Ryan S. Peterson

*The Imago Dei as Human Identity: A Theological Interpretation*

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This revision of Peterson’s doctoral dissertation at Wheaton College presents a survey of different interpretations of the *imago Dei* throughout the Christian Bible as well as representative views of Christian interpreters throughout history. Peterson proposes that the *imago Dei* should be viewed as human identity, since this view best explains the biblical texts related to the *imago Dei* and also includes diverse views related to this.


In chapters 1–2 Peterson surveys classical and contemporary views of the *imago Dei*. He shows how theologians have had difficulty relating the “image of God” at creation in the Old Testament with the image of God in Christ in the New Testament. In chapters 3–4 he proposes a new view of seeing the *imago Dei* as “human identity” (see further below) that does a better job of linking the references to the image of God throughout the Christian canon. In chapters 5–6 he shows how this view of *imago Dei* as human identity helps to explain the biblical texts and indicates how this view fits well with classical views of the *imago Dei* throughout Christian history.
Peterson suggests three views of the “image of God”: as substance, function, or relationship. He summarizes as follows: “The image has been taken to refer to the human soul (since God is spiritual), the human mind (since God is rational), the human body (since ancient Near Eastern people thought that gods had physical forms), human dominion (since God rules all things), human relations (since God, being triune, is eternally relational), human virtue (since God is good), and human existence (since God is)” (1–2).

Studies related to human identity usually relate to personal identity, but Peterson wants to develop a view of a common identity that all humans have as distinct from other creatures. Since humans have sinned and fallen short of God’s intentions for them, it is not easy to see that image in them, but even after sinning the image still remains accessible. Because Jesus is the image of God and has fully shown its nature, he provides a model for how humans should live.

Human identity is not a fixed concept but includes what humans can be as well as changes that take place in their life stories that may bring them more closely into the image of God as God intended humans to be. After creation, humans sinned against God and were not willing to mature into the image of God that was intended for them. Humans never lost the image of God entirely, but it became obscured. God had to reveal the nature of the image of God to humans, and they needed to receive and accept this revelation. Part of this revelation included the coming of Jesus into the world to show humans what the image of God entailed.

Human identity, Peterson argues, was not only a static substance such as reason or the capacity to communicate; it was not only a function such as ruling as representatives of God on earth; it was not only having a relationship with God and others. Human identity included all of these aspects but was not limited to any one of them. The view of human identity is broad enough that it can include many different interpretations that have been proposed throughout history.

The book provides a helpful survey of classical and contemporary views of the *imago Dei* and a biblical view that includes material from both Testaments. Peterson promotes a canonical and systematic view of the *imago Dei* that draws insights from all of these understandings as well as provides a more flexible and potentially expanding view of human nature.

While Peterson is attentive to the historical context of particular texts and particular interpreters, there is little or no attempt to provide a history of the interpretation of the idea of the *imago Dei*. By promoting a canonical and systematic view, he overlooks the historical shaping of this idea or of changes over time. He begins the first two chapters of
the book with recent interpreters and then classical interpreters but only provides an exegesis of Gen 1:26–28 in chapter 3. I found it rather odd that in his fifth chapter, “The Canonical Unfolding of the Imago Dei,” he began with the New Testament texts and then concluded with Old Testament texts. While it is true that he had addressed the central text Gen 1:26–30 earlier in chapter 3, it still seems odd how he arranged the material. How can one show the “canonical unfolding” if one does not follow the order of the canon?

While Peterson does present a Christian interpretation of the imago Dei, and it makes sense that most of his attention is given to Christian interpreters, it would have been helpful to consider Jewish interpretations of this idea as well. It is surprising that there is no mention of the work of Jeremy Cohen, “Be Fertile and Increase, Fill the Earth and Master It”: The Ancient and Medieval Career of a Biblical Text (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989). Cohen addresses both Jewish and Christian interpretations of Gen 1:28 and discusses this text in its larger context of Gen 1.

It is curious how the idea of the imago Dei is not that common in the Bible yet has generated much reflection and interpretation. Is this because the imago Dei is so important or because the concept is so ambiguous? Peterson has shown the importance of the idea. It can, as he suggests, provide a basis for the imitation of God and the imitation of Christ that may be central for ethics, but when the concept is so ambiguous it makes it difficult to know how and when to apply it. While the imago Dei suggests some similarity between God and humans, humans remain different from God in many ways as well. Even Jesus is problematic as an ethical model because Christians view him as being fully divine and fully human. When New Testament interpreters refer to the image of God in Jesus, are they only referring to his humanity? If this usage is also ambiguous, we are left wondering when and how we ought to imitate Jesus as well.