E-ISSN: 1116 - 2619 P-ISSN: 3026-8524
MPRI-JHLAR | INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES, LITERATURE AND ART RESEARCH
VOL. 12 NO. 6 – APRIL, 2026

THE IMAGO DEI IN GENESIS 1:26–28: IMPERATIVES OF ROYAL ANTHROPOLOGY, HUMAN DIGNITY, AND THE ETHICS OF POWER IN OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY FOR CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN SOCIETY

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.70382/mejhlar.v12i6.0112

Abstract

Genesis 1:26–28 stands at the theological center of Old Testament anthropology and provides a foundational framework for understanding human dignity and ethical responsibility. In contexts characterized by political corruption, gender injustice, economic exploitation, insecurity, and ecological degradation—particularly within contemporary Nigeria—a renewed theological interpretation of the imago Dei is imperative. This study argues that Genesis 1:26–28 presents humanity as God's royal representatives, commissioned to exercise delegated dominion reflective of divine kingship. Drawing on Ancient Near Eastern royal ideology, detailed lexical analysis of key Hebrew terms (ṣelem, dĕmût, rādâ, kābaš), and canonical development across the Old Testament, the article contends that the image of God is fundamentally vocational and political, while also encompassing ontological and relational dimensions

Keywords: imago Dei, ṣelem, dĕmût, royal anthropology, ethics of power

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(Middleton, 2005; Walton, 2009). The democratization of royal identity to all humanity—male and female—grounds universal dignity and establishes ethical constraints on power. The study concludes that the imago Dei offers both a prophetic critique of socio-political dysfunction and constructive theological resources for justice-oriented governance, ecological stewardship, gender equity, and public accountability in Nigeria..

Introduction

Genesis 1:26–28 remains a foundational text for Old Testament theological anthropology, affirming that humanity is created in the "image of God" (bĕṣelem ʾĕlōhîm). Traditionally interpreted in ontological and relational terms, recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized its functional and royal dimensions, viewing the imago Dei as humanity's vocation to exercise delegated authority within creation (Clines, 1968; Westermann, 1984; Middleton, 2005; Wright, 2004).

Yet, a critical gap persists between this theological vision and its socio-political application. In contemporary Nigeria, systemic corruption, abuse of power, gender-based violence, economic inequality, and environmental degradation expose a disconnect between theological anthropology and public ethics. Power is frequently enacted as domination rather than stewardship, contradicting the intent of Genesis 1:26–28.

This study re-examines the text through a theological–hermeneutical lens rooted in Old Testament biblical theology, arguing that the imago Dei constitutes a royal anthropology in which all humanity is commissioned as God's vice-regents. This democratized royal identity grounds universal human dignity while imposing ethical constraints on the exercise of power (Brueggemann, 1997; Bauckham, 2010).

The article aims to demonstrate that the imago Dei is fundamentally vocational and ethically normative, and to articulate its relevance for contemporary Nigeria, particularly in relation to governance, justice, gender equity, and ecological responsibility.

Methodological and Hermeneutical Orientation

This study adopts a theological–hermeneutical methodology that integrates literary exegesis, historical context, and canonical interpretation.

First, the study employs literary-theological exegesis of Genesis 1:26–28, with attention to syntax, structure, and lexical features (Wenham, 1987).

Second, it engages the Ancient Near Eastern background, particularly royal image ideology, which illuminates the representational function of ṣelem (Middleton, 2005; Walton, 2009).

Third, the research utilizes a canonical approach, tracing the theological trajectory of the imago Dei across the Old Testament canon (Childs, 1992).

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Finally, the study incorporates contextual theological reflection, applying biblical insights to contemporary Nigerian socio-political realities.
This integrated approach ensures both textual rigor and contextual relevance.

