

Book of Moses Essays #49: Let Us Make Man in Our Image, After Our Likeness (Moses 2-26)

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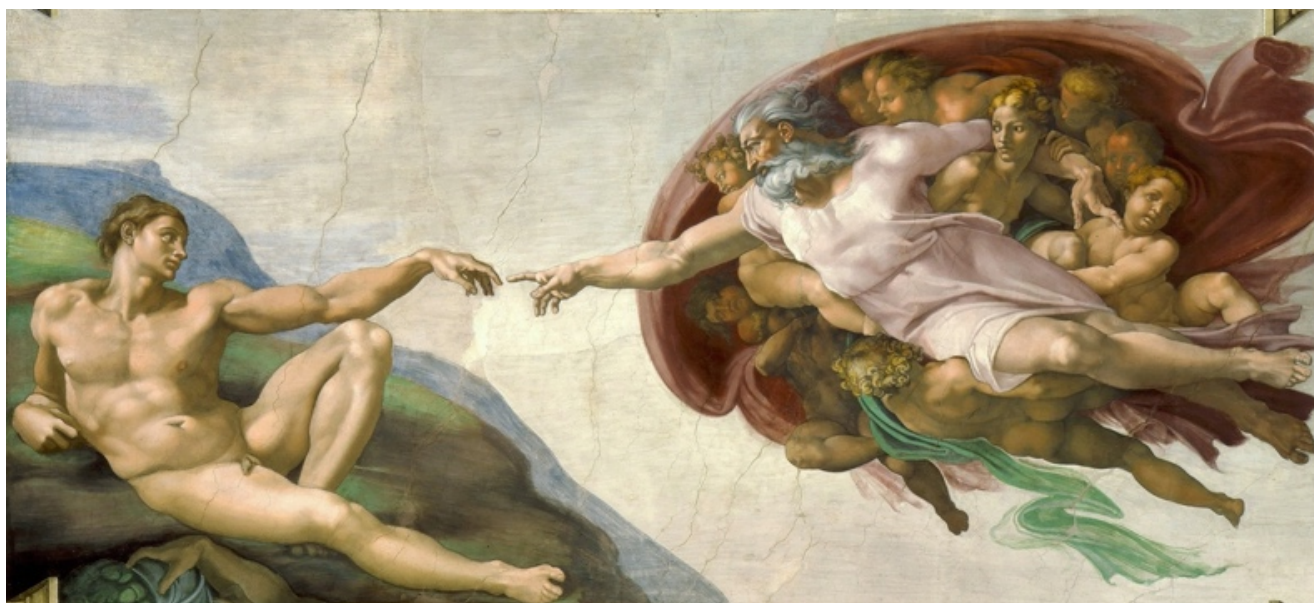


Figure 1. Michelangelo Buonarroti, 1475-1564: The Creation of Adam, 1510

In this *Essay*, we will discuss the Moses 2 account of the creation of Adam and Eve. We will focus on the interpretation of two difficult phrases in verse 26: “let us make man” and “in our image, after our likeness.” We will show how the Book of Moses and the teachings of the Restored Church of Jesus Christ shed light on the longstanding scholarly controversies about these verses. First, a digression on the most famous painting of the creation of Adam.

Of Michelangelo’s immortal depiction, De Vecchi eloquently writes:^[1]

Perhaps the best-known of the scenes in the Sistine Chapel, *The Creation of Adam* must also have aroused particular admiration among the artist's contemporaries, who discerned in it the materialization of one of the highest ideals of Renaissance culture: the 'dignity' of man, created by God 'in his own image.' ... [The] exaltation of the spiritual faculties of man was never separated from that of the beauty of the human body, 'the mirror of God' and the culmination of the Creation. ...

Vasari describes Adam as 'a figure whose beauty, pose, and contours are of such a quality that he seems newly created by his Supreme and First Creator rather [than] by the brush and design of a mere mortal.' Seen against an indistinct natural background that is only just hinted at, as if it were the dawn of the world, the youthful, athletic figure reclining on a grassy slope, almost on the edge of an abyss, seems as if he is about to rise from the ground. He holds out his arm toward that of the Lord, who, borne aloft amidst a flight of angels [or the premortal spirits of humanity], stands out brightly against the shell of shadow of his huge purple mantle. The remarkable invention of the outstretched arm and the forefingers about to meet becomes a metaphor for the vital energy that passes from the Creator to the creature fashioned in his image, awakening his heroic vigor. ... [Adam's] adolescent face, seen in profile, still lacking a definite expression, contrasts with the mature, intensely energetic one of the Lord, with his gray hair and long beard streaming in the air."

