

## Tzelem Elokim in Rabbinic Literature

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*Imago Dei*, the notion that man was created in the image of God, is one of the most well known statements of the Hebrew Bible. It is intuitively appealing but somewhat paradoxical. It is an idea that is often taken for granted, yet little thought is given towards what it actually means. In other words, it is ripe for a deeper analysis of Chazal's approach to this idea, the topic of this paper.

Of course, before taking a look at Rabbinic literature, it is prudent to look at what Tanach itself has to say on the issue. The term "Tzelem Elokim" is most often associated with Bereshit 1:27, but it actually appears in three passages, all of them in Bereshit. Let us take a close look at these passages and their context:

The first time the term appears is in Bereshit chapter 1. As many have pointed out, it is the second perek, with its use of the Tetragrammaton, that is far more anthropocentric than the first perek, which is why from a literary perspective the placement of *Imago Dei* here is significant and somewhat unexpected. Let's examine the passage:

And God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth." And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them and God said to them, "Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it;

and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth.”<sup>1</sup>

The topic here is dominion, and thus at first glance, *Imago Dei*, whatever it means, appears as the reason why man has dominance over beast. The second appearance of the term, in Bereshit 5:1, does not add any further insight. However, the third and final time the word is used is in a completely different context, and seems to have a different meaning entirely, As Noah emerges from the ark, God warns him of the value of human life, saying:

Whoever sheds the blood of man, By man shall his blood be shed; For in His image Did God make man.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to the first passage, man’s value, not his dominance, is the implication of *Imago Dei*. Thus, already in the text of the Tanakh itself, we find two distinct notions of what this means, even if their exact definitions remain unclear.

Moving a bit later to the apocrypha, it is interesting to note a third usage. In the Wisdom of Solomon, a first century book, the author writes:

For God created man to be immortal, and made him to be an image of his own eternity.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bereshit 1:26-28.

<sup>2</sup> Bereshit 9:6. This may be reflected as well in the ten commandments. If we assume the first five and last five are parallel, “I am Hashem Your God” is parallel with “Do not murder.”

<sup>3</sup> Wisdom of Solomon 2:23

What is most fascinating about this is that it sheds light on the Gan Eden narrative, relating Tzelem Elokim to the Etz Hachayim. In light of this, it may well give insight into the term's meaning in the Bible.

Ben Sirach, a more well known apocryphal work, fully adopts the dominion approach, writing:

He endued them with strength by themselves, and made them according to his image, and put the fear of man upon all flesh, and gave him dominion over beasts and fowls.<sup>4</sup>

Among the pseudepigrapha, it is 2 Enoch that gives us valuable information. Like Tanach, 2 Enoch presents 2 conflicting implications of Tzelem Elokim. One seems in line with Bershit 9:6 in that Tzelem Elokim is a value assessment:

The Lord with his own two hands created mankind; and in a facsimile of his own face. Small and great the Lord created. Whoever insults a person's face insults the face of the Lord; whoever treats a person's face with repugnance treats the face of the Lord with repugnance. Whoever treats with contempt the face of any person treats the face of the Lord with contempt. (There is) anger and judgement (for) whoever spits on a person's face.<sup>5</sup>

However, the second time it appears is different:

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<sup>4</sup> Ben Sirah 17:3-4

<sup>5</sup> 2 Enoch 44:1-3

And however much time there was went by. Understand how, on account of this, he constituted man in his own form, in accordance with a similarity. And he gave him eyes to see, ears to hear, and heart to think, and reason to argue.<sup>6</sup>

For the first time, Tzelem Elokim relates to man's intellectual capacities, an understanding that would later become common among medieval authorities.<sup>7</sup>

Now we have the context to understand the approach of Chazal. From context, four usages of Tzelem Elokim seem apparent, representing man's dominance, value, immortality, or intellect. We are now in the position to examine which of these Chazal preferred, or if they understood something else entirely.

A cursory glance at Talmud and Midrash reveals all four of these themes present.

