

NEW STUDIES IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY 36

# **Identity and idolatry**



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*Series editor: D. A. Carson*

# Identity and idolatry

THE IMAGE OF GOD AND  
ITS INVERSION

*Richard Lints*



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*To Ann:  
The light of my life in whose reflection the gospel shines clear*



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# Series preface

*New Studies in Biblical Theology* is a series of monographs that address key issues in the discipline of biblical theology. Contributions to the series focus on one or more of three areas: (1) the nature and status of biblical theology, including its relations with other disciplines (e.g. historical theology, exegesis, systematic theology, historical criticism, narrative theology); (2) the articulation and exposition of the structure of thought of a particular biblical writer or corpus; and (3) the delineation of a biblical theme across all or part of the biblical corpora.

Above all, these monographs are creative attempts to help thinking Christians understand their Bibles better. The series aims simultaneously to instruct and to edify, to interact with the current literature and to point the way ahead. In God's universe mind and heart should not be divorced: in this series we will try not to separate what God has joined together. While the notes interact with the best of scholarly literature, the text is uncluttered with untransliterated Greek and Hebrew, and tries to avoid too much technical jargon. The volumes are written within the framework of confessional evangelicalism, but there is always an attempt at thoughtful engagement with the sweep of the relevant literature.

Those who know him have long appreciated the ability of Richard Lints to think creatively while remaining soaked in joyful confession-alism. Begin with the *imago Dei*, which in times past has often been thought of in terms of essential characteristics or attributes, but which is here thought of in terms of a mirror reflecting God and of subtle differences that stand over against him, making relationship with him possible – in short, establishing our identity with respect to God. Work that out across the canon, and you discover that light shines on many topics, not least the nature of idolatry. This book manages to blend some elements of systematic theology with careful biblical theology to produce a study that is wonderfully evocative.

D. A. Carson  
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School



# Author's preface

'Identity' is a term with a thousand different connotations but few know its precise denotation. What after all is identity? What makes me, me? What makes you, you? This book grew out of the conviction that the more we try to answer that question straightforwardly, the less likely we are to answer it at all. The irony of identity is that by looking away from ourselves we are more likely to discover our identity. Part of that is the complexity of self-identity itself. Part of it is the difficulty of genuine self-awareness. And part of it is the mystery of being created as people who find their identity in their capacity to reflect the Creator and the created order. This book is centrally about that mystery.

No simple description captures all of who we are, nor of the many influences that have been woven into our character. So it is with this book. Its origins lie almost too far back in the past to recover and record them faithfully. A seminar here. A hallway conversation there. A dinner table discussion with my family. Reading Genesis with a new set of eyes. Realizing how important the golden calf story is, but for reasons quite different from what I had originally thought. Finding the most incisive analysis of idolatry in the writings of the most acerbic critic of religion in the nineteenth century. Researching the rise of the modern marketing industry and recognizing how clearly it illustrates the design of the created order. Watching contemporary films and the fascination with the management of impressions that is at the heart of the film world. All of these, and more, pulled me in a thousand different directions when it was time to think about personal identity, but strangely also focused my attention on the Scriptures more sharply than I could have imagined. This book is an attempt to pull together many threads by following one of them from the beginning and seeing it through to its conclusion. That thread is nothing other than the way in which the Bible speaks about our identity as an image and reflection. From that simple origin I hope this work takes you on a journey of surprising discoveries.

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This book is also a reflection of many influences in my own life and work. The conceptual origins of the book go back to the work (and friendship) of Meredith G. Kline. He taught me to see the text as a whole – and never to miss the forest for the trees. I will never forget the significance of that persistent voice of Meredith. One of Meredith's students and now one of my colleagues, Cathy McDowell, has written a remarkable dissertation on the early chapters of Genesis that further opened my eyes to these words of Scripture that speak powerfully to the 'the forest and the trees' of personal identity. Many others also reinforced that redemptive-historical, biblical-theological, big picture way of reading Scripture. Henri Blocher, Gordon Hugenberger, T. David Gordon, Greg Beale, D. A. Carson and Royce Greunler come very quickly and fondly to mind. Dear friends Michael Horton, Kelly Kapic and Paul Lim insisted that the best biblical theology would also be that which interacted with the wider world of critical scholarship. I hope they see their fingerprints all over this book. Long-time colleague David Wells as well as conversation partners Dick Keyes and Os Guinness taught me the inextricable connection between personal identities and cultural identities – which is also the heart of Scripture's conception of identity. Many of my students across the years have contributed to this work in explicit and mostly implicit ways. Brannin Pitre, Blake Arnoult and Derek Baker come immediately to mind across the last decade, as does Daniel Paik this past year, who laboured to put the indexes together.

