenly expressed in the sexual relationship,⁶⁰ but which spills over into all kinds of human relating. The mutuality enshrined in being “in the image and likeness of God” tells against the fissuring of human community which attends much of human experience and which is adumbrated in the Old Testament’s own story. In their longing for such relating, humans know something of their origin in God.

This view of the “image” allows it to be read in conjunction with the rest of the Old Testament witness about the relationship between God, humans, and the world. It leads to an understanding of it that both respects its ancient context and opens onto contemporary reexpressions by means of the theological imagination. Regarding its context, it will pay attention to what Middleton has called the “liberating” characteristic of Genesis’s depiction of the “image,” so that it is no longer an emblem of inherently oppressive social and political forms, but reinvents godlikeness democratically. This can be extended into contemporary contexts to become a ground for resisting every kind of denial of God-given freedom as a condition of humanity, including slavery, economic exploitation, and the subjugation of women.⁶¹ In this respect Genesis 1:1–2:4a stands squarely with the Old Testament prophets. But the kind of responsibility that thus devolves on the humans by virtue of being “in the image of God” does not stop with interhuman relationships but extends to the nonhuman creation, for it is to this that the command to “have dominion” applies (1:26, 28). The “image” opens also onto modern ethical concern about a right human relationship with the creatures and the planet.

In recognizing these responsibilities, it remains to reiterate that the “image” should not be read exclusively in terms of an imperative to act in certain ways. We saw that in its occurrences in Genesis 5:1–3 and 9:5–6, the concept of the

60. See *ibid.*, 7–11, for Coakley’s treatment of this. See also Rowan Williams, “The Body’s Grace,” in *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Eugene F. Rogers Jr. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001), 309–21.

61. Phyllis Trible famously makes Gen. 1:26–28 her “center” of an Old Testament theology, with what she sees as its predicate of equality between the sexes (Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, OBT [1978; repr., Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992], 12). The text probably does not exactly bear that meaning, since as we have seen, the sexual differentiation of men and women functions in the text in terms of procreation. However, equality between the sexes returns in the interpretation of the text because of its general liberating tendency, and its opposition to all forms of overbearing behavior of humans toward humans.

human as “image and likeness” of God was not expressed in terms of the call to “dominion.” Rather, it was predicated of humans simply as humans. This is not to revert to a notion of the “image” as a status or inherent quality, but rather to observe that, by virtue of the “image,” God views humans differently from other parts of the creation. They are peculiarly the object of his delight and desire. This stands against any temptation to see the “image” in terms of power, achievement, or success, a point that has been made cogently by Jean Vanier, who has found through experience that the variously challenged individuals who have formed part of the communities of L’Arche, which he founded, have given profound insights into what it means to be human.⁶²

Conclusion

Several things follow from our observations about the human as “image of God.” In virtue of the “image,” humans may be said to represent the presence of God in the world. The royal language that attends the depiction of the humans in Genesis 1 might suggest that this representative capacity is characterized primarily by power and privilege. However, since the orientation of this language of “image” and rule is in contention with conceptions of divine presence and royal function in the ancient Near East, it follows that ideas prevailing there should not be inadvertently imported into the Old Testament. The extension of the notion of the “image” to all humans, male and female, is the most obvious sign that something radically different is being offered here. And in fact, the bold gambit that casts humans as the “image” of God is also part of a theological vision in which God too is understood in a way that trenchantly opposes ancient Near Eastern conceptions of deity. To say, therefore, that the human is created in the “image of God” becomes a question not only about the human but about God. We have seen reasons to think that the notion of the human as “image” has an aspect of relationality, implying a longing or desire for the divine as well as a sense of mutuality among the humans themselves and a constructive orientation toward the nonhuman creation. In these relationships, the narrative’s hints of power are balanced or countered by notes of service. For these reasons, the powerful statement about humanity that appears on the first page of the Bible tends to open up questions about God and the human being rather than close them down at the outset. It remains to be seen, therefore, how the lines of thought in Genesis 1 feed into the Old Testament’s developing portrayal of the human.

62. Jean Vanier, *Man and Woman He Made Them* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985).