

## **The Liberating Image? Interpreting the Imago Dei in Context**

By J. Richard Middleton

For nearly two thousand years now the Christian tradition has singled out Genesis 1:26-27 for special attention.<sup>1</sup> These biblical verses constitute the *locus classicus* of the doctrine of *imago Dei*, the notion that human beings are made in God's image. The text is important enough to reproduce here in full (including verse 28, which is an important part of the context).

Then God said, "Let us make humanity in our image, according to our likeness. And let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air. Let them rule over the livestock, over all the earth, and over everything that moves upon the earth." So God created humanity in his image. In the image of God he created him. Male and female he created them. And God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase, fill, the earth and subdue it. And rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." (Genesis 1:26-28)

Although the Christian tradition has typically treated these verses as containing a central biblical affirmation with significant implications for human life, there are only three explicit references to the *imago Dei* notion in the entire Old Testament (Genesis 1:26-27; 5:1; and 9:6). Furthermore these references are all found in that section of Genesis (chapters 1-11) known as the "primeval history," in literary strands typically assigned to the priestly writers.<sup>2</sup>

With the exception of two deuterocanonical references (Wisdom 2:23 and Ecclesiasticus 17:3-4), the idea that humans are made in God's image does not surface again until the New Testament. Even here, however, only two texts speak of creation in God's image (I Corinthians 11:7 and James 3:9). The rest either exalt Christ as the paradigm (uncreated) image of God or address the salvific renewal of the image in the Church.

The concept of the *imago Dei* has been widely recognized as central to a Christian understanding of human beings, yet the paucity of biblical references has left the way open for a wide variety of philosophical and theological interpretations of this notion. In this essay J. Richard Middleton presents a "Royal" interpretation which is based on a "virtual consensus among Old Testament scholars concerning the meaning of the *imago Dei* in Genesis"; he then goes on to deal with contemporary theological objections to such an interpretation. Mr. Middleton teaches Old Testament at the Institute for Christian Studies (Toronto).

### The Problem of Contextless Interpretation

This paucity of biblical references has contributed to a wide diversity of opinion over what it means to be made in God's image. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that, until recently, very few interpreters have treated the immediate context of Genesis 1:26-27 as important for determining the meaning of those verses. It is not unusual for interpreters explicitly to affirm, contrary to standard hermeneutical practice, that here context does not clarify meaning.<sup>3</sup> As a result, many have turned to extra-biblical, usually philosophical, sources to interpret the image, and have ended up reading contemporaneous conceptions of being human back into the Genesis text.

Paul Ricoeur could be taken as a charitable commentator on this state of affairs, when he introduces his own essay on the *imago Dei* with the following words:

When the theologians of the sacerdotal [or priestly] school elaborated the doctrine of man that is summarized in the startling expression of the first chapter of Genesis--"Let us make man in our image and likeness"--they certainly did not master at once all its implicit wealth of meaning.

Ricoeur justifies his own explication of this "implicit wealth of meaning" by adding that:

Each century has the task of elaborating its thought ever anew on the basis of that indestructible symbol which henceforth belongs to the unchanging treasury of the Biblical canon.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was given at the annual meeting of the Canadian Theological Society, May 1991, in Kingston, Ontario.

<sup>2</sup> Since Julius Wellhausen's famous documentary hypothesis about the composition of the Pentateuch, argued in *Die Composition des Hexateuchs* ([1st ed. 1876-78] 4th ed.; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1963) and in his *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels* ([1st ed. 1878] 3rd ed.; Berlin: Reimer, 1899), it has been standard academic practice to attribute the final literary form of the book of Genesis (plus chapters 1, 5, 17, 23 and strands of 6-9) to one or more authors or redactors thought to be of an exilic or post-exilic priestly orientation (typically designated "P"). In the past two decades, however, the scholarly consensus has seriously eroded. For a convenient summary of the history and present state of Pentateuchal criticism as it applies to Genesis, see Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 (Waco; Texas: Word, 1987), pp. xxv-xlv. For an incisive, extended evaluation of the past century of scholarship on Genesis, see Duane Garrett, *Rethinking Genesis: The Sources and Authorship of the First Book of the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> G. C. Berkhouwer, for example, in *Man: The Image of God*, trans. by Dirk W. Jellema (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), states that Genesis 1 affirms a likeness between humans and God "with no explanation given as to exactly what this likeness consists of or implies" (p. 69). In a similar vein, Carl F. H. Henry claims that "the Bible does not define for us the precise content of the original *imago*" (in *God, Revelation and Authority*, Vol. II *God Who Speaks and Shows: Fifteen Theses, Part One* [Waco, Texas: Word, 1976], p. 125) and Charles Lee Feinberg asks: "After all, what is the image of God? The biblical data furnish no systematic theory of the subject, no clue as to what is implied" (in "The Image of God," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 129 [July Sept 1972] 515: 238).

<sup>4</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "The Image of God and the Epic of Mart," *History and Truth*, trans. by Charles A. Kelbley (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), p. 110.

A different (and less charitable) reading of the history of interpretation is given by theologian Hendrikus Berkhof. Berkhof replaces the explication of implicit meaning with another image. "By studying how systematic theologies have *poured* meaning *into* Gen. 1:26," he notes, "one could write a piece of Europe's cultural history."<sup>5</sup>

Berkhof's judgment is echoed, in somewhat more colourful language, by Old Testament scholar Norman Snaith. In Snaith's words:

Many "orthodox" theologians through the centuries have lifted the phrase "the image of God" (*imago Dei*) right out of its context, and, like Humpty-Dumpty, they have made the word mean just what they choose it to mean.<sup>6</sup>

Although this may be something of an exaggeration, it is not much of one. For the vast majority of interpreters right up to recent times have sought the meaning of the image in terms of a metaphysical analogy or similarity between the human soul and the being of God, in categories not likely to have occurred to the author of Genesis. As blissfully unconcerned with authorial intent as any post-structuralist critic, most medieval and modern interpreters have typically asked not an exegetical, but a speculative, question: In what way are humans like God and unlike animals? In answer to this question, various candidates have been suggested for the content of the image. These range from human reason, through conscience, immortality, and spirituality, to freedom and personhood. This dominant metaphysical stream of interpretation stretches from Ireneaus through Augustine to Aquinas in the pre-modern period, and until recently has held sway even in the modern period.

