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Image of God: Humans as God's Visible Messengers

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Abstract

The concept of the image of God or צלם אלהים (*tselem elohim*) raises theological questions regarding the interpretation of the nature and purpose of humanity. This article explores the concept of צלם אלהים by utilizing a comparative-inductive method, which is by examining the parallels between humans and angels as portrayed in the Hebrew Bible. Grounded in an analysis of Genesis 1:27, this article contends that the concept of צלם אלהים extends beyond a resemblance to Yahweh alone. By recognizing the divine court represented by the term אלהים in v. 27, this study makes an initial comparison between humans and angels as partakers of the divine image. Then, inductively, this article undertakes a comparative analysis of the textual narratives of Hagar and Moses to identify and examine the similarities between humans and angels as divine messanger. By examining the identity and role of the divine messanger in Hagar's story (Genesis 16) and the identity and roles of Moses (Exodus 34), this article aims to shed light on the shared characteristics and roles of humans as צלם אלהים.

Keywords: Image of God; angels; Genesis; Hagar; Moses

Intorduction

The notion of the image of God has long intrigued theologians and scholars, prompting a plethora of interpretations throughout history (Gurmin, 2010, p. 1). While the Genesis account presents the creation of humans in the image of God, the exact nature of this image remains elusive. Without denying the importance of the past achievements of the church fathers, theologians, and scholars, the understanding of the notion צלם אלהים is, however, still far from complete, if not problematic (Hammett, 2021, p. 29).

Various approaches have been taken to interpret this concept, each with its own strengths and weaknesses (Jónsson, 1988). For instance, the functional view interprets Genesis 1:26-28 to suggest that humans exercise God's authority over the created order as His divine image (Clines, 1968, pp. 87–88). The functional view of the image of God lacks a definitive definition, often focusing solely on the roles and functions that humans possess as representatives of God. However, this view fails to capture the full essence and depth of what it truly means to bear the image of God.

The structural view, on the other hand, locates צלם אלהים in the physicality of humans, emphasizing the resemblance to God's form. Believing that צלם אלהים is located in man's rational or intellectual soul, Augustine understands it as constituted of memory (*memoria*), intellect (*intellectus*), and will (*voluntas*), grounded in the image of the triune God (Yong, 2021, pp. 19–20). However, this approach raises questions about whether God can be confined to a specific form (Erickson, 1985, p. 502). If God were to possess a physical form, interpreting צלם would be easier (Simango, 2006, p. 15). However, some argue that perceiving God or creating an image of Him constitutes idolatry. There are even those who reject anthropomorphism language in the Bible that refers to God, despite its prevalence throughout the text.

Some interpretations influenced by philosophical reasoning distinguish humans from other creatures, emphasizing their similarities to God. They locate צלם אלהים in humans' rationality or other abstract qualities (Erickson, 1985, p. 499). While this approach highlights unique human attributes, it risks excluding individuals with disabilities, raising issues of bias and exclusion. Thus, reducing צלם אלהים to a simple divine fiat seems unlikely.

The relational view, which focuses on the relationship between humans and God, offers a promising perspective. However, it is important to question whether the author of Genesis intended to define צלם by the phrase "man and woman" (Barth, 1958-2009, pp. 187ff). Additionally, it is unlikely that Genesis 1:26-28 supports a Trinitarian reading.

This article proposes an alternative approach to understanding the image of God by examining the intriguing similarities between humans and angels as depicted in the Hebrew

Bible. While some theologians have long made connections between Elohim and angels or the divine court, the exploration of this topic has not yet advanced significantly.

