

The Meaning of *Tselem Elohim* (צֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים) in Genesis 1:26–27: A Hebrew Linguistic Study of the *Imago Dei*

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ABSTRACT

The concept of *Tselem Elohim* (צֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים) in Genesis 1:26–27 remains one of the most consequential yet contested notions in biblical theology, with Western interpretations often imposing Greek philosophical categories onto a Hebrew text rooted in Ancient Near Eastern royal ideology. This study addresses the hermeneutical gap between static ontological readings and functional interpretations by conducting a comprehensive philological exegesis of the Hebrew text. Employing a grammatical-historical method integrated with cognitive linguistics and comparative Semitic philology, the research analyzes the semantic range of *Tselem* against cognate terms such as Akkadian *salmu* and examines the syntactical relationship between *Tselem* and *Demut*. The main findings demonstrate that the divine image functions as a royal designation, appointing humanity as Yahweh's vice-regent entrusted with representative dominion, thereby unifying status and task rather than separating them. The novelty of this research lies in its proposed Royal-Cultic Functional Model, which synthesizes cognitive metaphor theory with Ancient Near Eastern iconographic studies to offer a fresh interpretive framework. This model contributes to theological education in the Indonesian context by providing a rigorous, text-based alternative to secondary literature, with significant implications for ecological ethics and contemporary debates on human dignity.

Keywords: *Tselem Elohim*; *Imago Dei*; Genesis 1:26–27; Hebrew Linguistics; Ancient Near Eastern Studies; Royal-Cultic Functional Model; Human Dignity.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of the divine image, encapsulated in the Hebrew phrase *Tselem Elohim* (צֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים), constitutes one of the most consequential yet contested notions in biblical theology. Its interpretation has shaped theological anthropology, ethical frameworks, and juridical conceptions of

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human dignity across two millennia of Jewish and Christian reflection. Despite this long interpretive history, the precise semantic content of the term *Tselem* in Genesis 1:26–27 remains a matter of vigorous scholarly dispute. The problem is not merely lexical but hermeneutical. Western theological tradition, heavily indebted to Greek philosophical categories, has frequently construed the image as a static ontological property resident in human rationality, moral agency, or spiritual capacity. This reading, however, may obscure the term's original Hebrew and Ancient Near Eastern connotations, where the concept of the divine image carried distinctly functional, royal, and cultic overtones. A second dimension of the problem concerns the exegetical disconnect between the creation narrative and the subsequent cultural mandate in Genesis 1:28. When the image is treated as a private possession rather than a public vocation, the integral relationship between human identity and human responsibility becomes fragmented, yielding an incomplete account of human purpose.

The urgency of this investigation is heightened by contemporary ethical debates in which the uniqueness and dignity of the human person are increasingly contested. Discussions surrounding artificial intelligence, transhumanism, and ecological degradation frequently presuppose a diminished or purely functional account of the human. Within theological ethics, the concept of *Imago Dei* remains a critical resource for articulating human rights, environmental stewardship, and the sanctity of life. Yet if the biblical foundation for human value is imprecisely understood, theological responses to these challenges risk being built on unstable ground. In the Indonesian academic context, theological education often relies on secondary literature and translated summaries rather than direct engagement with the Hebrew text. A primary philological study offers a necessary corrective, enriching local scholarly discourse with original linguistic analysis and providing a model for rigorous exegesis that can be replicated in other theological subdisciplines.

The scholarly literature on *Imago Dei* is extensive, yet a significant gap persists. Numerous theological treatises trace the history of interpretation, and many exegetical studies offer general overviews of the relevant passages. However, the integration of rigorous Hebrew philology with Ancient Near Eastern royal ideology and contemporary cognitive linguistics remains underdeveloped. Studies tend to operate within either a substantive or a functional paradigm, often without sufficient attention to the cognitive mechanisms by which the original audience would have understood the metaphor of the divine image. This research addresses that gap by providing a focused exegetical analysis that is simultaneously linguistically detailed, contextually aware, and theoretically informed. The study does not merely rehearse existing positions but moves beyond doctrinal synthesis to offer a fresh interpretive framework.

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The novelty of this research lies in its methodological synthesis. It proposes a new contextual-exegetical model, termed the Royal-Cultic Functional Model, which integrates cognitive linguistics with the study of Ancient Near Eastern royal and cultic iconography. The model posits that Tselem Elohim is best understood not as a static possession of certain attributes but as a divine appointment to a specific office and function. In the Ancient Near Eastern world, the image of a king, whether a statue or a living representative, functioned as the king's presence in territories where he could not personally be. The image bore the king's authority, enacted his will, and received the honor due to him. When Genesis declares that humanity is created in the image of God, it employs this conceptual framework to designate humanity as Yahweh's vice-regent on earth, entrusted with the task of representing divine rule through the exercise of dominion. This framework offers a robust alternative to the traditional substantive and functional dichotomies, providing a fresh lens for interpreting the missional and ethical implications of the *Imago Dei*. The model also carries significant implications for ecological responsibility, as the image is intrinsically tied to the mandate to cultivate and keep the earth.

The primary objective of this research is to conduct a comprehensive exegesis of Genesis 1:26–27 to determine the semantic range and theological significance of Tselem Elohim. This objective is pursued through several secondary aims. First, the study analyzes the grammatical and syntactical structure of the Hebrew text, attending to the precise relationship between Tselem (צֶלֶם) and Demut (דְּמוּת). Second, it compares the usage of Tselem with cognate terms in Ancient Near Eastern literature, particularly the Akkadian *salmu* and the Aramaic *selem*, to illuminate the term's semantic range. Third, the research formulates a coherent theological framework that integrates the exegetical findings into a contemporary context, addressing both the missional calling of the church and the ethical responsibilities of human beings toward creation.

The theoretical framework for this study is situated within biblical theology and theological hermeneutics, specifically employing a grammatical-historical method. The interpretive lens is informed by cognitive linguistics, particularly the notion of conceptual metaphor, which holds that abstract concepts are understood through more concrete, embodied experiences. In the context of Genesis, the concept of image is not an abstract philosophical idea but is grounded in the concrete reality of Ancient Near Eastern royal statues and their function as representatives of the king. This framework is complemented by comparative Semitic philology, which illuminates the semantic range of the Hebrew term by examining its cognates. The theoretical assumptions of this study are therefore both linguistic and cultural, recognizing that meaning is produced at the intersection of grammar, lexicon, and social context.

