



IMAGGO DEI

The concept of the *imago dei* (the image of God) in humanity is fundamental to so many other doctrines, yet there is still confusion over exactly what that image is and what it entails. This article will explore some of those questions.

Considering the Image of God

By Daniel Goepfrich, Th.M., D.Min.



The definitive passage is found on the first page of many Bibles. At the end of the creation week, at the pinnacle of God's creative imagination and power, God brought into existence humanity:

Then God said, "Let Us make mankind 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 livestock and over all the earth, and over every crawling thing that crawls on the earth." So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. (Genesis 1:26-27)¹



Notice two important details in this account. First, humanity was created *in* [God's] *image...according to* [God's] *likeness*. Whatever this means in its entirety, we must understand that the image of God has an element of divinity (not deity since we are not gods) inherent to it. God has placed something of Himself in us. Second, humanity is divided into two genders—male and female. Thus, even though we were created in different ways, at different times (based on the more detailed description in

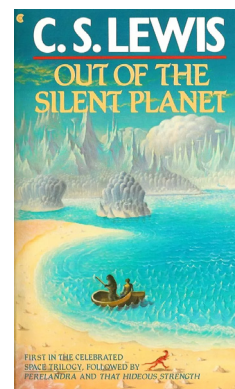
Genesis 2:7ff.), and with various other differences, men and women alike are images of God and carry His likeness.

The words "image" and "likeness" have caused difficulty for centuries. Many assume that God has no physical form of any kind. They base that assumption on John 4:24 ("God is spirit")² and verses such as Colossians 1:15 and 1 Timothy 1:17 where God is described as invisible. Numerous passages in which God is said to have a face, eyes, feet, hands, ears, and mouth (see Psalm 89 for several of these references in one place) are dismissed as merely anthropomorphic—human descriptions to help us understand and relate to God better. However, this is a big assumption indeed.

When John wrote, *No one has seen God at any time* (Jn. 1:18), he was necessarily referring to humans. Angels and others stand in God's presence, see Him, and regularly converse with Him (Job 1–2; 1 Kgs. 22:19-22; Rev. 4:1-4). Before Yeshua was conceived in Mary's womb and took on the fullness of humanity, the eternal Son of God often met with fallen humans, talked with them, and even ate with them (see Gen. 18). Angels, who are also assumed to have no physical bodies (based on Hebrews 1:14), have regularly done all the same things within our physical sphere. They even engage in battle in their own realm with limitations and constraints similar to ours (see Dan. 10). The common explanation is that

God and angels simply "appear" as humans or "take a human form," but that leads to two important questions. First, why is appearing as a human more advantageous than having a form that can interact both inside and outside of our finite, dimensional world? Second, why do humans assume that when something is invisible to our eyes, it necessarily means that it has no form or body at all? Is our world the only realm that can constitute a "physical" existence?

When we say that God is "outside of time" or "not limited by time," we are implicitly admitting that He exists in a dimension beyond our own. Since we are already making assumptions about God's appearance and nature based on our understanding of a few verses in Scripture, is there no place to allow that God and angels *do* have a form, one that is not limited to this



three-dimensional structure in which we live? C. S. Lewis attempted to explore this type of existence in his *Space Trilogy* series. In the first book,

Out of the Silent Planet, one creature described the *eldila* (Lewis' fictional word for angels) to humans who could not see them in this way:

...eldila are hard to see. They are not like us. Light goes through them. You must be looking in the right place and the right time; and

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the New American Standard Bible. 2020. La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

² Not "God is a spirit" as it is often misunderstood. The Greek text likely refers to a spirit quality rather than non-physical, much like when Balaam declared, "God is not a man" with everything that goes with it (Num. 23:19).



that is not likely to come about unless the *eldil* [one of the *eldila*] wishes to be seen. Sometimes you can mistake them for a sunbeam or even a moving of the leaves; but when you look again you see that it was an *eldil* and that it is gone. But whether your eyes can ever see them I do not know.³

Yet, later in the series, the human was able to “see” them with time and practice (and the *eldilas*’ permission). Their form allowed them to traverse space and time with almost zero limitations—certainly not the limitations humans face—jumping from one planet to another and from heaven to earth almost instantaneously. While this is certainly fantasy and fiction, it was Lewis’ attempt to explain how something can have a real form that is not limited to what we humans experience as “physical.” Thinkers like Lewis are important because we often simply disbelieve what we do not see or understand.