Research Method

This article explores the concept of צלם אלהים by utilizing a comparative-inductive method, which is by examining the parallels between humans and angels as portrayed in the Hebrew Bible. Grounded in an analysis of Genesis 1:27, this article contends that the concept of צלם אלהים extends beyond a resemblance to Yahweh alone. By recognizing the divine court represented by the term אלהים in v. 27, this study makes an initial comparison between humans and angels as partakers of the divine nature. Then, inductively, this article undertakes a comparative analysis of the textual narratives of Hagar and Moses to identify and examine the similarities between humans and angels. By closely examining the encounters with celestial beings in both Hagar's story (Genesis 16) and Moses' encounters with the Lord (Exodus 34), this article aims to shed light on the shared characteristics and roles of humans as צלם אלהים, offering fresh insights into the relationship between humanity and the angels.

Rethinking the Image of God in Genesis 1:26-27

Genesis 1:26-27 is analyzed in terms of the archetype from which humans are made and the manner in which they reflect this archetype (Auld, 2005; Fergusson, 2013, pp. 445-446). Since the notion of image of God is not descriptive in itself, this early examination provides an initial insight into the meaning of the term צלם on one hand, and on the other, establishes a connection to the term divine image to understand the concept later.

Genesis 1:1-2:3 initiates with a depiction of אלהים as a transcendent entity residing in his celestial dwelling. It is this divine figure who brings order to the constantly changing creation, as indicated by the phrase תהו ובהו וחשך על־פני תהום, transforming it into a coherent and intelligible form (Cassuto, 1941, p. 71). Thus, Genesis' God is sovereign over his creatures by His act of creating.

Some scholars propose potential Egyptian influences on the biblical creation account. A. H. Sayce was among the first to suggest parallels between the cosmogony of Hermopolis and Genesis 1 (Sayce, 1932, pp. 419-423). R. J. Williams followed, noting similarities between Genesis 2:7 and 14-13th century B.C.E. descriptions of the pharaoh and the gods Ptah and Re (Williams, 1969, pp. 93-94). Additionally, R. Kilian argued that Genesis 1:2 is the Hebrew equivalent of the four cosmic forces in the Hermopolis cosmogony, known as the chaos gods

(Kilian, 1965, pp. 420–438). J. Hoffmeier suggests that it denotes the time of creation and marking the onset of divine creative activity (Hoffmeier, 1983, p. 45).

Nevertheless, the biblical text itself asserts that אלהים exercised sovereignty over creation. Without direct physical interaction, the created order came into existence through divine utterances, indicative of absolute dominion—a kingship over the universe (Berlin and Brettler, 2004, p. 13). Unlike ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies, Genesis' אלהים does not engage in conflict with other deities to seize control of the created world. Primarily, he stands as the supreme being from whom all creation emanates. In this narrative, אלהים exhibits his sovereignty over the previously untamed chaos (Brueggemann, 2005, pp. 271-273).

However, concerning the creation of humans, it remains uncertain whether the term אלהים, as used by the author of Genesis, still refers to the singular supreme being. Moreover, the employment of נעשׂה, a cohortative form of the verb עשׂה, in place of the jussives, has been subject to various interpretations (Middleton, 2005, p. 55). Some propose that these linguistic choices hint at a residual polytheistic belief within Israel, referencing the gods of the Canaanite or Mesopotamian pantheon. Others consider the Trinity (following Augustine's suggestion) or, at the very least, a plurality within the Godhead (as proposed by Barth). Alternatively, it is seen as a plea for the earth's assistance in the act of creating humanity, according to some rabbinic viewpoints. Still, others understand it as plurals denoting deliberation or majesty (Hasel, 1975, pp. 58-66; Clines, 1968, pp 63-69; Westermann, 1987, pp. 144-145; Vawter, 1977, pp. 53-54).

Initially, the term אלהים itself carries a plural quality due to the suffix ים (Lambdin, 1971, p. 4). Thus, the straightforward interpretation of אלהים implies divine plurality, indicating a divine assembly consisting of יהוה and one or more אלהים (Heiser, 2004, p.1; Morgenstern, 1939, pp. 29-126). This type of council finds biblical support in passages like 1 Kings 22:19-22, Isaiah 6, and Job 1-2 (Mullen, jr., 1980, p. 116). In the context of human creation, יהוה the king announces the proposed course of action to his assembly of subordinate אלהים, although he retains the ultimate decision-making power (Berlin and Brettler, 2004, p. 14).