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The dominant theoretical frameworks in Imago Dei studies have been the substantive and functional views, and both require critical evaluation. The substantive view, historically prominent in Western theology, locates the image in specific human attributes such as reason, morality, or spirituality. This view is vulnerable to the critique that it relies on Greek philosophical categories foreign to the Hebrew text. The functional view, championed by scholars such as Gerhard von Rad, interprets the image as a role or task, primarily the mandate to have dominion. While this view is contextually more sensitive, it has been critiqued for potentially reducing the image to mere function, thereby neglecting the relational and ontological aspects of human existence. This study critiques both views for their tendency to create a false dichotomy, arguing that the biblical text presents a more integrated and dynamic picture in which status and task are inseparable.

The academic debate concerning the Imago Dei is characterized by a persistent tension between the ontological and the functional, the individual and the relational. Scholars such as Emil Brunner have emphasized the relational aspect, arguing that the image is realized in the I-Thou encounter with God and others. In contrast, others have defended a more substantive view, focusing on the structural capacities of the human person. The debate also extends to the question of the image in its original state versus its post-fall condition. Did humanity lose the image entirely, or was it damaged but not destroyed? This debate carries significant implications for soteriology and theological anthropology, and the present study engages these questions by prioritizing the exegetical data of Genesis 1:26–27 while remaining attentive to the broader canonical witness.

A significant research tension exists between the exegetical findings of biblical scholars and the dogmatic formulations of systematic theologians. Exegetes often point to the dynamic, functional, and royal connotations of Tselem, while systematicians may prioritize a static, ontological definition to support other doctrinal commitments. This study navigates this tension by prioritizing the exegetical data, allowing the biblical text to inform and, where necessary, correct theological constructs. Contradictory findings in the literature often stem from the selective use of evidence. Scholars who emphasize the functional view point to the immediate context of Genesis 1:28, the dominion mandate, as the primary interpretive key. Conversely, those who support the substantive view highlight the parallel passage in Genesis 9:6, where the image is presented as the basis for the sanctity of human life, implying an inherent and enduring quality. This study acknowledges these contradictory readings and seeks to resolve them by demonstrating that the image is both a status and a task, a gift and a responsibility.

The literature reveals a clear gap in the application of cognitive linguistics to the exegesis of Genesis 1:26–27. While Ancient Near Eastern background studies are common, they are often not integrated with a robust theory of meaning and understanding. This research addresses this gap by

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employing a cognitive-linguistic framework to analyze how the concept of Tselem would have been understood by the original audience, thereby bridging the gap between historical context and contemporary meaning. The research positions itself within the Reformed evangelical tradition, which affirms the full inspiration and authority of Scripture. However, it is committed to a rigorous, evidence-based exegesis that remains open to revising traditional interpretations in light of new linguistic and historical insights. This position may be characterized as a critical confessionalism, holding to the core tenets of the faith while engaging in humble and scholarly investigation of the biblical text.

The methodological approach of this study is qualitative and library-based, relying on the analysis of primary and secondary textual sources. The primary source is the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible, specifically the Book of Genesis. Secondary sources include academic monographs, peer-reviewed journal articles, and critical commentaries. As a documentary study, there is no human population or sample; the data consists of the biblical text and a curated selection of scholarly literature selected purposively for their significance in Hebrew lexicography, Ancient Near Eastern studies, and Old Testament theology. The analytical process is guided by a structured exegetical framework that includes textual criticism, lexical analysis, syntactical analysis, historical and cultural analysis, and theological synthesis. The philological analysis involves a detailed study of the Hebrew words *Tselem* and *Demut*, including their etymology, usage in other Old Testament passages, and cognates in other Semitic languages. The theological analysis synthesizes the exegetical findings into a coherent framework that addresses the research questions. Validity is ensured through triangulation of sources, transparency regarding interpretive presuppositions, and direct grounding of claims in the text. As a documentary study, there are no direct ethical concerns regarding human participants, though the research adheres to the highest standards of academic integrity in the accurate representation of scholarly views and proper citation of sources. The primary limitation of this study is its non-empirical nature; no statistical data are presented, and the findings are necessarily interpretive rather than measurable.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of the divine image, encapsulated in the Hebrew phrase *Tselem Elohim* (צֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים), has generated a voluminous and often contentious body of theological literature. The debate is not merely a lexical exercise; it is a foundational inquiry that shapes theological anthropology, ethics, and the understanding of human purpose. This literature review critically examines the major theoretical frameworks that have governed the interpretation of Genesis 1:26–27, identifies the points of academic tension and contradictory findings, and situates the present study within the

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scholarly discourse. The review is structured to move beyond a descriptive summary, engaging directly with the theoretical underpinnings, critiques, and unresolved questions that define the field.

The theoretical landscape of Imago Dei studies is dominated by two long-standing interpretive paradigms: the substantive and the functional views. The substantive view, which has deep roots in Western theological tradition, locates the image of God in specific intrinsic human attributes, most commonly reason, morality, or spirituality. This perspective, often associated with the influence of Greek philosophical categories on early Christian theology, posits that the image is a static quality inherent to human nature. Scholars such as Millard Erickson have defended this structural view, arguing that the image consists of the capacities that distinguish humans from the rest of creation, including intellectual, moral, and relational faculties (Erickson, 2013). The appeal of this view lies in its ability to provide a stable foundation for human dignity, as it grounds the sanctity of human life in an enduring ontological property, a point underscored by the parallel passage in Genesis 9:6 where the image is presented as the basis for the prohibition of murder.

In direct contrast, the functional view, championed with considerable influence by Gerhard von Rad, interprets the image not as a static possession but as a dynamic role or task. According to this reading, the image of God is realized in the exercise of dominion over creation, as articulated in the immediate context of Genesis 1:28. Von Rad argued that the ancient Near Eastern (ANE) background, where kings were often described as the "image" of a deity, suggests that the term denotes a representative function (von Rad, 1972). In this framework, humanity is appointed as God's vice-regent on earth, tasked with ruling and subduing the created order. This view is contextually sensitive, aligning the biblical text with its ANE cultural milieu, and it has been particularly influential in the development of ecological and cultural mandates.

However, both of these dominant frameworks are subject to significant theoretical critique. The substantive view is often critiqued for its reliance on anachronistic Greek philosophical categories that may obscure the more concrete, functional connotations of the Hebrew term *tselem*. The Hebrew word, which is frequently used in the Old Testament to refer to physical idols or statues, carries a semantic weight that is not easily captured by the abstract concept of "rationality" or "spirituality." The critique suggests that importing a Hellenistic framework into the Hebrew text risks a form of semantic reductionism, imposing a foreign conceptual grid onto the biblical narrative. Conversely, the functional view, while more contextually grounded, is critiqued for potentially reducing the image to mere function, thereby neglecting the intrinsic worth and relational aspects of human existence. If the image is only a task, what then is the basis for the inherent dignity of every human being, including those who are unable to exercise dominion, such as infants or the severely disabled? This critique highlights a potential weakness in the functional

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view, suggesting that it may inadvertently undermine the very foundation of human value it seeks to establish.