Closer to home there is little doubt that my own reflections on personal identity are bound up with my identity in the context of my family. Kate and Lucas and Sarah and now Nathan have been surprising mirrors for me, helping me to see myself more clearly than I could ever otherwise have hoped for. They have learned not only to laugh with me but at me, and have thereby helped me not to take myself too seriously. They are adept at raising their eyebrows when my attempt at parental persuasion overreaches the argument itself. I trust that I am more comfortable in my own skin because they have unconditionally accepted me – even if that unconditional acceptance sometimes comes with disagreements.

This book would not have seen the light of day had not my best friend, co-worker and wife kept the flame alive – and made sure I took time off from administrative responsibilities to finish it. Mostly this has meant squeezing a half day here and a couple of hours there, all of it in between the relentless crush of a Dean's schedule. But she has

## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

not only kept the book alive; she has made it a much better book than I could ever have hoped it would be. I hope she will see all of the many refractions of her image in its prism. And for persevering through thirty winters in New England (2015 being the worst) there are not words of gratitude that will do her justice. May this book be a small token of that gratitude. For that reason and a thousand more this book is dedicated to her.

*Richard Lints*  
*February 2015*



# Abbreviations

ACCS	Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture
ANE	ancient Near East(ern)
AUSS	<i>Andrews University Seminary Studies</i>
BJRL	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester</i>
CBQMS	Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series
ERT	<i>Evangelical Review of Theology</i>
EvQ	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
Ex.Aud	<i>Ex auditu</i>
FUQ	<i>Free University Quarterly</i>
HKAT	Handkommentar zum Alten Testament
HBT	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
JR	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSS	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
NAC	New American Commentary
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIDNTT	<i>New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology</i> , ed. C. Brown, vol. 2, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NS	new series
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
OTL	Old Testament Library
RevExp	<i>Review and Expositor</i>

IDENTITY AND IDOLATRY

SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
<i>SBLSP</i>	<i>Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers</i>
<i>StVTQ</i>	<i>St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly</i>
<i>Them</i>	<i>Themelios</i>
<i>TrinJ</i>	<i>Trinity Journal</i>
<i>TynB</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>

## Chapter One

# Living inside the text: canon and creation

Her name was Simone. She had the face of Audrey Hepburn and the smile of Lauren Bacall. Her body looked like it had been sculpted by an artist. She moved like Madonna. She was an actress with breathtaking presence but little dramatic ability. Her Greta Garbo-like allure seemed to more than make up for her lack of acting talent. No one seemed to notice her stiffness on the big screen. She simply overshadowed every other actor and actress who appeared with her in films. Her image was just too much to compete with. By all accounts she was too good to be true. And in fact she was – she was the computer generated figment of her director's imagination. In the 2002 film of the same name Simone was an actress without flaws (except a lack of talent) created for the silver screen by sophisticated computer code.<sup>1</sup> No one inside the film realized this until it was too late, until even reality couldn't dissuade them from believing in her. She became larger than life to the audience inside the film though the audience outside the film is overly aware of the satire playing out before their eyes. Poking fun at the ability of films to create an alternative reality while presenting that alternative reality for our simple enjoyment is part of the narrative intention of the film. The audience in the theatre quickly realizes what the audience inside the film does not – but in doing so the external audience is itself unaware of the 'film' in which their ordinary lives play out as well. Surrounded by images that have captured their imagination, they may confess to believe in truth but often they simply believe what they want to believe. Being conscious of the way in which others are captured by images is no guarantee of the discernment needed to realize one's own captivity. Playing on this ambiguity is the reason why modern film has had such a powerful role in the contemporary world.

Film-making in the post-Disney age has made us aware of the power of images, especially when they are not connected to reality.

<sup>1</sup> Niccol 2002.

