

# The Image of God as a Statement of Mutuality: An Illustration

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The image of God is only mentioned explicitly in three passages in the OT (Gen 1:26–28, 5:1–3, 9:6), yet it is likely the most foundational doctrine related to human identity in the entire Bible. As such, there is a vast bibliography available on its meaning. This essay will contribute to this literature by exploring an analogous experience my wife and I had that illustrates the image’s mutualist implications.

The most probable understanding of the *imago Dei* (“image of God”) is the royal-functional view, a view well defended by J. Richard Middleton,<sup>1</sup> who notes that it boasts a “virtual consensus” among OT scholars, though it is “quite distinct from the typical proposals found among systematic theologians.”<sup>2</sup> This view typically sees the image of God to mean that embodied humanity is responsible for administering the earthly realm as the Creator’s authorized representatives with delegated royal power.<sup>3</sup> I shall be using this view in a broad sense to include those understandings that either state the image of God is this representative royal function or that it *entails* or *ought to entail* this function. Regardless, the image of God necessitates the radical claim that all of humanity are kings under God, God’s royal representatives to the world and each other. It therefore implies—even more, is a direct statement of—true biblical equality between the sexes: a mutualist position over and above a hierarchicalist view.<sup>4</sup> After a brief review of the merits of the royal-functional view, I will use a recent shared experience with my wife to demonstrate how the image of God concept makes a mutualist statement.

## The Royal-Functional View

It is sometimes asserted that the meaning of the phrase “image of God” is left undefined in Genesis 1.<sup>5</sup> This may be strictly true, but context shapes meaning, and there are enough textual and cultural background clues for us to arrive at a reasonable inference.

Genesis 1:26–28 clearly associates the image of God with ruling, introducing the image (and likeness) idea (1:26) and immediately linking it with rulership. In the next verse (1:27), the famous triad marking male and female as made in God’s image is followed by God’s commissioning of humanity to rule. D. J. A. Clines says that the “dominion is so immediate and necessary a consequence of the image, it loses the character of a mere derivative of the image and virtually becomes a constitutive part of the image itself. From the exegetical point of view this opinion is completely justifiable.”<sup>6</sup> This is reinforced by Psalm 8 setting out humanity’s elevated status as ruler over God’s works (cf. Rev 22:5) with implications for humanity’s likeness to God.<sup>7</sup>

Ancient Near Eastern background information confirms the image’s strong royal and authoritative significance.<sup>8</sup> For example, Pharaoh Amenhotep III is described by the god Amon-Re thus: “You are my beloved son, who came forth from my members, my image, whom I have put on earth. I have given to you to rule the earth in peace.” Note the connection between imaging and ruling. Similarly, the Middle Assyrian king Tukulti-Ninurta I, in a context describing the king’s divine origin and status, is described as “the eternal image of Enlil, attentive to the people’s voice, the counsel of the land.” Likewise, a letter to a seventh-

century Assyrian king calls the king the image of the chief god Marduk, noting the king’s word has godlike finality, suggesting the image expresses a functional similarity between the king and the god, whereby the king speaks with the god’s authority. Clines provides a good synopsis:

The image of God, when applied to a living person, is understood almost exclusively of the king. As in Mesopotamia, so also in Egypt, if a god is spoken of at all as being imaged in living human form, there is only one person who can be regarded as the image of the god, namely the king. He is already believed on other grounds to be closest of all men to the realm of the divine, if he is not already, as in Egypt, a member of it.<sup>9</sup>

He adds, “It is the king who is the image of God; in virtue of his being the image of God he is ruler. Likewise in Genesis 1 the concept of man’s [that is, humanity’s] rulership is connected in the strongest possible way with the idea of the image.”<sup>10</sup> In short, the image of God presents humanity with a royal status and a royal task, both delegated from God. How does the royal-functional view express itself in marriage and ministry? Consider the following example.

## An Illustration: Co-Directing

My wife and I serve together as campus ministers for a Canadian para-church organization. One year, we were asked by our supervisor to direct our annual Scripture Camp. There, college and university students communally and inductively study Scripture in-depth for a week. We were both directors as individuals—we were not half-directors—as well as directors in a communal or corporate sense, for there was only one conference with one directorial role we fulfilled together. We never once wondered whether we had equal authority relative to one another, nor did we need to make a reasonable inference toward that end. Rather, the very fact that we were sharing the highest authority for the conference was in itself a statement of our mutual authority relative to one another. One can debate endlessly whether directing is an authoritative status or identity that implies a task or a task that implies an authoritative status or identity, comparable to debates about the *imago Dei*. Regardless, being made co-directors was, by definition, a statement that we had mutual authority relative to one another and, individually and together, we carried the highest authority relative to Scripture Camp.