Bamidbar Rabbah 16:24 reads<sup>8</sup>:

....like the first Adam, to whom I decreed one commandment which he was to do, that he might live and endure forever, as stated (in Gen. 3:22), "Behold, the human (*Adam*) has become like one of Us." Similarly also (in Gen. 1:27), "And God created the human (*Adam*) in His own image", so that he would live and endure like Himself. Yet he corrupted his works and nullified His decree, and he ate of the tree. Then I said to him (in Gen. 3:19), "For dust you are ."

And in Bereishit Rabbah 8:12:

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<sup>6</sup> 2 Enoch 65:2

<sup>7</sup> See The Guide for the Perplexed 1:2

<sup>8</sup> See Devarim Rabbah 2:13 which may reflect this understanding, but perhaps might be taking a different perspective.

“And dominate /ur’du the fish of the sea”—said R’ Chanina: If [a person] merited, “dominate! /ur’du” [the animals]; and if not, “they will be dominated /yeiradu” [by the animals]. Said R’ Yaakov of K’far Chanan: The one that is “in our image as our likeness” – “dominate! /ur’du”; the one that is not in our image and in our likeness – “they will be dominated /yeiradu”.

The value of human life is found in Yevamot 63b:

Rabbi Asi said: The Messiah, son of David, will not come until all the souls of the body have been finished, i.e., until all souls that are destined to inhabit physical bodies will do so. As it is stated: “For the spirit that enwraps itself is from Me, and the souls that I have made” (Isaiah 57:16). It is taught in a *baraita* that Rabbi Eliezer says: Anyone who does not engage in the mitzva to be fruitful and multiply is considered as though he sheds blood, as it is stated: “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed” (Genesis 9:6), and it is written immediately afterward: “And you, be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 9:7). Rabbi Ya’akov says: It is as though he diminishes the Divine Image, as it is stated: “For in the image of God He made man” (Genesis 9:6), and it is written immediately afterward: “And you, be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 9:7). Ben Azzai says: It is as though he sheds blood and also diminishes the Divine Image, as it is stated: “And you, be fruitful and multiply,” after the verse that alludes to both shedding blood and the Divine Image.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> All quotes of the Talmud in this essay are from the William Davidson edition.

The association of Tzelem Elokim with wisdom is perhaps the most common understanding among later commentators, such as Rashi and Rambam. However, it too is found in Chazal, albeit somewhat indirectly. Bamidbar Rabbah 19:3 says:

“And he was wiser than any man (literally, than all of Adam),” than the first Adam. And what was his wisdom? You find that, when the Holy One, blessed be He, wanted to create the first Adam, He consulted with the ministering angels. He said to them (in Gen. 1:26), “Let us make humankind (*Adam*) in Our image.” They said to him (in Ps. 8:5), “What is a human that You are mindful of him?” He said to them, “This Adam that I want to create Adam shall have wisdom greater than yours.”<sup>10</sup>

All this is not surprising. Before opening and reading a single word of Chazal, we would have *a priori* expected them to reflect on the same themes found in the apocrypha and the bible itself.<sup>11</sup> However, to really understand Chazal’s unique perspective, we have to look deeper. The targumim are an invaluable insight, and provide details we most certainly would *not* have expected. The following quotations from Rabbinic sources will be provided in the original, since the close textual examination we will make requires it.

Before reading the Targumin, let us consider what we might have expected them to say. Due to the anthropomorphic nature of *Imago Dei*, one may have expected Onkelos, as

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<sup>10</sup> Further see Bereshit Rabbah 27:1. Also see Avot D’rabbi Natan 2:5 which understands Tzelem Elokim to mean Adam was created a circumcised, perhaps a symbol of moral and intellectual perfection.

<sup>11</sup> Two sources we have not examined are Avodah Zara 43b and Bava Batra 58a. Both indicate that there is a spark of divinity within man, an avenue we will not explore in this essay,

he often does, to shy away from a literal translation. Perhaps Tzelem Elokim would become “Tzelem min Kadam Hashem”, a level of indirection common in these instances. In fact, if we look in Targum Yerushalmi to Bereshit 1:27. this is exactly what we find:

וּבְרָא מִיִּמְרָא דִּי יֵת אָדָם בְּדַמוּתֵיהּ בְּדַמוּת מִן קָדָם יֵי בְרָא יְתִיה דְּכַר וְזוּגִיָּה בְרָא יְתֵהוּן:

Note the addition of the word ‘memra’ as well, another tell-tale sign of removing anthropomorphic elements from the text. However, this is decidedly not what Onkeles, the most authoritative of the Targumim, does. Let us examine his translation of all three biblical passages in question, first using the most common text, and then exploring variants.

