

## GENESIS 1:26–7 AS A STATEMENT OF HUMANITY'S DIVINE PARENTAGE

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### Abstract

The linguistic and cultural background of the words צלם and דמות supports a reading of Gen. 1:26–7 as a statement of humanity's divine parentage. As such it is intended to evoke the responsibilities of child to parent and of parent to child in the minds of its readers. Such an interpretation accommodates both the semantic range of the key terms צלם and דמות and the sense that the statement is meant to be theologically significant.

THE story of creation in Genesis 1 declares that human beings were made in the image of God. However, in keeping with both Hebrew narrative in general and with the priestly creation narrative in particular, the Genesis text is lacking in any detailed explanation of what this statement means.

In what follows I would like to suggest an interpretation of the passage that accommodates both the semantic range of the key terms צלם and דמות and the sense that the statement is meant to be theologically significant. More specifically, I would like to propose that the linguistic and cultural background of the words צלם and דמות supports a reading of Gen. 1:26–7 as a statement of humanity's divine parentage. As such it is intended to evoke the responsibilities of child to parent and of parent to child in the minds of its readers.<sup>1</sup>

This metaphor, in which God is portrayed in parental terms and human beings are depicted as God's children, appears in a number of other texts in chronological proximity to the priestly writer, frequently with particular reference to the creative role of

<sup>1</sup> This is not intended in the literal sense of a divine father or mother physically conceiving and bearing the first human beings, but as a metaphorical depiction of the relationship between God and human beings as in the mould of that of parent to child. On metaphor, see also below.

God in the relationship.<sup>2</sup> In using this metaphor, therefore, the priestly writer was describing the divine–human relationship in a manner consistent with the theological outlook of his contemporaries.

Before discussing the specific arguments in favour of this proposal, however, a brief review of the history of interpretation of the Genesis text will be worthwhile, and in particular a look at the contemporary stalemate on the subject.

#### CURRENT INTERPRETATION

Despite the obscurity of the assertion that אדם was made בצלם אלהים, the text's suggestion of a close connection between human beings and the divine has inspired more exegesis than perhaps any other single passage in the Hebrew Bible. Its position at the climactic moment of the first chapter of the first book of both the Jewish and Christian biblical canons sets the tone for the Bible's understanding of the nature of humanity and of humanity's relationship with God.

Less clear than its import, however, is the passage's significance. A full history of attempts to address this issue would constitute a major undertaking in and of itself, and consequently here are mentioned only a few of those relevant to the present discussion.<sup>3</sup>

One of the oldest approaches to the biblical text has been to start from the assumption that there is some significance to the use of two different terms for the similarity which is to exist between God and humanity. More specifically, this line of exegesis attempts to distinguish between a natural likeness to God which is indicated by the term צלם, and a supernatural likeness which is indicated by the term דמות. So, for example, Martin Luther, following

<sup>2</sup> Whilst scholarship in the last few decades has challenged the status of the four-source Documentary Hypothesis as one of biblical criticism's assured results, the attribution of Genesis 1 and the genealogical passages utilized here to a priestly 'source' or 'redactor' remains secure. Likewise, there persists a strong tendency to date the priestly component of the Pentateuch in the exilic or early post-exilic period. Reviews of major recent proposals regarding the priestly document (or editorial layer, as the case may be) may be found in E. W. Nicholson, *The Pentateuch in the Twentieth Century: The Legacy of Julius Wellhausen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) and J. Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible* (London: SCM, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> See C. Westermann for an extensive review of the history of exegesis on Gen. 1:26–7, which in the main need not be repeated here (*Genesis 1–11: A Continental Commentary* [Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1994], pp. 147–55).