Likewise, God has directly and explicitly made male and female co-kings, the co-rulers of the earth under God, representing him to the world and each other. Note that I say *kings* rather than *kings and queens*, as queens are often understood to have lower authority than kings. Authoritatively, all are kings, presented with the same rank: the image of God. We are all co-regents, assigned by God, with mutuality, to share the highest authority on earth under God.

## Possible Rebuttals

Rebuttals could be developed by arguing: (1) the authority from the image is purely individualistic; (2) the authority is purely collective;

(3) the equal authority has a limited scope; (4) hierarchicalism is a secondary authority, as defined below, independent of 1–3; or (5) the image carries no authoritative implications. As 5 is simply a challenge to the consensus view of the image that I have briefly defended above, further rebuttal will not be offered.

#### *Is the Authority Purely Individualistic?*

A key reason our co-directorship implied equal authority was that Scripture Camp was a single, collective project. If we were only directors individually—that is, we were directing separate conferences—nothing could be ascertained about my wife’s authority relative to mine.

Likewise, could the authority from the image be only individualistic, saying nothing of the authority between men and women? There are numerous problems with the image being purely individualistic. First, it lacks exegetical support. Genesis 1:27 states:

So God created mankind in his own image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them. (NIV)

The “them” in the second line is singular in Hebrew, referring to mankind or, to translate woodenly, “the humanity.” Thus, the text makes explicit that the image constitutes a collective reality.<sup>11</sup> Humanity, as a singular collective, is created in the image of God.

Further support comes from the explicit tasks God gives humanity: to rule, subdue, and fill the land (Gen 1:28). These royal tasks are not only calls for humanity to care for creation; they are the high-level summary of the *entire* human vocation. Both Gen 1:26 and 28 mention every sphere from Genesis 1 (skies, land, and water) and all the creatures within these spheres (fish, birds, and every living creature on the ground), implying a task with total scope.<sup>12</sup> As humanity was to both rule God’s earthly realm alongside working and keeping the garden (Gen 2:15), this task likely implies spreading the boundaries of the garden, the hotspot of God’s presence, to all the earth.<sup>13</sup> This royal task cannot be done individually. Everyone can only be in one place at a time. As such, humanity must collectively be commissioned to a single, communal task.

Furthermore, if the tasks God gave were individual, we would all need to jockey to rule the whole earth to fulfill our tasks. We would find ourselves needing to step on each other to be the true royalty of the earth. By individualizing our commission, we describe precisely the sinful human condition and, ultimately, what is now wrong with the world.

Even if we take the image to be strictly individualistic, it is still *by the image* that humanity is given a collective authority over the earth, shown in the tasks we were assigned. As such, the equal authority inherited from the image would still have a collective bearing.

Humanity was to communally work together to spread God’s good garden-presence to the ends of the earth. Genesis 1 points towards the image of God being a collective reality for humans, just as co-directing Scripture Camp was collective.

#### *Is the Authority Purely Collective?*

Conversely, one could argue humanity’s authority from the image is only collective. If so, the image of God is less like co-directing

and more like a company being given authority over a project. A company is given the authority as a single, collective entity, but this says nothing about leadership hierarchies within the company itself. Given the royal-functional view, this would plausibly imply that no individual is made in the image of God.

Surprisingly, virtually nothing in Genesis 1 overtly presents individuals as God’s image. However, the breaking down of humanity into male and female components hints at this reality. This is reiterated in Genesis 5:1–2: “When God created mankind, he made them in the likeness of God. He created them male and female . . .” (NIV). Genesis 5:3 then follows up with a description of Seth, an individual, as being in Adam’s “own likeness, in his own image” (NIV). This implies that Seth inherits the same image as Adam, continuing the royal line. That every individual is made in the image of God is then confirmed in Genesis 9:6, as murder is prohibited because of the image. Every homicide is a regicide.

With Scripture Camp, when my wife and I were assigned to direct as a collective, internal leadership was not left undefined. We were asked to co-direct a single conference, making us both individually and collectively directors. Likewise, the royal authority granted equally to both women and men applies both individually and collectively, marking each with the same inherent authority relative to one another.