Creation as Ordered Kingship and Sacred Space

Genesis 1 has long been interpreted as a carefully structured theological account that portrays creation as an ordered expression of divine sovereignty. The repetitive formulae ("and God said…," "and it was so," "and God saw that it was good") underscore not only literary symmetry but also ontological intentionality and moral coherence within creation (Claus Westermann, 1984; Gerhard von Rad, 1961). This structured pattern has led many scholars to argue that Genesis 1 is concerned less with material origins and more with the functional ordering of the cosmos.
Developing this insight, John H. Walton (2009) proposes a functional ontology reading, suggesting that creation is depicted as the assignment of roles within an ordered system. In parallel, G. K. Beale (2005) and related temple-oriented studies argue that Genesis 1 reflects a cosmic temple framework, where the seven-day structure parallels ancient Near Eastern temple dedication narratives. In this interpretation, the cosmos is portrayed as God's temple, with the seventh day signifying divine enthronement and rest.
This temple cosmology is further reinforced by T. Desmond Alexander (2008) and John Day (2013), who highlight textual and conceptual parallels between Genesis and Ancient Near Eastern sacred space traditions. Within this framework, humanity's role in Genesis 1:26–28 is not merely political but also cultic: humans function as royal-priestly representatives mediating divine presence within creation.
Consequently, the notions of dominion (rādâ) and subduing (kābaš) are best understood not as legitimizing exploitation but as mandating responsible stewardship. Ellen F. Davis (2009) emphasizes that dominion must be interpreted within the moral order of creation, where human authority reflects God's just and sustaining rule. Thus, creation as ordered kingship establishes a theological foundation in which authority is derivative, structured, and ethically bounded.

Royal Anthropology in Ancient Near Eastern Context

The concept of humanity as created in the "image of God" (ṣelem ʾĕlōhîm) must be interpreted against the backdrop of Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) royal ideology. In many ANE cultures, kings were regarded as the image or embodiment of a deity, functioning as divine representatives on earth (Henri Frankfort, 1948). This restricted notion of divine image-bearing reinforced hierarchical and centralized structures of power.
Genesis 1, however, radically reconfigures this paradigm. Rather than limiting divine representation to kings, the text extends the imago Dei to all humanity—male and female

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alike (Gen 1:27). As Walter Brueggemann (1982) observes, this democratization of royal identity constitutes a theological critique of imperial hierarchies and an affirmation of universal human dignity.

Expanding on this, J. Richard Middleton (2005) argues that the imago Dei is fundamentally royal-functional: humans are commissioned as God's representatives to exercise delegated authority over creation. This functional understanding is complemented by Catherine L. McDowell (2015), who highlights the relational and ethical dimensions of the divine image, emphasizing responsibility, accountability, and moral agency.

Additional exegetical insights from Bruce K. Waltke (2001) and Richard S. Hess (2016) underscore the deliberative language of Genesis 1:26 ("Let us make…"), which signals divine intentionality and confers a distinctive vocation upon humanity. Yet this elevated status does not imply autonomy; rather, it presupposes accountability to the Creator whose authority humans represent.

Importantly, this universalization of the royal image carries significant ethical implications. Christopher J. H. Wright (2004) argues that the imago Dei establishes a framework in which power must be exercised in justice, care for the vulnerable, and fidelity to divine purposes. Authority, therefore, is neither absolute nor self-serving but covenantal and service-oriented.

Theological Anthropology, Power, and the Nigerian Context

While the foregoing scholarship provides a rich theological and hermeneutical foundation, its application to contemporary African socio-political realities remains comparatively underdeveloped. This gap is particularly evident in Nigeria, where persistent challenges of corruption, leadership failure, economic inequality, and environmental degradation stand in tension with the country's deeply religious identity.

African theologians have begun to address this disconnect. Kwame Bediako (1995) calls for a Christianity that moves beyond private piety toward public transformation. Similarly, John S. Mbiti (1969) articulates a communal anthropology that resonates with the relational dimensions of the imago Dei but is often undermined by socio-political structures of exclusion and domination.

In relation to governance and ethics, J. N. K. Mugambi (1995) advocates a reconstructionist theology aimed at rebuilding postcolonial African societies, while Samuel Waje Kunhiyop (2008) emphasizes the necessity of applying biblical ethics to issues of leadership, justice, and corruption. These perspectives converge with the Genesis mandate of delegated and accountable dominion.

More directly within the Nigerian context, Nimi Wariboko (2014) critiques the moral and structural failures of the political economy, arguing for a reorientation of ethical consciousness grounded in theological resources. His analysis highlights the urgent need

for a theological anthropology that not only affirms human dignity but also regulates the exercise of power.

Within this context, the democratization of the imago Dei in Genesis 1 functions as a critical corrective to hierarchical and exploitative leadership models. If all humans bear the divine image and are entrusted with representative authority, then governance must be reconceived as stewardship rather than domination. This challenges entrenched systems of patronage, elite control, and resource exploitation that characterize much of Nigeria's socio-political landscape.