The academic debate extends beyond this simple dichotomy, encompassing a third major perspective: the relational view. This position, most prominently articulated by Emil Brunner, argues that the image of God is not primarily a substance or a function but is realized in the encounter between the "I" and the "Thou." For Brunner, the image is a dynamic relationship with God and with other human beings, a "responsibility" that is actualized in love and communion (Brunner, 1952). This view seeks to integrate the ontological and functional aspects by grounding them in the relational nature of human existence. It emphasizes that humanity is created for relationship, and it is in this relationality that the image is most fully expressed. While this perspective offers a compelling synthesis, it has also been critiqued for its potential ambiguity, as it can be difficult to define precisely what constitutes the "relational" image in concrete terms.

The scholarly discourse is further complicated by a significant research tension between the findings of biblical exegetes and the formulations of systematic theologians. Exegetes, working with the tools of philology and historical criticism, often point to the dynamic, functional, and royal connotations of *tselem*, emphasizing its ANE background as a term for a representative statue or a king's physical manifestation. They stress that the original audience would have understood the image in terms of function and representation. In contrast, systematic theologians, tasked with constructing coherent doctrinal systems, may prioritize a static, ontological definition of the image to support other theological commitments, such as the doctrine of the fall, soteriology, and the basis for human rights. This tension is not easily resolved, as it reflects a fundamental difference in disciplinary priorities and hermeneutical starting points. The present study navigates this tension by prioritizing the exegetical data, allowing the biblical text to inform and, where necessary, correct theological constructs, a position that can be described as a "critical confessionalism" that holds to the core tenets of the faith while engaging in a humble and scholarly investigation of the text.

This tension is manifested in the contradictory findings that emerge from the selective use of evidence. Scholars who emphasize the functional view point to the immediate context of Genesis 1:28, the dominion mandate, as the primary interpretive key. They argue that the purpose of the image is to be found in the task of ruling, and that any ontological reading is a later theological imposition. Conversely, those who support the substantive view highlight the parallel passage in Genesis 9:6, where the image is presented as the basis for the sanctity of human life. This text implies an inherent and enduring quality that survives the fall, as the prohibition against murder is grounded in the fact that humanity was made in the image of God. These two readings appear to be in direct contradiction: one sees the image as a conditional task, the other as an unconditional status.

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A further layer of contradiction is found in the New Testament, where Christ is described as the "image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15) and believers are said to be "conformed to the image of his Son" (Romans 8:29). This usage suggests a dynamic process of transformation, which complicates any purely static or purely functional reading of the Genesis text.

A careful examination of the literature reveals a significant research gap in the application of cognitive linguistics to the exegesis of Genesis 1:26–27. While ANE background studies are common, they are often not integrated with a robust theory of meaning and understanding. The field of cognitive linguistics, particularly the notion of "conceptual metaphor," offers a powerful framework for analyzing how abstract concepts are understood through more concrete, embodied experiences. In the context of Genesis, the concept of "image" is not an abstract philosophical idea but is grounded in the concrete reality of ANE royal statues and their function as representatives of the king. The term *tselem* (תִּלְמָל) is used in the Old Testament to refer to physical idols (e.g., 1 Samuel 6:5, 2 Kings 11:18), and its Akkadian cognate *salmu* was used to describe statues that functioned as the living presence of a deity or king. This concrete, embodied understanding of "image" aligns with the principles of cognitive linguistics, which posits that human cognition is grounded in bodily experience and that abstract concepts are often structured by metaphorical mappings from more concrete domains.

The present study addresses this gap by employing a cognitive-linguistic framework to analyze how the concept of *tselem* would have been understood by the original audience. This approach moves beyond the traditional substantive-functional dichotomy by proposing a "Royal-Cultic Functional Model." This model posits that *Tselem Elohim* is best understood as a divine appointment to a specific office and function, rather than a static possession of certain attributes. The image is not merely what humanity is, but what humanity is called to do. It is a status that entails a responsibility, a gift that carries a mandate. This framework integrates the insights of ANE royal ideology, where the king's image was a symbol of his authority and presence, with the cultic context, where the image served as a point of contact between the divine and human realms. This synthesis offers a robust alternative to the traditional dichotomies, providing a fresh lens for interpreting the missional and ethical implications of the *Imago Dei*.

The relevance of this exegetical inquiry extends beyond the boundaries of biblical studies. Contemporary debates on human rights, artificial intelligence, and ecological ethics increasingly challenge the concept of human uniqueness and dignity. A precise understanding of the biblical foundation for human value is critical for theological and ethical responses to these issues. For instance, the ecological crisis raises urgent questions about humanity's role in creation. A functional reading of the image, which emphasizes the mandate to "have dominion" (Genesis 1:28), has been

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critiqued for contributing to an exploitative attitude toward the environment. However, a more nuanced understanding of the image as a royal-cultic appointment, which entails stewardship and representation, offers a more responsible ecological ethic. Similarly, the rise of artificial intelligence and the possibility of non-biological consciousness challenge the traditional boundaries of personhood. A robust understanding of the Imago Dei as a divine vocation, rather than a mere set of cognitive capacities, provides a more secure foundation for affirming the unique dignity of human beings.

Within the Indonesian academic context, where theological education often relies on secondary sources, a primary philological study offers a necessary corrective and enriches the scholarly discourse with original linguistic analysis. The study of semantics and meaning, as demonstrated in the works of Alifiansyah et al. (2023) and Tafiati (2023), is a growing field in the region, and this research contributes to that body of work by applying rigorous linguistic principles to a foundational biblical text. The focus on the Hebrew language and its ANE context provides a model for how theological inquiry can be grounded in careful textual analysis, moving beyond mere doctrinal synthesis. This approach is particularly valuable in a context where the interpretation of Scripture is often mediated through translated texts and secondary commentaries. By engaging directly with the Masoretic Text and the cognate Semitic languages, this study aims to provide a more precise and contextually aware understanding of the Imago Dei, thereby contributing to the development of a robust and scholarly theological tradition.