There has been, however, a significant minority reading of the image which has attempted to substitute for the metaphysical, substantialistic analogy a dynamic, relational notion. This attempt begins in the Reformation with Luther, and Calvin, who at least try to modify or adumbrate the metaphysical interpretation with the image as ethical conformity or obedient response to God. In more recent years, under the influence of "existential" anthropology, the human-divine, I-Thou relation has been suggested as the key to the image. Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, among others, have proposed that the image of God refers to the capacity of human beings to be addressed by and to respond to God's Word.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith*, trans. by Sierd Woudstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 179. Emphasis added.

<sup>6</sup> Snaith, "The Image of God," *Expository Times* 86 (October 1974-September 1975): 24. To the comments of Berkhof and Snaith could be added those of Karl Barth, who makes essentially the same criticism in his *Church Dogmatics*, 3/1 (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1958), pp. 192-193. Although Barth certainly attempts to root his own interpretation of the *imago Dei* in exegesis, he also ends up, willy nilly, reading contemporaneous anthropological notions into the text.

<sup>7</sup> For the terminology of *substantialistic* and *relational* interpretations I am indebted to Douglas John Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), p. 89. Hall has himself modified the categories of Paul Ramsey in *Basic Christian Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950). Summary accounts of the history of interpretation are found

What these two (dominant and minor) streams of interpretation have in common is that both may be found in the writings of theologians; writings which largely, if not entirely, ignore the massive literature in Old Testament scholarship on the *imago Dei*. This theological ignorance of biblical scholarship is a shame, on two counts.

First of all, the interpretation of the *imago Dei* among theologians almost universally excludes the body from the image, thus entrenching a dualistic reading of the human condition. Although few modern interpreters come to the Genesis text with the ascetic predilections of Origen or Augustine, nevertheless this unwarranted limitation of the image continues to perpetuate an implicit devaluation of the concrete life of the body in relation to spirituality.

What is a shame about this is that any Old Testament scholar worth her salt will tell you that the semantic range of *tselem*, the Hebrew word for "image" in Genesis 1, typically includes "idol," which in the common theology of the ancient Near East is precisely a localized, visible, corporeal representation of the divine. A simple word study would thus lead to the preliminary observation that visibility and bodiliness are minimally a necessary condition of being *tselem elohim* or *imago Dei*.<sup>8</sup>

But the ignorance of biblical scholarship among theologians is shameful for another reason. As my own survey of the field of Old Testament studies has revealed (and this is confirmed by the recently published Lund dissertation of Gunnlaugur A. Jonsson), there is at present a virtual consensus among Old Testament scholars concerning the meaning of the *imago Dei* in Genesis.<sup>9</sup>

in Hall, chap. 3: "Two Historical Conceptions of the Imago Dei"; G. C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, chap. 2: "A Preliminary Orientation"; Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt: A Christian Anthropology*, trans. by Olive Wyon (London: Lutterworth, 1939), Appendix I: "The Image of God in the Teaching of the Bible and the Church"; and Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), chap. 4: "The Image of God: Historical Survey." A more extended history of interpretation may be found in chaps. 4-13 of David Cairns, *The Image of God in Man* (Revised ed.; London: Collins, 1973).

<sup>8</sup> Although a number of different Hebrew words translate as "image" or "idol" in the Old Testament, *tselem* is used for idols in Numbers 33:52; II Kings 11:18; II Chronicles 23:17; Ezekiel 7:20, 16:27; and Amos 5:26. Based on this usage Walter Kaiser Jr. in *Towards an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), p. 76, translates *tselem* as "carved or hewn statue or copy." The case for *demut* ("likeness") is more complicated.

Although biblical scholars have often suggested that the physical, concrete connotation of *tselem* is intentionally modified by the more abstract *demut*, this latter term is sometimes used within Scripture for concrete, visible representations, as in I Samuel 6:5 and 11; II Chronicles 4:3; and Daniel 3:1. Furthermore, a recent (1979) excavation at Tell Fekheriyeh in Syria unearthed a 9th century statue with a bilingual inscription containing the cognate equivalents of both *tselem* and *demut* in Assyrian and Aramaic as parallel terms designating the statue. For an account of this inscription, see A. R. Millard and P. Bordreuil, "A Statue from Syria with Assyrian and Aramaic Inscriptions," *Biblical Archeologist* 45 (1982): 135-141.

<sup>9</sup> See Gunnlaugur A. Jonsson, *The Image of God: Genesis 1:26-28 in a Century of Old Testament Research*, trans. by Lorraine Svendsen, rev. by Michael S. Cheney (Lund: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1988), pp. 219-225. Before reading Jonsson, I would have said that perhaps 85% of

This virtual consensus is based, in the first place, on careful literary and rhetorical analysis of Genesis 1:1-2:3 as a textual unit.<sup>10</sup> Such analysis notes the predominantly "royal" flavour of the text, and does not depend only on the close linking of image with the mandate to rule and subdue the earth and its creatures in verses 26 and 28 (typically royal functions). Beyond this royal mandate, the God in whose image and likeness humans are created is depicted as sovereign over the cosmos, ruling by royal decree ("let there be") and even addressing the divine council or heavenly court with the words: "let us make humanity in our image," an address which parallels God's question to the seraphim at the call of Isaiah (in Isaiah 6:8), "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" Just as Isaiah saw Yahweh "seated on a throne, high and exalted" (6:1), so the writer of Genesis 1 portrays God as King presiding over "heaven and earth," an ordered and harmonious realm in which each creature manifests the will of the Creator and is thus declared "good."

