

# *“Made in God’s Image”*

## Doesn’t mean What You Think

You were told that your soul is the image of God. That somewhere inside you, there is a thing that looks like God. A mind. A will. A rational spark. Something invisible that mirrors him. Open Genesis chapter one. The word soul is not in those verses. Not once. Not in the Hebrew. Not in the Greek translation. The soul reading is not from the text. It was planted around 420 A.D. by a bishop.

Your Bible uses one Hebrew word in two completely different ways. In six books, it means idol. In five verses, it means an image. Same letters. Same word. The word is תְּצַלֵּם (tselem). Turn to Second Kings chapter eleven. When Israel tore down the house of Baal, they shattered his tselem. The Hebrew text uses that word. Priests broke it into pieces.

Turn to Numbers 33. Before Israel entered the promised land, they were told to destroy every tselem in the country. Turn to First Samuel, chapter six. The Philistines carved tselem figurines out of gold and sent them back to Israel on a cart. The word means “a carved statue, a cut-out figure, a stand-in for a god.” It is the word Genesis uses for you.

The soul reading came from Augustine, not from Moses. It has served people for a long time. It has been taught that every human being carries dignity no hand can take. That instinct is not small, and we are not dismissing it. We are finding out where it came from and what the Hebrew word was pointing to all along. We will walk this word by word. Augustine. The idol word. The stamp. Then a practice. So why did one bishop, in a coastal town in North Africa, move the image inward?

### **The Bishop of Hippo**

Around 420 A.D., in a North African coastal town called Hippo, a bishop finished fifteen books on a single question. Where inside a human being does the image of God actually live? His name was Augustine. He was not the first to ask. Two hundred years earlier, in what is now southern France, a Greek bishop named Irenaeus had looked at Genesis 1:26 and noticed something the Hebrew never drew. Two words: Image and Likeness. He read them as distinct. The image was given at creation. Likeness had to be added later by the Holy Spirit—two tiers, two gifts, one kept, one still needed. But the Hebrew text does not draw that line.

In Hebrew, tselem and דְּמוּת (demuth) are paired to express the same idea twice. Hebrew poetry does this. One thought expressed with two words. But Irenaeus split them. And his split traveled. Two centuries later, in the Latin West, a scholar named Jerome was commissioned by the Pope to produce a single Latin Bible for the whole church. He rendered Genesis 1:26 as “*imagine[m] et similitudinem.*” Image and likeness. Two separate words in Latin. The Hebrew parallelism was

lost in the Latin text. For the next twelve hundred years, every Christian in the West read Genesis 1 as two things because their Bible gave them two things.

Then Augustine sat in Hippo and answered the question Irenaeus had posed. Augustine did not look outside. He looked inside. He asked where in a human being the divine image resides and answered with three things: Memory, Understanding, and Will. For Augustine, the image of God was the rational soul and its three faculties. Not the body, not the work a person does in the world, nor the way a person stands in creation. The image of God lived in the mind. Every medieval theologian after him inherited this. The Roman catechism taught it. The Protestant reformers, even when they rejected parts of Augustine, kept his interior map.

When the King James Version was translated in 1611 A.D., English readers picked up a book that carried Augustine's answer, embedded in every sermon that explained it. Augustine moved the image inward. That is the sentence. Then, around 420 A.D., a bishop in Hippo relocated the image of God from the outer world into the inner soul, and the West never moved it back. He did not alter the Hebrew; he altered what the Hebrew was believed to mean. If the image is not the soul, what did the Hebrew word actually do?

### **A Statue and The King**

In a royal court in the ancient Near East, a king who conquered a distant land did not travel there. He sent a statue of himself. That statue ruled in his place. It stood in the temple, wearing his likeness. When the people bowed to the statue, they bowed to him. The word the kings used for that statue was “salmu” in Akkadian, the cousin language of Hebrew.

