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Created in the Image of the Angels?

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Alastair Roberts

Today I discuss the meaning of the first person plurals in Genesis 1:26 and how this might give us a more developed understanding of the image of God. For more on the issues I discuss here, you could read Meredith Kline's 'Images of the Spirit' (<https://amzn.to/2BrubcY>) or, with reservations, Michael Heiser's 'The Unseen Realm' (<https://amzn.to/2WVqghS>). James Jordan also discusses some of these issues in 'Through New Eyes' (<https://amzn.to/2WVIAHq>).

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today I want to do something slightly different. I want to discuss the image of God in Genesis chapter 1. The image of God concept is one that is familiar to all of us.

We talk about it a lot when we're talking about issues like abortion or euthanasia or these issues of humanity and the danger of dehumanization. We've been created in the image of God. We should acknowledge and respect people and honor them because they are created in the image of God.

It's the reason why we don't take human life. It's the reason why we are all equal in God's sight. These are the ways that we tend to use the concept of the image of God.

Now I want us to look a bit closer at what this image actually involves and how it is expressed because I believe in Genesis and in scripture more generally, it's used in a more complex way, in ways that maybe unsettle some of the uses that we put it to, which in principle, while not being wrong, undersell or underappreciate what's going on within this concept. There's a lot going on in the concept of the image of God that maybe we have missed or ignored and partly this is because we're looking for key verses to answer our questions. What we fail to do is pay attention to the scriptures on their own terms and so I want us to look at the scriptures on their own terms and see if there may be something more going on here.

In Genesis chapter 1, we see the creation of humanity and the creation of humanity is introduced by some deliberation. In verse 26 we read, And then after this we see God creating man in his image. This is described as God, individual, creating man in his image.

In the image of God he created him male and female, he created them. But there's something interesting about verse 26 and the interesting thing is that it says, let us make man in our image, in our likeness. Why the plural? Many people have speculated about this.

Common speculation is that it is just a sort of generic form of like the royal we that we see in the queen might declare we are intending to do so and so. The sense of the royal we. That may be it but I don't think that quite explains what we see here.

Another explanation that's very common among Christians is that this refers to the Trinity. Let us, as father, son and spirit, the divine persons of the Trinity, discussing making humanity in their image. And so we then see humanity created in the image of the Trinity.

That's something about human fellowship or something about male and female being co-equal as the persons of the Trinity are being co-equal. That that is the intent. Now I don't think that's the case either.

I think that reading is a bit removed from the original context. Now we do see the spirit of God in verse 2 of chapter 1 but there may be something more going on here. In chapter 3 we see the temptation of the serpent, of Satan tempts Eve.

In verse 5 we read, for God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil. What does it mean that they will be like God? In verse later on in the chapter, in verse 22 we read, then the Lord God said, behold the man has become like one of us, to know good and evil. And now let's he put

out his hand and also take the tree of life and eat and live forever.

Therefore the Lord sent him out of the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken. So he drove out the man and he placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden and a flaming sword which turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life. Again we see us appear.

He has become like one of us. Who is the us? Is it the divine persons? Is it the persons of the Trinity? Or is there something else going on here? And I think there is something else going on here. I think that the us refers to the persons of the divine council and that is a group which is not merely God and the divine persons as we see spirit, son and father.

It's also including the angels. It's including the cherubim and the seraphim and these various other creatures. We see it also later on including prophets.

Whom shall I send and who will go for us? Us, that's the divine council, that's the seraphim, that's God, that's the prophets, that's the whole body of people gathered together. In the book of 1st Kings chapter 22 we have interesting account starting at verse 19. Then Micaiah said, Therefore hear the word of the Lord.

I saw the Lord sitting on his throne and all the host of heaven standing by on his right hand and on his left. And the Lord said, Who will persuade Ahab to go up that he may fall at Ramoth Gilead? So one spoke in this manner and another spoke in that manner. Then a spirit came forth or the spirit came forward and stood before the Lord and said, I will persuade him.

