

# On Being Human

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What makes humans more than just another one of God's creations? This question arises frequently when reflecting on the biblical claim that mankind was uniquely created in the image and likeness of God<sup>1</sup>. Many (most?) people of the Judeo-Christian faith traditions interpret being made in the image of God to mean that mankind bears some attribute of the divine. The prevailing sentiment seems to be that this attribute is a moral conscience able to contemplate and know God's will. There is little biblical support for this view, however, most support coming from tradition. Recent scholarship, however, suggests that the author may have meant that bearing the image and likeness of God confers upon mankind the authority to rule over God's creation in His stead.<sup>2,i</sup> But, while there may be controversy as to the implications of being the image of the divine, the notion that mankind is qualitatively different than other life forms is evident elsewhere in the biblical witness and this article will explore one little known piece of evidence substantiating that claim.

So, let's get started.

The author of the second creation story<sup>3</sup> writes that humans, animals and birds are formed from the same substance (the earth). However, God creates humans with an ability to override nature's instincts. Humans, because of this attribute, have the potential to behave altruistically. At the risk of oversimplification, this attribute enables humans to act in ways counter to their own basic self-interest. This is a crucial point, because one of

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 1:26-27.

<sup>2</sup> See the discussion at <http://learn-biblical-hebrew.com/hebrew-scripture/beginning-genesis-11-24a/sixth-day-genesis-124-31/>.

<sup>3</sup> Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden – Genesis 2:4a – 3:25.

the foundational moral principles of the Bible (including both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament), is that humans are to behave according to God’s will, not nature’s dictates. The humans’ ability to defer or even deny their natural desires is what sets them apart from their animal kin. A discussion of the literary figure the author uses to justify this argument constitutes the subject of the rest of this article.

In Genesis 2, the author writes that God formed both humans and animals out of the earth. The human<sup>4</sup> is formed first (Genesis 2:7) followed by animals and birds (2:19). In both verses, the author uses the same verb (pronounced *vayyitzer*). However, the spelling of the two verbs, while identical in meaning, is subtly different. For the creation of man, *vayyitzer* is spelled with two Yods (יִי)⁵ instead of the normal one Yod (י) as illustrated below:

Verse 2:7 (Formed the man)	Verse 2:19 (Formed the animals)
וַיִּיצֶר (vayyitzer) <sup>ii</sup> And-God-formed ...	וַיִּיצֶר (vayyitzer) And-God-formed ...

Both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament hold that humans are special in God’s eyes. In Genesis 1:26-27, God makes them in His image and His likeness. No other living thing bears the image and likeness of God. In the second creation story, this idea is expressed differently notably by doubling the *Yod* so that the verb, *vayyitzer*, is spelled with one of the ineffable names of God, יי. In this verse, the author signals that mankind possesses something of the divine that the rest of the animal kingdom does not. The question this raises, however, is this: what is this thing that

<sup>4</sup> Adam (אָדָם - Lit. “the man”) is the archetypal human male. Adam along with Eve (created later) become symbolic of mankind in general.

<sup>5</sup> The Yod is the tenth letter of the Hebrew Alphabet.

mankind possesses and animals do not?

Here is where context and culture come into play. In this regard, we will need to learn about an ancient Hebrew tradition, the first definitive mention of which occurs in [Ecclasticus](#) 15:14 and later in 27:6, written in the second century B.C.E. In this text, mankind was formed with two types of basic desires or inclinations<sup>iii</sup>. The first type, called the *yetzer<sup>iv</sup> hara*, (“form of the bad”) is inherent and common to all creatures including humans. These are the inclinations that give rise to natural or instinctive behaviors. For example, the migratory behavior of salmon and geese arise from instinct and therefore belongs to the *yetzer hara* class of inclinations.

The second class of inclinations goes by the name of *yetzer hatov* (“form of the good”). The *yetzer hatov* inclinations motivate behaviors largely opposed to the *yetzer hara* and are uniquely human. For example, *yetzer hatov* inclinations give rise to behaviors such as caring for their elderly, sacrificing to provide material and spiritual sustenance to the poor, establishing systems of justice, and even risking their lives for strangers. These behaviors never occur naturally except in humans

The noun, *yetzer*, means “*form of*” and is the noun form of the verb, *vayyitzer*, used in the creation verses above. Now, examine Genesis 2:19. In this verse God forms all animals (except humans) with a single set of inclinations symbolized by a single Yod. By contrast, God formed the human with two sets of inclinations, symbolized by the two Yods; one Yod symbolizes the *yetzer hara* (because man, after all, is an animal) and the second symbolizes the *yetzer hatov*, the set of unique divine inclinations. By embedding the name of God in the verb describing the creation of Adam, Genesis 2:7 symbolizes as set of divinely instantiated set of inclinations that

enable humans to express behaviors counter to their natural, nature-driven ones.