These and other rhetorical clues, when taken together with the wealth of comparative studies of Israel and the ancient Near East, have led to an interpretation which sees the image of God as *the royal function or office of human beings as God's representatives and agents in the world, given authorized power to share in God's rule over the earth's resources and creatures.*<sup>11</sup>

Since the main function of divinity in both Israel and the ancient Near East is precisely to rule (hence kings were often viewed as divine), it is no wonder Psalm 8 asserts that in putting all things under their feet and giving them dominion over the works of God's hands, God has made humans "little less than *elohim*" (Psalm 8:5-6). It does not matter whether *elohim* is translated as "God" or "angels" (as in the Septuagint), the meaning is virtually unchanged. In the theology of both Psalm 8 and Genesis 1, humans (like the angelic heavenly court) have been given royal, and thus god-like, status in the world.<sup>12</sup>

Old Testament scholars were in agreement with the interpretation proposed here. Jonnsson, however, whose study surveys a century of Old Testament research in English, West European and Scandinavian languages, portrays the degree of consensus as considerably higher. The two most substantial articles in English by Old Testament scholars on the *imago Dei*, both of which contain extensive references, are D. J. A. Clines, "The Image of God in Man," *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968): 53-103 and Phyllis A. Bird, "Male and Female He Created Them': Gen 1:27b in the Context of the Priestly Account of Creation," *Harvard Theological Review* 74 (1981) 2: 129-159.

<sup>10</sup> Examples of good literary analyses of Genesis 1 include Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), pp. 22-39 and Bernhard W. Anderson, "A Stylistic Study of the Priestly Creation Story," in *Canon and Authority: Essays in Old Testament Religion and Theology*, ed. by George W. Coats and Burke O. Long (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), pp. 148-162.

<sup>11</sup> The near unanimity in Old Testament scholarship in proposing this "royal" interpretation of the *imago Dei* does not extend to the actual reasons advanced for this interpretation. Various scholars forward quite different lines of evidence, not all of which are of equal value. In this paper I summarize only the main lines of such evidence as I find convincing.

<sup>12</sup> On the centrality of God as Ruler in the Old Testament, see Patrick D. Miller, Jr., "The Sovereignty of God," in *The Hermeneutical Quest: Essays in Honor of James Luther Mays on His*

Although a "royal" reading of the image has found scattered support in the pre-twentieth century history of interpretation, its career in the field of Old Testament scholarship begins in 1898 and 1915 with the work, respectively, of H. Holzinger and Johannes Hehn.<sup>13</sup> And although there are at present a few important dissenters within Old Testament studies, such as Claus Westermann who holds to a modified Barthian interpretation, the last thirty years have seen the royal interpretation of the *imago Dei* come virtually to monopolize the field.<sup>14</sup>

Old Testament scholars, however, tend to be notorious in their hesitancy to make broad theological pronouncements based on their research, preferring instead to remain submerged in the textual and linguistic minutiae of their discipline. The theological significance, therefore, of the royal interpretation of the *imago Dei* has remained largely unexplored. The time is ripe, then, for extended theological reflection on the image of God that takes seriously both the biblical materials and contemporary biblical scholarship.

### Contemporary Objections to the Royal Interpretation

But just as this opportunity presents itself, the very notion of *rule*, whether human or divine, has become problematic. This is not the place to rehearse the recent history of feminist theology, with its profound challenges to patriarchy as an ideologically legitimated social system. Suffice it to say that no theologian today attempting to reflect on the *imago Dei* as rule can avoid grappling with the objections raised, for example, by Sallie McFague in *Models of God* to the traditional picture of God as a transcendent divine Monarch exercising absolute rule over his kingdom--a picture obviously crucial for the royal interpretation of the image. Such a picture, claims McFague, is derived from a patriarchal model

*Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. by Donald G. Miller (Allison Park, Penn.: Pickwick Publications, 1986), pp. 129-144; G. Ernest Wright, *The Old Testament and Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), chap. 4: "God the Lord," pp. 97-150; and J. Stanley Chestnut, *The Old Testament Understanding of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), chap. 4: "God and Kingship," pp. 70-81. On the relationship of divinity and rule in the ancient Near East, see Gary V. Smith, "The Concept of God/the Gods as King in the Ancient Near East and the Bible," *Trinity Journal* 3 (Spring 1982) 1: 18-38; and Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods: A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society and Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948).

<sup>13</sup> An early example of the royal interpretation in the Jewish tradition is found in Saadya's 10th century commentary on Genesis (cited by Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* [San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988], p. 112). An early example of the royal interpretation in the Christian tradition is found among 16th century Socinians and is explicitly stated in the Socinian Catechismus .Racoviensis of 1605 (see Berkouwer, p. 70 and Hall, pp. 71 and 217). On the pioneering work of Holzinger and Helmn, see Jonssori s account on pp. 55-59.

<sup>14</sup> Westermann's extensive treatment of the *imago Dei* text is found in part one of his three-part commentary on the book, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, trans. by John J. Scullion from the 1974 German edition (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), pp. 142-161.

of man ruling over woman and serves to enforce and legitimate such rule by its association of male dominance with God's transcendence.<sup>15</sup>

Neither can theologians ignore the objections raised by Catherine Keller, to take another example, in her superb interdisciplinary study, *From a Broken Web*, where she attempts to deconstruct the first chapter of Genesis as a thinly disguised--more gentlemanly--version of the *Enuma Elish*, the classic Mesopotamian creation story, which--on her reading--served mythically to legitimate patriarchy in the Babylonian empire. Keller goes further than McFague in exposing not only the parallels between God-world and man-woman, but the way in which rule involves the externalization of the other as an object and its ultimate demonization.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to feminist objections, however, the Genesis mandate for human dominion of the earth has often been linked to the present environmental crisis. The literature is too large to cite exhaustively, but historians like Lynn White, Jr. and contemporary scientists from Ian McHarg to David Suzuki have challenged the Western model of humanity over against the non-human world, which they trace back to its roots in Genesis.<sup>17</sup>

Beyond both feminist and ecological objections, however, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann has noted the propensity of creation theology to serve to legitimate the status quo. In his prolific writings on the Old Testament, in which he (unlike many Old Testament scholars) powerfully bridges the hermeneutical gap between ancient text and present situation, Brueggemann has vividly shown how easily ideologies ground the present social order in the order of creation, thus religiously disallowing the possibility of change.<sup>18</sup>

In the wake of this host of warnings concerning the oppressive consequences of creation theology in general and the monarchical model in particular, a legitimate question arises as to whether a "royal" reading of the *imago Dei*, whatever its exegetical basis, is tenable today.

<sup>15</sup> Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), pp. 63-69. Also relevant is McFague's *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), chap. 5: "God the Father: Model or Idol?"

