Middleton, J. Richard

The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1


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The “image of God” is notorious for an extensive secondary literature vastly out of proportion to the term’s appearance in the Old Testament. Richard Middleton’s addition to the debate stems from a distress over the fact that, despite the volume of ink spilled on this issue, theologians and biblical scholars cannot agree on the image’s meaning and significance. In Old Testament scholarship there is a widespread consensus that the image is representational. Humanity represents God, ruling for him over the created world. Many theologians, however, are persuaded by Karl Barth’s relational understanding of the image. The human social communion, particularly the male-female relationship, mirrors the triune existence of the Godhead.

The failure of the theologians to listen to their biblical colleagues produces a little exasperation from Middleton, but also an attempt to communicate the fruits of Old Testament scholarship in a manner that may win it a receptive hearing. “My aim is to make Old Testament scholarship on the creation of humanity in man’s image accessible as a resource for theological reflection on human identity and ethics in a world increasingly characterized by brutality and dehumanization. As such this book is meant to facilitate an interdisciplinary conversation between theologians, ethicists, and biblical scholars on the imago Dei” (10).
The biblical specialist will not find much surprising in the first three-quarters of the book. Here Middleton sets out the problem and places the *imago Dei* in the larger symbolic world of Gen 1 and then within the context of the ancient Near East. The account of the representational interpretation of the image is typical, with only an occasional distinctive or minority position taken, such as a preexilic date for P. Nevertheless, this is a presentation that is clear and attractive. A large amount of biblical scholarship on Gen 1 is digested and accurately reproduced, and ancient Near Eastern myths are neatly summarized and contextualized.

In the final part of the book Middleton moves in a more novel direction as he considers the ethical implications of the biblical doctrine of the image. First, there is the problem of the *Chaoskampf*. Are humans imaged after a violent deity? Middleton admits there is some evidence of creation by conflict in the Bible (though not as much as many others, such as Jon Levenson or John Day, think), but Gen 1 is a polemical re-envisioning of creation without conflict. Second, there is the problem of humanity’s exercise of power. In response, Middleton argues that God’s actions toward creation flow from his generosity. Far from being passive, creation is involved in God’s acts of creation. This is the model for human rulership.

Middleton has written a book with a clearly articulated mission, one with which this reviewer has much sympathy. Conversations between biblical scholars and systematicians can be all too infrequent, and when they do occur marked by mutual incomprehension. Will Middleton succeed in assisting meaningful dialogue? Ultimately, the answer to this cannot come from within the biblical guild. Yet if an answer must be ventured from one biblical scholar, I would say that Middleton succeeds only partially, and not for the reasons that he thinks. This is because, in my view, the problem has not been accurately diagnosed.

The representational interpretation espoused by biblical scholars has not lacked intelligent and articulate defenders. Some of the discussion, it must be admitted, has been of a rather technical nature: the meanings of the crucial nouns (*tselem* and *demut*) and prepositions (*b* and *k*), for example, have been debated extensively. Nevertheless, the majority position within Old Testament studies has been clearly and accessibly presented, and the existence of this consensus has not escaped the notice of the more thoughtful proponents of a relational interpretation of the image. Nor has Old Testament scholarship been slow to draw out some of the possible theological and ethical implications of the biblical doctrine of the *imago*. It has frequently been observed that the biblical portrayal is a radical move toward “democratization” of the image when compared to the ancient Near East royal ideology. In the last twenty years biblical scholars and theologians have
both faced the environmental challenge, particularly Lynn White’s charge that Gen 1:28 mandated rampant exploitation of the planet’s resources.

What is at stake is not presentation but an issue of hermeneutics and, in particular, the question of context. Middleton finds fault with Barth for reading a Buberian I-Thou ontology into the text, despite his claim to be reading the text on its own terms. “Whatever his disclaimers, Barth thus shares with previous interpreters of the image an evident dependence on theological paradigms and agendas derived from outside the Genesis text” (24). The problem is that the representational interpretation derives its principal force from an ancient Near Eastern context that lies outside the text of Genesis. Similarly, the theological and ethical implications of this view as Middleton expounds them are not articulated in Genesis but are deduced from the juxtaposition of the biblical text with the Near Eastern parallels. Phyllis Bird expressed this with striking clarity in her classic essay on the image.

Though the term selem, by itself, lacks specific content, the phrase selem ʾelohim appears to derive its meaning from its special associations with the royal ideology of the ancient Near East. It is true that OT uses of selem do not point to such a thesis, nor does the OT’s ideology or lexicon of kingship. If a royal image lies behind the use of selem in Gen 1:26–27, it must rest on an idea or expression of kingship found outside of preserved Israelite sources. (“‘Male and Female He Created Them’: Gen 1:27b in the Context of the Priestly Account of Creation,” HTR 74 [1981]: 129–59, here 140)

Old Testament scholarship may argue that the ancient Near East is the most appropriate context in which to interpret the biblical text, but this is no longer merely an exegetical argument but also a hermeneutical one!

Middleton does show a welcome hermeneutical awareness, but this principally comes to expression in the final part of the book where the theological and ethical implications of the image are discussed. It is present elsewhere, but it is not sufficiently probing into the body of knowledge and norms assumed within Old Testament scholarship so that the issues at stake in our disagreements about the image can be articulated and moved toward resolution. The conversation between biblical scholars and systematicians has to be more radical and address the “how” and “why” of exegesis.

The partial success of the volume arises at the point where this issue is implicitly addressed, for Middleton is unhappy with merely bringing an ancient Near Eastern royal ideology to bear onto the biblical text. Consequently, he seeks to demonstrate that God is portrayed as a king in Gen 1. This is done only tentatively, since, as Middleton admits,
“the royal metaphor in Genesis 1, if it is there at all, is certainly not overpowering. It is, on the contrary, somewhat implicit and adumbrated” (71). If the representational interpretation is to prove persuasive to our systematics colleagues, it is here that work must be done. By pursuing this, Middleton has done a service to both biblical and systematic colleagues.

To conclude, this is a well-written and well-presented argument that may be given to students with confidence. Its concerns are welcome and some of the ethical and theological implications of the representational interpretation engagingly discussed. I do not judge that it will achieve the rapprochement between biblical scholars and systematicians at which it so laudably aims. Nevertheless, this is a useful contribution to an ongoing discussion whose value will be judged by its ability to stimulate thoughtful conversation. My own reflections demonstrate the way that Middleton’s work laudably provokes fresh thinking on this hoary interpretive crux.