Augustine, wrote that 'the image [צלם] of God is the powers of the soul: memory, mind or intellect, and will', while 'the similitude [דמות] lies in the gifts of grace'. 'Nature is perfected through grace', he says: the resemblance of humanity to God which is indicated by צלם is perfected through the more refined resemblance indicated by דמות.<sup>4</sup> Though poetic, this approach—like many both before and after it—suffers from a lack of grounding in the text. In the absence of convincing evidence otherwise, the twofold repetition of the likeness between God and humanity ought merely to be taken as heightened poetic language.<sup>5</sup>

With regard to this sort of reading of meaning into the text, K. Barth would later protest that in this kind of interpretation 'it is obvious that their authors merely found the concept [of the image of God] in the text and then proceeded to pure invention in accordance with the requirements of contemporary anthropology'.<sup>6</sup> Whatever society, theology, or anthropology of an exegete's time considered the higher attributes of humanity was taken to be the intended referents of the Genesis text: an approach ripe with theological possibility, perhaps, but not necessarily a technique likely to inform us as to the intentions of the writer in making the statement in the first place.

The pursuit of such imaginative approaches—and in particular the lack of any obvious limitations on the possibilities which such an approach might allow—ultimately provoked the increased concern of more recent scholarship to pin down the actual meaning of the words used by Genesis 1: instead of reading contemporary anthropology into the text, it was hoped that linguistic study might enable the exegete to read meaning out of the text. As a result of this reorientation of exegesis, most of the twentieth century's developments have been attempts to take advantage of the increasing knowledge of other Semitic languages

<sup>4</sup> Quoted and translated by J. D. Douglass, 'The Image of God in Women as Seen by Luther and Calvin', in K. E. Børresen (ed.), *The Image of God: Gender Models in Judaeo-Christian Tradition* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1995), p. 231.

<sup>5</sup> For a recent analysis of the form of 1:26–7, see P. Niskanen, 'The Poetics of Adam: The Creation of צלם in the Image of אלהים', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128 (2009), pp. 417–36.

<sup>6</sup> K. Barth, *The Doctrine of Creation*, Pt. 1, vol. 3 of *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958), p. 193. For discussion see P. Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1997), p. 126.

in order properly to define צלם and דמות, the two key words in the debate.

The physical implications of the terms employed by the priestly writer were first highlighted in the 1940s by P. Humbert, who collected all the uses of צלם within the Hebrew Bible and argued that, almost without exception, the term was used to signify a physical likeness or resemblance.<sup>7</sup> In all but two of its uses the word refers to something definitely physical, and the cognates in both Akkadian (*šalmu*) and Aramaic (צלמא) also overwhelmingly denote physical entities, most frequently referring to statues or idols.

The idea that צלם was used in an entirely physical sense, however, raised the question of why a priestly writer would have made use of the word. The priestly strand of the Pentateuch is well known for its anti-anthropomorphic bent and, in addition, the priestly writer's activity in the exilic or post-exilic period meant that he was working at a time in which exposure to the Aramaic cognate appears to have meant that the Hebrew word was, aside from its simple physical significance, also acquiring an association with cult statues and therefore with idolatry.<sup>8</sup> In response to this difficulty a number of scholarly proposals have arisen.

<sup>7</sup> P. Humbert, 'Études sur le recit..., L'Imago Dei dans l'AT', *Mémoires de l'Université de Neuchâtel* 14 (1940), pp. 153–65. See also L. Koehler, 'Die Grundstelle der Imago-Dei-Lehre', *Theologische Zeitschrift* 4 (1948), pp. 16–22, and discussions in, e.g., Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, pp. 149–50; W. R. Garr, *In His Own Image and Likeness: Humanity, Divinity, and Monotheism* (Culture and History of the Ancient Near East, 15; Leiden: Brill, 2003), p. 5; J. Barr, 'The Image of God in the Book of Genesis—A Study of Terminology', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 51 (1968), pp. 21–2; D. J. A. Clines, 'Humanity as the Image of God', in *idem*, *On the Way to the Postmodern: Old Testament Essays, 1967–1998*, vol. 2 (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series, 293; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), pp. 468–70. The two exceptions, where a less clearly physical referent may be in view, appear in Pss. 39:7 and 73:20. Cognate languages, of course, may or may not always be significant for determining the meaning of Hebrew terms, but the obvious—if not indeed overwhelming—overlap in the semantic fields in this case tends to support appeals to Akkadian and Aramaic as affirmations of a primarily physical meaning also in Hebrew. For discussion of these issues, see especially J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961) and 'Etymology and the Old Testament', in A. S. van der Woude (ed.), *Language and Meaning: Studies in Hebrew Language and Biblical Exegesis: Papers Read at the Joint British–Dutch Old Testament Conference Held at London, January, 3rd–6th 1973* (Old Testament Studies, 19, Leiden: Brill, 1974), pp. 1–28.