The Lord spoke to him in what way? So he said, I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets. And he said, You shall persuade him and also prevail. Go out and do so.

What we see here is a scene of a throne room, of a council chamber and the divine council includes these various prophets. It also includes the angels, the cherubim, the seraphim and these other creatures of God that are included in the divine deliberations. Who will do this? Who will do that? How will this be done? And the angels bring forward their suggestions.

And within this council we see a number of figures. We see the spirit, we see the prophets, we see angels, we see the angel of the Lord, we even see Satan. If we read Zechariah, we can see Satan as one before the throne of God accusing Joshua the high priest.

So you have this council and you have the deliberations of that council concerning God's actions. Now getting back to Genesis, what does it mean that they have become like one of us? I believe it refers to members of that council, the ruling council of heaven. They have become like members of that ruling council, knowing good and evil.

And when we go back to verse 5 of chapter 3, it says, You shall be like God. Or is it one of the gods? I believe it's one of the gods. The word there is Elohim and Elohim can be translated as singular God, as we see in various places in the Genesis account.

And also on occasions it can be translated as gods. They can be like one of the gods. They can be part of this ruling council, this group that rules the creation under God as part of his chamber, his throne room.

And I believe that that's what's being referred to. If we go to the book of Psalms and Psalm 8, we can see that man was made a little lower than God or the gods. Now that's translated in most Bibles and it's described in the book of Hebrews as a little lower than the angels.

So the word gods in that point is related to the angels. The angels are the gods. We see this elsewhere in the book of Job as the sons of God, the angels come before God and give account of themselves.

This is the throne room. As we look through the book of Genesis, what we'll see is that the divine presence is often a mediated one, that people encounter God in association with the angels, with other divine figures, but divine with a small d and their gods with a small g. We see the experience of Jacob, for instance. Jacob describes at the end of his life, he blesses the sons of Joseph and he says that the angel who guarded him, I'll find the exact verse, it says, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, verse 16 of chapter 48, bless the lads, let my name be named upon them, etc.

The angel who has redeemed me from all evil. We see angel experienced by Jacob as he wrestles with God at the crossing of the Jabbok. And we've seen the face of God, Peniel.

We see Bethel, where he sees the ladder and the angels of God ascending and descending. And then at the top of that ladder, he sees the Lord. We see the angel of Lord appearing to him in dreams.

And in all these different events, we see that Jacob's experience of God is very strongly connected with his experience of angels around God. At Mahanaim, he encounters, he speaks of two camps, and he encounters God's camp as he meets many angels. And the angels, he presumes that God is there with them, that as their camp is there, God's camp, God's throne room is present.

So what we're seeing in this is a picture emerging, that God's presence is associated with the angels, with the throne room. We see this also in the appearance of the angels to Abraham. Three divine, three visitors come.

Now some have read that as the Trinity. I don't believe it's the Trinity. What we see is in chapter 18, God stays and talks to Abraham.

And the two angels proceed to Sodom. Now what does that mean? It means that there were three visitors. Two were angels, and one was the Lord himself.

And I believe that we're supposed to understand this as the angel of the Lord. The angel of the Lord that appears to Moses in the burning bush, the angel of the Lord that goes before Israel into the promised land, the angel of the Lord that appears at various points in places like the beginning of the book of Judges, that the angel of the Lord is the, as it were, the paradigmatic prophet, as Meredith Klein has spoken about it in Images of the Spirit. The angel of the Lord is God's messenger, but not just any old messenger like the angels.

He is the paradigmatic messenger. He's the messenger of the covenant. He's the angel of God's presence.

And I believe we are appropriately to think about the angel of the presence as the second person of the Trinity, that this is the Son. This is Christ prior to his incarnation. It's the angel of the Lord that goes before Israel in the exodus, that defeats their enemies.

He's the commander of the armies of God. What does all of this mean? Well, in part, it means that God's, the experience of God by the people of Israel was in association with the angels that surrounded God's throne. So when we're talking about us, we're not just talking about God in solitary detachment from all other creatures, from all creatures, but God who has surrounded himself with the heavenly host, God who leads the heavenly host as the angel of the covenant.