#### *Does the Authority Have a Limited Scope?*

Though my wife and I had the same authority relative to one another for Scripture Camp, this said nothing about our authority relative to one another outside of Scripture Camp. Could the equal authority of the sexes found in Genesis 1 be limited in scope?

There are three problems with this position. First, as we have seen, humanity’s dominion is the high-level summary of the *entire* human task. The scope is total. Second, humanity’s dominion is inseparable from the image. To limit the scope of equal rulership necessitates that the image of God be limited in scope. The authority of kings is only limited by the places they are not kings. It is preposterous to think there are spheres of life where someone is not made in the image of God. Third, part of the job of co-directing was directing alongside an authoritative equal; it was not a separate job! Likewise, it is absurd to assert that inter-human relationships are outside the scope of imaging.

Though my wife and I co-directing did not speak to our authority relative to one another in contexts outside of Scripture Camp, if there were no contexts outside of Scripture Camp, the inherent, equal authority between us would be universal in scope. Likewise, there is no scope of life where mutual, equal authority from the image does not apply. Still, justified authority differences do exist throughout life, bringing us to our final potential objection.

#### *Is Hierarchicalism a Secondary Authority?*

In nearly every sphere of our lives, humans interact amongst authority differences. When we stop at a traffic light, we are submitting to government authorities. At work, we have bosses. As children, we are under our parents. In informal group settings, often leaders emerge whom others follow. Indeed, society would fall apart if all authority differences were inappropriate. Still, the royal-functional view not only explicitly identifies men and women as having equal authority relative to one another, but implies *all*

*people* have equal authority relative to one another. How can this be compatible with good, everyday authority differences?

Hierarchicalists could argue that, though they accept the OT scholarly consensus on the image of God while recognizing the image's authority as collective, individual, and unlimited in scope, male leadership in church or marriage does not overstep the image of God in women. Rather, it is appropriate like other everyday hierarchies, such as governmental authority or workplace hierarchies. To explore this possibility, a brief understanding of different types of authority will be beneficial.

## 1. Basic and Secondary Authority

It is plausible that some authorities are more foundational than others. A more foundational authority could be called a more basic or higher-order authority, while a less foundational authority could be called a lower-order or secondary authority. Secondary authorities are somewhat nominal relative to more basic authorities. They are rooted, not in someone's true authority *per se*—that is, their basic authority—but in the requirements of the task.

For example, my wife and I divided authority over different subtasks. Even when we met with our planning team, we took turns leading the meetings and were thus regularly under each other's authority, despite our equal directorial authority. This was teamwork, not usurpation. The subtasks were secondary authority relative to our basic directorial authority. But even our directorial authority was secondary to more basic, higher-order authoritative equality. Those we directed were authoritatively equal to us outside the context of Scripture Camp. This chain of more basic authoritative statuses continues upward right to our ultimate, most basic royal statuses from God's image.

Differentiating between basic and secondary authority reasonably harmonizes authority differences experienced in the day-to-day routines by people all made in the image of God. A just authority difference is one where there is not an authoritative *status* difference *per se*, but a *functional* authority difference entered—whether tacitly or formally—by authoritative equals.

As such, it is plausible that a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for an authority difference to be justified is that higher-order authoritative equalities are not being contradicted or nominalized, the highest being the image of God. Nominalizing a higher-order authority does not necessitate directly challenging that authority, only acting in such a way as to imply that authoritative equality is not ultimately true. For instance, I could have made unilateral directorial decisions, implying my wife was not truly my co-director.

For hierarchicalism to be true, therefore, it must be able to coherently posit that male authority is a secondary authority that upholds the basic authoritative equality between men and women.

## 2. Is Male Authority Secondary?

There are several views under the banner of hierarchicalism. One hierarchicalist view is analogous to relegating my wife to an assistant camp director, while I retain the role of camp director. Given the royal-functional understanding of both male and female humans created in the image of God, this view is clearly untenable.

Another hierarchicalist view is analogous to our supervisor assigning me the leadership of a particular directorial subtask, like the planning meetings. It would certainly be within our supervisor's rights to assign me this subtask. Even though I would have authority over my wife in these meetings, this would not render my wife's directorship nominal. Where hierarchicalists err, however, is that they do not recognize that our supervisor would never create assignments inconsistent with the status my wife and I share as co-directors. Our supervisor would neither place an *arbitrary* restriction on my wife leading planning meetings nor would she appeal to my wife *having a lower authoritative status* than me to justify the restriction. She could, of course, assign that directorial subtask to her, rather than to me.

