

Study Notes for [Genesis 1:20-31](#)

GOD’S IMAGE

Gerald Neufeld

Setting:

In this passage God continues his work in day five and six. In day five, God creates all the creatures that live in the sea and all the birds in the air. On day six, God makes all the animals and “creeping things” that live on the land and finally, he makes man and woman. Each time there is an announcement: “And God said.” This is followed by the commandment: “Let there be.” It is through God’s spoken word that all things come into being. Waltke states “The hero of creation is God. Each event occurs according to God’s express will and through the agency of his word. Speech signifies that God is intimately bonded to his creation” (Waltke, *Genesis*, 56).

As many biblical observers have pointed out there is a progress to creation; into chaos and darkness God brings his world ([2 Corinthians 4:6](#)). This can be seen in the following table (Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 56).

Forming the Creation	Filling the Creation
Day 1: Light (1:3-5)	Day 4: Lights (1:14-19)
Day 2: Firmament (1:6-8) sky seas	Day 5: Inhabitants (1:20-23) birds fish
Day 3: Dry land (1:9-10) Vegetation (1:11-13)	Day 6: Land animals (1:24-25) Human beings (1:26-31)

In the first three days God creates three spheres which will contain and support life. In the next three days God fills these spheres with the sun, moon and all living creatures. The whole account of creation is set within one week of time. As Waltke states, this “Structure affirms the consonance and symmetry, the harmony and balance in God’s world’ (Waltke, *Genesis*, 58).

The Fifth Day (1:20-23)

In day five God creates the “great sea creatures and every living creature that moves with which the waters swarm” filling the seas he created in day 2. He also creates “every winged bird” to fill the sky. After creating these living things, God spoke to them stating for the first time a blessing over his creation, saying “Be fruitful and multiply.”

1:20 God states “Let the waters swarm.” The waters do not have the ability on their own to create life. Life is only produced by God’s word.

“living creatures” distinguishes plants from animals including fish, birds, creeping things and land animals. (Later we will see that the term “image of God” distinguishes humans from animals.)

- 1:21 Who are the “great sea creatures?” Certainly they can be whales and other large sea creatures. However the reference is likely to Leviathan ([Job 3:8; 41:1; Psalm 74:14; 104:26; Isaiah 27:1](#)), Rahab ([Job 9:13; Psalm 89:10](#)) and Tannin ([Job 7:12; Psalms 74:13; 148:7](#)). These were viewed as the dreaded sea monsters in pagan mythology. As such, pagan religion worship them. Here these monsters are viewed as just a few of God’s many creatures, solely dependent on God and ultimately created to serve him. This is a direct polemic (a written or verbal attack) against pagan theology which the Israelites coming out of Egypt were steeped in. God through Moses revealed to the Israelites that he alone is God, everything else is created for his pleasure.
- 1:22 “God blessed them” means that God filled them with the ability to live and to create new life through fertility and procreation. To be “blessed” is to be given all of what is necessary to survive and thrive. It also means to have some control of your environment. “Blessing constitutes the power of life: fertility and vitality, health and success (Roop, 30). Through multiplication, the fish and birds inhabit their specific spheres: the sea and the air. As Waltke states, “Because of God’s blessing, the natural world is teeming with life. Blessing is God’s gift of potency and power. Blessing enables God’s creatures to fulfill their natures and to live in their element” (Waltke, *Genesis*, 69).
- 1:23 The fish and birds are to be fruitful and multiply. This can only be done with God’s blessing upon them. When seeing all of God’s abundant blessings in the world around us we can readily agree with the doxology by Thomas Ken:
- Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;
Praise him, all creatures here below;
Praise him above, the heavenly host;
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

The Sixth Day (1:24-31)

Live Stock, Animals and Creeping Things

- 24 God creates both domesticated as well as wild animals and “everything that creeps on the ground.” “creeping things” is “not a scientific classification but a description of the smooth or crawling motion of various kinds of creatures” (Kidner, 50).
- 25 God does not state that the land animals are blessed. This is because to bless also implies to rule or to have dominion. The land animals and humans who are to come later occupy the same sphere of land; only one can rule and that will be man (Waltke, *Genesis*, 64).

Human Beings

We finally reach the climax of the creation story: the creation of humans. The story slows down as if to emphasize this significance (Wenham, 27).

- 1:26 Note the difference between the creation of animals and of man. God said: “Let the earth bring forth” for the animals but for humans God said the personal: “Let us make man in our image.” The word “us” is used 3 times in Genesis ([1:26; 3:22; 11:7](#)). Is there a foreshadowing of the Trinity here ([John 1:3; Ephesians 3:9; Colossians 1:16; Hebrew 1:2](#))?