<sup>8</sup> See Barr, 'The Image of God in the Book of Genesis'.

J. Sawyer argued on the basis of verb associations that צלם is simply the normal term to use in a theological context; J. Barr acknowledged the problems associated with צלם but contended that they were merely the least that the available Hebrew lexicon offered.<sup>9</sup> The author chose צלם because it lacked verbal cognates within Hebrew through which it might acquire negative associations; possible alternatives (e.g. מראה, פסל) had associated verbs which especially emphasized the idea of physicality, were used in relation to the making of idols, or were possessed of other negative connotations. In other words: the alternatives were even worse. Barr also considered the potentially problematic associations of the term with statues and idols to be a feature of Aramaic, not Hebrew, and thus irrelevant to its use in Genesis 1. Rather less grounded was his contention that צלם in Hebrew actually represented two homonyms—one which referred to a physical image and one, attested only in Genesis and Psalms 39 and 73, which denoted a more ethereal similarity.

Along similar lines P. Bird would later argue that צלם was, in itself, an 'empty' term, lacking any particular content and requiring further definition to obtain meaning. Its use in Genesis 1 was unproblematic because its content is defined as dominion by 1:28; this interpretation deftly avoids the problem by effectively rejecting physicality as the content of צלם.<sup>10</sup>

Somewhat ironically, given the original purpose of the pursuit of a linguistic approach to the text, the other major means by which interpreters have attempted to negotiate around the physical emphasis of צלם has been to resort to a variation on the old two-term interpretation strategy, arguing that the priestly

<sup>9</sup> J. F. A. Sawyer, 'The Meaning of בְּצֶלְמֵ אֱלֹהִים ('In the Image of God') in Genesis I–XI', *Journal of Theological Studies* 25 (1974), pp. 418–26; Barr, 'The Image of God in the Book of Genesis'. For additional interpretations see, among others, J. F. Kutsko, 'Will the Real šelem 'elōhīm Please Stand Up? The Image of God in the Book of Ezekiel', in *Society for Biblical Literature 1998 Seminar Papers* (Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers Series, 37; Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1998); A. Hultgård, 'Man as Symbol of God', in H. Biezais (ed.), *Religious Symbols and their Functions* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1979); A. Hultgård, 'God and Image of Women in Early Jewish Religion', in K. E. Børresen (ed.), *The Image of God: Gender Models in Judaeo-Christian Tradition* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1995); G. A. Jónsson, *The Image of God: Genesis 1:26–28 in a Century of Old Testament Research* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1988); J. Abraham, *Eve: Accused or Acquitted? A Reconsideration of Feminist Readings of the Creation Narrative Texts in Genesis 1–3* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster, 2002); F. Horst, 'Face to Face: The Biblical Doctrine of the Image of God', *Interpretation* 4 (1950), pp. 259–70.