A minority of hierarchicalists claim women are *inherently* less capable leaders than men. Even if we were to grant women are *generally* less able to lead than men, there are many women qualified and gifted in leadership. This group of hierarchicalists would not permit them to lead either, and the reason would be their sex. Imagine a scenario where women, who are generally shorter than men, are barred from a certain activity because women generally do not meet a set height requirement. Now imagine a tall woman who does meet the height requirement. If height was truly the reason, she would not be barred from the activity. If she is barred despite meeting the requirement, it would prove that the height requirement is only a pretence to achieve the intended goal of barring all women from that activity. Unless there are *no* good female leaders, it is simply a façade to argue for hierarchicalism on the basis of men generally making better leaders.

God gave women dominion over all the earth (Gen 1:26–28), implying their leadership capacity. There is no sexual discrimination with the Spirit's gifts, including leadership and teaching (1 Cor 12, Rom 12:3–8, 1 Pet 4:10–11). God even pictures *his own wisdom* as a woman whose authority and teaching we must come under (Prov 1:20–33, 3:13–20, 8:1–36, 9:1–12). Further, if women are less capable leaders than men, women should not hold *any* authority, let alone teach children! Yet, some of the best leaders—and Bible teachers—I know are women. Furthermore, marriages where mutualism is practiced are happier, less likely to result in abuse, and massively less likely to end in divorce.<sup>14</sup> It is difficult to imagine why mutualist marriages are healthier if women lack the capabilities necessary for mutual leadership in marriage.

Other hierarchicalists might argue that, while women are as capable as men in leadership, there is an overriding transcultural rationale for male leadership.<sup>15</sup> However, if this rationale is truly transcultural, it must be independent of the cultural or situational context. We know that context can justify authority differences. For example, it would be transculturally wrong to set ethnic restrictions on church leadership. However, given the injustices against indigenous peoples due to colonization, it could be wise and right in some indigenous communities to limit church leadership to indigenous people. This would be not only for insider cultural competency but also to counteract claims that Christianity is a “white man's religion” or is the fuel for genocide and conquest. This is, however, a purely context-driven, temporary restriction, wise and right for the sake of Christian witness (cf. 1 Cor 9, Phil 2:1–11). This example shows a restriction that is *dependent* on an intrinsic characteristic, namely, ethnicity. Yet, this restriction could be justified because the rationale for the restriction is not *rooted* in the status of one ethnicity over another. Rather, it is rooted in

the necessities of the context. However, since hierarchicalists claim male leadership is transcultural, they cannot appeal to context to argue for exclusively male leadership.

If the reasoning behind the restriction on women in leadership is neither functionally helpful nor contextually justified, it must be rooted in women *per feminitatem*. Is this not the implication of arguing—incorrectly—for male leadership from, say, created order, or other arguments derived from the stories in Genesis 1–3 that lay the biblical foundation for human identity? To root women’s authority restrictions in femaleness is to root those limitations in the image of God. The image of God, and therefore the authority it implies, is *explicitly* associated with maleness and femaleness (Gen 1:27). Women share with men—equally—the highest authority on earth under God. To argue that women cannot operate in certain spheres of authority simply because they are women is like saying my wife, as a *director*, could not have *director-level authority* over certain Scripture Camp tasks. Even if these tasks were subtasks, it would be logically untenable since the rationale is at odds with her directorial authority. Supposedly biblical, sex-based authoritative inequalities root the inequality—whether hierarchicalists admit it or not—in the very concept (that is, one’s sex) explicitly identified with authoritative equality (Gen 1:27)!

There are possible counterexamples of authoritative inequality rooted in intrinsic characteristics that are comparable to sex, such as the case of children or the case of Levites. However, each can be conceptualized consistently with the *imago Dei* as espoused here. Parental authority diminishes over time. (Children can even have authority over their parents as they care for them in their old age.) So, parental authority cannot be rooted in the parent-offspring relationship *per se*. Instead, parental authority is rooted in children’s need to learn *how* to rule (Gen 1:28). To be a child is to be a king undertaking a royal apprenticeship under experienced kings. It is as if my wife had much more experience at directing than me, and so our co-directorship would have been temporarily one-sided until I was up to speed. Few would say this would infringe my directorial status.

