

# Examining the Physical Nature of the *Imago Dei*

## Part 1 - The Words God Used

***“Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness...”***

These were the words of God spoken within the counsel of the Triune Godhead before the creation of Adam on the sixth day of Creation (Gen 1:26).

While all of creation is the revelation of God, the creation of man is a very different and more personal revelation. Not only does the creation of man tell us something about God which we could not know from the rest of creation, it also bestows upon man a unique honor which no other creature possesses.

But what does it mean to be in God’s image and likeness? That is a question which has surely been pondered for millennia. The full meaning of the *Imago Dei* is unknowable in this life for the simple fact that the full and true nature of God is beyond our human comprehension. Yet it is without question that God very intentionally revealed something of Himself when he created man. This makes the words of Genesis 1:26-27 essential to our understanding of both the nature of God and the nature of man.

Even though the full meaning of the *Imago Dei* may be unknowable, there are truths that we *can* know about it by a careful study of the Scriptures. The purpose of this paper is to explore those truths.

### Image and Likeness

God chose to use two words to describe mankind’s similitude to Himself. But what do these words mean?

***Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; ...” God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.*** (Gen 1:26a,27 - NASB)

The plain meaning of this text must be our starting point. Obviously, these words were written in Hebrew, but we read it here in English.

The natural meaning of the English words “image” and “likeness” would lead us to an initial understanding that “image” is a visual similarity and

“likeness” is a more general similarity, for this is the natural meaning of these words.

But this is only a translation of the original language words, so we must ask, *“does this translation accurately reflect the nuances of the original language?”*

## **“Likeness”**

Starting with the word “likeness,” research reveals that it is translated from the Hebrew word, **děmuwth** (H1823). A review of the various places this Hebrew word is used in the Old Testament reveals the following different types of usages:

- 2 Kings 16:10 – “fashion” (KJV), “pattern” (NASB) – a similarity of visible design.
  - Notably, of the 19 usages of this word outside the book of Genesis, all but three referred to a visual similarity like the one above.
- Psalm 58:4 – similarity of poison
- Isaiah 13:4 – similarity of sounds
- Ezekiel 23:15 – similarity of actions

Obviously, this word is correctly translated. While the word can refer to a visible likeness, it is certainly not limited to that.

In keeping with this meaning, we can list many attributes of mankind which could be rightly understood as being “like” God’s attributes:

- Our spirits will persist for eternity.
- We are volitional (we have a will).
- We are moral beings.
- We are aesthetic.
- We are creative.
- We are relational.
- We have intelligence.
- We have feelings.

Of course, this list is not exhaustive, but it demonstrates that there are many ways in which mankind reflects the nature of God. In other words, we are *like* God in these ways.

There is little dispute over the correct meaning of “likeness” in this passage, so for the remainder of this discourse, the focus will be on the meaning of “*image*.” This focus in no way discounts or contradicts the “likeness” to God as expressed above, but rather, it is to concentrate on the meaning of “image” since that is where there *is* dispute.

## ***“Image”***

The word translated “image” is the Hebrew word, ***tsalem*** (H6754). A review of the various places this Hebrew word is used in the Old Testament reveals that it *always* refers to a visible similarity. Here is a summary of how the word is used (all instances are included below except those in Genesis, which will be covered below):

- Images as idols – Num 33:52, 2Ki 11:18, 2Ch 23:17, Amos 5:26
- Images of body parts or animals – 1Sa 6:5, 1Sa 6:11, Ezekiel 7:20, Ezekiel 16:17
- Images on a wall – Ezekiel 23:14
- God seeing a man – Psalm 73:20
- Psalm 36:9 – Translated “*shadow*” (NKJV & Amplified), “*phantom*” (NASB & NIV), “*vain shew*” (KJV). A shadow or a phantom both have visible form but without any substance. A “vain shew” is clearly visible, but also lacking substance.

Here again, it is clear that the natural meaning of the English word “image” correctly carries the nuance of the underlying Hebrew word. *Tsalem* always speaks of a visual representation of a real person or object just as the word “image” does in English.

Before concluding this review of the usage of the word “image” in the scriptures, we need to return to the book of Genesis and look again at its usage outside of the first chapter. Moses used the word twice more in Genesis, and both give strong affirmation of the same meaning which has been discerned from its usage throughout the rest of the Old Testament.

- Genesis 5:1,3 – *“This is the book of the generations of Adam. In the day when God created man, He made him in the likeness of God... 3 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.”*
  - There is a clear reference back to Genesis 1 in verse 1 here. Therefore, we must conclude that Moses was invoking the memory of the creation of Adam as he relates the birth of Seth.

- Moses uses the very same two Hebrew words in Gen. 5:3 as he had used in Gen. 1:26-27... “image” and “likeness.” Without any doubt, Seth was like Adam physically as well as metaphysically.
- Exegetical principle teaches us that when the same author uses the same terms in the same context in the same book, the words must have a consistent meaning. This means that...
  - We must accept that “image” in Genesis 1:26-27 is a physical and visible similarity, or...
  - We must reject that “image” in Genesis 5:3 has any reference to the fact that Seth actually looked like his own father.
- Genesis 9:6 - *“Whoever sheds man’s blood, By man his blood shall be shed, For in the image of God He made man.”*
  - The underlying truth that God gave as the reason that murder is wrong is the fact that God made man in His *image*. He did not use the term “likeness” here, only the Hebrew word *tsalem*.
  - In Matthew 10:28, Jesus said, *“Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”* (compare Luke 12:4-5)
    - Jesus drew a distinction between the killing of a body by man and the destruction of a body *and* soul by God.
    - According to Jesus, murder is the destruction of the body, but it does not touch the soul.
  - Murder is a sin against the body, for it does not truly harm the spirit. God forbade murder because man is made *in His image*. This clearly implies that it is the *body* of man that is made in God’s image.

In both Hebrew and English, the natural meaning of the text (that we are created in God’s *image*) leads us to the *initial* understanding that we are created to visually represent God. In other words, mankind was physically crafted to reflect God’s form. Even though this may be difficult to understand or explain, it must be our starting point because that’s the plain sense of the words God used. This is exegetically required.

As Howard Hendricks said, *“If the plain sense makes sense, seek no other sense.”*

Of course, that raises the question... *does the plain sense make sense?*

This is the question that will be addressed in Part 2 - *The Plausibility of the Physicality of Bearing God’s Image.*