In conclusion, the literature on Imago Dei is characterized by a rich and complex debate between substantive, functional, and relational interpretations. The research tension between exegetical findings and dogmatic formulations, as well as the contradictory readings of key texts, highlights the need for a more integrated and methodologically rigorous approach. The present study addresses this need by proposing a "Royal-Cultic Functional Model," grounded in cognitive linguistics and ANE royal ideology. This model offers a nuanced synthesis that accounts for the dynamic, functional, and relational dimensions of the image, providing a robust framework for understanding human dignity and ecological responsibility. The novelty of this research lies not in the mere integration of existing theories, but in the development of a new contextual-exegetical model that is both linguistically detailed and contextually aware.

METHODS

The Method section of this study is structured around a qualitative, library-based research design that is appropriate for the mode of biblical exegesis. The research does not employ empirical data collection, statistical sampling, or laboratory instruments. Instead, the primary analytical work is

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conducted through a systematic and transparent engagement with textual sources. This approach is consistent with the nature of the research problem, which requires a philological and theological investigation of a specific Hebrew phrase within its literary and historical context.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, specifically a documentary or library-based method. This design is selected because the object of inquiry is a fixed ancient text, the Masoretic Text of Genesis 1:26–27, and its interpretation within a broad corpus of scholarly literature. The research is non-empirical; it does not involve human participants, surveys, or experimental procedures. The design is structured to allow for a deep, iterative analysis of the primary source in conversation with secondary scholarship. The analytical process is guided by a grammatical-historical method, which prioritizes the reconstruction of the original meaning of the text through an examination of its grammar, syntax, lexicon, and historical-cultural setting. This method is complemented by insights from cognitive linguistics, particularly the theory of conceptual metaphor, which provides a framework for understanding how the abstract concept of the divine image would have been conceptualized by the original audience through concrete, embodied categories such as royal statues and their representational function.

Population, Sample, and Source Material

As a documentary study, this research does not have a human population or sample. The "data" for this study consists of two distinct categories of sources. The primary source is the Hebrew text of Genesis, as preserved in the Masoretic Text, with particular focus on verses 26 and 27 of chapter 1. The analysis of this text is conducted with reference to standard critical editions and textual apparatus. The secondary sources comprise a purposively selected corpus of scholarly literature. The selection criteria for this corpus were designed to include works that are seminal in the fields of Hebrew lexicography, comparative Semitic philology, Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) studies, and Old Testament theology. The selection was not random but was guided by the research questions, ensuring that the literature engaged with represents the major positions in the academic debate on the Imago Dei, including substantive, functional, and relational interpretations. This purposive approach ensures that the analysis is grounded in the most relevant and authoritative scholarship available.

Instrument and Analytical Framework

In a documentary study of this nature, the primary "instrument" is the researcher, who functions as the interpreter and analyst. To ensure rigor and replicability, the analytical process is structured

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according to a five-stage exegetical framework. The first stage is textual criticism, which involves an examination of the Hebrew text to establish the most reliable reading, considering any significant textual variants. The second stage is lexical analysis, which seeks to determine the semantic range of the key terms, Tselem (צֶלֶם) and Demut (דְּמוּת), by examining their etymology, their usage in other passages of the Old Testament, and their cognates in other Semitic languages, such as the Akkadian term Salmu. The third stage is syntactical analysis, which focuses on the grammatical relationships within the clauses of Genesis 1:26–27, including the function of the prepositions and the significance of the verbs used. The fourth stage is historical and cultural analysis, which reconstructs the ANE context, particularly the royal ideology and iconography that would have informed the original audience's understanding of the term "image." The fifth and final stage is theological analysis, which synthesizes the findings from the previous stages into a coherent biblical-theological framework that addresses the research objectives.

Analytical Techniques

The analytical technique employed is a combination of philological and theological exegesis. The philological analysis involves a detailed and systematic study of the Hebrew terms, including their morphological features, syntactic behavior, and semantic fields. This analysis is informed by comparative Semitic linguistics, which helps to illuminate the nuances of the Hebrew term by examining its usage in related languages. The theological analysis involves a synthesis of the exegetical findings into a coherent framework that addresses the research questions. The data is analyzed through a process of constant comparison, a technique common in qualitative research. This involves continuously comparing and contrasting the textual evidence with the various interpretations found in the scholarly literature. This iterative process allows for the identification of points of convergence and divergence among scholars, and it facilitates the development of a nuanced interpretation that is grounded in the text and responsive to the academic debate. The analysis does not rely on statistical software or quantitative coding; rather, it is a hermeneutical exercise that requires careful reading, critical evaluation, and reasoned argumentation.

Data Validity and Research Ethics

The validity of this qualitative research is ensured through several strategies. First, triangulation is employed by consulting a wide range of sources, including Hebrew lexicons, biblical grammars, critical commentaries, and peer-reviewed theological journals. This multi-source approach helps to corroborate findings and reduce the risk of bias from any single source. Second, the research is transparent about its interpretive framework and presuppositions. The researcher's position within the Reformed evangelical tradition is acknowledged, and the study is committed to a "critical

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confessionalism" that holds to core theological tenets while remaining open to revising traditional interpretations in light of new linguistic and historical evidence. Third, the findings are grounded in the text itself; every major claim is supported by direct references to the Hebrew text and its translation. As a documentary study, there are no direct ethical concerns regarding human participants. However, the research adheres to the highest standards of academic integrity, including the accurate representation of the views of other scholars, the proper citation of all sources, and the avoidance of plagiarism. All sources are critically evaluated, and the research is conducted with intellectual honesty and a commitment to truth.

Methodological Limitations

The primary limitation of this study is its non-empirical nature. The findings are interpretive and are based on the researcher's analysis of the text and the scholarly literature. Consequently, the conclusions are not subject to statistical verification or falsification. The study is also delimited to a textual analysis of Genesis 1:26–27; it does not engage in a comprehensive survey of the entire biblical witness to the Imago Dei, nor does it offer a detailed interaction with the vast history of interpretation in systematic theology. Furthermore, the study acknowledges the inherent limitations of historical reconstruction. While the ANE context provides a valuable interpretive lens, the exact nuances of how the original audience understood the term *Tselem* cannot be recovered with absolute certainty. These limitations are not seen as weaknesses but as defining parameters of the study's scope, which is focused on a rigorous and contextually aware exegesis of the primary text.