As for Levites, they were chosen by God to replace the firstborn offering, serving in the Tabernacle (Num 3:11–13, cf. Num 1:47–53, Exod 12, 13:1). Among the Levites, only Aaron’s descendants could be priests (Exod 28:1). No explicit explanation is provided for these unique responsibilities. They are plausibly not authoritative roles *per se*, but only representative roles. But even if authority is intended, that authority is only functionally *dependent* on priestly lineage, not *rooted* in it. Throughout the OT story, the Levites’ distinctive—even if imperfect—zeal is regularly highlighted, particularly at Dinah’s rape (Gen 34) and the incident of the Golden Calf (Exod 32). It is plausible that one reason God chose the Levites was as a symbol of his zeal for justice and holiness, a critical component within the broader imagery of the tabernacle. This symbolism could not be borne by any other tribe because it was intricately connected to the Levites’ zealous actions. Through their symbolic role, God redirected the Levites’ zeal for justice into channels that best served the nation. It would be as if our supervisor requested that my wife, having some publicly significant events in her past, lead a certain subtask because of its relatedness to the past events and the significance it would add for both her and the camp students. As with parental authority, few would argue this would dishonour our identical authoritative standing.

The same cannot be said of hierarchicalism. Hierarchicalism affronts the image of God in women. To affront the image of God in women is to affront their value and equality. As Rebecca Groothuis has said, “Advocates of male authority seem to have difficulty acknowledging that the *reason* for the difference and the *nature* of the function determine whether such a difference can logically coexist with equality of being. As it happens, the reason for and nature of woman’s subordination logically excludes woman’s equality.”<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

The image of God is the foundational human doctrine, setting guardrails for interpretations of later texts. Through the concept of *imago Dei*, Genesis 1 asserts mutuality. Indeed, the command to rule as God’s images, like co-directing, was a command to share equal authority. The hierarchicalist position is like saying I ought to have had authority over my wife even as we explicitly had equal authority as co-directors. In asserting that women ought not to image God alongside men, hierarchicalists presume that women are not truly made in the image of God. Hierarchicalism, therefore, should be rejected.

## Notes

1. See J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Brazos, 2005).
2. Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 25. The disconnect between systematic theologians and biblical scholars is likely the reason the image is often left underdeveloped in mutualism-hierarchicalism debates.
3. See J. Richard Middleton, “Image of God,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Theology*, vol. 2, ed. Samuel E. Ballentine et al. (Oxford University, 2015) 516–23.
4. The terms “hierarchicalist” and “mutualist” are used to describe “complementarian” and “egalitarian” more accurately. See Lucy Peppiatt, *Rediscovering Scripture’s Vision for Women* (IVP Academic, 2019) 6–7.
5. E.g., William Lane Craig, *In Quest of the Historical Adam: A Biblical and Scientific Exploration*, Kindle ed. (Eerdmans, 2021) 528.
6. D. J. A. Clines, “The Image of God in Man,” *TynBul* 19/1 (May 1968) 96.
7. See Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 57–58.
8. See Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 109–18.
9. Clines, “The Image of God in Man,” 92. The one exception is a priest. See Clines “The Image of God in Man,” 93. A priestly (mediatory) role is implied by the image. See Middleton, “Image of God,” 516–23. Temples are also closely associated. *Tselem*, Hebrew for “image,” is a common term for an idol (e.g., 2 Kgs 11:18, Ezek 7:20). Humanity is like the idol statue in God’s creation-temple, representing him and his rule to the world. See Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 45–48, 77–90, 104–8.
10. Clines, “The Image of God in Man,” 95.
11. Alternative views of the image struggle to account for this.
12. Except the chaotic sea monsters (*tanninim*, Gen 1:21).
13. See Gregory K. Beale, “Eden, the Temple, and the Church’s Mission in the New Creation,” *JETS* 48/1 (March 2005) 5–31.
14. See Sheila Wray Gregoire, Rebecca Gregoire Lindenbach, and Joanna Sawatsky, *The Great Sex Rescue*, Kindle ed. (Baker, 2021) 31–35.
15. Symbolic functions, such as imaging Christ and the church or the Trinity through hierarchy, are exegetically and theologically unsound. Additionally, the male being the leader on these views would be arbitrary. Space limitations prevent an exploration of these views.
16. Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, “‘Equal in Being, Unequal in Role’: Challenging the Logic of Women’s Subordination,” in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Biblical, Theological, Cultural, and Practical Perspectives*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce, Cynthia Long Westfall, and Christa L. McKirland, 3rd ed. (IVP Academic, 2021) 408. Emphasis original.



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