Furthermore, the concept of creation as sacred space introduces an ecological dimension with profound relevance for Nigeria, particularly in regions affected by environmental degradation such as the Niger Delta. Insights from Ellen F. Davis (2009) and Christopher J. H. Wright (2004) reinforce the idea that dominion entails responsible care for the earth, thereby confronting exploitative economic practices.

Taken together, these perspectives demonstrate that Genesis 1:26–28 provides not only a theological account of human origins but also a normative framework for reimagining human identity, authority, and responsibility. By integrating Old Testament theology with African contextual concerns, this study addresses a significant gap in existing scholarship and advances a constructive theological response to the crises of power and governance in contemporary Nigeria.

Exegesis of Genesis 1:26–28

Genesis 1:26–28 represents the theological climax of the creation narrative, integrating ontology and vocation.

Ṣelem and Dĕmût

The terms ṣelem and dĕmût denote representation and resemblance. While ṣelem emphasizes concrete representation, dĕmût qualifies this representation analogically (Clines, 1968).

Scholarly consensus suggests that these terms function together to express humanity's role as God's representative within creation (Middleton, 2005). The immediate connection between image and dominion indicates that the image is fundamentally vocational.

Rādâ and Kābaš

The verbs rādâ and kābaš describe human authority. While these terms can imply domination, their meaning is shaped by context. Within Genesis 1, dominion is exercised in a non-hostile, ordered creation, suggesting responsible governance rather than coercion (Wright, 2004).

Genesis 2:15 further clarifies this mandate through the verbs ʿābad and šāmar, emphasizing service and protection. This interpretive balance indicates that dominion is stewardship-oriented.

Male and Female: Shared Image

Genesis 1:27 affirms that both male and female bear the divine image equally. This challenges hierarchical interpretations and establishes a theological foundation for gender equality (Bird, 1974).

Blessing and Cultural Mandate

The divine blessing in Genesis 1:28 establishes human vocation as a gift rather than a burden. Cultural development is thus framed as participation in divine purpose, bounded by ethical responsibility.

Canonical Development of the Imago Dei

The imago Dei develops across the Old Testament as a theological foundation for justice and accountability.

The fall narratives (Genesis 3–11) illustrate the distortion of dominion into domination. However, Genesis 9:6 reaffirms the enduring reality of the image, grounding the prohibition of murder.

The Torah institutionalizes image-ethics through laws protecting the vulnerable and regulating economic life (Wright, 2004). The prophets further intensify this ethic by condemning injustice and exploitation (Brueggemann, 1982).

Wisdom literature reinforces creation equality, linking oppression with offense against the Creator.

Royal Anthropology and Human Dignity

The imago Dei establishes dignity as conferred rather than achieved. This challenges socio-economic and political systems that define human worth in functional terms.

The democratization of the image undermines hierarchical structures and affirms universal equality. This has direct implications for addressing ethnic division, class inequality, and gender injustice in Nigeria (Mbiti, 1990; Bediako, 1995).

The Ethics of Power

Genesis 1 defines power as delegated authority under divine sovereignty.

Legitimate rule is characterized by justice, as reflected in Psalm 72. Ecological responsibility further demonstrates that dominion includes stewardship of creation (Bauckham, 2010).

Violence represents a distortion of original vocation, emerging only after the fall. Thus, any use of power that dehumanizes contradicts the imago Dei.

Implications for Contemporary Nigerian Society

The theology of the imago Dei provides critical resources for addressing Nigeria's socio-political challenges.

Political corruption reflects a distortion of delegated authority. The imago Dei demands accountability and ethical governance.

Insecurity undermines the sanctity of life, contradicting the theological foundation of human dignity.

Gender-based violence violates the equal image-bearing status of women.

Economic exploitation contradicts the distributive justice implied in biblical law.

Environmental degradation reflects a failure of stewardship, particularly evident in resource extraction practices.

Ethno-religious divisions are challenged by the universal scope of the imago Dei, which affirms shared humanity.

Conclusion

Genesis 1:26–28 presents humanity as God's image-bearers, commissioned for responsible dominion within creation. This royal identity is democratized, grounding universal dignity and constraining the misuse of power.

The Old Testament canon develops this theology through legal, prophetic, and wisdom traditions, emphasizing justice, accountability, and stewardship.

In contemporary Nigeria, the imago Dei provides both critique and constructive vision. It challenges corruption, injustice, and exploitation while offering a theological framework for ethical leadership and social transformation.

The doctrine of the imago Dei thus remains indispensable for Old Testament public theology, calling humanity to exercise power as faithful representation of divine justice and righteousness.

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