Crucially, in Genesis 1:1-2:4b, there is a tendency to separate אלהים from the created entities. Instead of direct action, a mere command brings forth the creatures (Pikor, 2022, p. 461-472). However, a significant shift occurs in the creation of man in Genesis 1:28, where the technical term for constructing out of material (ברא) is used. This implies a direct relationship between man and אלהים from the very origin, with the theological precision of this relationship being the primary focus of the divine resolve in Genesis 1:26.

Nevertheless, the relationship established by this act of אלהים signifies only that he alone is the creator of man. In contrast to the language used in verse 26, Genesis 1:27 employs a different verb, shifting from עשׂה to ברא. The distinction between these two verbs reinforces that it is solely אלהים who created אדם, as the latter term is exclusively used to denote the divine creative activity in all biblical occurrences. This verb retains its exclusivity to convey a creative activity fundamentally without analogy (von Rad, 1972, p. 49).

Next, עשׂה can be appropriately ascribed to the action of אלהים, but not necessarily to him alone (Delitzsch, 1888, pp. 98-99; Driver, 1909, pp. 14-15). As the verb is first-person plural cohortative in meaning, it is reasonable to infer that אלהים, the King, declares the proposed course of action to his assembly of subordinate deities (Berlin and Brettler, 2004, p. 14).

Furthermore, Genesis 1:27 employs both the phrases "his image" and "image of אלהים" in parallel lines. On the surface, this might seem redundant, unless אלהים encompasses both God and the heavenly court. This potential nuance leads Sawyer to interpret the verse as: "So God created the man with a resemblance to Himself; With a resemblance to divine beings, He created him" (Sawyer, 1974, p. 424).

These subordinate deities are present with אלהים, and thus אדם was made in the image of both, as stated in בצלמנו כדמותנו׃ The presence of the suffix נו־in that phrase, functioning as a plural possessive pronoun, aligns with the plurality of the earlier verb, נעשׂה. For this reason, the LXX translates אלהים as ἀγγέλους in Psalm 8:5, suggesting that אדם was created a little lower than the heavenly beings, consisting of both אלהים and angels (Middleton, 2005, p. 58).

Claus Westermann's objection that the priestly author of Genesis 1 was unfamiliar with the concept of the heavenly court seems challenging to uphold (Westermann, 1987, pp. 144–145; Vawter, 1977, p. 54). If the author, responsible for editing the entire book into its final form or even just the primeval history (Genesis 1-11), was indeed the same, Westermann's objection loses credibility. On the contrary, it is quite plausible that in Genesis 1, similar to Isaiah 6, God shares the decision to commission the human agent with divine or angelic courtiers for a significant earthly task (Middleton, 2005, p. 57).

The use of plural pronouns in Genesis' narrative strongly emphasizes the council, unlikely to be interpreted as a majestic plural in pronouns. Such a concept was not part of the vocabulary of kings or individual gods in the ancient Near East (Levenson, 2013, p. 158 n 14). Most commentators reject the idea that the plural pronouns refer to a singular entity; instead, they argue for a true plural. Both Ugaritic and biblical literature exhibit the use of first-person plural in addressing the divine council (Cross, 1997, p. 187 n 176). There appears to be a presence of other divine beings in Genesis 1, to whom God proposes the creation of humanity.

It should be seen as a divine announcement to the heavenly court, drawing the angelic host's attention to the masterstroke of creation, man (Garr, 2003a, p. 20).

Comparing the use of the plural pronoun with the same meaning and usage as נעשׂה, Randall Garr concludes several aspects related to the use of the plural pronoun הבה in J tradition. This sheds light on the former pronoun, suggesting that when used in the beginning with direct speech, it formulates a directive speech proposing an activity collaboratively between the speaker and a distinct addressee (Garr, 2003a, 49). The speaker's proposal receives tacit consent from the addressee and is then executed by an agent, whether unidentified or identified and salient. In Genesis 1:26, according to this analysis, אדם was made according to the צלם and דמות of a nonsingular divine entity, i.e., God and his heavenly council.