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These alternative universes invite us to suspend judgment for a time, eventually disorienting us to the point where the lines between myth and reality become difficult to distinguish. Classic mythology carried this same intention, as have novels in every era. We are drawn into these narratives supposing at the outset that we are leaving reality behind, only to be caught inside a story that reorients us to its plot line and values. We are introduced to an alternative set of perceptions about what matters and why. This happens not only in fictional works, but also in any work of literature or film that perceives the world differently from the way we do. The works may be gritty and realistic portrayals of life from the vantage point of those who stand in other shoes than our own, or they may represent images of life very close to our own but whose consequences are different from the way we suppose they should be. The common thread is that these are not merely presentations of alternative facts, but alternative perceptions about the way the world is. And these alternative perceptions become intelligible when they are wrapped within universes of meaning – when they connect dots across a wide set of perceptions. These sorts of perceptions or images are powerful in so far as the patterns emerging from the dots resonate with us. Asking why the patterns resonate is to ask about the way we humans are wired for meaning.

The power of images to shape and reshape our perceptions is not new to our age but neither is it without a unique ethos in our age.<sup>2</sup> The age of marketers is peculiarly modern, but the age of competing perceptions is as old as civilization. The technological capacities of contemporary film-makers is without precedent, but the crafting of imaginative universes is as ancient as the Homeric gods. Humans have always lived with competing accounts of reality, but there can be little doubt that the amount of competition among alternative visions has reached epic proportions in our time. And with the rise in the conflicts of perceptions has come a renewed attention to the manner in which our self-identity both shapes and is shaped by those perceptions.

It is naive to suppose that the world has changed but our human identities have remained relatively unchanged. The world may be filled with technological innovations undreamt of a hundred years ago, for example the Internet and advanced medical technologies, but greater change has occurred in how we relate to that world, what we think

<sup>2</sup> See Stevens 1998 for an extended cultural argument about the decline of the written word and the ascendancy of the image in the last two centuries.

about ourselves and the ways in which our religious convictions have been compartmentalized inside our self-identities.

Equally naive is the supposition that there is nothing enduring about human identity, that all of what it means to be human is fluid. Whether from a strict evolutionary naturalism, or from a cosmic pessimism about the modern world, there are those who cannot see important analogies of human existence across the diverse ages and communities of humans. They may suppose that we are on the mythological road of progress or by contrast on the certain road of corruption by the modern world. What they share is the conviction that human nature is primarily a reflection of the culture in which they are embedded. But there are fixed points that tie us together and about which our classic religious convictions seek to make sense. God has made us in his image and that imprint in some sense has persisted across the ages and across our differences. Cultural influences are important but an enduring human identity is not thereby dissolved under the conditions of modernity.<sup>3</sup> Or so the biblical witness amply testifies.

To speak of the social shape of reality is to speak of the diverse ways in which our perceptions of reality function to shape the realities we are perceiving. Our expectations influence what we see and what we hear. Our assumptions about life influence how we listen to politicians as well as friends. Simone was created by a director in his own image with the expectation that she would act and speak as every actress should – that is to say, how he would like every actress to behave. She speaks his words. She acts out his intentions. She is his virtual image except that she happens to be a different gender, much more pleasing to the eyes and never frustrating to those around her. Her iconic status takes on a life of its own in the film inside the film. She becomes so idolized by her fans, and thus by her Creator, that her (un)reality becomes the controlling force over them. Eventually, in a desperate act aimed at regaining control, the director ‘kills’ Simone, only to find that her adoring fans refuse to admit to this fact and have him imprisoned for his malicious and murderous intention. Their entertainment has become more important than justice itself, or perhaps their entertainment has become the new basis of justice. The film plot is so outrageous that we fixate on its fictional and satirical quality even while laughing in a knowing way about how close to home it hits.

<sup>3</sup> Lints 2000: 91–110.

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We shape the identities of those around us by seeing them through our filters. We listen to them with our expectations. We tell their stories through our own narrative. Normally these actions are not so outrageous that we forget that others are not simply images of our own creation, but we are often lulled into thinking that our own act of ‘shaping’ is mostly innocent and trivial. And often we cannot tell when this has happened, though we can spot it clearly when others perpetrate these distortions.

The social dimension of our identities and perceptions points at the fact that our relationships (visual, virtual, personal, communal) profoundly influence our identities.<sup>4</sup> We are creatures inside a social dynamic. That dynamic consists of a set of perceptions about the way the world is, perceptions that belong to us individually and corporately. That is to say, we not only have perceptions but are influenced by them. From one angle we may say the self is an ongoing conversation between our perceptions. Self-consciousness is that sense we have that we are both subjects (who have perceptions) and objects (which are perceived). The great mystery is that we can experience ourselves simultaneously as objects and subjects.<sup>5</sup> It is as if there are two people running around inside us – one that views others and one that views how others view us.<sup>6</sup> We take clues from ourselves and give clues to ourselves.