<sup>16</sup> Catherine Keller, *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), pp. 73-88.

<sup>17</sup> Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (10 March, 1967): 1203-1207; Ian McHarg, *Design with Nature* (Garden City, N.Y.: Natural History Press, 1969), p. 26 et passim; David Suzuki, "Subdue the Earth," Part 2 of his television series, *A Planet for the Taking* (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1985).

<sup>18</sup>For example, see Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), pp. 27-28; *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), pp. 39-40; *Israel's Praise: Doxology Against Idolatry and Ideology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), pp. 101-121; and "A Shape for Old Testament Theology, I: Structure Legitimation," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47 (January 1985) 1: 28-46 (especially pp. 41-42). I have questioned the one-sidedness of Brueggemann's argument in "Is Creation Theology Inherently Conservative? A Dialogue with Walter Brueggemann," *Harvard Theological Review* 87 (1994) 3.

It is, of course, impossible to give a comprehensive answer to this question in the short compass of this paper. My purpose is less to settle the matter than to indicate the main contours of an adequate response, and thus to open dialogue on the subject.

### **A Personal Confession**

Let me begin by saying that I do not take these contemporary objections lightly. As one whose consciousness has been shaped by both biblical and post-modern sensitivity to marginalization and oppression (even in the name of high ideals;), I have had to re-evaluate my own use of creation and kingdom language, as well as its function in Scripture and the church.

I am highly suspicious, for example, of the triumphalist use of such language within the growing conservative movement in the United States (and to some extent in Canada) known as "Theonomy" or "Christian Reconstruction." This movement, which represents the extreme right-wing of Calvinism, not only propounds a post-millennial eschatology of progress, but claims a royal reading of the *imago Dei* as part of its program for "reconstructing" America along theocratic lines, with full implementation of Old Testament legislation and sanctions. A commentary on Genesis by a leading reconstructionist is thus aptly and ominously--entitled *The Dominion Covenant*. With a combination like that I believe the potential for oppression is obvious.<sup>19</sup>

Let me, therefore, freely admit that creation theology and monarchial images of God and humanity may be--and have been--used to legitimate systems of oppression. The trouble is that I do not believe that either creation theology or the metaphor of rule have exclusive rights to being oppressively used.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Gary North, *The Dominion Covenant: Genesis* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1982). The two foundational texts of Christian Reconstruction are Rousas John Rushdoony, *Institutes of Biblical Law* (Nutley, N.J.: Craig Press, 1973) and Greg L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (Nutley, N.J.: Craig Press, 1977). For a brief summary of the movement, see Rodney Clapp, *The Reconstructionists* (rev. ed.; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990). For a sustained, sympathetic critique, see the essays in William S. Barker and W. Robert Gofrey (eds.), *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988).

<sup>20</sup> It is well known that Karl Barth's objection to Emil Brunner's call for a new (non-Thomistic) "natural theology" or emphasis on creation order was in part fuelled by his observation that German National Socialism appealed to the notion of such order to legitimate its conservative, authoritarian ideology. Brunner himself agreed that there were "political" consequences to a theology of creation, but pointed out (correctly, I believe) that these were not inherently conservative, but could indeed be revolutionary (see *Natural Theology*, trans. by Peter Fraenkel [London: Geoffrey Bles, 1948], p. 51). On this ambiguity in the social practice of Calvinism (that branch of Protestantism with the most explicit theology of creation), see Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), chap. 1: "World Formative Christianity."



I grew up in a small pietistic church with a virtually non-existent creation theology. The dominant theology of fall and salvation, however, encouraged quietistic attitudes to the world and tended to legitimate the *status quo* by divorcing social concerns from the life of faith. I was pushed to a more world-transformative spirituality precisely by a theology of creation which *questioned* the identity of the present order with the way things were creationally meant to be. Creation thus functioned as a transcendent ground of criticism vis a vis the *status quo*. This theology, furthermore, affirmed the goodness and integrity of the natural order against every attempt to manipulate it for purely human ends.<sup>21</sup>

As for the metaphor of rule, it strikes me that this captures something of the empirical realities of power, which humans undoubtedly have over our environment, and which is not an intrinsically male trait, as Genesis 1 recognizes ("male and female he created them"). I do not believe we can avoid the question of power, since the dialectic of oppression and liberation can be retranslated as a dialectic of powerlessness and empowerment. The question is not whether humans have power, but how they organize and use such power.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore--and this may be a sensitive issue for a male to raise--I can testify to having experienced (justly, I suppose) marginalization at the hands of some feminists. I have even attended lectures by a prominent feminist theologian whose aggressive stance and triumphalistic fervor would have put any reconstructionist to shame.

The problem with the critique of ideology is that it cuts both ways. Any position can itself become ideological if it is exempted from the possibility of critique. Certainly, the *imago Dei* as rule can become an ideology. But it is not necessarily ideological.

### **The Polemical Intent of Genesis 1**

On the contrary, if read contextually, vis a vis its historical background, in terms of its polemic intent against ancient Near Eastern notions of humanity and kingship, Genesis 1:26-27 turns out to be not oppressive, but liberating and empowering. At least, that is how the text would have functioned for its original hearers.

It has long been recognized that Genesis 1 likely contains a polemic against ancient Near Eastern polytheism, replacing the bloody battle of the gods found in

<sup>21</sup> See Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1984) for an attempt to articulate a creation theology that is alternative to both dualistic, world-avertive pietism and the modern secular ideal of world-mastery.