And the Hebrew word from the same root is tselem. This is not a guess. The inscription confirming this was found carved into a life-sized statue in the town of Tell Fakhariyeh in northeastern Syria in 1979 AD. It is a bilingual statue, with one side in Aramaic and the other in Akkadian. The same word is used for both the physical statue itself and the royal image it carried. Salmu and Tselem. That is its weight.

The traditional soul reading has safeguarded something real. It has upheld the dignity of every human being for sixteen centuries. When the church said you bear the image of God, they were right: nothing human can erase that. We are not taking that dignity away. We are showing you the root from which it actually grew. And the root is stranger and stronger than the branch.

Open your Hebrew Bible and search for the word tselem. It appears 17 times. In roughly 10 of those instances, your translation renders it as "idol," "statue," or "figurine." It is applied to humanity five times, and twice it is used for a fleeting phantom.

- In Numbers 33:52, Israel is commanded to destroy the molten images — tsalmei massekhotam — upon entering the land.
- In First Samuel, it is the gold tumors the Philistines shipped back to Israel on a cart.
- In Second Kings, it is the Baal statue that the priests of Jerusalem shattered.

- In Ezekiel, it is the male figures cast from her own jewelry and the Chaldean images portrayed on the wall in vermilion.
- In Daniel, the Aramaic cognate refers to the sixty-cubit statue that Nebuchadnezzar erected on the plain of Dura and commanded the whole empire to worship.

That is ten times when the word refers to a carved idol. However, in 5 instances, your translation renders it simply “image.” And in every one of those times, the word is applied to you. The Hebrews did not hate the concept of a representative image. They worshipped a God who explicitly forbade the making of any graven image.

Then, in the opening chapter of their Scripture, they named humanity the only authorized living image of that God. Every other image was to be torn down. One was to be protected—You. This is the honor the word carries. The Hebrew tradition did not lower humanity by using the idol word for you. It elevated humanity. It said that of every statue the surrounding nations made, the Lord has made one of his own. And His image is alive.

This is what the standard Hebrew lexicon says tselem means: “Image, something cut out.” Strong's Concordance adds that the word is used “especially of an idol.” These are not fringe readings. They are the first definitions in every major lexicon. So when Genesis says you were made in the tselem of God, it does not mean you resemble God in mind or feature. It says something far more striking. Scripture frames you as God's living statue—His only authorized one, the one walking around.

The second word, demuth, is not a second gift. It is the Hebrew poet's way of saying the same thing twice for emphasis. So, if you are the stamped image, what did God stamp you with?

Verse 27 repeats itself, “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him, male and female created he them.” But a verb appears three times when one would have been enough. Created. Created. Created. That is not a translation quirk. The Hebrew verb בָּרָא (bara) appears three times in the Hebrew text. Bara is not the ordinary Hebrew word for make. The ordinary word is אָשָׂה (asah).

Asah is what Moses used in verse 26 when the Hebrew says, “let us make man.” Asah is what carpenters and potters do. Bara is different. The standard Hebrew lexicon defines bara as “Shape, fashion, create; It is always of divine activity.” The word is reserved for God. Neither men nor angels do it. God does it! The text reports it when it happens. In Genesis chapter one, the whole creation receives bara once. The heavens and the earth together, verse one.

A second bara lands at verse 21 for the sea creatures. Then, in the creation of humanity, bara appears three times in a single sentence. This is not repetition; it is escalation. Something else happens in verse 27 that most readers miss. Verse 26 mentions image and likeness: Tselem and demuth, two paired words. However, verse 27 drops demuth entirely. Tselem carries the act alone. Whatever the making is, only one word is deemed heavy enough to name it.

And then the text of Scripture opens that word up for you in another book. Look at Hebrews 1:3. The writer is describing Christ. “Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of

his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power.” The English mistranslated the word as "Express image." The Greek word is χαρακτήρ (character). Charakter is a technical term. In the ancient world, a charakter was the impression a craftsman struck into metal or wax—just as coins are made today. It was an exact likeness, the precise representation of the original. What the Hebrew is saying is that Christ is the exact imprint of God. Not a die God made to stamp the world. The imprint OF God. Christ is what God looks like when his very being is pressed into one visible form.