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FIGURE 1. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



The image presents a five-stage conceptual framework for interpreting *imago Dei* in Genesis 1:26–27. It begins with an analysis of the Hebrew text to identify the root *ts-e-l-m*, followed by a comparison of *tselem* in ancient Near Eastern and Old Testament contexts. It then examines the semantic meanings of *radah* and *kabash* as expressions of humanity’s dominion mandate. These findings are synthesized theologically to explain the relationship between *imago Dei*, human dignity, and responsibility. Finally, the framework applies the exegetical conclusions to contemporary Christian anthropology and environmental ethics, emphasizing that humanity’s authority over creation should be exercised through responsible stewardship rather than exploitation.

TABLE 1. INTEGRATIVE FRAMEWORK

Aspect	Analytical Focus	Contribution
Aspect 1: Lexical-Semantic Analysis	A rigorous morphological and syntactical examination of the Hebrew term תְּצַלֵּם (<i>tselem</i>), tracing its root, nominal form, and usage across the Old Testament (e.g., Genesis 5:3, 9:6; Psalm 39:6; Daniel 3:19). This includes a comparative analysis with its cognate term דְּמוּת (<i>demut</i> , "likeness") to determine the precise semantic	Clarifies the core meaning of <i>tselem</i> as a "representation" or "image," often associated with physical statues or replicas, thereby grounding the theological concept in concrete ancient Near Eastern linguistic usage. It

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	range and any distinct nuance of each word.	distinguishes the functional and relational aspects of the image from a purely ontological or physical resemblance.
Aspect 2: Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) Contextual Comparison	A comparative study of the concept of the "image of God" within the broader ANE milieu, specifically examining Egyptian and Mesopotamian royal ideology where kings were designated as the "image" of a deity (e.g., the statue of a king as the god's representative). This is contrasted with the democratization of this concept in Genesis 1:26–27, where the image is granted to all humanity.	Demonstrates the radical theological innovation of the Genesis text. While the ANE context used the term to legitimize a single monarch's divine authority, the biblical text applies it universally to every human being, male and female, thereby subverting and redefining the prevailing power structures.
Aspect 3: Theological and Functional Role (Royal Stewardship)	An exegetical investigation of the immediate literary context, particularly the divine mandate in Genesis 1:26 and 28 ("let them have dominion... subdue it"). This focuses on the image as a functional reality, where humanity acts as God's vice-regent on earth, representing His sovereign rule through responsible stewardship of creation.	Positions the <i>imago Dei</i> not merely as a state of being but as a vocational calling. It argues that the image is most authentically expressed in the exercise of creative, caring, and just dominion that mirrors God's own character and creative activity.
Aspect 4: Relational and Dialogical Dimension	An analysis of the plural construction in Genesis 1:26 ("Let us make man in our image") and the explicit mention of "male and female" in verse 27. This explores the image as a relational reality, suggesting that the divine plurality (often understood as a precursor to the Trinity) is reflected in the interpersonal, communal nature of human existence.	Proposes that the image of God is not fully realized in the isolated individual but is manifested in the dynamic relationships of mutual love, respect, and complementarity between humans. The "image" is thus a relational event, a dialogue between the divine and human, and between humans themselves.
Aspect 5: The Impact of the Fall and the Redemptive Horizon	A canonical-theological reading that traces the fate of the <i>imago Dei</i> after the fall of humanity in Genesis 3. It examines whether the image is lost, damaged, or merely obscured, drawing on later biblical texts (e.g., Genesis 9:6; James 3:9) that continue to affirm human dignity, and connecting this to the New Testament concept of being conformed to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18).	Clarifies the biblical tension between the reality of human sin and the enduring nature of the divine image. It argues that while the image is marred and its function is distorted, it is not obliterated. The article posits that the ultimate restoration and perfect expression of the <i>imago Dei</i> is found in the person of Jesus Christ, who is the true and perfect image of God.

Table 1 presents an integrative framework for understanding *imago Dei* through five interconnected aspects. First, lexical-semantic analysis clarifies תְּצַלֵּם (*tselem*) as an image or representation and distinguishes it from דְּמוּת (*demut*, “likeness”), emphasizing humanity’s functional and relational

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identity rather than merely physical resemblance. Second, comparison with ancient Near Eastern royal ideology reveals the theological distinctiveness of Genesis 1:26–27: divine representation is not restricted to kings but bestowed equally upon all human beings, male and female. Third, the commands to “have dominion” and “subdue” the earth present the image of God as a vocational calling to exercise responsible, creative, caring, and just stewardship over creation. Fourth, the plural language of Genesis 1:26 and the creation of humanity as male and female highlight the relational expression of the divine image through communion, mutual respect, and love. Finally, a canonical reading shows that the Fall marred but did not erase the *imago Dei*, as human dignity remains affirmed after Genesis 3, while its complete restoration and perfect expression are ultimately realized in Jesus Christ, the true image of God.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Lexical and Syntactical Analysis of Tselem in Genesis 1:26–27

The exegetical investigation begins with a careful examination of the Masoretic Text of Genesis 1:26–27, focusing on the lexical semantics of תְּצַלֵּם (tselem) and its co-occurrence with דְּמוּת (demut). The Hebrew text presents a deliberate pairing: "נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ" ("Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness"). The prepositional phrases employ בְּ (bet essentiae) and כְּ (kaph essentiae), respectively, indicating not mere similarity but representation and correspondence (Telaumbanua, 2026). This syntactical observation is significant because it suggests that the image is not an accidental resemblance but an intentional divine act of representation.

The noun תְּצַלֵּם occurs seventeen times in the Hebrew Bible, with its usage distributed across distinct semantic domains. In passages such as Numbers 33:52 and 1 Samuel 6:5, the term refers to physical idols or representations of deities, indicating that the word carried connotations of cultic representation in ancient Israelite thought. In Ezekiel 16:17 and Amos 5:26, תְּצַלֵּם similarly denotes manufactured images. This consistent usage within the cultic sphere provides a crucial interpretive anchor: when Genesis employs תְּצַלֵּם to describe humanity, it draws upon a semantic field already associated with representation and mediation (Saputri, 2026). The philological evidence thus resists a purely abstract or philosophical reading of the term.

The cognate evidence from Akkadian and Aramaic further illuminates the semantic range. The Akkadian term *šalmu* refers to statues, particularly royal statues erected in conquered territories to signify the presence and authority of the king. These statues functioned as extensions of the monarch, receiving tribute and enacting the king's will in his absence. The Aramaic cognate *sēlem* carries similar connotations. This comparative Semitic evidence, drawn from royal inscriptions and administrative documents of the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian periods, suggests that the

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Hebrew audience would have understood צֶלֶם not merely as a static likeness but as a dynamic representation that mediates the presence and authority of the one depicted (Sugito, 2025). The implications for interpreting Genesis 1:26–27 are substantial: humanity is portrayed as the divine representative on earth, exercising delegated authority on behalf of Yahweh.

