

Image of God, Human Beings

I heard a Messianic teaching that advocated human beings were not made in the image of God? Can you explain this?

One of the most significant issues that is avoided by most Messianics today appears in the very first Torah portion, *Bereisheet* (Genesis 1:1-6:8). Considering the fact that we encounter this issue every single year, and thousands of pages of thoughts, commentary, and theological analysis of this issue are seen in both the Jewish and Christian scholastic traditions—the fact that most Messianics do not deal with it is a sign that (as of 2008) we are not at all where we need to be. The Biblical assertion that human beings are made in the image of God (Lat. *imago Dei*) is significant not only as it concerns human origins, but also as it concerns the composition and value of the human person. The ramifications of what it means to understand human beings made in God's image concern not only the uniqueness of the human race in His Creation, but also affect the mission and outlook of the *ekklēsia* in today's world as Believers should desire to see other people the way that He sees them.

As the Creation activities of God begin to draw to a close, He says something very important in Genesis 1:26-27, “‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (NASU). *Elohim* (אֱלֹהִים)—actually speaking to Himself—says “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness” (NRSV), *b'tzalmenu k'demutenu* (בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדִמוּתֵנוּ). The human being possessing these qualities would be able to have dominion over God's Creation. Being made in God's image not only concerned the human male, but *also* the human female.

This assertion of Genesis 1:26-27 would have run completely contrary to Ancient Near Eastern concepts of rulership. Victor P. Hamilton writes, “It is well known that in both Egyptian and Mesopotamian society the king, or some high-ranking official, might be called ‘the image of God.’ Such a designation, however, was not applied to the canal digger or to the mason who worked on a ziggurat...In God's eyes all of mankind is royal. All of humanity is related to God, not just the king.”¹ Both the male and female were originally created by God and intended to rule over God's Creation as His viceroy. In the words of Nahum M. Sarna,

“A human being is the pinnacle of Creation. This unique status is communicated in a variety of ways, not least by the simple fact that humankind is last in a manifestly ascending, gradual order. The creation of human life is an exception to the rule of creation by divine fiat...Human beings are to enjoy a unique relationship to God, who communicates with them alone and who shares with them the custody and administration of the world.”²

In this schema, at least before the Fall, man was intended to be second *only to God* in Creation—a status which is restored to him to eternity. However, because of the Fall and the introduction of sin, the image of God on man has been marred.

I actually encountered one Messianic teacher who actually took up the subject of human beings made in God's image. This individual advocated that it was only Adam, the first human being, who was created in God's image. Because of Adam and Eve's fall from grace, it was said, human beings are no longer made in God's image. Genesis 5:3 was supplied as a proof text: “When Adam had lived one hundred and thirty years, he became the father of a son in his own likeness, according to his image, and named him Seth” (NASU). The Hebrew text says *v'yoled b'demuto k'tzalemo* (וַיּוֹלֵד בְּדִמוּתוֹ כְּצַלְמוֹ), “and begetteth a son in his likeness, according to his image”

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

² Nahum M. Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 11.

(YLT). According to this, Seth was made after the image and likeness of Adam, as opposed to the image and likeness of God. And this is where the argument stopped.

But the Book of Genesis itself does not stop there. Genesis 9:6 further says, “Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God He made man” (NASU). Mortals who are killed by sinful mortals are still considered by God to be made in His image. The difference is, of course, unlike Adam who was originally created without a sin nature, is that every human born since Adam has inherited that sin nature (cf. Romans 5:12). In that context *alone* are all human beings made “in Adam’s image.” A human being still possesses the unique Divine imprint of his or her Creator.

James, half-brother of Yeshua, says that the tongue can curse other people, all of whom “have been made in the likeness of God” (James 3:9, NASU). He uses the Greek word *homoiōsis* (ὁμοίωσις), “a making like” (*Vine*).³ This is the same word used in the Greek LXX to translate *tzelem* in Genesis 1:26, and UBSHNT renders *homoiōsin Theou* (ὁμοίωσιν θεοῦ) as *tzelem Elohim* (צֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים), indeed indicating that human beings—even after the Fall in the Garden of Eden—have been made in “the image of God.” James expects his audience to show due respect for other human beings through what they say, regardless of whether or not they are saved and of the community of faith. John Wesley commented, “Indeed we have now lost this likeness; yet there remains from thence an indelible nobleness, which we ought to reverence both in ourselves and others.”⁴ While people are not as perfect as Adam was prior to the Fall, they still have enough of God’s image within them as fallen humans to show others proper respect and character. We have enough of God’s image within us that we should be drawn to things of God rather than things of Satan—and for those regenerated by the power of the Holy Spirit, that image should indeed have been restored.

Understanding what it means for a person to be made in the *tzelem Elohim* is significant. Christopher J.H. Wright asserts, “this forms the basis of radical equality of all human beings, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion or any form of social, economic, or political status.”⁵ He goes on to conclude, “Anything that denies other human beings their dignity or fails to show respect, interest and informed understanding for all that they hold precious is actually a failure of love.”⁶ If one is to truly demonstrate God’s commanded love (seen in both the Tanach and Apostolic Scriptures) to His human creatures, then one must recognize that there is a strong value placed on them as made in His image. To stretch the meaning of Genesis 9:6, “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image” (RSV), by not demonstrating Yeshua’s love to others—could it be considered tantamount to murder?