One of best example of behaviors arising from the *yetzer hatov* is altruism<sup>6</sup>. To illustrate how this might work consider the following thought experiment: What happens when we put food before two hungry lions; one an adult lion and the other an unrelated adolescent cub? The adult lion will eat until satisfied. The cub will eat, but only if the adult leaves food behind. Indeed, should the cub attempt to eat while the adult is eating, it would risk serious injury. By comparison, when the same scenario is observed in humans – an adult human and an unrelated child, the adult will almost always share the food with the child or even give the child all of the food.

Because of the *yetzer hatov*, the adult human in the scenario above is able to defer his immediate need to satisfy his hunger so that the child's may be satisfied first. This is significant. Absent the *yetzer hatov*, animals are not afforded the possibility of behaving in any other way and therefore cannot make moral distinctions. Indeed, all animals, except humans, cannot envision nor experience moral conflict and so cannot be held morally accountable. In short, animals cannot have a moral conscience and, therefore, cannot be moral agents.

The use of the double yod is used metaphorically to symbolize that belief that invested in humans is a nature that produces a life guided by choice;



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<sup>6</sup> In biology and ethology, altruism is defined as an individual p individual (or group) but at a cost to themselves. In psychology aim to enhance the welfare of another person in the absence the New Testament, the Greek word for 'love' – agape – refer

whether to proceed according to nature's dictates (the *yetzer hara* - the first Yod) or God's (the *yetzer hatov* - the second Yod). The humans, in God's design, are creatures able to defer gratification. They are able to behave in ways unrelated to the next meal or with whom to breed. They are able to resist their animal inclinations and behave righteously.

To fully appreciate the nature of man as depicted in the Bible, we need to take a look at the Greek culture that surrounded the ancient Hebrews (and other Semitic cultures in those days). The Greeks, unlike the ancient Hebrews, viewed the essence of man to be based on a single unitary principle – the principle Reason. The Greek philosophers argued that it is reason that makes us human.

This assumption has come to permeate the Western view of mankind. It is the basis of our penchant for scientific exploration and reliance on real world experiences. This assumption constituted the basis for the enlightenment movement in the 1800s. Today, rationale man is the bedrock of our view of government and law, and economic policy. But it is *not* the biblical point-of-view expressed by the ancient Hebrews and the New Testament authors.

In the biblical world of the ancient Hebrews, reason was a means to an end – a *tool* to be used to identify and describe the choices before them. Unlike the Greek view, the Bible views reason as an *instrument*, not the source of man's humanity. In the second creation account, we learn that the source of man's humanity is the ability to choose between the competing inclinations of self-interest and altruism. In the biblical view, the fundamental and unique constituent of humans is the duality expressed by possession of both inclinations - the *yetzer hara* and the *yetzer hatov*.

We are defined by how we choose to behave. And while we surely must pray for the reason necessary to identify the right choices, praying for reason alone is insufficient. It is insufficient because *knowing* what is right is not enough to resist the temptation to yield to the *yetzer hara* within us. Reasonable men can still make evil choices. Contra the Greek philosophers, reason will not save us. Once we know what is right, we need the strength will to live by our choices.

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<sup>i</sup> In the first creation story the image of God is an external badge of authority, like the gavel of a judge or the stars of a general. Moreover, because the source of mankind's authority is external (i.e., the image of God), the narrative reveals nothing about the inner character of human. It leaves open the question of whether mankind is fundamentally, or somehow qualitatively different than that of the other animals. In the first creation story, mankind is analogous to the police officer with a badge. But for the badge, human is not qualitatively different than any other animal.

<sup>ii</sup> In the Bible, *vayyitzer* ("he formed" or "it formed") occurs 19 times. But only in Genesis 2:7 is *vayyitzer* spelled with 2 Yods.

<sup>iii</sup> Ben Sira noted in 15:14 that mankind was controlled by his inclinations or desires. In 27:6 he described two kinds of desires – innate (like the fruit of a tree) and those controlled by his thoughts.

<sup>iv</sup> *Yetzer* is the pronunciation of יֵצֶר, the noun form of the verb, *vayyitzer*. *Yetzer* occurs 19 times in the Hebrew Bible and, where *vayyitzer* means "formed", *yetzer* means "form of". *Yetzer* is more often used figuratively to mean inclination, desire, or purpose. Its classic use is found in Genesis 6.5 to describe the motivation for the evil thoughts of man, "... and desire [form] of the thoughts of his heart is surely evil forever" (my translation).