<sup>22</sup> On the subject of power in the Scriptures, see J. P. M. Walsh, *The Might from Their Thrones: Power in the Biblical Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987). The connection between theology/ideology and social power arrangements is the major focus of Norman K. Gottwald's ground-breaking and massive work, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel 1250-1050 B.C.E.* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979).

the *Enuma Elish* with the serene, unchallenged rule of Yahweh. Catherine Keller is much too suspicious on this point. She dismisses out of hand the possibility that Genesis 1 might constitute a critique of Babylonian mythology, claiming instead that the heroic dismembering of Tiamat, the primordial female, by the young male upstart, Marduk, is simply repressed and submerged in Genesis.<sup>23</sup>

Yet many biblical scholars have noted a number of fundamental contrasts between the two creation accounts. To give two examples: Not only is creation in Genesis both harmonious and "very good" (1:31), as opposed to being the tragic result of Marduk's rending apart of the dead body of Tiamat (a rending which represents violence and evil as constitutive of the very fabric of the cosmos), but the Genesis text seems to be critical of Babylonian astrology. For example, sun and moon, astral deities in ancient Babylon, are subtly demythologized by never being named, but instead merely described in terms of their function as the "greater" and the "lesser" lights to regulate the seasons (1:16). And the creation of the stars, likewise divinities which were thought to influence human action, are mentioned parenthetically, almost as an afterthought ("he also made the stars"). The Genesis creation story thus serves to propose an alternative vision of both God and the cosmos.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> In this, Keller is closer to Herman Gunkel's pioneering study, *Schopfung and Chaos in Urzeit and Endzeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1895), where he argues that Genesis 1 is essentially a "faded" recension of the Babylonian myth (see pp. 3-29, 114-120). Ever since Gunkel's work, some connection between Genesis 1 and the *Enuma Elish* has been undeniable. Few scholars today, however, accept Gunkel's conclusion of simple dependence of the biblical account on the Babylonian myth. For typical recent assessments, see Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Significance of the Cosmology in Genesis I in Relation to Ancient Near Eastern Parallels," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 10 (1972) 1: 1-20 and "The Polemic Nature of the Genesis Cosmology," *Evangelical Quarterly* 46 (1974): 81-102; Arvid S. Kapelrud, "The Mythological Features in Genesis Chapter I and the Author's Intentions," *Vetus Testamentum* 24 (1974):178-186; Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis: The Story of Creation* (2nd ed.: Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951; "Phoenix Books," 1963), chap. 3; and Conrad Heyers, *The Meaning of Creation: Genesis and Modern Science* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1984), chaps. 2 and 3. But not only is Keller too suspicious, at one point she is simply mistaken. She follows older scholarship in claiming the derivation of Hebrew *tehom* ("deep") from Akkadian *tiamat*. The majority of scholars today, however, have been convinced by Heidel's argument in *The Babylonian Genesis* (p. 100) that both words probably go back to a common semitic root.

<sup>24</sup> The underlying issue here is that Genesis 1 and the *Enuma Elish* embody widely divergent worldviews. This is recognized even outside the arena of biblical scholarship, among scholars of comparative religion. Whereas Mircea Eliade, in *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Or, Cosmos and History*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), distinguishes the two worldviews as the "cyclical" and the "historicistic," Merold Westphal, in *God, Guilt and Death: An Existential Phenomenology of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), contrasts them as "mimetic" versus "covenantal" (see chaps. 10 and 11). Paul Ricoeur's insightful analysis of the Babylonian worldview also makes clear its fundamental divergence from the Hebraic. See *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. by Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), Part II, chap. 1: "The Drama of Creation and the 'Ritual' Vision of the World."

What has not been as widely recognized, however, is that Genesis 1 may also be read as polemical against ancient Near Eastern notions of *being human* and, by extension, against the use of such notions to legitimate an oppressive social order.<sup>25</sup>

Although the following account agrees in broad outline with the conclusions of numerous Old Testament scholars, no single scholar has read the evidence in precisely the configuration that I have, nor has all the evidence been gathered solely from scholars working on the *imago Dei*. What follows, therefore, is my own "contextual" reading of the counter-ideological, and thus liberating, function of Genesis 1.

This contextual reading begins with the recognition that ancient Near Eastern society, whether Mesopotamian (that is, Sumerian, Babylonian or Assyrian), West Semitic (that is, Canaanite), or Egyptian, was hierarchically ordered and ideologically dimorphic. The hierarchy ranged from the gods at the top (and there is even an intra-divine hierarchy of classes of gods, with one god as supreme--as Marduk was in Babylon) to peasants and slaves at the bottom. Above this lowest class came more privileged groups like artisans, merchants, the civil bureaucracy and the military, and above them were the priesthood and the royal court.<sup>26</sup>

Standing between the human realm, on the one hand, and the gods, on the other, was the king, universally viewed in the ancient Near East as the mediator of both social harmony and cosmic fertility from the gods. To contrast the two cultures we know most about, whereas in Egypt the Pharaoh is viewed as the eternally begotten son of the gods, in Mesopotamia the king was but an adopted son. Both, however, are referred to as the *image* of this or that particular god, whether Re, Amon, Marduk, 'Shamash or Enlil.<sup>27</sup>

Although there are many more extant references to Egyptian Pharaohs than to Mesopotamian kings as *imago Dei*, the Egyptian references tend to be from

<sup>25</sup> A number of scholars do, in fact, recognize a polemic in the Genesis text against Mesopotamian "anthropology." This is, however, usually taken to mean a critique of the Mesopotamian *idea* or *view* of humanity, without any exploration of its implications for Israelite critique of the *concrete*, existing Babylonian social order. See, for example, Hasel, "The Significance of the Cosmology in Genesis 1," pp. 15-17; Hasel, "The Polemical Nature of the Genesis Cosmology," pp. 89-90; and Bird, "Male and Female He Created Them," pp. 143-144.

<sup>26</sup> On the sociology of the ancient Near East, see I. M. Diakonoff (ed.), *Ancient Mesopotamia: Socio-Economic History* (Moscow: "Nauka" Publishing House, 1969), especially chaps. 1, 5 and 9; George Steindorff and Keith C. Steele, *When Egypt Ruled the East* (2nd ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963); H. E. Kassis, "Gath and the Structure of the 'Philistine' Society," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 84 (1965): 259-271; A. F. Rainey, *The Social Stratification of Ugarit* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Brandeis University, 1962); and Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh*, especially Parts 8 and 9.

<sup>27</sup> For these references see Bird, "Male and Female He Created Them," pp. 140-143; Clines, "The Image of God in Man," pp. 83-85; and Edward Mason Curtis, *Man as the Image of God in Genesis in the Light of Ancient Near Eastern Parallels* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1984), pp. 80-96.

pre-Israelite times, clustered around the 16th century B.C. The Mesopotamian references, though fewer, range from the 13th century Middle-Assyrian empire to the 7th century Neo-Assyrian and 6th century Neo-Babylonian empires.<sup>28</sup>

There has been disagreement for many years now in Old Testament studies over whether Egyptian or Mesopotamian (or, for that matter, Canaanite) parallels are more significant for the Old Testament. That is also true in the case of the *imago Dei*.<sup>29</sup> One factor that might help decide the issue is the question of when the book of Genesis (or at least its prologue, 1:1-2:3) is to be dated.