The clues we receive may well be peculiarly modern and deeply secular today but the persistent realities of our identities precede the modern era and will last beyond this present age.<sup>7</sup> We reflect the world we live in and the God who made us. The mystery of this double reflection is very much a part of the complex narrative of the Scriptures. It is what makes us both fragile and fixed in our identities. There

<sup>4</sup> Karl Barth’s (1975) discussion is often cited as the locus for this renaissance of relational or trinitarian discussions of personhood. Grenz (2001) offers a nice summary of this and its impact upon theological questions of personhood. From a popular cultural vantage point with roughly corresponding consequences see Brooks 2012.

<sup>5</sup> A contemporary philosopher of mind in the Islamic tradition (Fatoorchi 2008: 29) writes in a similar vein, ‘Consciousness is at once the most obvious feature of our mental life and the most mysterious.’

<sup>6</sup> The old dictum ‘Talk to yourself; don’t just listen to yourself’ captures this dynamic of self-identity.

<sup>7</sup> Berger (1967: 3) writes, ‘Every individual biography is an episode within the history of society, which both precedes and survives it. Society was there before the individual was born and it will be there after they have died. What is more, it is within society, and as a result of social processes, that the individual becomes a person, that he attains and holds onto an identity, and that he carries out the various projects that constitute his life. Persons cannot exist apart from society. The two statements that society is the product of persons and that persons are the product of society, are not contradictory.’

is an explanation for the character of our identities as fragile and fixed in the Scriptures themselves if we pay attention. The conceptual categories of the canon offer substantive help in understanding ourselves, as one might expect if the author of the canon were the Creator of the universe, who not only created all that is but also established its meaning. As a divine being who writes and speaks, this same God constitutes his creation in such a fashion that his categories of understanding are ‘built into’ that creation. Put succinctly, we are the way we are because God is the way he is, and we are the way we are because we are not God.

When God creates, he creates contexts reflective of his character. The analogies of his character are naturally found in the created order. The authors of Scripture do not merely create apt analogies to/for God from their own world of experience as they write about him. Language of God is not in the first instance simply derived reflections of human experience. God puts the analogies into creation as the divinely appointed means of understanding him.<sup>8</sup> The God who speaks, creates beings who speak, though they do not speak identically to their Creator. With words, they create worlds of meaning, but the creature’s words do not sovereignly call reality into being as does the divine word. Verbal and visual images communicate meaning into the created order as well. Marriage is a metaphor of divine fidelity throughout the Scriptures precisely because God ordained marriage as just such an analogy in the created order. Marriage is also an ‘image’ within which husbands and wives carry on a distinctive relationship. That image of marriage is influenced from a variety of quarters in any culture. In the modern world those images come from many diverse quarters, and the problem of conflicting images then serves as a difficult interpretative problem for couples. It can also disorientate us in thinking about divine fidelity and divine compassion, even as divine fidelity serves as a prophetic corrective to human experiences of infidelity.<sup>9</sup>

The God who creates constitutes his creation in such a fashion that the categories of our understanding of him are ‘hardwired’ into our being. Without filling out this account with many details just yet, the natural reflection of God in the created order and in human creatures in particular serves as the beginning of the biblical account of the *imago Dei*. Humans are created as images of God. There is nothing

<sup>8</sup> Ward 2002.

<sup>9</sup> T. Hart 2000: 334–337.

complex about this claim nor is it filled with much conceptual baggage at the beginning of the canon of Scripture. It is primarily a methodological point. As a book enacting a mega-narrative between God and his creatures, the reflections (and distortions thereof) between humankind and God are woven into the fabric of the story itself. These reflections allow the story to make the divine–human interactions intelligible.

A conceptual linkage between God and humans is one of reflection – so the opening chapters of Genesis claim. It is quite obviously more than that, but there is a surprising silence as to the substance of this reflection and thereby the restraints it places on our speculations about human identity. But that humans reflect God does not go far towards saying how they do and do not reflect him. There is little cash value in the claim itself. There is virtually no content placed in the conceptual construct of ‘image’.<sup>10</sup>

At most the language of reflection in the early chapters of Genesis instructs us how we are to read the rest of the canon though not necessarily what we will find there. Reflection is a hermeneutical principle more than a substantive theological one. We read the Scriptures with the expectation that there will be reflections along the way, some of which may appear natural while others appear as surprising divine intrusions into the story. It is not the only methodological constraint in reading the canon, but without this constraint we will miss much of what follows.