Christ is revealed, God is revealed often as the angel. He's associated with the angels, not as one who's completely detached and apart from them, completely unassociated, but the one who leads from their midst, the angel of the covenant. And this angel of the covenant is sent, is the messenger of Yahweh, sent by Yahweh.

And the spirit of Yahweh goes out as well. So we see spirit and we see the angel of the covenant, the sun, and we see God. And all these figures come together and we can see in the New Testament that we see that this is the Trinity.

But the Trinity is surrounded by this throne room. So we have the spirits of God before the throne. We have the angel of the covenant and we have the throne of God on the right hand, Christ sitted or the angel sitted.

And then we have these angel, angelic hosts that surround. Now getting back to the image of God, what does all this mean? This means that there is a sense in which there is a Trinitarian image. We are associated with the angelic, we're associated with the divine council and that's associated with God in three persons, but also with the angelic host, the host that surrounds God's throne.

If we look through the story of Genesis chapter one, the creation account, we see a number of things that occur. The light that's created on the first day is associated, I believe, with the spirit. It's this great light that establishes the most fundamental order within the creation.

And then on the fourth day, that light is represented by the lights in the firmament, the sun, moon and the stars. And if we read that account, as we read about the sun, moon and stars, it says, let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to divide the day from the night and to let them and let them be for signs and seasons and for days and years. Let them be for lights in the firmament of the heavens to give light on the earth.

And it was so. Then God made two great lights, the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night. He made the stars also.

So lights are created for ruling, ruling the heavens. When we get to the creation of humanity, humanity is also created for rule, for rule of the earth and the seas. So the heavens above are ruled by the sun, moon and stars and the earth beneath and the seas are ruled by humanity.

And the description of humanity is also one that might make us wonder, is there a connection between the sun, moon and stars and humanity? As we go further on in the book of Genesis, we can see that there is some sort of connection drawn. In verses nine following of verse chapter 37, we read, then he dreamed still another dream and told it to his brothers saying, look, I have dreamed another dream and this time the sun, the moon and the 11 stars bowed down to me. So he told it to his father and his brothers and his father rebuked him and said to him, what is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall your mother and I and your brothers indeed come to bow down to the earth before you? The sun, moon and the 11 stars.

It's the, within this dream, it's Jacob and Rachel and the 11 brothers. And we can see this throughout scripture that these things, there's associations between humanity and the stars. Abraham's descendants will be like the stars in the heaven.

That does not just mean that there will be a great multitude of them. I mean, that's conveyed with the sand on the seashore. And it's also conveyed with the stars in the heavens, the numerous character of them.

But there's not just that going on. There's something more. Part of it is also seeing that humanity in Abraham will rule, that this is the ruling significance of humanity.

As we look through the rest of the scripture, I think we see this borne out, that Israel arrayed around the tabernacle, for instance, is arrayed 12 different camps around the tabernacle. It's like the zodiac. And we can see at each point that the four extremes have symbols associated with the relevant zodiacal symbols.

We can see it elsewhere in scripture with the description of Daniel, that the righteous will shine like the stars. And we can see it as we look in more detail at these laying out of the camp of Israel, other events like that. Israel is associated with the ruling of the heavens.

As we look through the prophets again and again, we see sun, moon and stars, stars particularly associated, the heavens associated with humanity and its ruling capacity, with political order, with kings and princes, governments, empires, kingdoms. That's what's associated with the heavens, with the angels and with the stars above. Now, what else is going on here? I believe when we pay attention to these patterns, what we'll see is that when humanity is created, they are created not merely in the image of God, but in the image of God in a broader sense.

The angels are described as the sons of God in Job. And as we read through Job, we can see that they are associated also with the stars in the heavens. Now, that doesn't mean that they are the stars, but it means that they are analogous to the stars, that there is some great connection between these two, that the stars above us are a manifestation or image of the angels in heaven.