<sup>10</sup> Bird, *Missing Persons*, pp. 133–4.

writer's use of a second term, דמות, was done deliberately in order to modify—that is, lessen—the physical implications of צלם. If the negative associations of צלם with regard to idolatry were only acquired through exposure to the Aramaic צלמא, it seemed possible to argue that the priestly writer's use of דמות was intended to guard against these connotations and any attendant idolatrous interpretation. Various permutations of this basic principle exist. G. von Rad, for example, explained that דמות interprets צלם by underlining the idea of correspondence and similarity rather than physicality as such, while Sawyer argued that, having clarified the meaning of צלם in Genesis 1 by defining it with דמות, the writer was then able to use צלם without modification in passages like Gen. 9:6.<sup>11</sup>

Operating on more or less the same principle while reversing the logic, J. M. Miller maintained that צלם modifies דמות; this is on the grounds that an original דמות in Gen. 9:6 was changed to צלם because of its assonance with blood (דם) and the attendant risk of blood's association with Mesopotamian stories of humans created with divine blood.<sup>12</sup> If the priestly writer intended to use the vaguest term for likeness, Miller argued, he should have used דמות in both Genesis texts, but דמות had to be employed in the creation narrative because of the risk that the use of דמות alone would conjure up undesirable connotations of the creation of humans with divine blood.<sup>13</sup>

Whether it is צלם modifying דמות or דמות modifying צלם, all of these interpretations try to avoid the physical implications of the passage through the modification of one, physically orientated term with a second and more ethereal one.

All the creative manoeuvring around the apparent physicality of the language used by the priestly writer to express the image of God concept was effectively arrested by the discovery of a bilingual Aramaic–Akkadian inscription in which the Aramaic צלמא and דמותא appear in parallel, both referring to the statue on which the inscription appears.<sup>14</sup> Both translate the Akkadian term

<sup>11</sup> G. von Rad, *The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*, vol. 1 of *Old Testament Theology* (London: Oliver & Boyd, 1962), pp. 144–5; Sawyer, 'Meaning', p. 421; cf. Clines, 'Humanity', p. 468.

<sup>12</sup> J. M. Miller, 'In the "Image" and "Likeness" of God', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 (1972), pp. 301–2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 299, 301–2.

<sup>14</sup> A. Abon-Assaf, P. Bordreuil, and A. R. Millard, *La Statue de Tell Fekherye et son inscription bilingue assyro-araméenne* (Etudes Assyriologiques; Paris: Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1982). For discussions see A. R. Millard and P. Bordreuil, 'A Statue from Syria with Assyrian and Aramaic

*šalmu*; דמותא appears as the translation in the initial dedication of the statue, while צלמא is used in the second dedication. The appearance of דמותא and צלמא in parallel, being used as functionally equivalent translations of the same Akkadian term, and both in reference to the unequivocally physical statue in question, has essentially ended the lingering attempts to prove that דמות did not have connotations as physical as the troublesome צלם. The discussion by D. M. Gropp and T. J. Lewis is representative when it concluded that 'The concrete use of *dvmūta*' in the Hadd-Yith'i inscription in complete parallelism with *šalm* weighs against the general consensus that *dēmūt* in Gen 1:26 reflects a theologically motivated qualification of the more concrete *šēlem*.'<sup>15</sup> The debate on the physical connotations of צלם and דמות has largely been abandoned, and a consensus as to the meaning of the enigmatic text of Gen. 1:26–7 appears to have been reached. After centuries of speculation on the content of the image, the dominant view is now that the author meant for the image of God in humanity to be understood as comprising merely the physical human form, rather than any spiritual or existential similarity between God and humanity.

The wide adoption of these linguistically founded conclusions has brought to a halt the free-ranging hypotheses which have often characterized the debate as to the meaning of the image of God, and this is no bad thing. However, the downside of this new consensus has been the tendency to interpret the physical implications of the terms as implying that the verses have no real theological significance. At worst, the priestly author did not have any particular content in mind for the image when he penned the verses, and only intended to evoke a vague connection between God and humanity; at best, the divine-human connection is limited to simple physicality, a superficial likeness with no deeper significance.