The methodological point simply amounts to this – a mirror reflects. A distorted or broken mirror also reflects, but in a distorted or broken fashion. Paying attention to reflections in the canon is to pay attention to the way in which the human narrative reflects the larger divine narrative. But the human narrative is broken and sometimes distorted. When we read the narrative, we should pay attention to the reflections, though care must be paid because sometimes they distort the divine realities to which they point. In other words the methodological constraint is negative as well as positive. Our attention should be drawn not only to the abundance of ways God is reflected in human creatures, but also to the diverse ways those reflections distort divine realities. Light is refracted in any number of ways across the canon. Paying

<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that there are not significant background clues to the use of *selem 'elohim* in Gen. 1:26–27. Rather it is to say that there is a paucity of uses across the canon that would inform the use of the *selem 'elohim* in Gen. 1. Chapter 3 below spells this out at greater length. For a very fine-grained analysis of the background clues to *selem 'elohim* see Beckerleg 2009.

attention to the manner in which the reflections illuminate the meaning of creation and the manner in which they distort their Creator are two interpretative guidelines.

The methodological commitments of the *imago Dei* are manifested in how we read the canon and also how we read ourselves. The language of the *imago Dei* draws attention away from ontological accounts of human identity towards theological accounts. Human identity is in view rather than human nature.<sup>11</sup> Accounts of human nature wrestle with the mind–body relationship, with the shape of human faculties, with the relationship of the will to the emotions, and so on. Theological accounts of human nature wrestle with these issues in the context of a wider theological framework. By contrast accounts of human identity wrestle with the issues of the meaning of human existence. Affirming that the language of *imago Dei* is a claim about human identity is to say that the *imago Dei* is part of the wider theological framework in which human meaning is embedded.

The opening chapters of Genesis for example want us to ask questions such as the following: Wherein do we find meaning for our lives? What grants our actions significance? What is important about other people? When we ask these sorts of questions, we are paying attention to human identity rather than human nature (in chapter 2 below I explain the difference between these concepts).<sup>12</sup>

Questions about human identity push our explorations towards certain kinds of questions in the context of our own lives. Why are images important in our lives? Why do we pay attention to what others think about us? What is the role of power, money or reputation? Why do these social dynamics matter?

The portrait of Simone points us in the right methodological direction. Her image is well crafted with certain goals in view. Her (un) reality is constituted by what other people think about her. Her power has little to do with physical strength or political will or with substantive human attributes. Understanding the nexus of social realities that surround her ‘image’, we realize Simone may be ontologically thin while yet having enormous social significance and weight.

<sup>11</sup> I take this to be Kelsey’s (2006: 139–158) point in reverse when he argues that the *imago Dei* is substantially insignificant in providing details of a Christian account of human nature.

<sup>12</sup> Theological anthropology has tended to think more about human nature than human identity, and as a result has misinterpreted the *imago Dei* as constituted by a set of human attributes. Undoubtedly much can be said and should be said about human attributes, but not on the basis of the limited exegetical grounds of the *imago Dei*.

## IDENTITY AND IDOLATRY

An account of human identity is not in the first instance descriptive of constituent attributes but rather thinks of meaning in social contexts – one of which is the social context of divine–human relationships. These are the lived contexts of perceptions about what matters and why. And in turn these lived contexts derive from some important ways in which they have been created and called to live. The canonical account I am seeking to describe is an account about how life is lived as reflections of God and as reflected in our communal contexts. These accounts are not concerned with a static observation of things out there. They are accounts that begin with the fundamental shape of the God–human relationship as Creator and creature, as image maker and image bearer. Thinking about human attributes as reflections of divine attributes has a role to play but it is a derivative project to the one pursued here, and makes more sense inside the wider theological framework of the image maker to image bearer relationship. That wider theological framework is more nearly in view at the outset of the canon than the narrower one of distinctive attribute reflections.

This is important to establish because it restrains the pretensions to develop a full-blown philosophical anthropology out of a relatively scant amount of conceptual resources in the canon. It also helps to keep in focus the inextricable relationship across the canon between God and humankind, between Creator and creature, between image maker and image bearer. In large measure we are striving to let the Scriptures ask the questions before we leap ahead and offer the answers.