When we think about the angels in heaven, the sons of God, what does this mean? To be the sons of God is to be associated with God, to be spoken of as the gods, to be spoken of as those who represent God's rule and authority within the world. When we think about it, the angels play the roles of prophet, priest, and king. As priests, they govern God's house.

They're his household servants for the heavenly temple. As kings, they rule over creation under God. They are those that rule kingdoms.

We see this in Deuteronomy, at the end of Deuteronomy, this description of the nations divided among the angels. They are prophets. They are those who enter into the council and deliberate as part of the council.

So, the angels are prophet, priests, and kings. They are those who represent rule. And when humanity is created, humanity is created as the image of God.

And that image of God is associated with sonship. If we look in Genesis chapter 5, in Genesis chapter 5, it says that God was created, God created man in his image and his likeness, and then Adam begets a son in his own likeness and after his image. The concept of image is very closely associated with the father-son relationship.

Christ is the image of God as son. The Spirit is not spoken of as the image of God in the same way. The Spirit is spoken of as the glory of God, but the Spirit is not the image of God in the same way.

The image of God is particularly associated with the Son. And as the image of God, we are created in the image of God. We're created as the image of God, but also there's a

sense that that in is implicit in that is the sense that there is the paradigmatic image of God, which is the Son.

And then there are others created in that image. When we think about the angels, the angels are also associated with the image of God. They represent God's rule.

They symbolize his rule. They are his image, his representation, his likeness. As they rule under God and as God's vicegerents, they have a manifestation of God's own rule.

And that's what humanity is supposed to be. Humanity is supposed to grow up to represent God's image within the world. Now, part of that is imaging God himself, God's rule.

There is the emphasis upon the singular image of God, that God himself, we are God's image, the image of God himself. But we are also the image of the angels, the image of this divine counsel that surrounds God. And as we grow up and mature as humanity, we will become as the angels.

Now, humanity has a different number of different aspects to it. We are kind, a particular kind that we beget according to our kind. We are a race.

Male and female come together and we descend from the sexual union of male and female. But we are also a host. We are a multitude of people gathered around.

And as a host, that is the respect in which we're like the angels. The angels do not have sexual relations. The angels, it's interesting, as you go through scripture, they are all described as male.

That is significant. They're all described as sons of God, not sons and daughters of God, but sons of God. And whenever we see an angel appear, the angels are described as sons.

Now, some might think of an exception to this in Zechariah, but I can't get into that here, but that's far from an exception. As we're looking through the angels, then, we can see that they are described as sons, that there is something masculine about what they're doing, what they represent. They represent ruling figures establishing the order.

But yet, what does the woman mean then? If the concept of the image of God is particularly associated with the father-son relationship, if it's associated with the angels so that the angels are very much male, what does it mean when we talk about women? How do they reflect God? It's interesting that the angels are seen to have a peculiar relationship to women, that there's something about women that fascinates them, perhaps, as we look through the account of 1 Corinthians 11. There's weird stuff there about the covering of women's head on account of the angels. Now, why on earth would that be the case? Well, all sorts of speculation can be given about this, and I'm not going

to get into that here, but suffice it to say that the angels do not have women.

They are all sons. There are a multitude, a host, that are created apart from sexual procreation. When we think about the image of God, there are ways in which it's described which suggests that men and women relate to it differently.

If we read in 1 Corinthians 11, the passage I just mentioned, we see part of this, that for a man indeed ought not to cover his head since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. Now, that's a surprising text because we use the image of God concept as something that founds our understanding of the equality of all human beings, but there seems to be more going on there. Whenever we look in Scripture, some have tried to say that the image of God, male and female, reflects the Trinity.

Now, whatever we say about that is interesting that whenever we talk about the image of God, whenever we talk about male and female in Scripture, what is seen to image is not an internal relationship within God himself primarily, but the relationship between God and humanity. Internal to humanity, this image that images the image, what it means for God to relate to humanity is then imaged within humanity itself on some level. Now, that can be troubling for us because we put a lot of weight on these concepts in certain contexts that they may not actually bear.