Although Adam and the Father are the central figures of this panel, much attention has been given to the beautiful and enigmatic female figure who is intently regarding the creation of the first man while wrapped in the loving embrace of God's left arm. Her identity has variously been given as the immortal Sophia (Wisdom),^[3] or as the premortal Eve. Relying on the analysis of the structure of the three Sistine Chapel Adam and Eve panels by art historian Leo Steinberg,^[4] Gary A. Anderson observes:^[5]

Just to the right of Eve sits an infant who is also held by God the Father, though this time with just the thumb and index finger. The extension of his fingers corresponds exactly to the way a priest would grasp the Eucharistic wafer. In other words, this child is Mary's boy, the Christ child. Strikingly, he is the only figure on the entire ceiling who looks directly down into the gaze of the viewer. And so our question as we ponder the women in these three panels: Are they Eve, the first woman and spouse of Adam, or Mary, the Mother of Jesus and symbol of the Church? Or perhaps more accurately, are these women in truth both Eve and Mary?

Anderson concludes that just as Christ is portrayed in scripture as the second Adam,^[6] Mary is being depicted here as the second Eve.

A final note about the fresco from the historian of sacred art, Marko Ivan Rupnik:^[7]

When, in 1512, Michelangelo finally completed the fresco on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, one of the best known paintings of all time, the cardinals supervising the work admired the magnificent fresco for several hours. Afterward, they wanted to meet the master, Michelangelo. They reproached him, saying: Do it over again!

Their dissatisfaction, of course, was not for the work as a whole, but for a seemingly unimportant detail. Michelangelo had drawn the panel of the creation of man with the fingers of God and Adam touching each other. The cardinals said that the fingers should not touch. Indeed, they required not only that the fingers be separated, but also that the finger of God would be fully extended, while the last joint of the finger of Adam would bend back.

A simple detail but with a surprising meaning: God is always there, but it is man who must decide to search for him. If he so desire, he can reach out and touch the finger of God, but otherwise he can spend his whole life without searching. Thus, the last joint of Adam's contracted finger represents free will.