Although a great deal of what the older literature referred to as the "assured results" of Old Testament scholarship is presently in creative ferment (some would say outright chaos), under pressure from the postmodern decline of Cartesian certainty and the old hegemonic paradigms, a 6th century, exilic dating for the canonical form of Genesis (whatever its pre-history might have been) is still the most plausible alternative at hand. One crucial indication for a 6th century date is the relative paucity of Old Testament references to humans as the image of God and the strange limitation of such references to the book of Genesis. It is unlikely that so fecund an image, if it were early, would receive no intra-scriptural commentary whatsoever, given the proclivity of the biblical writers to engage in such commentary and the later attraction of both Jewish and Christian commentators to this notion. It is, furthermore, difficult to imagine that the dramatic question of Isaiah 40:18 (spoken in the midst of Babylonian exile), "To whom, then, will you liken God?/What image will you compare him to?" could have been written by a prophet who was aware of the *imago Dei* texts in Genesis.

Of course, if Genesis is exilic, the *imago Dei* is more likely to have a Babylonian than an Egyptian background. And this is further supported, I believe, by the Babylonian creation story, the *Enuma Elish*. Although this story, to judge from some of the divine epithets it contains, may have had a Sumerian (and therefore pre-Babylonian) origin, Marduk only came to ascension in the old Babylonian empire at the time of Hammurabi (18th century). However, the major text of the *Enuma Elish* that we possess was found in the ruins of Assurbanipal's library at Nineveh, from the 7th century B.C., thus bringing it quite close to the Babylonian exile.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> There are about half-a-dozen Mesopotamian references to particular kings as the image of particular gods (as well as one reference to a priest as the image of Marduk). These (admittedly few) references are embedded in the ubiquitous *Konigsideologie* or royal ideology of the ancient Near East. This ideology is part of a wider theology which holds that the divine presence is locally mediated to the masses, whether by idols (also called "images"), kings or priests (indeed, in Egypt, Assyria and Babylon, the king was also the high priest). For the theology of images, see Curtis, pp. 97-142; and Clines, pp. 81-82.

<sup>29</sup> The dominant (though not unanimous) opinion seems to favour an Egyptian origin for the notion. For an account of this debate, see Jonsson, pp. 142-143, 154, 207-209. For an intriguing suggestion of how Egyptian notions of *imago Dei* could have influenced Mesopotamian notions, and hence Genesis 1, see Curtis, pp. 167-170.

<sup>30</sup> It is also known that the *Enuma Elish* was immensely popular in 6th century Babylon and that it was ritually re-enacted during the annual Akitu (new year) festival at that time.

Earlier I noted that ancient Near Eastern society was both hierarchical and dimorphic, and while I touched on the hierarchy I did not address its ideologically dimorphic or two-tiered character.

If the king, the priesthood and the royal court could be regarded as the highest elites of Babylon, charged with--in varying degrees--representing and mediating the rule of the gods in human life, at the bottom of the social pyramid were the peasants and slaves (those who built the Egyptian pyramids and the splendour that was Babylon). Whether those in the center of the hierarchy (such as the bureaucracy, the merchants and the military) would align themselves with the privileged or underprivileged groups depended on how they read their own mythology.

Just as the king, and by extension, the entire Babylonian elite classes, received ideological legitimation by the *imago Dei* notion (hence this has come to be known as the ancient Near Eastern royal ideology), so the lowest classes received mythic legitimation for their status by the *Enuma Elish*.<sup>31</sup>

In that account, after Tiamat had been slaughtered and the cosmos constructed out of her body, the defeated (and now demoted) rebel gods who had sided with Tiamat began to complain that they had too much hard work to do, too much menial labour. So a divine decision was made. Kingu, who was both consort of Tiamat and instigator of the revolt that led to her death, was executed and from the blood of this chief rebellious deity, human beings were fashioned by Ea, Marduk's father, says the *Enuma Elish*, as cheap slave labor, to do the dirty work of the lower gods.<sup>32</sup>

The most recent translation of the *Enuma Elish* is found in Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh and Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 228-277. The best exposition and commentary is given by Thorkild Jacobsen in *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), chap. 6. For older translations of the *Enuma Elish*, accompanied by an introduction, see Heidel, pp. 1-60 and James B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (3rd ed.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 60-72, 501-503.

<sup>31</sup> Although this is all well known, I am not aware of anyone beside myself who has explicitly connected both the *Konigsideologie* and the *Enuma Elish* in their function of mythically legitimating the social order as the explanatory background to the *imago Dei* in Genesis. That is, I propose we go beyond a literary, to a socio-political, reading of the Genesis text. I have developed this reading further in "Genesis I as Ideology Critique: A Socio-Political Reading of Creation in God's Image," a paper given at the June 1993 meeting of the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies, in Ottawa.

<sup>32</sup> The creation of human beings is recounted in *Enuma Elish*, Tablet VI, lines 1-37. The notion that humans are created to relieve the gods of their labor is a distinctly Mesopotamian, not Egyptian, notion. It is found also in the *Atrahasis* epic, Tablet I, lines 240-242. For a translation, see W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atrahasis* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1969). Other ancient (and fragmentary) Mesopotamian myths that agree with *Atrahasis* and the *Enuma Elish* on the purpose of human creation may be found in Heidel, pp. 68-71, Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Harps That Once. ...: Sumerian Poetry in Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), pp. 151-166, and Samuel Noel Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology*:

The social hierarchy of Babylon is therefore vigorously legitimated. If the purpose of the mass of humanity is to serve the gods, and the king represents those gods as their son and image, then the gods are served precisely by serving the king, who wills the present social order.

In the context of the 6th century Babylonian exile, then, the people of Judah who were uprooted from their land and transplanted into an alien culture, would have been faced with this same oppressive social system and its ideological legitimation. The mythology of the *Enuma Elish*, it seems likely, would have conspired with the Babylonian social order and the royal ideology to keep Jewish exiles subservient to both the king and the gods of Babylon.