What can we make of this then? I think that what we'll see is that the creation of man and woman is a spreading out of what the image concept means. It's a development out from the image concept. What we see, I think, is that the angels are particularly associated with sonship.

They're associated also with the angel of the Lord, with Christ, the son, ultimately. They represent his sonship, but humanity also has the bride and is associated itself with the bride. And I think as we look through Scripture, we can see connections between the bride and the spirit, that there is a particular association between the bride and the spirit.

We see the spirit and the bride coming together at the end of Revelation. We see the spirit is the one who fills, gives life, communion, and establishes generations, all these sorts of things. The spirit is the one who begets, that enables us to multiply.

The angels can't do any of those things because they do not have women. They do not. They're just sons and there's something missing there.

So I think what we're seeing in this image of God is a number of things going on. The image of God is not a flat concept. It's not just every single person individually is the image of God.

There's something about humanity as a whole that represents the ruling council of God upon the earth. And in our multiplication, as we become a great host, that imaging is

seen in a new way. As we multiply, as we become rulers within the creation, as we establish political structures, all these sorts of things, this is part of what it means to be the image of God in the earth.

As the ruling council of the angels is in heaven, so we on earth are a ruling council. And this describes not just the sort of ways that we tend to think of this as a very unitary thing, the image of God, either humanity as a whole in a very generic sense, or every individual human in a generic sense. But there's something about kingdoms and empires and forms of authority that those are associated with the image of God in a particular way.

Those are associated with the angelic structures, the principalities, powers, kingdoms, and all these other structures of angelic rule. That that is also associated with structures of human rule. Those are some of the ways that we image God.

Likewise, the king is associated with themes of sonship and image in a particularly pronounced way. What is man that you're mindful of him? Who is this referring to, this psalm? Is it humanity in general? Or is it the king more particularly? I think there's something about that psalm that suggests that it bears a specifically strong relationship to the king. The king is the one who is the paradigmatic son.

He's the paradigmatic Adam, the one who rules and relates to the beasts. Putting this together, I think what we see is that man was supposed to grow up to the image of the ruling council. The ruling council, they're sons of God.

They're images of God. And humanity is supposed to grow into that. And so we're supposed to be like that ruling council.

But there's something more, that we multiply, that we have the fullness of the spirit in a new way. We have life and communion and all these sorts of things that are associated with the spirit in a way that the angels do not. And so there's the other element that is brought in that's associated with women particularly.

And here I think we maybe need to focus more upon the figure of the spirit. This fills out the picture. Now there's so much more that can be said about this.

And much of this I think will trouble people for various reasons. Partly because we like the image of God concept simple. We like it so it's very tidy.

We like it so that it can be deployed very easily without much explanation. You can appeal to the image of God in debates in society more generally. But within scripture, it plays out in complicated ways.

Men and women do not relate to this in the same way. It is not a concept that is free of hierarchical associations. There are ways in which the king is in a pronounced way the

image of God.

There are ways in which human structures and societies themselves, the multitude of humanity and in their differentiated structures, that that is associated with the image of God. Now I suggest care in the way that we approach these things. We're not going to throw all these concepts of the image of God that have traditionally been deployed out.

Now there are ways in which they can be placed in a better relationship with the broader concept that I'm describing here as it derives from scripture. But I believe it is important to recognise what is taking place in the text itself. That it may not be what we presumed it to be.

And what we miss in the process is something that promises a lot of insight. Now you will be originally concerned probably with the way that the image of God does not apply in the same way to men or women. Or that it might be associated with hierarchical structures.

Or that it might suggest that we are made in the image of the angels, not just the image of God. Now it's not the image of God or the angels, it's both. Because the angels are created in the image of God.

And so as we're creating the image of God we have a likeness with the angels but also with God. Just as Seth is in the image of Adam, his father, but also in the image of God who Adam was created in the image of. So it's not an either or here.

But it's important to recognise that even though we're troubled, perhaps, we need to work through this and think where it leads. And where it leads is I believe a far fuller understanding of how these pieces fit together. I hope this helps.

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Lord back... Lord willing I'll be back again tomorrow. God bless.