The human being is of extremely high value, especially in comparison to the rest of Creation. Being made in God’s image (Genesis 1:26) obviously means that human beings possess unique qualities that those of the animal kingdom do not possess. In the Creation account, Genesis 2:7 says “the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being” (NASU). One part of the human being, his body, is clearly of this Earth. Yet it is significant that nowhere in the creation of the animals is it said that the animals had *nishmat chayim* (נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים) breathed into them. The *Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament* makes the important point, “the vital principle in man is different from that in the animal...The beasts [only] arose at the creative word of God.”⁷

The *nishmat chayim* breathed into man indicates that he does possess a uniqueness specifically endowed by his Creator, a part made not of this Earth. The Hebrew language has no specific word for “mind” or “consciousness,” but it is safe to say that this *neshamah* (נִשְׁמָה) or specific “breath” from God would help constitute it. In fact, when Adam ate the forbidden fruit, the Apostle Paul only makes the point that “death spread to all men” (Romans 5:12, NASU), *eis pantas anthrōpous* (εἰς πάντας ἀνθρώπους) or “to all humans.” **Human death is by no means the same as animal death.** To equate animal death and human death as being the same is to disregard the uniqueness of the human race in God’s Creation, and the Divine imprint He has placed upon it. Throughout history, human culture has demonstrated a number of unique qualities, bearing witness to God’s imprint, including:

³ W.E. Vine, *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1968), 372.

⁴ John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, reprint (Peterborough, UK: Epworth Press, 2000), 864.

⁵ Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 423.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp 423-424.

⁷ *E-Sword 7.6.1: Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament*. MS Windows 9x. Franklin, TN: Equipping Ministries Foundation, 2005.

1. awareness of a moral code “written” or impressed with a conscience
2. concerns about death and about life after death
3. propensity to worship and desire to communicate with a higher being
4. consciousness of self
5. drive to discover and capacity to recognize truth and absolutes⁸

Indeed, it is only the human race among God’s Creation which possesses intelligence, a capacity to reason, and verbal speech—making it different when compared to the animals.

Psalm 8 picks up on the theme of man made in God’s image, and specifically on the fact that God made man to rule over His Creation (Psalm 8:6-8). But the Psalmist’s assertion is a very important one that cannot be overlooked: “You have made him a little lower than God” (Psalm 8:5a, NASU) or “You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings” (NIV). The Hebrew clause of interest is *m’at m’Elohim* (מֵאֵלֹהִים מְנַטָּה), “lower than God,” rendered in the Greek LXX as *brachu...par angelous* (βραχύ...παρ’ ἀγγέλους), “a little less than angels” (LXE), due to the ambiguous nature of *Elohim*.⁹ Regardless, though, the lot of humanity is not cast with the animal kingdom **but instead** with the Heavenly host; the Psalmist **did not say** that man was made “a little higher than the animals.” The debate that the Messianic movement has from time to time about the intermediate state between the death of a person and resurrection would, in fact, be easily solved if we could understand what it means to be made in God’s image with human beings possessing qualities different than the rest of Creation.¹⁰

The day-to-day aspects of understanding what it means for human beings to be made in God’s image are quite severe for where sectors of the Messianic movement stand right now. Every person on Earth today has value in the eyes of the Creator, and it is the responsibility of those who have placed their trust in Yeshua to see value in other people. In today’s Messianic community, we often see a great deal of vehemence and hatred released against fellow brothers and sisters in the Christian Church, and even the Jewish Synagogue, much less those of other religions. I have sat in Messianic worship services where people have prayed that the Israeli army roll their tanks over “the cursed bones of their Muslim enemies,” but then have seen Israeli military being interviewed on television, testifying to the ethical dilemmas they face in defending their country. For some reason or another, rather than seeing value in Muslims as human beings made in God’s image, various persons in our faith community have thought that it is appropriate to treat them as animals—even though our Heavenly Father *does not*. The Lord is every bit as concerned for their salvation and redemption as we should be!

There are undoubtedly any number of reasons why the image of God, a critical issue in the Torah, is avoided every year in the annual cycle. Have we adequately dealt with the questions of a person’s composition? Do we really think that a human being is unique compared to the animals, or is no different than a dog or cat? Do we realize that each of us has a connection to the Heavenly dimension? Do we understand the responsibility for each of us to demonstrate love and respect toward others, because all of humanity bears the Divine imprint? This is an issue that simply cannot be avoided any more. What will it mean for the redeemed to rule and reign with the Lord throughout eternity?

⁸ This list of five character traits is copied from Hugh Ross, *The Genesis Question: Scientific Advances and the Accuracy of Genesis*, second expanded edition (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2001), 55.

⁹ The author of Hebrews applies Psalm 8:4-6 to Yeshua the Messiah and His Incarnation (Hebrews 2:6-10), whose ministry and service for the world restores redeemed humanity as second only to God in Creation.

Consult the commentary *Hebrews for the Practical Messianic* by J.K. McKee for a further explanation.

¹⁰ Consult the publication *To Be Absent From the Body* by J.K. McKee.