In Bereshit 1:27

וּבְרָא יֵי יֵת אָדָם בְּצַלְמָהּ בְּצַלְמָא דִּי בְרָא יְתֵהּ דְּכַר וְנוֹקְבָא בְרָא יְתֵהוּן:

This is a completely literal translation, No surprises here. Then in Bereshit 5:1

דִּין סְפָר תּוֹלְדֹת אָדָם בְּיוֹמָא דְּבְרָא יֵי אָדָם בְּדַמוּת אֱלֹהִים עֶבֶד יְתֵהּ:

To the uninitiated, this may look unremarkable, but for those familiar with Onkelos, this translation is nothing short of shocking. As a rule, Onkelos translates Elokim as the tetragrammaton, with two exceptions. One is when the Tetragrammaton appears next to it, as in Genesis 2. The other is when the term does not denote God. Other meanings of Elokim include angels, the court, nobility, and foreign gods. In the above verse, Elokim appears twice. Onkeles renders the verse as Hashem, but the second one is left

untranslated! Unmistakably, Onkelos does not render Tzelem Elokim as “God’s Image” but rather as “a divine image.”<sup>12</sup> In 9:6, he is back to a literal translation:

דִּישׁוּד דְּמָא דְאַנְשָׁא בְּסִהְדִין עַל מִימַר דְּיַנְיָא דְמִיָּה יְהִשְׁד אַרְי בְּצַלְמָא דְיִי עֲבַד יְת אַנְשָׁא:

So what is to be made of this inconsistency? A possible culprit is scribal error. One could easily imagine how a scribe could naturally assume that the word Elokim remained untranslated in error and substitute Hashem. Indeed, in multiple critical editions of Onkelos, the word remains Elokim in all three locations<sup>13</sup>.

This may tie in with the Rabbinic understanding of 1:26, where the plurality is taken as referring to angels. It makes sense for God to speak to the angels before creating man in an angelic image.<sup>14</sup>

This is not the only surprise that Targum has in store for us. Targum Yonatan Ben Uzziel, like Onkelos, is inconsistent in its translations. Verses 5:1 and 9:6 are translated literally. However, 1:27 is decidedly not:

וּבְרָא יְיָ יְת אָדָם בְּדִיוֹקְנֵיהּ בְּצַלְמָא יְיָ בְּרָא יְתִיָּה בְּמַאֲתָן וְאַרְבַּעִין וְתַמְנִי אֵיבְרִין בְּתַלְתּ מְאָה וְשִׁיתִין וְסִמְשָׁא גִידִין וְקָרָם  
עָלוּי מוֹשְׁקָא וּמְלִי יְתִיָּה בְּסָרָא וְאִדְמָא דְכָר וְנוֹקְבָא בְּגִנְהוֹן בְּרָא יְתִהוֹן

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<sup>12</sup> See Tehillim 8:6 which may support such a translation.

<sup>13</sup> “Homo Imago Dei in Jewish and Christian Theology, Alexander Altmann, *The Journal of Religion* Vol. 48, No. 3 (Jul., 1968), pp. 237. See also the footnotes where several critical editions are cited, as well as Shadal.

<sup>14</sup> Similarly, we find the plural in the second perek in the context of man partaking from the Etz Hadat. As we have seen, some sources link immortality to Tzelem Elokim, so this connection may further support this thesis.

On a side note, the usage of this bizarre plural idiom in Bershita 1 and 2 severely undermines the critical view that they are from different sources. It is a very unusual idiom, and due to its potential polytheistic implications, unlikely to have been inserted by a later editor.

There are two fascinating elements to this translation. We will focus now on the first, and examine the second later. For those unfamiliar with Aramaic grammar, this subtle point may not be readily visible. In a literal translation, we would have expected the name of God to take on the prefix daled, indicating it was his image. This is what is found in the common version of Onkelos, as well as Targum Yonatan to the other two verses. However, here the missing daled completely changes the translation.

Unmistakably, the verse is being rendered “In an image, God made him”.

