



Women and Children's Rights Genesis 1:26-31

Prepare a worship/reflection space that includes a picture, sculpture, or other object(s) that symbolizes empowerment, sharing, and/or mutual support. You may use this picture or something else.

Open with the following prayer or a prayer of your own choosing:

*O Creator of life abundant,
create in us
receptive hearts
that we may hear
your word for us today.
Open our minds
that we may understand.
Give us eyes to see
your vision for the world
and imagination
to dream
your dream.
Refresh our spirits
that we may
walk with strength
and courage,
empowered
for your loving, healing work
in Creation.
Amen*



Read the biblical passage twice, once using the translation below and once using a translation of your own choosing.

Genesis 1:26-31

Then God said, "Let's make a human being as our own image, according to our own likeness, so they can rule among the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky and the animals and the whole earth and all the creeping things that creep on the earth."

So God created the human being as God's own image, as the image of God created it, male and female, created them.

Then God blessed them and God said to them, “Be fruitful, become numerous, fill the earth and subdue it. Rule among the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky and every living, creeping thing on the earth.”

Then God said, “Look, I have given you every herb, seed-bearing seed that’s on the surface of the whole earth and every tree that has tree-fruit in it, seed-bearing seed. It will be food for you.

And for every living thing on earth and for all the birds of the sky and all the creeping things on the earth that have the breath of life in them -- every green plant as food.” And it was so.

Then God looked at everything God made and -- look at that! -- it was very good! And there was evening and morning, the sixth day.

Discuss the following questions

What are some of the ways the translation offered above differs from the other translation you read? Do the differences matter for the way you read the story? If so, how?

Are men and women created at the same time in this story? Are both created “in” or “as” the image of God?

What do you think “in” or “as the image of God” means?

In the translation above, why are people created “in/as the image of God”?

In the view of this passage, who should have power to govern in the world? Should there be a distinction between men and women when it comes to sharing power?

There are a few important things to know about the phrase “in the image of God” in vv 26-27. (A more detailed discussion is offered in the commentary that follows the discussion questions.)

- “image” (*tselem*) is the Hebrew equivalent of a Babylonian word (*tsalmu*). In every Babylonian text we’ve dug up so far that word refers to the image of a king carved or sculpted into a stone monument.
- the ancients thought the *tsalmu* represented the actual presence and authority of the king in the location where the image was placed, just like an idol expressed the actual presence of the god it represented in the place where the idol was placed.
- the Hebrew preposition we normally translate as “in” in the phrase “in the image of God” probably means “as” in this case. So the best way to think about Gen 1:26 is to say: “God said, ‘Let’s create a human being as our own image....’”



Disciples General Minister and President Sharon Watkins and Disciples Indiana Regional Minister Rick Spleth meet the first woman ordained by the Disciples community in Congo.

In light of the points made above, what are the implications of saying that God creates every human being, male or female, “as the image of God” -- or “in” the image of God in the earth?

What does that mean for how we should think of ourselves? What does it mean for how we should act and how we should treat ourselves?

What does that mean for how we should think of other people? What does it mean for how we should treat others?

Are there political implications to this view of human beings? Are there economic implications? Explain.

What are some of the implications for relationships between women and men? What are the implications for the empowerment of women in the church? in society? in legal and political life?



Edward Hicks, “The Peaceable Kingdom”
Edward_Hicks_-[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Edward_Hicks_-_The_Peaceable_Kingdom_-_Google_Art_Project_\(723124\).jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Edward_Hicks_-_The_Peaceable_Kingdom_-_Google_Art_Project_(723124).jpg)

At the end of the passage, God offers the plants of the earth as food for human beings and for every animal that lives on the earth. The text doesn’t mention meat. This is a vegetarian world! Not just for humans, but for lions and tigers and bears! The world as God created it to be doesn’t depend on bloodshed and violence. Nothing must die for something else to live. Is this a realistic depiction of the world? Why do you think the story teller describes creation this way? What does this say about what God hopes for the world? Can you think of other scriptures that envision a world where predator and prey coexist without bloodshed? What impact, if any, should these scriptures have on what we understand our mission -- God’s mission -- to be?