If this is taken together with Israel's uniquely monotheistic faith and its foundation in the book of Exodus along radical egalitarian lines, the situation the exiles faced constituted a massive challenge to their religious and social identity. In this historical context Genesis 1 came as a clarion call to the people of God to take seriously again their royal-priestly vocation in God's world, a vocation outlined in that early election text, Exodus 19:3-6, which describes Israel as a "kingdom of priests" and a "holy nation," a text quoted in the New Testament (in both I Peter and the book of Revelation) and applied to the church.<sup>33</sup>

It is not, therefore, that Genesis 1 introduces any radically new idea about human beings. Rather, facing the supreme challenge of the exilic loss of Israelite identity--which meant the loss of Israel as Israel--the author of Genesis 1, in essential continuity with the ethical, religious and social ideals of earlier Scripture (including the pervasive prophetic critique of absolute kingship in Israel), daringly seized on the bold symbol of the *imago Dei* to crystalize Israel's unique insight about being human, in the process (as numerous scholars have noted) "democratizing" the ancient Near Eastern royal ideology, by applying it to all human beings, male and female.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, far from constituting an oppressive text, Genesis 1 (and the *imago Dei* as rule) was intended to subvert an oppressive social system and to empower

*A Study of the Spiritual and Literary Achievement in the Third Millennium B.C.* (Rev. ed.; New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), pp. 68-73.

<sup>33</sup> For analyses of the radically egalitarian nature of early Israel, see Gottwald, part 9; and Paul D. Hanson, *The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), chap. 3. Hanson explicitly deals with the Exodus 19 election text in the context of describing the Yahwistic vision of Israel as a community alternative to the hierarchy of Egypt (pp. 40-41).

<sup>34</sup> One of the first scholars to claim this democratization is Helmer Ringgren, "Ar den bibliska skapelseberättelsen en kulttext?" *Svensk Exegetisk Arsbok* 13 (1948): 13. This is not to say that this democratizing, egalitarian vision was applied universally to men and women in either Israel's dominant theology or social practice. The evidence is against this. Nevertheless it may be argued that this vision contains the seed of the destruction of patriarchy and *implies* the radical equality of humans in the teaching of Jesus as well as the Pauline statement in Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

despairing exiles to stand tall again with dignity as God's representatives in the world.

### **The Wider Biblical Context**

That this "socio-political" reading of Genesis 1:26-27 is on track is indicated by the pervasive understanding of both idolatry and monarchy in the Old Testament. Although space limitations preclude a thorough investigation here, it would be important to explore the connection between the *imago Dei* text in Genesis 1 and idolatry: both the ubiquitous prohibition against "images" from the beginning of Israel's history (which is absolutely unique in the ancient Near East) and the later, increasingly strident, opposition to idolatry voiced by the prophets. Against this background, the Genesis text gains in depth. It suggests a critique of idolatry as a system of localized, mediating images which function to control access to the divine, a system usually supervised by the royal and priestly elites.<sup>35</sup> The Genesis text instead proclaims that human beings have direct access to God's presence simply by being human. We have here liberation from the hegemony of the "clergy" and the root of the later Christian notion of the priesthood of every believer.

With regard to monarchy, it is noteworthy how contingent the institution was in Israel. Not only was it a later, post-covenantal addition to Israel's social practice, but post-exilic Israel was able to survive without it. This contingent status of kingship in Israel is absolutely unique in the ancient Near East, where the monarchy is typically traced back to creation itself and the king is thought to be crucial to the cosmic and social ordering of reality. The Old Testament, however, not only subjects the institution of kingship to strict limitations (Deuteronomy 17:14-20), it testifies to both an early anti-monarchical strain in Israel's tribal confederacy (illustrated by Gideon's refusal of kingship in Judges 8:22-23 and by Samuel's opposition to the people's request for a king in I Samuel 8:4-22) as well as to later (9th to 7th century) prophetic critique of the monarchy in the name of allegiance to Yahweh.

What is particularly worth exploring about the Old Testament's critique of both idolatry and kingship is how they are seen as usurpation of Yahweh's rule, which inevitably leads to injustice and oppression, and how this impacts the *imago Dei* texts in Genesis. Could it be that some notion of "democracy"

<sup>35</sup> Suggestive studies on images in Israel and the ancient Near East include Walter Harrelson, *The Ten Commandments and Human Rights* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), pp. 61-72, Robert P. Carroll, "The Aniconic God and the Cult of Images," *Studia Theologica* 31 (1977): 51-64, Walter Brueggemann, "Old Testament Theology as a Particular Conversation: Ajudication of Israel's Socioethical Alternatives," chap. 7 in his *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text*, ed. by Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), and J. J. Stamm with M. E. Andrew, *The Ten Commandments in Recent Research* (Naperville, Ill.: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., 1967), pp. 76-88.

and the sharing of power is an essential implication of biblical monotheism, an implication consonant with our human status as creatures?<sup>36</sup>

If we move from the Old Testament to the New, the *imago Dei* as rule is further corroborated, but also nuanced. Although we can no more discuss the matter fully than we could the Old Testament issues of monarchy and idolatry, it is important to note the connection between the Christian confession of Jesus as Messiah (Mark 8:29; Matthew 26:62-64; Acts 2:36) and the New Testament portrayal of Jesus as image of God par excellence (Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3; II Corinthians 4:4-6).<sup>37</sup>

Although by the first century Messiah or Christ (literally, "anointed") was understood as essentially a royal designation, Jesus persistently refused the popular acclamation of those who tried to make him king. His own discernment of what constituted true kingship was atypical of the times. It is exhibited in his counsel to the disciples that they were to exercise power not as the Gentiles do, lording it over one another, but in serving each other, "for even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:42-45; cf. Luke 22:25-27). Thus, the life and characteristic teaching of Jesus, and especially his paradoxical enthronement on a cross, point to a canonical trajectory from rule to compassionate service.<sup>38</sup> That is, Jesus explicitly exemplifies what is at least implicit in Genesis 1 and often explicit in the Old

<sup>36</sup> For a beginning of this exploration-though without any connection to the *imago Dei*--see Gottwald, pp. 903-913; and George V. Pixley, *God's Kingdom: A Guide for Biblical Study*, trans. by Donald D. Walsh (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1981), chap. 2: "Yahweh's Kingdom, the Political Project of the Israelite Tribes." Hanson's monumental study, *The People Called*, is suffused with concern for this question.