Given that Genesis' narrative compares humans not only to the creator but to the divine or heavenly realm in general, suggesting a broad analogy between the cosmic king, his royal angelic courtiers, and his earthly human vice-regent (Middleton, 2005, p. 59). Rabbi Nathan even suggests that humans are like angels in having understanding, walking erect, and engaging in conversation (Obermann, 1955, pp. 152–157).

A Comparative Analysis of Man and Angel

It has been contended that humans are fashioned in the likeness of אלהים, signifying the divine court. Delving into this matter prompts an exploration of the interconnected aspects between humans and angels within the divine court. The findings reveal that in numerous instances, humans share similarities with angels, especially concerning the task of representing God in the human realm. Much like angels, humans, as the image of אלהים, bridge the gap between the divine and physical worlds, serving as God's representatives.

The forthcoming section will engage in a more in-depth analysis of how humans, created in the image of אלהים, manifest God's presence in their physical surroundings. Two texts will undergo scrutiny in connection to this term: Hagar's narrative and Moses' narrative. There are at least five criteria used to choose of the two texts. At least, the narratives have: (1) cult language appearance, (2) the word *panim* appeared as signaling presence, (3) signaling a certain degree of representation direct or indirect, (4) interaction between divine and human, and (3) signifying action.

Angel as God's Representative in Genesis 16

While angels often manifest in a supernatural manner that instills fear in humans, they can also adopt a human-like appearance. Examples include their resemblance to human males

as seen in Genesis 19:15-16 (Koehler, 1957, p. 158), human mobility depicted in Exodus 23:23; 32:34, and their ability to eat and accept hospitality (e.g., 19:3; 18:4-5). In a certain sense, they exhibit a hybrid nature, being both theomorphic and anthropomorphic (Garr, 2003b, p. 54).

The angel of the Lord is tasked with delivering messages of utmost importance, speaking with divine authority. Interestingly, this divine messenger speaks in the first person, seemingly as if he is God Himself, as seen in Genesis 16:10 and 21:18 (cf., Genesis 12:1-3 and 17:3-8). Despite this, he also refers to God in the third person (Genesis 16:11 and 21:17), maintaining an ambiguous and veiled identity without explicit self-identification (von Heijne, 2010, p. 51).

The initial encounter between Hagar and the angel appears ordinary, lacking the characteristics of a divine revelation such as a vision or epiphany. It resembles a meeting between two ordinary individuals in the desert (von Heijne, 2010, pp. 51-52), and the angel does not introduce himself, remaining unknown and originating from an undisclosed source (Westermann, 1985, p. 243).

The prophetic nature of the message delivered by the angel becomes evident as he promises abundant offspring and instructs Hagar to name her unborn son Ishmael, signifying that the LORD has heard her affliction (v. 10-11). The interpretation of the name holds a unique phrase in the Hebrew Bible, suggesting a twofold meaning where God sees affliction and hears the cries of the oppressed (e.g., Genesis 29:32; Exodus 4:31; Exodus 3:7; Deuteronomy 26:7) (Sarna, 1989, p. 121). This prophecy about Ishmael's life and destiny likely leads Hagar to recognize the divine nature of the messenger Köckert, 2007, p. 53), as evident in her exclamation in verse 13b, "You are El-roi/You are the God who Sees" [אתה אל ראי] (Sarna, 1989, p. 121).

The messenger's role is akin to minor members of the Canaanite pantheon who execute tasks for their superiors, resembling the tasks of messengers of Yamm, servants of Baal (*Gapnu* and *Ugaru*), or Asherah's servant, *Qadišu-wa-Amruru*, also known as *Daggay*. Similar to Canaanite gods, the messenger of Yahweh undertakes various responsibilities as a representative and, like them, is considered a member of the divine assembly (Hendel, 1987, p. 64; Mullen, Jr., 1980, pp. 111–280).