If the *imago Dei* is a methodological postulate at the outset of the canon, it is appropriate to offer some methodological comments about the canon. In what follows, ‘canon’ will refer to those books that have formed the identity of the Christian church, because of the conviction that God has authorized these texts as his own. That authorization is rooted in the claim that God has authored the Scriptures in conjunction with a multitude of human authors. His authorship has not diminished the human production of these texts, but neither has the full humanity of these texts diminished their divine authorship. The canon is a single work of God with diverse parts. It is not a single work of any human author, but divine authorization of the canon entails that it be read as a single work whose unity is complex. It must be read as a totality in order to understand it.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> I am here combining two arguments made by Wolterstorff (2004: 217–232). The authorization argument is made most fully in his *Divine Discourse* (1995).

The church has also confessed that the God who has authorized these texts as his own is one God and three persons. The canon is a single work of God, but is a complex single work. The mystery of the Trinity simply makes more complex the divine authorization of the canon. The unity of the canon is grounded in its divine authorization, but this unity must reflect the triunity of the divine author as well. This requires conceptual resources rich enough to capture a triple-agency discourse. Human analogies are limited but may help. The collaboration in most film-making is integral to the final ‘product’. It is not primarily the work of one agent but of many. It would be wrongheaded to suppose that the different ‘strands’ of a film could be unwound into its distinct parts, each of which stands on its own. Academy awards may be given for distinct parts of the final production, but this hides rather than illuminates the truly collaborative nature of film-making. So it is with large works of architecture. Castles and cathedrals are enormous collaborative projects that nonetheless are single works on a massive scale. Rooms that appear as disjointed from each other may nonetheless fit into a pattern when the castle is viewed as a whole.<sup>14</sup>

The interpretative consequence of the canon reflecting the triunity of its divine author is that knowing the meaning of any text is a function of knowing the meaning of every text. As we read the canon, the historical conditions under which the multiple authors and editors produced the books of Scripture are not to be privileged above the triunity of its divine authorization. There are no mechanical guidelines here. Keeping the whole in view while we read the parts and the parts while we read the whole is vital.

If the canon should be read from whole to parts and from parts to whole, then it may be helpful to lean on dramatic notions of unity and diversity to provide further conceptual resources. The canon may be compared to a theological drama.<sup>15</sup> There is a plot that progresses. There are ironic twists and turns to the plot. Characters are thicker than they might at first appear. Speeches take many different forms: monologues, conflict-filled conversations, poetic whimsy, proverbial counsel, even silent non-verbal forms of communication. So Scripture is historical writing, wisdom literature, prophetic challenge and apocalyptic visions all rolled up into one grand ‘epic’. Each book of the Scriptures is conscious in its role as a distinct ‘act’

<sup>14</sup> Bartholomew and Goheen 2004a.

<sup>15</sup> Vanhoozer 2005.

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in the drama. A reader paying attention to the forest as well as the trees will see this.<sup>16</sup>

That 'forest' can be framed in any number of ways. Calling it a 'single work' simply draws attention to the claim that there is a meaningful way to talk about the unity of the canon. It does not yet fill out what the nature of the 'work' is. Consonant with much work in biblical scholarship in the last half century, it is important to note that a significant thread across the whole canon is the enactment of covenants between God and his people.<sup>17</sup> From this lens each book has some sense of being party to historical and covenantal relationships between YHWH and his people. The new covenant is new only if there are old covenants. The complex relationships between the old and new covenants animates most of the books of the New Testament. That there is an archetypal fulfilment of the covenants in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus points at the interpretative relationship between him and all of the covenants prior to his appearance. The forest and the trees matter very much in this case.<sup>18</sup>

The books of the Bible also consciously relate events, themes and characters that expound the nature of God's dealings with his people and his people's dealings with him. Marital themes of fidelity and infidelity are played out across most parts of the canon because of the conviction that marriage was an institutional reflection of the relationship between God and his people.<sup>19</sup> This is not to argue for a peculiar way of 'interpreting' any part of Scripture. It is the admonition to interpret books of the Bible as connected to the drama of Creator and creature. A plot line 'holds' the books together, though that plot line is at times overwhelmingly complex.<sup>20</sup>

Quite obviously the drama metaphor cannot capture the full breadth of the whole to the parts and the parts to the whole of the canon. The individual books in the canon do not appear as one chronologically ordered drama. And one should be careful not to subsume the diverse genres represented in the canon neatly under the one genre umbrella of a dramatic narrative. This would be to privilege the whole while diminishing the parts, or at least some of the parts. Yet the drama

<sup>16</sup> Lints 1993.