This might be persuasive were it consistent with the rest of the text, but in the light of Genesis 1 as a whole it is clearly problematic. Genesis 1 wastes no words: its author is constantly and purposefully making a point, whether it is a point about the

Inscriptions', *Biblical Archaeologist* 45/3 (1982), pp. 135–41; J. C. Greenfield and A. Shaffer, 'Notes on the Akkadian-Aramaic Bilingual Statue from Tell Fekherye', *Iraq* 45 (1983), pp. 109–16; D. Pardee and R. D. Biggs, 'Review of *La Statue de Tell Fekherye et son inscription bilingue assyro-araméenne*', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 43 (1984), pp. 253–7; D. M. Gropp and T. J. Lewis, 'Notes on Some Problems in the Aramaic Text of the Hadd-Yith'i Bilingual', *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 259 (1985), pp. 45–61.

<sup>15</sup> Gropp and Lewis, 'Notes', p. 47.

status of the sea monsters as mere created beings or a point about the sole activity of God in creation by divine fiat. The threefold repetition that humans are in the image of God makes clear that it is a matter of utmost and unparalleled importance among all God's creative acts. To suppose that the last two and a half millennia of exegesis have been a wild goose chase for a meaning which never existed is to ignore the theological and creative talents which are demonstrated by the priestly writer in Genesis 1.

The unsatisfactory nature of this purely superficial interpretation of the text has led to interpretation along two essentially separate paths, one critical and aimed at dissecting the technical aspects of the passage, and one dogmatic and attempting to explicate its theological implications.<sup>16</sup>

For the latter, many theologians have been drawn to the Barthian argument that the image is lodged in the personal relationship unique to God and humans.<sup>17</sup> Drawing on the 'I-Thou' language of M. Buber, Barth proposed that the image 'consists as man himself consists as the creature of God'.<sup>18</sup> The language of image, which has no immediately clear relevance to this relational interpretation, had been adopted by the text to emphasize that this was the sole provenance of the human-divine relationship: 'neither plants nor animals are a "Thou" whom God can confront as an "I", nor do they stand in an "I-Thou" relationship'.<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, this interpretation largely ignores the linguistic aspects of the text, and the argument is effectively a scholasticized version of the 'spiritual' image popular prior to the twentieth century. One might also note that Barth has himself fallen into the trap which he so decried, by interpreting the image of God concept according to the dominant anthropology and theology of his own day.

Thus both paths have left something to be desired. The assertion that the writer meant nothing more than that human beings share the physical form of God fails as a theological explanation of the passage, and is uncharacteristically anthropomorphic for a priestly writer. On the other hand, exegesis of the passage divorced from the technical linguistic analyses which are now such an integral part of biblical studies ignores the advantages and insights offered by such analysis into the meanings of the

<sup>16</sup> So Bird, *Missing Persons*, pp. 124-25.

<sup>17</sup> Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, p. 154; Clines, 'Humanity', p. 483.

<sup>18</sup> Barth, *Doctrine*, p. 84.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*



words in question at the time in which they were chosen by the priestly writer for his particular purpose.

Before proceeding to the proposal advocated here, I should note one exception to these isolated prongs of historical-linguistic and theological investigation: the attempt to connect the divine image in Gen. 1:26–7 with the blessing in 1:28 which commands humanity's dominion over the earth—and thereby with images associated with royal dominion in several ancient Near Eastern texts. The basis of the argument lies in the supposed analogy between the creation of human beings in God's image and the statues which were set up by ancient Near Eastern kings in far-flung territories; this solution supposes that these statues were directly representative of the kings themselves and by extension of their ruling authority and power. When applied to the Genesis 1 situation, humans are seen as a kind of living statue, representing God in the territory of earth.<sup>20</sup> While appealing, there are three problems with this line of thought; individually these might be surmountable, but collectively they militate against this solution. First, it requires the interpretation of the ב in בצלם as a 'bet essentialiae', with humans made not 'in' the image of God but 'as', or 'to be' the image of God.<sup>21</sup> This is unusual but not unheard of, and in itself would not be enough to disqualify the argument; more crucially, further scholarship has indicated that the understanding of these statues 'as' the kings in question is probably faulty, and the analogy accordingly breaks down.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the fact that humanity's dominion appears in the blessing would tend to indicate that, though closely connected to the existence of humanity in God's likeness, dominion probably does not itself constitute either the צלם or the דמות: dominion, it seems, must be additionally given—or at least explicitly mentioned—rather than being inherently included in the concept of the divine-human image.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Clines, 'Humanity', pp. 480–3.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 480–5.