The “Image of God” in ancient imperial context

Scholars have long noticed that the creation story in Genesis I draws from the Babylonian imperial creation myth, the *Enuma Elish*. What is not often emphasized, however, is the strikingly subversive nature of the biblical version of creation.

The text we have of *Enuma Elish* was written on clay tablets found in an ancient royal library. The tablets date to the 600s BCE, but the myth is much older and exists in a variety of forms in ancient Mesopotamia. It was read every year during the New Year’s festival. So it played a very important cultural role in explaining the foundational rules and principles by which the annual cycle of agrarian life operates. If you mess with these rules, crops will fail, people will starve, and social order will completely collapse. We’ll all die!

The story centers on the divine hero Marduk, god of storms and crop fertility, who creates the world by defeating and killing the mother of the gods, the divine primordial waters -- his grandmother Tiamat, the goddess of the sea.

The war begins when Marduk stirs up Tiamat by blowing the four winds of heaven across the surface of her belly -- an image that describes the wave-producing winds that normally blow across the sea. This relentless irritation sends Tiamat into a rage -- think of a tropical storm or hurricane. She vows to destroy the younger gods who are already irritating her by their constant noise and motion. The gods are terrified. Marduk offers to be their champion if they will make him their king.

After a fierce battle, Marduk defeats Tiamat by blowing the four winds of heaven down her throat when she opens her mouth to swallow him. Marduk kills her with his lightning-bolt arrow, splits her corpse in two, making half into the dome of heaven and the other half into the disk of the earth. Marduk then orders the execution of Kingu, the god who had led Tiamat's army. With help from his father, Marduk creates human beings out of Kingu's blood.

Though made of divine substance, human beings are created by Marduk to be slaves to the gods, doing the hard work the gods don't like to do. Humans will now clean canals, build roads and temples, and feed the gods -- growing crops, hunting and butchering meat, and offering them as sacrifices so the gods can eat the rising smoke. Now the gods can enjoy leisure. As reward for Marduk's victory in battle and his wisdom in creating human slaves to do the gods' grunt work, the gods crown him king of the universe.

Of course, gods don't normally walk around on earth. They select kings and their courtiers to manage divine interests in our world. Since Marduk is the patron deity of the city of Babylon, the emperor who sits on the throne there is the earthly overseer of Marduk's estate. The emperor keeps Marduk's slaves in their place, doing their proper subservient work. The emperor collects the rent on Marduk's property and commands an imperial army to acquire new lands -- they are, after all, the rightful property of Marduk, the king of the universe.

The world envisioned by *Enuma Elish* -- where cosmic peace and stability emerge from an act of war, where might makes right and justice and peace come from the power of the sword -- is the world according to empire. Resistance to the power of the empire is not just treason, it's blasphemy.

Resisting the law of the emperor is resisting the law of the gods, violating the very rules of nature, threatening the stability and peace of the world, as well as its agricultural fertility. *Enuma Elish* is a very effective -- and politically transparent -- imperial myth.

The biblical story in Genesis 1 draws heavily from it. As in *Enuma Elish*, at the beginning of creation, a wind from God blows across the surface of the deep -- the Hebrew word for "deep" is *tehom*, from the same root word as the Babylonian word Tiamat. In vv 6-8, this primordial water is cut in two by the solid dome of heaven. In vv 9-10, the waters below are contained by the disk of the earth. The story begins to come to a climax with the creation of human beings, who are made of divine substance. Just as the gods in *Enuma Elish* find leisure after humans are



created to do their work, so too the biblical story of creation comes to its climax after humans are created, with divine rest on the seventh day, the sabbath, God's leisurely appreciation of the world now created. The difference, as Exodus 20:7-10 later makes clear, is that God's rest at the end of creation is the model for human rest on the sabbath day. Humans are created, not for endless toil and servitude, but to enjoy sabbath rest just as God does.

The Bible's first creation story makes many allusions to the familiar details of the Babylonian myth. But Genesis tells the story with a twist. It turns the imperial narrative inside out and upside down.