<sup>17</sup> For a helpful introduction to the hermeneutical significance of covenants in Scripture see Horton 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Vos 1948 for a thoughtful analysis of the covenantal threads that tie the Bible together as a whole and their interconnections.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Hugenberger 1994 for an extended argument to this effect.

<sup>20</sup> A helpful essay that both defends and clarifies this claim at greater length is Bartholomew and Goheen 2004b.

metaphor oft mentioned in contemporary discussions of theological interpretations of Scripture serves a useful function in restraining the more dominant impulse to privilege the parts over the whole.<sup>21</sup> Striving to keep the metaphor itself thick enough to account for the interesting diversity across the canon therefore remains important.

Yet there is no 'one size fits all' template of diversity for all the structures of our lives, nor for the canon of Scripture.<sup>22</sup> Some forms of diversity are trivial and some have eternal significance. Some are appropriate and morally commendable, while others distort the divine character and the triune reflections of that character in the created order.

The modern construct of democracy has given us a much richer discourse of diversity, but it has also unleashed a rhetoric of pluralism that too quickly flattens out differences, and thereby masks the many kinds of differences we encounter. Our cultural context can also submerge the diversely appropriate ways we might deal with different kinds of diversity. The language of diversity is different from the language of pluralism. The dominant cultural rhetoric of pluralism has too often run roughshod over more subtle distinctions of diversities. So to some the language of pluralism signals the unmitigated disaster of postmodern democratic culture. To others the language of pluralism protects all that we should cherish in a modern democracy. But this truncates the language of diversity into two and only two perspectives. Often times the heated rhetoric of our public discourse does not allow us to find the virtues of diversity we might hold in common, the vices of other forms of diversity about which we are needlessly divided and a host of other forms of diversity about which we will have to learn to deal with differently.<sup>23</sup>

Let me suggest that the differences that matter in the canon are those that reflect the conceptually interesting differences in the Trinity. That is to say, the Trinity exercises control over the differences in Scripture. This is the principle of hermeneutical absorption alluded to earlier.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Notable examples in addition to Vanhoozer 2005 of theological works employing the dramatic motif include von Balthasar 1988, Horton 2002 and Wright 1992.

<sup>22</sup> Lints 2013.

<sup>23</sup> Lints 2011.

<sup>24</sup> Being 'absorbed' is a term borrowed from many within the so-called Yale School (Hans Frei and George Lindbeck most particularly). It was once called the New Yale School, but since all the major players have retired or passed on and the framework is no longer the cohesive vision at Yale Divinity School it seems appropriate to refer to it as the Old Yale School. The fullest articulation of the absorption principle can be found in Frei 1974. The clearest summary of the principle can be found in Marshall 1990: 69–102.

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Throughout the biblical witness large constructs illuminate the complex relationships in which we are embedded. One of the first to appear on the pages of Scripture has to do with humans themselves. Genesis 1 narrates the primal creation not of one individual, but of two diverse people who nonetheless are united by a relationship into 'one flesh'. Although different, they belong to each other. Male and female are created as beings who offer something the other does not have. They find satisfaction in the intimacy of their union, which is richer by virtue of their differences. We might say the idea of 'person' from the beginning of Scripture is a 'being involved in the relationship of unity and diversity'. In some important sense people find their meaning only in relation to another person who is different from them.<sup>25</sup> The words instituting marriage in Genesis 2 function not merely to cement a social contract between consenting parties, but rather as a deeply theological claim on their reflected identity. Marriage is a significant recognition of this unity in diversity across the canon.

It has become increasingly obvious that Scripture, accompanied by a corresponding suspicion about older notions of 'individualism', presents humans as essentially 'social'. The pendulum is swinging in our public conscience towards notions of personhood rooted in communities and away from Cartesian 'solitary minds'.<sup>26</sup> Christians ought to celebrate this swinging of the pendulum in part because it opens the door to recognizing more clearly the nature of our unity and diversity as created human beings framed by the Scriptures. If the cultural pendulum were to swing too far in this direction, individuals would cease to be anything above their relationships. That is not likely to happen anytime soon in the West, though there are cultures outside the West and small literary communities in the West where this has begun to happen. In our land of 'What's in it for me?' rank individualism still shows no signs of losing its traction.<sup>27</sup>

Across the canon is another significant relationship for humans, that of creature to Creator. If God is ontologically prior to us, as the Bible affirms, then he is also the source of all that we mean by 'person'. Consequently there is a relationship to God as 'other' that captures the identity of human personhood. It is appropriate to say that human identity is constituted in relationship to God. It is also true to say, asymmetrically, that God's identity is not rooted in his relation to

<sup>25</sup> Volf 1996.