Hagar's reaction to the divine messenger, expressed as "Have I truly seen God and survived—do I still live!" (NRSV). aligns with the name given to the well in verse 14, which can be translated as "the well of the living one who sees me" or "the well of one who sees and lives." Hagar is astonished that she has witnessed God and yet lived, a sentiment echoed in other biblical instances (compare Genesis 32:30, Exodus 33:20, Judges 6:22-24, and 13:22). In

this interpretation, the well's name reflects the idea that encountering God usually results in death, a concept also encountered when Moses seeks to see God (von Heijne, 2010, p. 53).

An alternative interpretation suggests that God communicates with Hagar through an angel, though this viewpoint faces challenges due to the narrative's ambiguity (von Heijne, 2010, p. 57). Does Hagar truly declare in verse 13 that she has seen God and even gives Him a name (von Heijne, 2010, p. 57)? If she indeed perceives God, how does she survive, considering the traditional Jewish belief that encountering God leads to death? Is she identifying the angel of the Lord as God Himself (von Heijne, 2010, p. 58)?

The text implies a blending of identities between God and the angel, likely stemming from the messenger's role as God's representative (Botterweck, 1997, p. 322). The messenger conveys promises on God's behalf, suggesting either an extension of God or a distinct being carrying divine authority. In essence, the messenger appears to be a supernatural being sent by God, acting as His envoy (van der Toorn, Becking, and van der Horst, 1999, p. 105; Johnson, 1961, pp. 5-41). Additionally, Meier contends that the messenger and sender could not be merged in the Ancient Near East (van der Toorn, Becking, and van der Horst, 1999, pp. 87-88, 105), supporting the likelihood that the angel of the Lord is not identical to God but serves as His ambassador, speaking and acting with divine authority on His behalf (von Heijne, 2010, p. 118).

The notion of image of God presence somewhat in the role of an angel as shown above and it is this role that humans as image of God are assigned in the created world. As image of God, then, humans form appropriate relationships between them and God, between humans and other humans, and between humans and creation (Hammett, 2021, pp. 43-44; Moo, 2006). This relationship has to do primarily with representing God’s identity, the role that is also presence on angel as the messanger of God.

Moses as God’s Representative in Exodus 34:29-35

One perspective suggests that Moses never truly beholds the face of God during the encounter at Sinai (Cassuto, 1997, p. 448). On one hand, Moses requests to see God's face but is told, "No human may see me and live" (Exodus 33:20). On the other hand, Deuteronomy portrays Moses as someone known by God face to face (Deuteronomy 34:10). The theophany surrounding Moses remains shrouded in mystery.

The prohibition against seeing the divine emphasizes the separation and otherness between divinity and humanity (Saracino, 2003, p. 94). However, when considered in context, this warning might be viewed as an attempt by Israel to counter the prevalent depictions in

the surrounding pagan culture. The conflicting biblical sources also suggest a debate among ancient Israelite thinkers regarding the visibility of God (Green, 2011, p. 63).

The expression "to view God's face" (ראה פני אלהים) is not commonly found in typical theophany narratives in the Hebrew Bible, except in Exodus 33:20. It likely serves as a technical term in cultic language, potentially borrowed from surrounding cultures. In Babylonian prayer texts, this phrase means literally "to view the cultic image" or metaphorically "to request grace and assistance" (Jenni and Westermann, 1997, p .1267).

Exodus 34:29–35 primarily focuses on Moses as a mediator between יהוה and the people of Israel, concluding the Sinai event (Philpot, 2013, p. 83 nn 6). Stephen L. Herring suggests that this passage aligns well with the P theology of humanity as the divine image, portraying Moses as צלם אלהים in his role as a mediator between the divine and humans (Herring, 2013, p. 127).