“Image” and “Likeness”

The importance of this line of questioning comes back to the two key words of Genesis 1:26-27: “image” and “likeness.” The Hebrew word translated “image” is *tselem*. It occurs only 17 times in the Hebrew Scriptures and refers to an image, statue, idol, figurine, and even a picture drawn on a wall.⁴ It was most

commonly translated in the Septuagint⁵ by εἰκών (*eikōn*, where we get “icon”) and εἰδῶλον (*eidōlon*, where we get “idol”). Both the Hebrew and the Greek words indicate a visible representation of something else, a replica by which the viewer would recognize the real thing.⁶ We still hear this use of the term occasionally when someone refers to a child as “the spit-tin’ image” of his or her relative (parent, grandparent, uncle/aunt, etc.).

The Hebrew word translated “likeness” is דָּמוּת (*dēmut*) and occurs only 25 times in the Hebrew text, but it is overwhelmingly (20 out of 25 times) translated in the Septuagint with ὁμοίωμα (*homoiōma*) and ὁμοίωσις (*homoiosis*), both of which have to do with similarity. More than half of the occurrences of *dēmut* are in Ezekiel 1 and 10, as the prophet attempted to describe the cherubim (1:5, 10, 13, 16; 10:10, 21, 22), the heavenly throne room (1:22, 26; 10:1), and God Himself on the throne (1:28). His imperfect explanations of what the reality was “like” sets up nearly the same description John gave later in Revelation 4.

Thus, whereas “image” is the replication of one thing into another form (usually imperfect and less than identical), “likeness” seems to focus less on replication or presentation and more on the characteristics and description of the reality. So, to say that humanity was created *in* [God’s] *im-*

age...according to [God’s] *likeness* is to say that God gave to us some form of his “physical” attributes—enough that those who have seen Him can recognize Him in us—and enough of His characteristics (often called attributes) so that we could accurately represent Him to all observers as we carry out His work in this world.

We Are the Images of God

We do not simply *bear* His image; we ourselves *are* the images of God in this realm, Yeshua Himself being both *the* [perfect] *image of the invisible God* (Col. 1:15) and *the exact representation of His nature* (Heb. 1:3)—the One into whose image God wants us to be conformed (Rom. 8:29). Indeed, Yeshua presents and represents God so perfectly that He once told His apostles, *The one who has seen Me has seen the Father* (Jn. 14:9). It is to this that God wants to shape us so that we, too, can once again be His perfect image and representation.

Human life is precious to God, not simply because we carry His image but also because we *are* His image. Humans are the image, the not-quite-identical replica, of God Himself, and we have His likeness (His character and at least some attributes) with which we are to represent Him before the human and angelic world. Sin has corrupted us to the extent that God is barely recognizable

³ C. S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, book one of *The Space Trilogy*, (HarperCollins. Kindle Edition), p. 60.

⁴ Genesis 1:26-27; 5:3; 9:6; Numbers 33:52; 1 Samuel 6:5, 11; 2 Kings 11:18; 2 Chronicles 23:17; Psalm 39:6 (39:7 in Hebrew); 73:20; Ezekiel 16:17; 23:14; Amos 5:26.

⁵ The Septuagint (abbreviated as LXX) is the 2nd-century B.C. Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. It includes the full Hebrew *Tanakh* plus several apocryphal books. It is an important resource to help see how later scholars understood the meaning of the Hebrew text through the Greek words they chose when translating from Hebrew and Aramaic.

⁶ The exception to this would be a shadow, but even that typically shows the shape of its source (although often distorted).