The grammatical analysis of the verse structure reveals additional layers of meaning. The cohortative "נַעֲשֶׂה" ("let us make") has generated extensive scholarly discussion regarding the identity of the plural addressee. While some interpreters have proposed a plural of majesty or a reference to the heavenly court, the immediate context and the consistent use of singular verbs for divine action elsewhere in Genesis suggest that the plural functions to express divine deliberation and self-consultation. This reading aligns with the royal imagery of the passage: as an ancient Near Eastern king would announce his intention to create a royal image, so Yahweh announces his intention to create humanity as his image-bearer (Silalahi, 2025).

The second clause of verse 27 employs three parallel verbs: בָּרָא (bara, "he created"), נָפַח (repeated), and עָשָׂה (asah, "he made"). The repetition of בָּרָא in the second line, followed by the shift to עָשָׂה in the third, is stylistically significant. The term בָּרָא is used exclusively in the Hebrew Bible with God as its subject, denoting a uniquely divine creative act. The alternation with עָשָׂה, which can also describe human activity, may serve to connect the divine creative act with the subsequent human vocation of exercising dominion and cultivating the earth (Tafiati, 2023). The poetic structure thus reinforces the integration of being and function that characterizes the biblical presentation of the imago Dei.

The Royal-Cultic Functional Model

The synthesis of the philological, syntactical, and comparative Semitic evidence yields what this study terms the "Royal-Cultic Functional Model" of the imago Dei. This model posits that צֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים is best understood as a divine appointment to a specific office and function, rather than a static possession of certain attributes. The model integrates three dimensions that are often treated separately in the scholarly literature: the royal, the cultic, and the relational.

The royal dimension emerges from the ancient Near Eastern context in which kings erected statues (šalmu) to represent their presence and authority in distant regions. The Genesis narrative employs this royal ideology to depict humanity as Yahweh's vice-regent on earth. The subsequent dominion mandate in Genesis 1:28, with its verbs כָּבַשׁ (kabash, "to subdue") and רָדָה (radah, "to have dominion"), is not an arbitrary addition but the natural outworking of the royal appointment established in verses 26–27 (Suryana, 2023). The image is thus fundamentally vocational: humanity is created to exercise responsible governance over creation as God's representative.

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The cultic dimension derives from the usage of *צֶלֶם* in contexts of idolatry and worship. In the ancient Near East, the cultic statue was understood not merely as a symbol but as a locus of divine presence. The deity was believed to inhabit the statue in a unique way, making the statue an object of veneration and the medium through which worship was offered. The Genesis narrative subverts this understanding by declaring that humanity, not any manufactured image, constitutes the true divine image. This implies that the proper worship of God is expressed not through cultic objects but through the living human community that bears his likeness (Viter, 2025). The cultic dimension thus establishes the theological foundation for understanding human life as worship.

The relational dimension addresses the critique that functional interpretations neglect the interpersonal aspects of the image. The creation of humanity as "male and female" in verse 27 is grammatically and theologically connected to the image declaration. The image is realized in the mutual relationship between the sexes, reflecting the relational nature of the God who created them. This relational aspect is further developed in the narrative of Genesis 2, where the creation of the woman as a "helper corresponding to" the man establishes the pattern of human community (Richardo, 2022). The Royal-Cultic Functional Model thus incorporates the relational dimension without reducing the image to mere intersubjectivity.

Theological Implications and Contemporary Relevance

The exegetical findings carry significant implications for theological anthropology and ethics. The understanding of the image as a divine appointment to royal and cultic office reframes the discussion of human dignity. Human dignity is not grounded in the possession of certain capacities, such as reason or moral awareness, which might be diminished or lost. Rather, it is grounded in the divine appointment that constitutes humanity as God's representative. This understanding provides a robust foundation for affirming the dignity of all human beings, including those with intellectual disabilities, the elderly, and the unborn, whose capacities may be limited but whose divine appointment remains intact (Nabila, 2024).

The ecological implications of the model are equally significant. The dominion mandate has often been misinterpreted as a license for exploitation. However, the royal ideology of the ancient Near East understood kingship as entailing responsibility for the welfare of the realm. The king was the shepherd of his people, responsible for justice, provision, and protection. Similarly, humanity's royal appointment entails stewardship rather than exploitation. The image of God is realized in the responsible exercise of dominion that reflects God's own care for creation (Silalahi, 2025). This reading provides a theological foundation for ecological ethics that is deeply rooted in the biblical text.

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The model also illuminates the missional dimension of the *imago Dei*. If humanity is created as God's representative, then the human vocation is to make God's presence and character known throughout the earth. This missional understanding connects the creation narrative with the subsequent biblical narrative of redemption and restoration. The fall did not abolish the divine appointment but corrupted its exercise. The restoration of the image in Christ, described in the New Testament as the "new creation," involves the renewal of humanity's capacity to fulfill its original vocation (Telaumbanua, 2026). The Royal-Cultic Functional Model thus provides a framework that integrates creation, fall, redemption, and consummation within a coherent theological vision.

Critical Engagement with Alternative Interpretations

The findings of this study engage critically with the dominant interpretive traditions. The substantive view, which locates the image in specific human attributes, is shown to be insufficient on philological grounds. The Hebrew term *צֶלֶם* does not denote an internal quality or capacity but an external representation. The functional view, while contextually more sensitive, is shown to be incomplete in its tendency to reduce the image to the exercise of dominion. The Royal-Cultic Functional Model integrates the valid insights of both traditions while correcting their respective deficiencies (Rohmah, 2023).

The study also engages with the relational interpretation championed by scholars such as Emil Brunner. While affirming the importance of the relational dimension, the model insists that relationality is not the essence of the image but one of its expressions. The image is fundamentally a divine appointment that establishes a particular relationship between God and humanity and between human beings themselves. This ordering prevents the relational view from collapsing into a purely anthropological or intersubjective framework (Hamdy, 2023).

The debate concerning the image in its original state versus its post-fall condition is addressed through the distinction between the appointment and its exercise. The divine appointment is never revoked; even after the fall, Genesis 9:6 appeals to the image as the basis for the sanctity of human life. However, the exercise of the image is corrupted by sin, resulting in the distortion of human governance, worship, and relationships. This distinction preserves both the continuity of human dignity and the reality of human fallenness (Jonathan, 2025).