The significance of the word פנים is evident in the narrative, especially in Exodus 34:29, where Moses' פנים is shining. While commonly interpreted as Moses' face radiating light (קרן), considering the noun form קרן as "horn" introduces an alternative meaning. Translated as "horn" in various instances in the Hebrew Bible, this term also metaphorically signifies strength and power. The verb form, appearing in Exodus 34:29, 30, 35, and Psalm 69:32, suggests the sprouting or displaying of horns. Therefore, the text could imply that Moses "grew horns" due to prolonged exposure to God's presence, elevating him to a divine degree, functioning as God's representative.

The commonly accepted interpretation of the phrase suggests that Moses' face was shining, קרן. However, a different meaning may emerge when considering the noun form קרן, which likely derives from the word "horn." This term is consistently translated as "horn" in various contexts, such as the horn of an ox or bull, or the horns on the corners of the altar (e.g., Exodus 27:2). Additionally, the word metaphorically denotes the strength and power of individuals.

The verb form of קרן appears several times, including Exodus 34:29, 30, 35 in the Qal stem and as a Hiphil participle in Psalm 69:32, meaning "to bring forth horns." Thus, the Qal form in Exodus 34:29, as a denominative verb, likely means to display or sprout horns. This interpretation implies that Moses actually grew horns due to prolonged exposure to God's presence, signifying an elevation to a divine degree, functioning as God's representative (Propp, 1987, p. 376).

Despite Moses' numerous encounters with God, his face did not shine as a result until his final descent from Sinai. The radiance of Moses' face is undoubtedly the outcome of his

unique experience with the glory of יהוה in 34:1–9,21, distinguishing it from his earlier exposure on Sinai. This "glory" accompanies Moses back to the camp of Israel (Philpot, 2013, pp. 85-88).

Upon seeing Moses' shining face in 34:29-31, the people are afraid to approach him, mirroring their reaction to the theophany of YHWH in Exodus 20:18-19. This parallel is also observed in Hagar's narrative, highlighting the role of *panim* as representatives of the divine (Herring, 2013, p. 139).

In a broader context, Moses is portrayed as representing God, especially evident in the golden calf narrative (Exodus 32:1). In Moses' absence, the people demand a god to go before them, emphasizing divine power and protection, characteristics of YHWH in Exodus (Herring, 2013, p. 150). Moses serves as a substitute for God in this narrative (Moberly, 1983, p. 46). highlighting his role as a divine representation for the Israelites (Herring, 2013, p. 150).

To summarize, Moses serves as a covenant mediator between יהוה and the people, with an emphasis on the people's fearful reaction to his shining face in 34:30. The term קרן should be rendered to shine in this context, aligning with Moses' unique status and his representation of God.

The shining face of Moses communicates God's essential goodness to the people, reflecting יהוה's love, mercy, and compassion. Moses' radiant face becomes emblematic of יהוה's goodness, reinforcing the reassurance of God's gracious character to the Israelites despite their idolatry. The role of Moses is, after all, the role of the image of God. He bears the office of both prophet and priest. Thus, becoming image of God, humans are meant to fulfill their purpose, which is to retain some relative virtue of God, such as peace, truth-telling, cooperation, trust, and so on. In N. Gray Sutanto's words, being image of God, humans fulfill their cultural mandates (Sutanto, 2023).

Conclusion

From the discussion above, it becomes apparent that an alternative perspective emerges regarding the concept of the image of God. By considering the similarities between human and angel, as evidenced in the analyzed texts, a new reading comes to light. In the narrative of Hagar, the angel serves as the representative of God, delivering divine revelation to her. Similarly, Moses in Exodus 34 assumes the role of God's representative, conveying divine judgment to the Israelites. Both the angel and Moses exhibit comparable qualities, providing compelling evidence to support the interpretation that the image of God in Genesis 1:27 encompasses a role of resemblance between humans and angels. The role of Moses is,

after all, the role of the image of God. He bears the office of both prophet and priest. As image of God, humanity bears a role as God's visible messenger to reveal who God is in the created world.

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