Abarbanel, in a letter to Shaul Hakohen<sup>15</sup>, makes clear that in his version, Onkelos consistently translated the term this way, keeping Tzelem and Elokim separate.<sup>16</sup>

Further, once one is familiar with this line of interpretation, the words of Rabbi Akiva in Avot 3:14 indicate he understood the verse this way as well. He says:

הוא הִיָּה אֹמֵר, חָבִיב אָדָם שֶׁנִּבְרָא בְּצֶלֶם. חֲבִיבָה יִתְּרָה נֹדַעַת לוֹ שֶׁנִּבְרָא בְּצֶלֶם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (בראשית ט) כִּי בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים  
עָשָׂה אֶת הָאָדָם.

If one renders Tzelem and Elokim together, certainly this is the most significant part of the phrase, yet Rabbi Akiva conspicuously leaves that out, leaving us to conclude he understood the verse like Targum Yonatan and Abarbanel’s version of Onkelos.<sup>17</sup> Man being made ‘in an image’ is a radical read of the text, and its implications are somewhat

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<sup>15</sup> Abarbanel, She'elot Shaul Hakohen (Venice 1574) fol. 12b.

<sup>16</sup> Ibn Ezra makes reference to this explanation, although it is not attributed to anyone, and rejects it.

<sup>17</sup> In Avot D'rabbi Natan, Rabbi Meir is quoted as saying the same thing, but this time using the term Tzelem Elokim. Altmann, in the above quoted article, thus argues against understanding Rabbi Akiva in light of this Targum, but I remain unconvinced that Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Akiva have to be saying the same thing, their relationship as student-teacher notwithstanding.

unclear. It seems to me that this read most likely understands it as indicative of man's intellect.

The fact that Bershit 1:26 uses the term “in our image” is very problematic with this read. It seems to clearly state that the image in question in verse 27 is indeed God's. However, in light of the understanding of this verse posed earlier, this can be understood as referring to an image of the angels (hence the plural). Accordingly, Tzelem, even read separately from Elokim, still must denote a divine image. Thus, both variants of Onkelos are functionally quite similar.

Now let us turn to the second half of Targum Yonatan. The Targum goes out of its way to emphasize Tzelem as the physical human body with its 248 limbs and 365 sinews. This of course evokes the famous passage in Makkos 23b:

Rabbi Simlai taught: There were 613 mitzvot stated to Moses in the Torah, consisting of 365 prohibitions corresponding to the number of days in the solar year, and 248 positive mitzvot corresponding to the number of a person's limbs.

While this became a more common association later, this is perhaps the earliest text to link *imago Dei* to *imitatio Dei*, creating a moral imperative to imitate God by implying that we resemble him in some way. Sotah 14a makes this argument as well:

And Rabbi Hama, son of Rabbi Hanina, says: What is the meaning of that which is written: “After the Lord your God shall you walk, and Him shall you fear, and His commandments shall you keep, and unto His voice shall you hearken, and Him shall you serve, and unto Him shall you cleave” (Deuteronomy 13:5)? But is

it actually possible for a person to follow the Divine Presence? But hasn't it already been stated: "For the Lord your God is a devouring fire, a jealous God" (Deuteronomy 4:24), and one cannot approach fire. He explains: Rather, the meaning is that one should follow the attributes of the Holy One, Blessed be He.<sup>18</sup>

After having examined all of the above, we can make several conclusions. Of course, Chazal had a wide variety of voices, and we cannot speak conclusively of all of them. However, it would seem from our analysis of the Targumim that a common understanding either separated Elokim from Tzelem, or understood Elokim as Chol. In other words, many of Chazal did not think man was made in God's image at all! This understanding seems largely absent from later writers.

Another takeaway is that Chazal understood Tzelem Elokim in all the diverse ways implied in the bible and apocrypha, feeling no requirement to streamline them into a single underlying meaning. This speaks to the complexity of the term, and interestingly, is somewhat absent from later writers as well, who often seek to give Tzelem Elokim a single authoritative meaning. We can see from Chazal that the term belies that.

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<sup>18</sup> There is also the more famous formulation of "Just as he is merciful, so too you should be merciful", but at the time of writing I am unable to locate it.