

At what point in the evolutionary process did humans attain the “Image of God”?



"God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." — [Genesis 1:27](#)

The Image of God

In order to answer this question, "image of God" must be defined.¹ In the account of man's creation, found in [Genesis 1](#), God declares, "Let Us make man in Our image" (Genesis 1:26). The multifaceted debate over the meaning of the image of God has gone on for centuries in the Christian community. Most theologians argue that the image of God is not reflected upon humans as a physical image, related to the way we look. Rather, the fundamental qualities of the image of God are characteristics of the mind and soul, however we understand those: the ability to love selflessly; engage in meaningful relationships; exercise rationality; maintain dominion over the Earth; and embrace moral responsibility.

From the BioLogos perspective, God planned for humans to evolve to the point of attaining these characteristics. For example, in order to reflect God's image by engaging in meaningful relationships, the human brain had to evolve to the point where an understanding of love and relationship could be grasped and lived out. God's intention for humans to have relationships is illustrated in the opening chapters of Genesis, where many fundamental truths about God and humankind are communicated through the imagery of a creation story. After placing Adam in the

Garden of Eden, [Genesis 2](#) describes God's decision to provide Adam with a partner:

“Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him!’”²

The capacity — and even need — for meaningful relationships is a reflection of the image of God.

Bearing God's image also comes with a responsibility to have dominion over the Earth and care for it. With the ability to be in loving relationship, Adam and Eve are charged to procreate and care for God's creation ([Genesis 1:26-28](#), [Genesis 2:15](#)). By the time humans fully evolved, they were clearly capable of establishing dominion over the Earth and had the necessary skills to care for it.

The image of God also includes moral consciousness and responsibility. Humans did not have a fully formed moral consciousness prior to the time of Adam and Eve. However, general consciousness must have already evolved so that a moral consciousness and the associated responsibility were possible.³ When Adam and Eve received God's image, they had evolved to where they could understand the difference between right and wrong. It seems that Adam and Eve first demonstrated their new moral prowess when, using their free will, they chose wrong by eating from the forbidden tree of knowledge of good and evil. Adam and Eve then knew the difference between right and wrong in a more personal way than before, having experienced the guilt and shame that accompanied their decision (see [Genesis 3:1-13](#)).

When Did Humans Receive the Image of God?

We cannot know the exact time that humans attained God's image. In fact, it may be that the image of God emerged gradually over a period of time. Estimates of the historical time of Adam and Eve are varied. While some literalist interpreters of Genesis argue that God created Adam and Eve in their present form, the evidence of DNA and the fossil record establishes that humans were also participants in the long evolutionary continuum, and God used this process as his means of creation.

Scriptural evidence supports the view that other humans existed during the time that God's image was attained. Genesis makes this apparent when the writer makes reference to Cain's fear of other people, when God cursed him. Likewise, Cain finds a wife among a nearby tribe ([Genesis 4:13-17](#)). In light of these references, it seems likely that Adam and Eve were not individual historical characters, but represented a larger population of first humans who bore the image of God.

We also do not know if humanity received the image of God by the immediate onset of a relationship with God or by a slower evolutionary process. In either case, this development occurred before the Fall of Adam and Eve, since moral responsibility and a broken relationship with God are both involved in the story of the Fall. Perhaps God used the evolutionary process to equip humankind with language, free will and culture, and then revealed God's will to individuals or a community so that they might then enter into meaningful relationship with God through obedience,

prayer and worship. In this scenario, the evolutionary process is necessary but not sufficient to encompass the biblical teaching on the image of God, which includes both the key characteristics of being biologically human as well as the special gifts of moral reflection and the potential for being in relationship with God.

What is the Significance of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil?

After receiving the image of God, Adam and Eve were in full, perfect relationship with God, instructed only to avoid eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil with the consequence of death for disobeying ([Genesis 2:16-17](#)). Adam and Eve consciously chose evil when they disobeyed God's orders and ate from the tree, thus coming to a deeper understanding of morality. At this point they became self-conscious and ashamed, covered their naked bodies and hid from God. God cast them out of the Garden of Eden, and they were alienated from God through a spiritual death. This event is widely known as the Fall, although the term is not used in the Bible itself.

Most biblical scholars agree this story contains many figurative elements consistent with the ancient motifs that were common in Near Eastern creation accounts, many of which predate the story of the Garden of Eden. It seems unlikely these were literal trees. But the point of the story is not to catalog the plant life in the garden, but to illuminate the consequences of rejecting God's will.

How Does This Relate to Free Will and Moral Responsibility?

Humans apparently had free will prior to the Fall of Adam and Eve when they chose to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. This is evident in Adam's choosing names for all the animals ([Genesis 2:18-20](#)). Adam and Eve may have used their free will to act against their moral consciousness by eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. At this point they experienced moral responsibility in a new and more personal way.