<sup>26</sup> W. Barrett 1986. Putnam's (2001) work charts this pendulum swing.

<sup>27</sup> The now classic Putnam 2001 amply testifies the enduring strength of individualism in contemporary consumer cultures.

humanity. His existence is rooted in the triune relationships that exist prior to and thus apart from creation. God's permanence as 'three persons in eternal communion with each other' grounds his independence from human personhood. By contrast, the transitory character of human personhood grounds its dependence in the triune persons.

The *imago Dei* captures this transitory identity – as an image is contingent upon the object for its identity, so the *imago Dei* is contingent upon God for its identity. Conversely the Scriptures use the language of 'idolatry' when this dependence upon God is subverted in religiously significant ways. The idol may be ontologically vacuous but is still incredibly powerful. Its power lies in the transformation of the divine image bearer into the image of the idol. People, who are created as divine image bearers, are also capable of reflecting the created order. Thus humans may be said to have a reflective identity. In some sense they find meaning outside themselves by virtue of what they reflect.

The language of 'image' argues for a dependence upon an 'original'.<sup>28</sup> The nature of 'dependence' is not manifest until something further is known about the image, the original and the relation between them. The earliest account of the *imago Dei* (Gen. 1:26–27) is notoriously silent about the character of that concept as such.<sup>29</sup> The witness of the Scriptures as canon serves as a touchstone for these matters and to which Christian theological enquiry is indebted.<sup>30</sup> The shape of the canonical story suggests that the overriding relation of the image (humans) to the original (triune God) is that of worship, honour, completion and satisfaction, and conversely suggests the subverting of that relationship of image to original is that of perversion, corruption, consumption and possession.<sup>31</sup>

It is a relational dynamic that connects image (person) to original (God) but it is also a relationship of worship or honour that depicts this connection. From the beginning to the end of redemptive history the image is constituted by its (dis)honouring of God. The image

<sup>28</sup> Some of what follows finds its genesis in the work of Meredith G. Kline (1980), and then in turn from Henri Blocher (1984).

<sup>29</sup> By most reckoning, the language of 'image' (*selem*) in the Gen. 1 account is rooted in the ancient construct of a concrete form representing an invisible deity. See the related articles under 'Image', in *NIDNTT* 2, 284–293.

<sup>30</sup> Grenz (2001: 267–303) provides a paradigmatic hermeneutical discussion of the *imago Dei* – moving from Genesis to the remainder of the canon and then returning from the end to the beginning.

<sup>31</sup> C. Plantinga (1995: 10) argues that 'sin' is conceptually messy. So idolatry is never merely 'one sort of practice'. Rather it is a large umbrella of concepts, all of which subvert the original relationship between image and original.

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(humankind) finds its *telos* (purpose) in the honouring relationship to the original (God the Creator). This is true at both the beginning and the end of the canon.

Human identity is rooted in what it reflects.<sup>32</sup> That reflection will be strong or fragile as a function of this ‘reflected relationship’. The reflection of fleeting material goods such as money or power will be tenuous and transitory. The reflection of the living and loving God will be enriching and enduring. The dynamics of human identity, however, are similar in both instances. Humans gain an identity in the social network of reflections in which they are embedded and upon which they set their hearts. In this respect, as Leora Batnitzky comments, ‘God and idolatry are codependent conceptually and in the lives of the faithful.’<sup>33</sup> Identity and idolatry are intertwined. This draws our attention to the conceptual resources and restraints that the canon itself places on this dynamic. We turn to the beginning of that project in the next chapter.

<sup>32</sup> Beale’s (2008: 16) work on idolatry has paid particular attention to the exegetical basis of this conceptual claim. He takes his initial clues from Isaiah’s witness to idolatry and summarizes the claim, ‘what you revere you will resemble’. He has painstakingly followed the textual clues about the role of idolatry in Israel’s sojourn after their entrance into the Promised Land. I am indebted to many of his exegetical insights, particularly in the major prophets, as chapter 5 below bears out.

<sup>33</sup> Batnitzky 2000: 11.