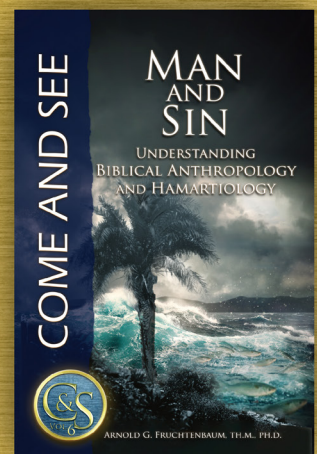
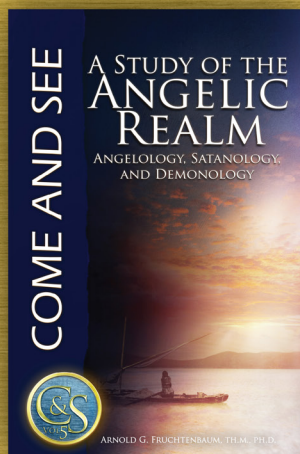
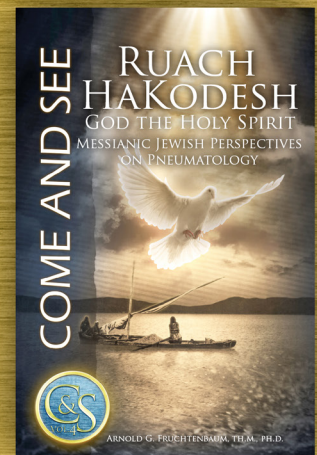
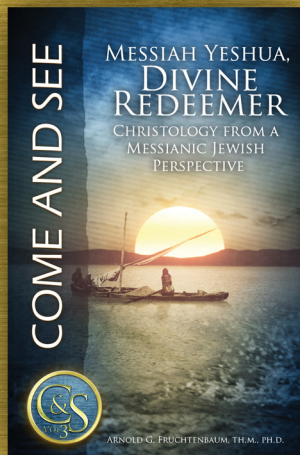
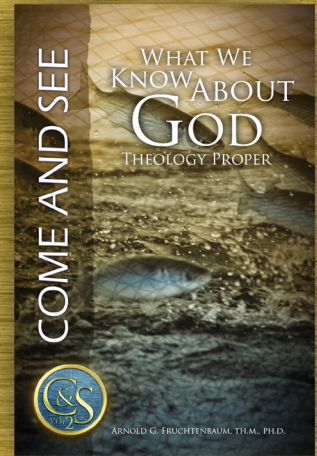
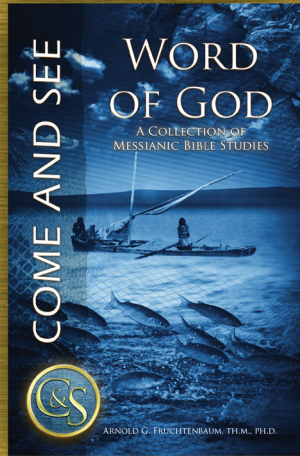
in us, yet sin has not removed the image from humanity. There is nothing in Scripture that implies that the image can be lost or removed. This is why Paul urged his readers in Colossae to grow in their spiritual maturity and thus become *renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created it* (Col. 3:10). As we are conformed to the image of God's Son (Rom. 8:29), the tarnished image begins to shine once more so that the multifaceted wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places (Eph. 3:10).



Daniel Goepfrich (Th.M., D.Min.), an international conference speaker and author, is the Teaching Pastor at Oak Tree Community Church (South Bend, IN). He teaches Greek at Calvary University (Kansas City, MO) and Bible exposition for Word of Life Bible Institute (international campuses) and is an Associate Professor of Bible and Theology at Tyndale Theological Seminary (Hurst, TX). In 2017, he founded Theology is for Everyone (theologyisforeveryone.com) to produce biblically sound resources that everyone can use and understand. He is the author of *Biblical Discipleship* (2020), *New Testament Chapter by Chapter* (2017), and *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage* (2007), as well as several journal articles and multi-author contributions.

Come and See

*A solid foundation for
discipleship in biblical truth*



ariel.org