Verses 26 and 27 offer an especially radical subversion of the imperial story.

People who read these verses often are struck by the surprising appearance of plural pronouns in the divine speech at this point in the story. Until now, singular verbs have described God's activity. But when we get to v 26, the verbs become plural:

“God said, ‘let US make a human being in OUR own image, according to OUR own likeness... ’”

Who are “us” and “our” in this verse?

Christian interpreters have traditionally said, “the Trinity” -- what we're witnessing in this story is the inner dialogue of the Triune God. But this interpretation is problematic because the doctrine of the Trinity wasn't fully formed until a couple of centuries after the New Testament was written -- about 700 years after Genesis I was written. If Genesis 1:26 is referring to the Trinity, it would be 700 years before anyone really understood what these plurals meant!

But the ancients did understand: “us” and “our” refer to the heavenly court, the divine beings who carry out the orders of God the king.

Since God as a concept is fundamentally about cosmic order and the flow of power in the world, people always use familiar models of power and order to talk about God. In the ancient world, power was exercised through the royal court and through the family. So it was typical to think of God as “monarch” or “father” or “mother.” What we see in Genesis 1 is a depiction of the divine realm as a royal court. God is a king who rules by decree: “Let there be light!” “And there was light.” But ancient kings exercised royal power through their court, officials and priests who handled affairs of state, who advised and managed and did the bidding of the king. God the king must have a divine court. Until now in the story, the court has been in the narrative background, out of the spotlight. But when God creates human beings, the whole royal court steps to center stage.

Why now?

We find our most important clue in the Hebrew syntax of verse 26. We actually have this syntactical construction in English. If I say, “Let's go to the store, and we'll buy some lunch” -- what I'm saying is “Let's go to the store so we can buy some lunch.” I'm expressing purpose or intent. In Hebrew, we have the same thing. We have “Let's create a human being” followed by “and they will rule.” As in English, this syntactical construction in Hebrew expresses purpose or intent. The best way to translate verse 26 is this: “Let's create a human being in our own image, according to our own likeness, SO they can rule....” The purpose of creating human beings “in the image of God” is that every human being, male and female, may be empowered to rule, to govern in the world!

Among all the creatures of the earth, human beings alone are given the power to govern in the earth like God and the divine court govern in the universe. For this reason, the story now brings the heavenly court -- all the heavenly beings who serve the king of heaven -- from the shadowy sidelines into the spotlight of center stage to witness this momentous event, the creation of a creature that will exercise power in the earth like they do in the universe.

This is an amazing concept for the ancient world, a view of the human person that is radically different than the view expressed in *Enuma Elish*, where human beings are created to be slaves to the gods and to their divinely appointed emperor. In the Bible's account, by contrast, all human beings are created to have and to share power. Every human being is royalty.

This radical understanding of human personhood is underlined by the very notion that every human being is created "in the image of God."

The Hebrew phrase is *b'tselem elohim*. *B'tselem* means "in the image." *Elohim* means "God" or "the gods," "the divine beings."

We'll come back to the preposition *b'* that's attached to *tselem* after we consider *tselem* itself.

The Babylonian version of this word is *tsalmu*. In the Babylonian texts discovered so far, *tsalmu* always refers to a sculpted or carved image of a king.

For the ancients, the "image" of the king functioned the same way an idol of a god functioned. They believed that the image of the king actually expressed the presence of the king in that location, just as an idol contained and expressed the actual presence of the god in the temple. The image of the king contained the essence, expressed the power, the ruling authority of the king in that place, though the king himself was not physically present.

Genesis 1:26-27 use the Hebrew equivalent of *tsalmu*, *tselem*, to describe, not the king or emperor, but every human being. Simply by being born, each individual human being bears the "image," the very essence of God. Perhaps even more dramatically, Genesis says that "every human being" includes women and children as well as men. We're all created "in the image of God." It's not just kings. It's not just men. It's not just adults. Every human being, male or female, young or old, rich or poor, high-and-mighty or down-and-out, is created *b'tselem 'elohim*, "in the image of God." Every human being is an expression of God's presence and authority in the earth. Every man is a king and every woman is a queen! Every single human being is an emperor!