There are glimmers of both free will and moral awareness in the other members of the animal kingdom. Primatologist Frans de Waal has spent decades observing primates in their natural settings and is convinced that human-like moral sentiments are present in other animals.⁴ The general unpredictability of animal behavior may also be a product of free will.⁵ Anyone who has played with their dog on the lawn certainly sees what looks like a joyous celebration of freedom. Moreover, glimpses of moral awareness are observed in our animal ancestors in basic neural processes that underlie complex kinds of empathy exhibited by humans.⁶

Though more research is needed, if further studies establish the free will of animals or a version of moral awareness in animals, this need not threaten the Christian concept that moral awareness is a signpost to God. It suggests that God planned the evolutionary development of animals to prepare the ground for morality. However, the full blossoming of moral awareness and

responsibility — and the other components that make up the image of God — are unique to humans ([Genesis 1:27](#)).

What About the Soul?

The soul is a complex, mysterious concept representing the essence of a person. Author Walter M. Miller, Jr., described it this way: “You don’t *have* a soul... You *are* a soul. You *have* a body, temporarily.”⁷ There are many opinions about the meaning of the soul, but nothing about its existence is threatened by the BioLogos view.

For example, many evangelical theologians subscribe to the view that the soul is not a separate, nonphysical entity that inhabits a physical body, the “ghost in the machine.” Instead, they understand the soul as the pattern, or coherent structure of the self. This view is called monism, and it renders moot the question of when the soul was added to the developing human species. Christian monists generally qualify their monism by emphasizing that it is not strictly physical. The Rev. John Polkinghorne, for example, uses the phrase “dual aspect monism” to make it clear that he is not reducing the soul to its physical composition. The key question for monists is when God entered into a special relationship with humans, which may be part of the image of God. Dualism is the opposing view, arguing that the soul is separate from the body. This raises the question of when humans first acquired souls and many other questions about the interaction of the soul with the body and brain.

In either model there is no simple way to establish when it first makes sense to start referring to human souls. Perhaps the soul was bestowed as a part of humans receiving the image of God ([Genesis 1:27](#)).⁸ Perhaps human souls appeared with the breath of life that God breathes into his creation, as described in [Genesis 2:7](#). We also cannot know whether God directly intervened in the evolutionary process at this point, or whether the unfolding evolutionary process produced the human soul.⁹ The Bible says that the same life-giving breath was given to animals, and some people have inferred from this that animals have souls as well.

That humans live and breathe and have their being in relationship to God is one of the deepest mysteries of our existence. Perhaps we should not be surprised that no simple model for this has yet been developed.

Consulted Experts:

The BioLogos Foundation is grateful for the assistance of [Pete Enns](#) and [Alister McGrath](#) in drafting this response.

Notes

1. Note: On several occasions, this response refers to Adam and Eve as individual historical figures. For more on the topic of whether Adam and Eve actually represent a larger community of first humans, please see Question 15 on Evolution and the Fall.
2. New American Standard Bible, "Genesis 2:15-25," Bible Gateway.com, <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=genesis%202:15-25;&version=49>; (accessed 1/1/09)
3. John Polkinghorne, "Taking Genesis Literally," John Polkinghorne Q & A, http://www.polkinghorne.net/qanda.html#Taking_Genesis_Literally (accessed April 2, 2008).
4. Frans B.M. De Waal, *Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals* (USA: Harvard University Press, 1996).
5. Alexander Maye, Chih-hao Hsieh, George Sugihara, and Björn Brembs, "Order in Spontaneous Behavior," *Plos One* 2, no. 5 (2007), <http://www.plosone.org/article/fetchArticle.action?articleURI=info:doi/10.1371/journal.pone.0000443> (accessed April 2, 2008).
6. Stephanie D. Preston and Frans B. M. de Waal, "Empathy: Its Ultimate and Proximate Bases," *Behavioral and Brain Science* 25, no. 1 (2002): 1-72.
7. Although C.S. Lewis is often given credit for this phrase, the quote in fact comes from: Walter M. Miller, Jr., *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1959: pg. 281.
8. Avery Cardinal Dulles, "God and Evolution," *First Things: The Journal of Religion, Culture, and Public Life* (October, 2007), http://www.firstthings.com/article.php3?id_article=6038 (accessed February 2, 2008).
9. Roman Catholic theology affirms the traditional view of a separate soul that is "added" to the body.

Further Reading

Articles

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- Brauer, Oscar L. "[Source of Error In English Bible.](#)" *American Scientific Affiliation*.
- Dulles, Cardinal Avery. "[God and Evolution.](#)" *First Things: The Journal of Religion, Culture, and Public Life*.
- Feinberg, Charles L. "[The Image of God.](#)" *Bibliotheca Sacra*.
- Trenn, Thaddeus J. "[If the Spiritual Soul were Beyond the Scope of Physicalism.](#)"
- Various Contributors. "[Duel over Dualism.](#)" *First Things: The Journal of Religion, Culture, and Public Life*.

Books

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