<sup>37</sup> For a fuller treatment of the New Testament teaching on the *imago Dei*, see Hall, *Imaging God*, pp. 76-87, and Walsh and Middleton, *The Transforming Vision*, pp. 83-86.

<sup>38</sup> The enthronement of the Messiah on a cross is an ironic theme in Mark's Gospel. It is signalled by Mark's description of the crucifixion of Jesus: "The written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS. They crucified two robbers with him, one on his right and one on his left." (15:26-27) Indeed, this ironic portrayal is alluded to in the verses preceding the Marcan text cited above, where Jesus corrects his disciples' understanding of rule. This correction is occasioned by the demand of James and John for privilege in the Messianic kingdom: "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory." (Mark 10:37) The irony is clear to the reader (if not the disciples) when Jesus tells them that they don't know what they are asking (10:38) and that those places have already been assigned (10:40), alluding to the crucifixion scene. But the enthronement of the Messiah on a cross is also a Johannine theme. Raymond E. Brown (among others) has discussed the ambiguity of Jesus' sayings about being "lifted up" (John 3:14, 8:28, 12:32-34) in connection with the theme of his glorification. Drawing perhaps on the lifting up of the suffering servant in Isaiah 52:13 (the same word, *hypsoun*, is used in both John and in the Septuagint of that text), John portrays the death of Jesus on the cross as an exaltation, the inextricable beginning of his Messianic glorification, which finds its climax in the resurrection and ascension. See Brown, *The Gospel of John (i-xii): Introduction, Translation and Notes* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966), PP- 146, 475-478.



Testament, namely that the right use of power is not oppressive control of others, but their liberation or empowerment.

So much for rule, but how is this connected to the *imago Dei*? The answer lies in the church's fundamental discernment of nothing less than *the character and purposes of God* precisely in this paradoxical self-giving of the Messiah. As the one who is the paradigm *imago Dei*, Christ's death on a cross, perceived by the world as foolishness and weakness, reveals instead, to those who have faith, the wisdom of God and the power of God (I Corinthians 1:18-25). The death of Jesus discloses and models nothing less than the rule of God.

Since Christ is the head of the church, this community of faith inherits his revelatory, representative task. The "body of Christ" is no mere metaphor; it is the calling of the church to continue the incarnation and mission of Christ by manifesting God's redemptive purposes and coming kingdom. Just as Christ is sent by and discloses God, so the church as the new humanity, renewed in the *imago Dei* (Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:9-11; II Corinthians 3:17-18), is sent by Christ and called upon to imitate his paradigm of self-giving, thus witnessing to God's rule in the concrete shape of their communal life. Perhaps the crucial text is Paul's argument in Philippians 2:5-11. Citing what is in all likelihood an early hymn, the apostle argues that if Jesus, as the unique *imago Dei*, used his divine power and sovereignty not for his own interests, but to serve others, even unto death, then the Christian community, following in its Lord's footsteps, should have among itself the same "mind" of compassionate self-giving.<sup>39</sup> In the New Testament, *imago Dei* as rule becomes *imitatio Christi*.

What ties together this whole trajectory from Genesis 1 to the New Testament is the consistent biblical insight that humanity from the beginning--and now the church as the redeemed humanity--is both *gifted* by God with a royal status and dignity and *called* by God actively to represent his kingdom in the entire range of human life, that is, in the very way we rule and subdue the earth. If Genesis 1 focuses on the gift of *imago Dei* (although not to the exclusion of the call), in contrast to dehumanizing ancient Near Eastern alternatives, the New Testament makes both gift and call crystal clear. In gratitude for God's gracious mercy in gifting us with salvation, the community of faith is called upon by Paul in Romans 12:1-2 to stop mirroring passively the culture in which it lives ("conformed to the world") and instead to mirror God in and to the culture. But a mirror, although a traditional symbol for the *imago Dei*, is too flat to capture the full-orbed character of the human calling to be God's royal representatives in creation.<sup>40</sup> A more adequate symbol might be the *prism*. Humanity created

<sup>39</sup> For a careful reading of the Philippians text that not only interacts thoroughly with the history of interpretation, but which integrates insightfully the unique deity of Jesus as Lord and the call to imitate him, see N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), chap. 4.

<sup>40</sup> The idea of the *imago Dei* as a mirror of God's glory derives ultimately from II Corinthians 3:18 via John Calvin's influential reflections. See his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. I, Book 1, Chap. 15, no. 4 (also Hall's analysis, p. 104).

in God's image--and the church as the renewed *imago Dei*--is called and empowered to be God's multi-sided prism in the world, reflecting and refracting the Creator's brilliant light into a rainbow of cultural activity and socio-political patterns that scintillates with the glory of God's presence and manifests his reign of justice.

There is much more that could be said, both connecting the *imago Dei* to the full range of Scripture and, especially, drawing out its implications for contemporary human life.<sup>41</sup> Even as far as this paper's explicit task goes, I do not expect the foregoing brief analysis to be entirely satisfactory, either in defending the scholarly opinion that *imago Dei* means rule or in answering contemporary theological objections to this interpretation. Nevertheless, if this paper stimulates theologians and others to take seriously the work of biblical scholars on the *imago Dei* and to engage in biblically informed reflection on this subject, I will be more than satisfied.

<sup>41</sup> The *imago Dei* as rule is discussed in Walsh and Middleton, *The Transforming Vision*, chap. 3, and the book as a whole constitutes a concerted attempt to work out its implications for contemporary life. See also Middleton and Walsh, "Dancing in the Dragons Jaws: Imaging God at the End of the Twentieth Century," *The Crucible 2* (Spring 1992) 3: 11-18.

*Todd Steen, Managing Editor  
Christian Scholar's Review  
Hope College, P.O. Box 9000  
Holland, MI 49422-9000*

<http://www.hope.edu/resources/csr/>

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: [thildebrandt@gordon.edu](mailto:thildebrandt@gordon.edu)