This is a "stela," a stone pillar that contains the image of a king and pictures and writing that tells a story or issues a decree. This pillar, now on display at the Louvre Museum in Paris -- thanks to modern imperialism -- contains the Code of Hammurabi, a Babylonian king in the 18th Century BCE. Hammurabi is seated in the top right.

The preposition *b'* that is attached to *tselem* is usually translated as "in" -- "in the image of God." But prepositions are notoriously difficult to translate from one language to another. This is certainly the case with *b'* which can be translated as "in" or "with" or "among" or even "while" or "as." Sometimes it can be left untranslated, effectively serving as the object marker for a verb. It's pretty clear that *b'* in this case doesn't mean "in" in the sense of "inside" or "within." It doesn't mean "with" in the sense of "alongside" or "in the presence of." The best way to think of *b'* in this verse is that it means "as." God creates human beings "as" the image, the *tselem* of God in the earth.



Just as an idol sculpted "in the image" of the god expresses the essence, the authority of that god on earth, just as the *tsalmu* of a king expresses the essence, the ruling authority of that king in the location where the *tsalmu* is placed, so too human beings express the presence, the ruling authority of God in creation. We are created "as the image of God" in the world.

This may be why the Israelites are told not to make an idol, an engraved image of God. God has already created God's image in the world. You and I and every other human being are it. We are the image of God!

In the imperial story of creation, humans are made to be slaves to the gods and their imperial enforcers. But in the Bible's telling of the story, the world as God intends it to be is a world where every man and woman, simply by virtue of birth, is empowered to rule. We all are the *tselem*, the very image of God in the earth.

The empowerment human beings enjoy "as the image of God" is shared power. God created the human being in the image of God, male and female. Women and men are alike, but different. So there is something about being the image of God that is both unifying and diverse. Power in the image of God is shared power, not the dominating power of might makes right, of men over women, of violence and the threat of violence. God creates a world where all human beings are worthy of power and rightly share power in their great diversity. This shared power is the foundation of justice and peace.

Finally, God creates a bloodless world, where no creature must die for any creature to live. God gives "every green plant" of the earth for food for human beings and for all the animals of the earth. The world God created is completely vegetarian. Neither humans nor animals in the wild must kill in order to eat. This obviously is not a picture of the world as it actually exists. It is a description of the world God hopes for and intends to build. This is the vision that lies at the heart of our mission as disciples of Christ.

For us as Christians, this remarkable ancient vision of the world as it should be stands at the heart of our modern commitments to democracy and human rights.

Empowering women, children, and men in Congo

The Disciples community in Congo maintains a strong focus on the education and empowerment of women and children who are often the targets of violence and exploitation. Every congregation has a pastor, a minister for women, and a minister for youth. Every congregation has a children's choir. The Disciples community in Congo has only been ordaining women for the last couple of decades, but women have long exercised strong leadership in the church. Women serve in a variety of congregations, and the church recently appointed the first woman to be their equivalent of a regional minister or conference pastor. The church's programs in human rights education, rape counseling and support, prenatal and maternity health care, and children's education promote the vision of Genesis 1, that God intends a world where all people, male and female, simply by virtue of their birth, share power, exercise the right and responsibility to govern in the earth.



Close with the following prayer or a prayer of your own choice

*O God,
our maker and model,
help us live lives worthy
of our creation
as your image in the world.
Help us use the power
you have given us as human beings
to work without shame or fear
for the healing of your creation,
for the wholeness of your created world.
Help us respect our power
as women,
as men,
as boys,
as girls,
and use it wisely
to further your cause of justice,
to resist bloodshed and violence,
to rescue the vulnerable,
to heal this broken world.*

*In the name
and by the power
of the Humble and Compassionate
Healer,
Jesus of Nazareth,
Amen.*

**For the complete bible study series please visit
www.globalministries.org/congo-initiative/biblestudies.html.**