<sup>22</sup> Miller, "Image", p. 296.

<sup>23</sup> Bird, *Missing Persons*, p. 134; Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, pp. 154–5. In light of the following proposal, it is worth note that the appearance of the idea of dominion on the heels of the statement about the image may well be an elaboration on the parent-child concept, insofar as a parent might be ultimately expected to turn over land and property to his or her child, who would then undertake the responsibilities of governing and caring for them (i.e., exercising dominion).

## IMAGE AND PARENTHOOD IN GEN. 1:26–7 AND GEN. 5:1–3

Given the dead end which examination of the Genesis 1 text seems to have reached, we may turn to Gen. 5:3, which also uses **צלם** and **דמות** in close proximity to each other. There, Adam is declared to have fathered a son in his own image and likeness. While several scholars have emphasized the physicality which this passage highlights with regard to the Hebrew meaning of both **צלם** and **דמות**, it is actually suggestive of far more: this statement, which connects the **צלם** and **דמות** of Seth to his father and begetter/creator Adam, elucidates the similar statement concerning humanity being in the **צלם** and **דמות** of its creator, God. That statement, in fact—that humanity is made in the image of God—occurs not only in Gen. 1:26–7 (using **צלם** and **דמות**), but is reiterated in Gen. 5:1 (using **דמות**), immediately preceding the statement about Adam and Seth. The chapter's direct connection between the **צלם** and **דמות** of Adam and Seth and the **דמות** of God and **אדם** (both individually and representatively) validates such extrapolation as may be possible from the Adam–Seth situation to the general question of the content of the **צלם** and **דמות**. Specifically: the description of humans as in God's **צלם** and **דמות** in the same terms used to describe Seth's connection to Adam is an attempt to draw a parallel between the father–son relationship of 5:3, between Adam and Seth, and the divine–human relationship of 1:26–7 and 5:1.

Before examining the technical and comparative arguments for using **צלם** and **דמות** in this manner, the instinctive appeal of the idea is worth noting. Even without knowledge of genetics it takes minimal observational skills to note that children tend to look like one or both of their parents. Taken more broadly, children tend to look more like their parents than like any other adult in the community, other than perhaps other blood relatives. It is therefore usually assumed that the adult to whom a child bears the closest physical resemblance is in fact that child's biological parent. While recent developments in humans' control over their own and their offspring's genetic code may someday alter this premiss, it is plausible that this basic assumption regarding the connection between similar appearance and parentage would also have been valid for ancient Near Eastern societies.

Coming back to the text, Gen. 5:3 clearly implies that the **צלם** and **דמות** which Seth possesses and which are like the **צלם** and **דמות** of Adam were transferred to Seth because of the fact that Adam fathered him. The **צלם** and **דמות** are unambiguously connected to the fact of parentage. Furthermore, because the

statement in 5:1 which reiterates the transmission of God's דמות to אדם occurs immediately preceding the statement about transmission of the דמות from Adam the father to Seth the son, the obvious conclusion is that as Seth is to Adam, so Adam—that is, humanity—is to God. The parallel statements of Gen. 5:1 and 5:3 indicate that the use of צלם and דמות with regard to both the divine-human relationship and the parent-child relationship is meant to suggest that something about the former is akin to the latter. The terminology is not the technical language of genetics with which a modern writer might articulate the connection, but the sense is the same. As Adam is Seth's father, so too God is the parent of humanity.<sup>24</sup>