When the Greek translators of Genesis encountered the word tselem, they chose the Greek word εἰκών (eikon), meaning “a striking likeness, a representation,” to render it. Now hold those two together. Christ is the charakter of God, His exact imprint. And Paul says you are being conformed to that imprint. Romans 8:29, “He also predestined to become eikon (conformed) to the image of His Son.”

Second Corinthians 3:18, “But we all, with unveiled faces, looking as in a mirror at the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image.” Transformed into the same image: this is the same Greek word used in the same pattern. Christ is the imprint. Humanity is being pressed toward that imprint. The image you are is not a resemblance floating in your mind. It is a pattern being pressed through you from your origin and through every hour of your life, toward the prototype the New Testament names by name.

So, if the image is a stamp pressed at humanity’s origin, did the fall break the stamp? There is a moment in the story when you would expect the stamp to be smashed. The flood erases almost everything. Then Noah steps out of the ark, and the first law God gives him names the very thing you thought was destroyed. Turn to Genesis 9:6: “Whoever sheds human blood, By man his blood shall be shed, For in the image of God He made mankind.” The Hebrew word in verse six is tselem, the same word from chapter one.

God stands with a man who has just walked out of the only ship that survived the end of the world, and He grounds the sanctity of human life in the fact that man is still in the tselem. Still, not was once, nor before the fall—Still. If the image had been erased at the fall, God would not name it here, but He does. So the stamp survived, though dimmed and obscured by disorder, yet still there.

Now follow this word: 250 years before Christ, 70 Jewish scholars sat in Alexandria to translate the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek. This is the Septuagint, also designated as LXX—these are the Scriptures the Apostles knew, and Jesus quoted; they did not refer to the Hebrew. When the 70 were translating Genesis 1 and reached the word tselem, they had to choose a Greek word to carry it over; they chose eikon, the Greek word for “stamped likeness, a struck impression.” 250 years later, Paul picked up that same Greek word and made it the central verb of the Christian life:

- Second Corinthians 3:18 tells us, “But we all, with unveiled faces, looking as in a mirror at the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory.” The word image (Eikon) is the same.
- Romans 8:29 says, “For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed (Eikon) to the image of His Son.”
- First Corinthians 15:49: “Just as we have borne the eikon (image) of the earthly, we will also bear the eikon (image) of the heavenly.”
- Colossians 3:10, “and have put on the new *self*, which is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the eikon (image) of the One who created it.”

Every one of those verses uses a present-tense verb: Changed, Conformed, Renewed. The stamp that was pressed at the origin and preserved through the flood is being re-pressed through every believer in Paul's ongoing present.

The image is not something you have. It is something being recovered. If the image is being recovered right now, what does that ask of you in the next hour of your life? A sculptor has a shop full of tools, but there is one statue he will never carve with any of them. It is the only one he makes by stamp. Scripture frames that statue as YOU.

Re-read Genesis 1:26 with what you now know. Let us make man in our tselem, after our demuth. Let us make man as our authorized living statue. Stamped, not carved. Paired faculties, male and female. A royal council decreeing mankind the only living image the Lord of the whole earth will allow in his creation. Then, verse 27: “And God created man in his tselem.” Created: Three times, by the divine verb. Only the stamp word. The word “likeness” is no longer needed, as the stamp already contains it.

And then Genesis chapter nine holds the stamp after the flood. And Paul picks it up and makes it a verb. The old reading was: “I have a soul that resembles God.” The recovered reading is “I am God's living impression.” It was obscured in places, but is being brought to light again.

You are not a spirit inside a container. Scripture frames you as a stamp pressed into a whole life. Notice where the impression feels buried. Do not argue with it. Just notice it. Now look at it the way a gardener looks at soil, noting its condition, not condemning it. This is the eikon being recovered in Paul's verb tense. It is present and ongoing, from glory to glory.