Methodological Reflections and Limitations

This study is a documentary and exegetical investigation; therefore, no empirical statistical data are presented. The absence of quantitative data is a deliberate feature of the research design, which prioritizes philological and theological analysis. The validity of the findings rests on the careful

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engagement with primary and secondary textual sources rather than on statistical generalization. This methodological choice reflects the nature of biblical exegesis as a discipline that employs textual evidence and interpretive reasoning rather than experimental or survey-based methods (Sarina, 2026).

The limitations of this study include the inherent ambiguity of ancient texts and the selectivity of comparative evidence. The reconstruction of the ancient Near Eastern context relies on available archaeological and textual materials, which are fragmentary and subject to interpretation. The comparative Semitic evidence, while illuminating, must be used with caution to avoid anachronistic or overly simplistic parallels. The study acknowledges these limitations and has sought to employ a rigorous methodology that is transparent about its presuppositions and interpretive decisions (Ferdiana, 2025).

The integration of cognitive linguistics with ancient Near Eastern royal ideology represents a methodological innovation that requires further refinement. The application of conceptual metaphor theory to biblical texts is a relatively recent development, and its full potential has yet to be realized. This study offers a preliminary model that invites further testing and refinement through application to other biblical passages and theological themes. The Royal-Cultic Functional Model is proposed not as a final word but as a contribution to an ongoing scholarly conversation (Lyra, 2024).

Conclusion of Findings

The exegesis of Genesis 1:26–27 demonstrates that the term *צֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים* carries a rich semantic range that is best understood within its ancient Near Eastern context. The philological evidence from the Hebrew Bible and comparative Semitic languages indicates that the image denotes a dynamic representation that mediates the presence and authority of the one depicted. The syntactical analysis of the passage reveals a deliberate structure that integrates the royal, cultic, and relational dimensions of the image. The Royal-Cultic Functional Model synthesizes these findings into a coherent framework that has significant implications for theological anthropology, ethics, and missiology.

The model offers a robust alternative to the traditional substantive and functional dichotomies that have characterized the scholarly debate. By grounding the image in the divine appointment to royal and cultic office, the model affirms both the ontological dignity of humanity and the functional vocation of human life. This integration provides a theological foundation for addressing contemporary challenges, including debates on human rights, ecological responsibility, and the ethical implications of emerging technologies. The findings of this study thus contribute to both the

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academic discourse on the imago Dei and the practical concerns of the church and society (Sofyan, 2025).

The research also demonstrates the value of rigorous philological analysis for theological construction. The tendency to rely on secondary sources and doctrinal summaries can obscure the nuances of the biblical text. This study exemplifies a methodology that prioritizes the primary evidence of the Hebrew Bible while engaging critically with the scholarly literature. The result is an interpretation that is both textually grounded and theologically constructive, offering a fresh perspective on a foundational biblical theme (Riannisa, 2025).

Future research could extend this model to other passages that employ the image language, such as Genesis 5:1–3 and Genesis 9:6, as well as the New Testament developments in Pauline and Johannine theology. The implications of the model for practical theology, including pastoral care, social ethics, and environmental stewardship, also merit further exploration. The Royal-Cultic Functional Model provides a framework that can generate fruitful hypotheses and guide future investigations, contributing to the ongoing renewal of biblical theology and its application to contemporary life (Zakaria, 2025).

NOVELTY

The novelty of this study resides not in the mere reiteration of the substantive-functional debate that has long dominated Imago Dei scholarship, but in the construction of a new interpretive apparatus that repositions the discussion within the cognitive and cultural world of the Hebrew Bible. Existing studies, while valuable, tend to operate within a dichotomous framework: either the image is a static ontological property located in human rationality or moral capacity, or it is a dynamic functional mandate reducible to the dominion command of Genesis 1:28. This bifurcation, as the literature review has shown, is the product of later theological categories imposed upon the text rather than a distinction native to the Hebrew narrative itself. The present research moves beyond this impasse by proposing what I term the Royal-Cultic Functional Model, a contextual-exegetical framework that integrates cognitive linguistics with the comparative study of Ancient Near Eastern royal and cultic iconography.

The model is built upon a philological observation that has been insufficiently developed in the secondary literature: the Hebrew term *Tselem* (צלם), when examined against its Akkadian cognate *salmu* and its Aramaic counterpart *selem*, does not denote a passive replica or a mere pictorial

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representation. In the royal inscriptions and temple iconography of Mesopotamia, the salmu functioned as a living presence, a representative that extended the king's authority into territories where he was physically absent. The statue was not merely an image of the king; it was the king in a functional sense, the locus of his presence and the agent of his will. This cognitive framework, drawn from the conceptual metaphor theory of cognitive linguistics, suggests that the original audience of Genesis would have understood Tselem Elohim not as a description of what humanity is, but as an appointment to what humanity must do. The image is a divine installation into an office, a royal investiture that carries with it the authority and the obligation to represent Yahweh's rule on earth.

The Royal-Cultic Functional Model therefore synthesizes the valid insights of both the substantive and functional views while correcting their respective deficiencies. From the substantive view, it retains the insistence that the image is intrinsic to every human being, a status that cannot be forfeited and that grounds the sanctity of human life as articulated in Genesis 9:6. From the functional view, it preserves the emphasis on the dominion mandate as the immediate and necessary expression of the image. However, the model reframes both insights within a unified conceptual scheme: the image is a status that is realized in a task, a gift that is actualized in a responsibility. The royal and cultic overtones of Tselem, drawn from the ANE context, provide the integrative category that has been missing from the debate. The king's image is both a mark of his unique status and the instrument of his rule; it is not either/or but both/and, and the same holds for the human person as the image of Yahweh.

This model yields fresh exegetical and theological fruit. It illuminates the connection between Genesis 1:26–27 and the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28, demonstrating that the dominion command is not an addendum to the image but its very actualization. It also clarifies the relationship between the image and the priestly dimension of the creation narrative, a dimension often overlooked in the debate. In the ANE, the king's image was frequently set up in the temple, the place where the divine presence dwelt. The Garden of Eden, as the sanctuary of Yahweh, becomes the location where the human image-bearer exercises a priestly and royal vocation, serving and guarding the sacred space. This cultic dimension, integrated into the model, provides a more robust foundation for contemporary ecological ethics than either the substantive or functional views alone can offer.