Before moving on to the supporting evidence for this interpretation, it is worth emphasizing that the physicality which is underlined by the use of צלם and דמות is a device used by the priestly writer to bring to mind the parent-child relationship—to activate the metaphor—and need not itself be one of the aspects of that relationship which the writer is trying to communicate about the God-human relationship. To use the language of cognitive metaphor theorists G. Lakoff, M. Johnson, and M. Turner, the physical resemblance, once it has been used as a trigger for the metaphor's source domain (the parent-child relationship), does not then need to be mapped onto the target domain (the God-human relationship).<sup>25</sup>

#### ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN PARALLELS

That this interpretation reflects a concept far from alien to the ancient Near Eastern theological world-view is evident from a number of other cases which use the language of image with respect to parentage. So, for example, in a letter to the Assyrian king Esarhaddon a writer declares that 'the father of the king, my lord, was the very image [*salmu*] of Bel, and the king, my lord, is

<sup>24</sup> The gender-neutral 'parent' is maintained despite the slight irregularity of terminology which it produces because of the appearance in other biblical texts of parental imagery for God which emphasizes the maternal aspects in addition to the paternal (see below). A recent analysis by Niskanen is supportive of this neutrality, with its emphasis on the ambiguities of the singular and plural and male and female terminology employed by the text ('The Poetics of Adam').

<sup>25</sup> For discussions of the nature and use of metaphor to convey meaning, see e.g. G. Lakoff and M. Turner, *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989); M. Johnson and G. Lakoff, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); M. Black, *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962).

likewise the very image [*šalmu*] of Bel'.<sup>26</sup> As in the Genesis texts, the image of the god and the passing of this image from parent to child appear together in a single nexus of terminology and thought: as was the image in the father, so too is the image in the son.

The same convergence of terminology occurs in Egyptian texts relating to the pharaohs, where the pharaoh is described as 'the shining image of the lord of all and a creation of the gods of Heliopolis ... he has begotten him, in order to create a shining seed on earth, for salvation for men, as his living image'. The pharaoh is also called 'a prince like Re, the child of Qeb, his heir, the image of Re' and described by the gods as 'my living image, creation of my members, whom Mut bare to me' and 'my beloved son, who came forth from my members, my image, whom I have put on earth'.<sup>27</sup> Again the convergence of creation, the image of the god, and of humanity's divine parentage is evident.

In addition to these texts which include a clear parental component, there are also a number of Mesopotamian and Egyptian texts which speak of human beings being in the image of a god. As several of these texts speak with respect to royalty in particular, D. J. A. Clines has argued that the image of god terminology is associated with kings and kingship and concluded that the Genesis text represents a democratization of the royal image of god ideology and a reapplication of that ideology to humanity as a whole.<sup>28</sup> While this is probably also part of the underlying message of the priestly writer, the royal image of god language should be seen in conjunction with the numerous texts which speak of kings as the son of gods. The overlapping terminology of the king who is the son of the god and the king who is in the image of the god affirms the association already observed between the image of the god and the idea of divine parenthood.

#### GOD AS CREATOR AND PARENT

The proposal also has in its favour a number of biblical texts which describe God using parental metaphors and connect this parentage to God's creative acts. This connection between God

<sup>26</sup> S. Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars* (State Archives of Assyria, 10; Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1993), p. 181. See also S. E. Loewenstamm, *Comparative Studies in Biblical and Ancient Oriental Literatures* (Alter Orient und Altes Testament, 204; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1980), p. 48.

<sup>27</sup> See Clines, 'Humanity', pp. 479–80.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 480.

depicted as the creator of humanity and God characterized as humanity's parent is particularly evident in texts of the exilic and post-exilic period, in line with the generally proposed date of the priestly writer of Genesis.<sup>29</sup> These texts come from Deutero-Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Malachi, and suggest that the priestly writer's depiction of God as humanity's divine parent would not have been out of place at the time of writing.