What does “image” mean to Moses and Israel? Clearly it sets man apart from all other living creatures. Other living creatures are created “according to their kind” but man is created in “the image of God.” The word “image” occurs 14 times in the OT referring to paintings, models or statues. So, we are “statutes” of God – that is a faithful and adequate representation of God. There are no images or icons of God except for us. Another idea of image is that the image also contains the life of the one being represented. Only when God breathes into man is he truly the image of God. The image also represents the “function” of the one being represented. So we represent God – we are God’s regents – we are his representatives. In the ancient near east it was their belief that only the king was in the image of God. Here it says we are all in the image of God and so all are intended to rule¹.

“image” and “likeness” do not refer to the same thing. This second word makes it clear that we are only a likeness not a true image – we are not God. This second word reduces the power of the word “image.” In the ancient Near East an idol was an image of the deity and so was actually equated with the deity itself. That is why the pagan would worship the idol as the deity. Here the word “likeness” clearly separated God from humans.

Understanding that we are made in God’s image is fundamental to our understanding of our relationship to God and to each other. As Waltke states, “As representatives mirroring God and breathing God’s life, we may live in relationship with God and exercise our dominion over all the earth. This can take many forms; for example, the cultural mandate gives dignity and meaning to the arts and sciences” (Waltke, *Genesis*, 70).

- 27 Although your English Bible may not show it, this verse is the first poem in the Bible revealing a greater creativity reflecting humans as God’s image bearers (Waltke, *Genesis*, 67).

“male and female” – see Jesus’ comments on this verse in [Mark 10:6-10](#).

- 28 “And God said to them” – God address man directly. Communication between God and humans is possible in a unique way.

“be fruitful and multiply” and “subdue it and have dominion” is a twofold mandate for humans to fill the earth and to rule over God’s creation on earth² as benevolent kings ([Genesis 9:2](#); [Psalms 8:5-8](#); [Hebrews 2:5-9](#)).

- 28-29 God tells humans to be “fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” as he instructions other created things (1:22). As well, God gives every plant and fruit for everything that has “breath of life” for food including human beings. These then are the two basic desires of all living things: sex for reproduction and food for sustenance. Humans, however, are created in the image of God and so also have a desire for God; this is what makes them different from all other created things ([Psalms 42:1](#)).

1 Often God is depicted in the Bible as anthropomorphic (that is, like a human being). Waltke states that “More accurately, a human being is theomorphic, made like God so that God can communicate himself to people” (Waltke, *Genesis*, 65).

2 Man’s rule is limited to the earth and does not include the spiritual realm of Satan ([Ephesians 6:10-12](#)).

Notice the peaceful nature of the world at this time. Both animals and humans eat from the growth of the land before the Fall. This is the state that is again envisioned by Isaiah ([Isaiah 11:6-9](#)) (Roop, 32)³.

These verses are also a polemic against pagan religion where humans provided food for the gods; here, God provides food for humans as well as all other living creatures (Psalm 104:27).

30 "I have give" shows that all of God's creation is completely dependent on him.

31 "very good" is the state of creation before the Fall. God had declared the details of his word as 'good' (1:4,10,12,18,21,25) (See also [Psalms 104:24](#); [1 Timothy 4:3-5](#)). but now on observing his entire creation ("God saw") together he pronounces it "very good." One can almost feel the enthusiastic pleasure God himself felt for his creation. Of course, it would not be long before it would become tainted with sin but at the beginning, at its origin, it was just as God wanted it (Wenham, 34).

The psalmists often speak of the holiness of God revealed in his creation.

"The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them he has set a tent for the sun, which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy. Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them, and there is nothing hidden from its heat."

(Psalms 19:1-6, ESV)

Each aspect of God's creation is worthy of wonder and praise, from the grandeur of the Rocky Mountains and the vastness of the ocean to the smallest bird, insect or even a blade of grass. Julian of Norwich in observing a little hazelnut exclaimed, "In this little thing I saw three truths. The first is that God made it; the second that God loves it; and the third that God sustains it . . ." (quoted in Atkinson, 43).

References

David Atkinson, *The Meaning of Genesis 1-11*, The Bible Speaks Today Series, OT Ed. J.A. Motyer, Downers Grove, IL:InterVarsity Press, 1990.

Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary, 1973.

Eugene F. Roop, *Genesis*, Believers Church Bible Commentary, Ed. Elmer A. Martens, Scottdale: Herald Press, 1987.

Bruce Waltke, *Genesis*, with Cathi J. Fredrids, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Press, 2001.

Bruce Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, with Charles Yu, Grand Rapids, MI:Zondervan Press, 2007.

Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary, Waco, TX:Word Books, 1987.

³ It should be noted however that not everyone believes this verse means all living creatures were vegetarian. As Kidner states, "It is a generalization, that directly or indirectly all life depends on vegetation, and the concern of the verse is to show that all are fed from God's hand. (Kidner, 52).