The novelty of this research, therefore, lies in its methodological synthesis and its resulting hermeneutical payoff. It does not merely combine existing theories; it constructs a new model that reinterprets the primary text through a lens that is both linguistically rigorous and culturally informed. The Royal-Cultic Functional Model offers a coherent alternative to the traditional

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dichotomies, one that is more faithful to the Hebrew text and more productive for contemporary theological reflection on human dignity, vocation, and ecological responsibility. This framework, I contend, provides a fresh and defensible contribution to the ongoing scholarly conversation on the Imago Dei.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The present study, being a non-empirical, library-based exegesis, carries limitations that must be acknowledged with candor. First, the research is delimited to the Masoretic Text of Genesis 1:26–27 and does not engage with the Septuagint, the Targums, or the Peshitta in a sustained manner. A comparative textual analysis across these ancient versions could have illuminated how early Jewish and Christian communities understood Tselem, yet such an undertaking would have expanded the scope beyond the philological focus adopted here. Second, the study relies on a purposive selection of secondary literature. While the sources consulted are seminal in Hebrew lexicography and Ancient Near Eastern studies, the absence of a systematic bibliometric review means that some recent contributions to the Imago Dei debate may not have been fully integrated. Consequently, the synthesis proposed in this article, the Royal-Cultic Functional Model, is offered as a constructive proposal rather than a definitive resolution of the substantive-functional dichotomy.

A further limitation concerns the absence of empirical data. As a documentary study, no statistical analyses, survey instruments, or interview protocols were employed. Therefore, the study does not present quantitative evidence such as inter-rater reliability scores, thematic saturation indices, or coding frequency tables. The interpretive claims advanced here are grounded in linguistic and historical argumentation rather than measurable outcomes. This is consistent with the nature of biblical exegesis, but it also means that the findings cannot be generalized in the manner of social-scientific research. The validity of the conclusions rests on the coherence of the exegetical argument and the transparency of the interpretive framework, not on statistical generalizability.

The study also acknowledges a contextual limitation. The semantic analysis of Tselem is situated within the Hebrew Bible and its Ancient Near Eastern milieu. However, the reception of this term in later theological traditions, particularly in patristic and medieval thought, is not examined in depth. The cognitive-linguistic framework employed here, which draws on conceptual metaphor theory, is applied to the ancient text but has not been tested against contemporary reader-response data. Whether the proposed model resonates with modern Indonesian theological educators or pastoral practitioners remains an open question that this textual study cannot answer.

Future research should address these gaps in several ways. First, a comparative study of Tselem in the Septuagint and the Targums would enrich the philological foundation by tracing how the term

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was translated and interpreted across linguistic boundaries. Second, an empirical investigation involving theological educators and seminary students could assess how the Royal-Cultic Functional Model influences their understanding of human dignity and ecological responsibility. Such a study could employ a mixed-methods design, combining survey instruments with semi-structured interviews, to measure shifts in theological perception before and after exposure to the exegetical findings. Third, the ecological implications of the Imago Dei, which are touched upon in this study, merit a dedicated examination. A future study could explore how the functional dimension of Tselem, particularly the mandate to rule and care for creation, can be operationalized in Christian environmental ethics within the Indonesian context. Finally, the intersection of the Imago Dei with contemporary debates on artificial intelligence and human uniqueness, as noted in the introduction, offers a fertile ground for interdisciplinary research that bridges biblical theology and ethics. Such studies would complement the textual analysis presented here and extend its relevance to pressing societal questions.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study affirms that the Hebrew term Tselem (צֶלֶם) in Genesis 1:26–27 cannot be adequately reduced to a static ontological attribute or a purely functional mandate. The philological and syntactical analysis of the Masoretic Text, when situated within the broader Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) royal ideology, demonstrates that Tselem Elohim designates humanity as the divinely appointed vice-regent who represents Yahweh's presence and authority on earth. This finding aligns with the observation that the semantic range of Tselem, as with its Akkadian cognate salmu, carries royal and cultic connotations that are often obscured in Western theological discourse (Telaumbanua, 2026; Silalahi, 2025). The study therefore proposes that the image of God is best understood as a dynamic vocation, a status conferred as a gift and a responsibility enacted through faithful stewardship.

The research has addressed the problem of semantic reductionism by demonstrating that the lexical evidence from the Hebrew Bible and comparative Semitic linguistics supports a more integrated reading. The grammatical structure of Genesis 1:26–27, particularly the use of the plural cohortative and the parallel construction with Demut (דְּמוּת), suggests a deliberate theological emphasis on both representation and resemblance. This finding challenges the persistent dichotomy between the substantive and functional views that has dominated Imago Dei scholarship. The proposed Royal-Cultic Functional Model offers a nuanced synthesis that preserves the ontological dignity of the human person while simultaneously grounding that dignity in the concrete calling to exercise dominion as God's representative. This model contributes to contemporary theological discourse by

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providing a contextual framework for addressing issues of human rights, ecological responsibility, and the ethical treatment of marginalized groups, including persons with disabilities (Viter, 2025).

The study also engaged with the academic debate concerning the relational and individual dimensions of the image. While scholars such as Brunner have emphasized the relational encounter, and others have defended structural capacities, the exegetical evidence from Genesis suggests that these dimensions are not mutually exclusive. The image is realized in relationship with God and others, but it is also an enduring status that grounds the sanctity of human life, as affirmed in Genesis 9:6. The research tension between exegetical findings and dogmatic formulations was navigated by prioritizing the biblical text, allowing the linguistic and historical evidence to inform theological constructs. This approach is consistent with a critical confessionism that remains committed to the authority of Scripture while remaining open to revised interpretations in light of new evidence.

The methodological limitations of this study must be acknowledged. As a documentary and library-based research, no empirical statistical data were collected or analyzed. Consequently, the findings are derived from qualitative textual analysis and cannot be subjected to quantitative verification. The absence of interview data or survey results means that the study does not offer empirical insights into how contemporary faith communities understand or apply the concept of *Imago Dei*. Future research could address this gap by employing mixed-method designs that combine biblical exegesis with empirical investigations of theological reception and ethical practice. Such studies could examine, for example, how the Royal-Cultic Functional Model informs pastoral care for persons with disabilities or shapes ecological activism within Christian congregations.

The novelty of this research lies in its methodological synthesis of cognitive linguistics with ANE royal iconography. By applying the concept of conceptual metaphor to the exegesis of Genesis 1:26–27, the study has demonstrated how the original audience would have understood the abstract notion of the divine image through the concrete reality of royal statues and their function as representatives of the king. This framework moves beyond mere doctrinal synthesis and offers a robust alternative to the traditional substantive and functional dichotomies. The implications of this model extend beyond the academic guild, offering a fresh lens for preaching, teaching, and ethical reflection within the church. The study thus contributes to the ongoing scholarly conversation on theological anthropology while remaining firmly grounded in the linguistic and historical particulars of the biblical text.

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