The clearest connection between God the creator and God the parent is in Deutero-Isaiah, where the exilic prophet reassures his audience by reminding them that they were created by God as God's children. In Isaiah 43 Yahweh is 'he who created you, O Jacob' and 'he who formed you, O Israel', and the people are identified as Yahweh's 'sons' and 'daughters' (43:1, 5-7). Isaiah 44:2 emphasizes that the metaphor of God the creator-parent is enduringly applicable, with God's parental characteristics relevant not only to the first generation in Genesis 1 but also to the present day: 'Thus says Yahweh who made you, who formed you in the womb and will help you'. God's creative powers are continually applied *in utero*; the verse aptly combines God's role as creator with highly organic language of generation and biological parenthood. Here, as in Isaiah 43, the implications of God's parenthood also start to emerge: God's role in the parent-child relationship is that of guardian and protector.

Jeremiah also appeals to a parent-child relationship between God and humanity, saying: 'How long will you waver, O faithless daughter? For Yahweh has created a new thing on the earth' (31:22). In this case it is the responsibility of humanity to God which is elucidated: the daughter ought to be confident in God's concern and in God's power to act in accordance with this concern because of the parent-child relationship between her and God and because God is creator of both what was (implicitly) and of what will be.

Finally, the most explicit connection between the God who is creator of humanity and God the parent of humanity appears in Mal. 1:10a, which asks, 'Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us?' The role of God as parent is directly related to the fact of God's creation.

It is evident from these passages that the exilic and post-exilic conception of God in the role of divine parent was connected to the recognition of God as creator of humankind. For Gen. 1:26-7

<sup>29</sup> See e.g. Nicholson, *Pentateuch*, pp. 218-21; Blenkinsopp, *Pentateuch*, p. 26.

to make a statement affirming this connection is perfectly in tune with the understanding of God presented by contemporary texts.

#### GOD AS PARENT

What that relationship entailed, however, was largely left to texts outside Genesis, and in conclusion we will note a few instances of the metaphor in order to outline what the divine parent–human child relationship was thought to entail. These texts primarily emphasize the role of God as protector and disciplinarian, and God’s attendant demands for respect, honour, and obedience.

In Mal. 1:6a Yahweh’s requirement that the Israelites honour God is grounded in God’s role as parent; Yahweh says: ‘A son honours his father and servants their master. If then I am a father, where is the honour due me? And if I am a master, where is the respect due me?’ Deuteronomy 32 speaks similarly, with the people chastised for not minding a God whose authority and source of respect is articulated using a metaphor of motherhood (‘you forgot the God who gave you birth’; 32:18).

Proverbs 2:11–12 touches on God’s responsibilities, articulated as the unenviable task of disciplining a wayward child, and also advises on how the human being ought to respond to such correction (‘My child, do not despise Yahweh’s discipline or be weary of his reproof, for Yahweh reproves the one he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights’). Yahweh’s censure arises from loving personal concern, in a relationship akin to that which, in human existence, is one of the closest and most intimate. The God which is described by this parental language is one concerned with the welfare of each person.

Similarly Jer. 3:12b ff. has Yahweh coaxing wayward Israel, as would a worried parent; God prefers that the child return and punishment be overlooked than the child lost (“Return, faithless Israel”, says Yahweh, “I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful” . . . “Return, O faithless children”).

As already noted, Deutero-Isaiah was particularly aware of the concept of God the creator and parent; in addition to the passages in Isaiah 43 and 44 noted above, the implications of God as parent are articulated in Isa. 49:14–16a. The language testifies to the power that the metaphor possesses for expressing the relation between God and humanity:

But Zion said, ‘Yahweh has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me’.  
Can a woman forget her nursing child

or show no compassion for the child of her womb?  
Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you:  
See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.

Though hardly exhaustive, these texts give an impression of the strength of the metaphor for biblical writers, who persistently resort to parent–child language to explain the divine–human relationship. As such they contribute to the weight of evidence which collectively legitimates the interpretation of **בצלם אלהים** as a statement of humanity's divine parentage. Rather than the physical connotations of **צלם** and **דמות** limiting humanity's creation in the image of God to a statement of simple physical likeness, the priestly writer employed the terms' concreteness as a means of directing the reader towards the realization that God had made humans as God's own children.