

# Heiser Unseen Realm Imager Defined

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### IMAGE OR IMAGER?

Identifying the nature of the divine image has preoccupied students and pastors for a long time. Chances are you've heard a sermon or two on the topic. I'm willing to bet that what you've heard is that the image of God is similar to something in this list:

- Intelligence
- Reasoning ability
- Emotions
- The ability to commune with God
- Self-awareness (sentience)
- Language/communication ability
- The presence of a soul or spirit (or both)
- The conscience
- Free will

All those things sound like possibilities; but they're not. The image of God means none of those things. If it did, then Bible-believers ought to abandon the idea of the sanctity of human life in the womb. That assertion may jar you; but it's quite evident once you really consider that list in light of how Scripture talks about the image of God. Genesis teaches us several things about the image of God—what I call "divine image bearing." All of what we learn from the text must be accounted for in any discussion of what the image means.

1. Both men and women are equally included.
2. Divine image bearing is what makes humankind distinct from the rest of earthly creation (i.e. plants and animals). The text of Genesis 1:26 does not inform us that divine image bearing makes us distinct from heavenly beings, those sons of God who were already in existence at the time of creation. The plurals in Genesis 126 mean that, in some way, we share something with them when it comes to bearing God's image.
3. There is something about the image that makes humankind "like" God in some way.
4. There is nothing in the text to suggest that the image has been or can be bestowed incrementally or partially. You're either created as God's image bearer or you aren't. One cannot speak of being partly or potentially bearing God's image.

Among the list of proposed answers to what image bearing means are a number of abilities or properties: intelligence, reasoning ability, emotions, communing with God, self-awareness, language/communication ability, and free will. The problem with defining the image by any of these qualities is that; on one hand, nonhuman beings like animals possess some of these abilities, although not to the same extent as humans. If one animal anywhere, at any time, learned anything contrary to instinct, or communicated intelligently (to us or within species), or displayed an emotional response (again to us or other creatures), those items must be ruled out as image bearing. We know certain animals have these abilities because of carefully conducted research in the field of animal cognition. Artificial intelligence is on the verge of similar breakthroughs. And if intelligent extraterrestrial life is ever discovered, that would also undermine such definitions.

**Defining image bearing as any ability is a flawed approach.** This brings me back to my pro-life assertion. The pro-life position is based on the proposition that human life begins at conception (the point when the female egg is fertilized by the male sperm). The simple-celled zygote inside the woman's womb, which pro-lifers believe to be a human person, is not self-aware; it has no intelligence; rational thought processes, or emotions; it cannot speak or communicate; it cannot commune with God or pray; and it cannot exercise its will or respond to the conscience. If you want to argue that those things are there potentially, then that means that you have only a potential person. That's actually the pro-choice position. Potential personhood is not actual personhood. This thought process would

mean that abortion is not killing until personhood is achieved, which nearly all pro-choicers would certainly consider to be after birth.

Even the soul idea fails the uniqueness and actuality tests This notion derives from the traditional rendering of Genesis 2:7 in the King James Version ("and the man became a living soul). **The Hebrew word translated "soul" is nephesh.** According to the Bible, animals also possess the nephesh. For example, in Genesis 1:20, when we read that God made swarms of "living creatures," the Hebrew text underlying "creatures" is nephesh. Genesis 1:30 tells us the "living nephesh" is in animals.

**The term nephesh in these passages means conscious life or animate life** (as opposed to something like plant life). Humans share a basic consciousness with certain animals, though the nature of that consciousness varies widely. **We also cannot appeal to a spirit being the meaning of image bearing. The word nephesh we just considered is used interchangeably with the Hebrew word for spirit (ruach).** Examples include 1 Samuel 1:15 and Job 7:11 \_ Both terms Speak of an inner life where thinking; reason, and emotions occur, along with their use in activities like prayer and decision making. **The point is that the Old Testament does not distinguish between soul and spirit.** All these qualities associated with spirit require cognitive function, and so cannot be relevant until after brain formation (and use) in the fetus.

So how do we understand divine image bearing in a way that does not stumble over these issues and yet aligns with the description in Genesis? Hebrew grammar is the key. The turning point is the meaning of the preposition in with respect to the phrase "in the image of God." In English we use the preposition In to denote many different ideas. That is, in doesn't always mean the same thing when we use that word. For example; if I say, "put the dishes in the sink," I am using the preposition to denote location If I say, "I broke the mirror in pieces," I am using in to denote the result of some action. If I say, "I work in education," I am using the preposition to denote that I work as a teacher or principal, or in some other educational capacity.

This last example directs us to what the Hebrew preposition translated in means in Genesis 1. **Humankind was created as God's image.** If we think of imaging as a verb or function, that translation makes sense. **We are created to image God; to be his imagers It is what we are by definition. The image is not an ability we have, but a status. We are God's representatives on earth. To be human is to image God.**

This is why Genesis 1:26-27 is followed by what theologians call the "dominion mandate" in verse 28. **The verse informs us that God intends us to be him on this planet** We are to create more imagers ("be fruitful and multiply fill") in order to oversee the earth by stewarding its resources and harnessing them for the benefit of all human imagers ("subdue ... rule over").

**Gen 1:28 LEB** And God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of heaven, and over every animal that moves upon the earth."