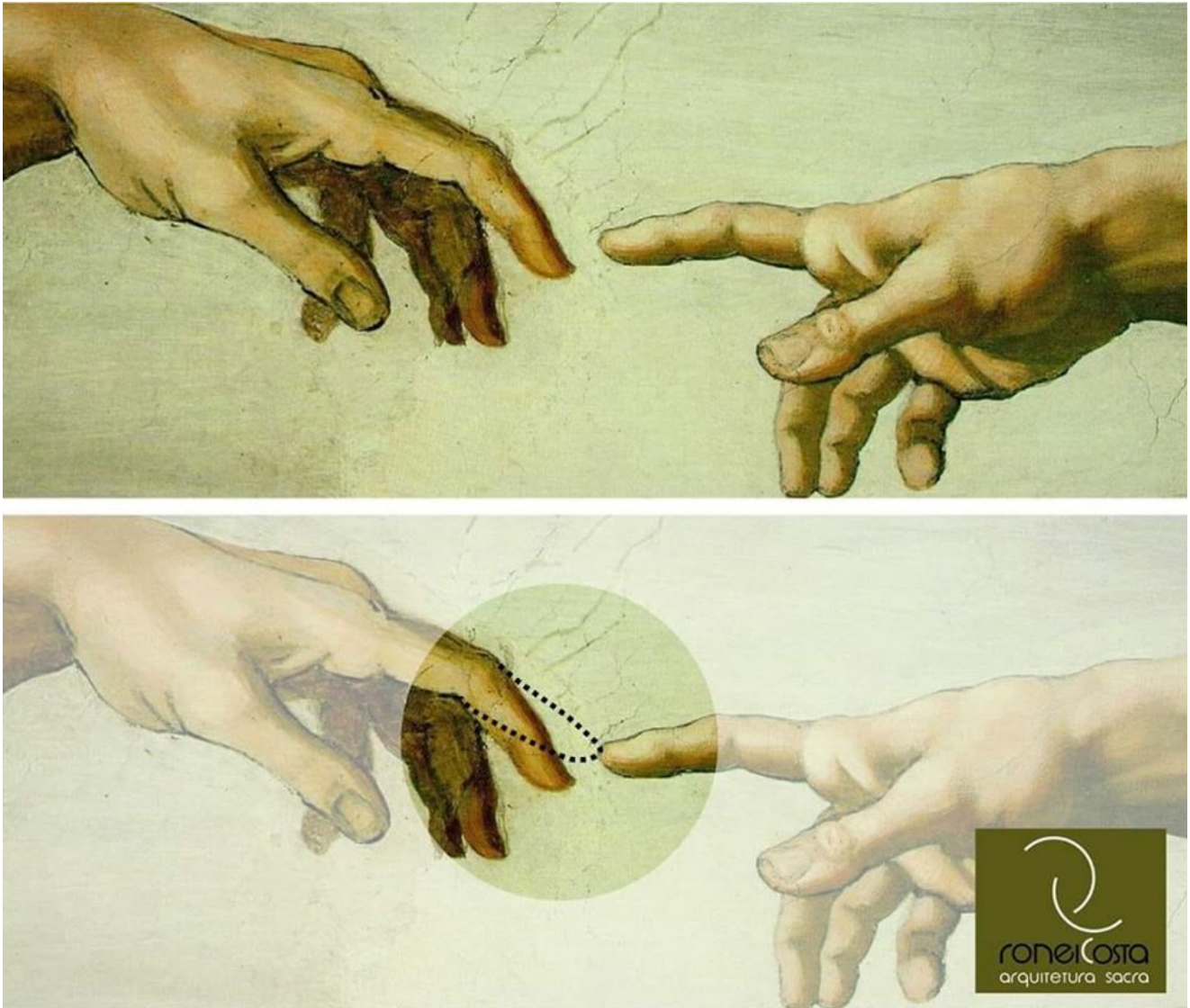


Figure 2. The Fingers of God and Adam

“Let *Us* Make Man”

Readers may wonder whether the reference is only to Adam or to both Adam and Eve. The term, “man” (Hebrew *‘adam*), as it is used in this context, is meant to encompass both man and woman, as shown in verses 27–28 and Moses 6:9, “where it is construed with plural verbs and terminations.”^[8] By way of contrast, the use of the Hebrew term *‘ish* to mean “man” in the everyday sense is eventually introduced only after the woman (*‘ishah*) is created. President Spencer W. Kimball further explained that man, as used here, was not meant to describe “a separate man, but a complete man, which is husband and wife.”^[9]

With respect to the “us” in the phrase, the Book of Moses, unlike Genesis, explicitly identifies the other participant in the discussion as God’s “Only Begotten.”^[10]

Notably, both other instances of the use of this plural formula in Genesis involve important decisions about the fate of humanity: the expulsion from Eden^[11] and the dispersal after the destruction of Babel.^[12] Despite the fact that Joshua Seixas’ *Hebrew Grammar*, which Joseph Smith studied in Kirtland, describes the Hebrew equivalent of the English “Elohim” as a singular noun with a plural form,^[13] the Prophet came to interpret the term as a plural.

The plural form of this expression has long been an interpretive problem for commentators that look at the Old Testament through the lens of strict monotheism. The phrase is often explained by way of analogy to “the royal we” used by a king or queen in self-reference, however this does not explain why it occurs only in the early chapters of Genesis and nowhere else.^[15] Moreover, the point of the verse at hand is to show “the unique correspondence between God and man, not the majesty of God.”^[16]

A view consistent with Latter-day Saint scripture^[17] is to imagine the setting for the verse as God addressing not only the premortal Jesus Christ but, in addition, a heavenly council.^[18] It is significant, observes Faulconer, that: “Human creation is not a simple act of God’s fiat; rather, creation is a subject of consideration and discussion. ... God creates humanity in response to others, rather than as a mere act of self-will. Even in the beginning there is already relation: there is no absolute beginning, not even in the beginning.”^[19]

Describing this scene, the Prophet stated: “The head God called together the Gods and sat in grand council to bring forth the world.”^[20] Friedman likewise writes: “In pagan myth, the chief god, when formally speaking for the council of the gods, speaks in the plural.”^[21] Since, for most Christian and Jewish commentators, the idea of a plurality of gods is unacceptable, a court of angels is often imagined in place of a polytheistic council — though one is forced to admit that the concept of many gods is hinted at elsewhere in the Old Testament.^[22] Further describing the composition of a council of gods, Margaret Barker argues that the ancient religion of Israel, prior to alterations by reforming Deuteronomists, clearly distinguished between the “Most High God” and several Sons of God, the chief of which was Yahweh (Jehovah).^[23] She marshals evidence to show that the early Jewish converts to Christianity who retained shreds of the ancient belief naturally saw Jesus Christ as the bodily manifestation of Yahweh, the Holy One of Israel.^[24]

The abrupt change of style between the description of the creation of animals (“Let the earth bring forth ...”) and that of man (“Let us make ...”) signals the unique status of the man and the woman, created in God’s image and likeness as the pinnacle of the “manifestly ascending gradational order” of Creation.^[25] Moreover, the phrasing of Abraham’s account (“Let us go down and form man. ... So the Gods went down to organize man”^[26]), together with the additional detail about the creation of Adam and Eve provided in Moses 3, make strikingly clear the increased personal and direct involvement of God in the creation of man. The idea in and of itself does not necessarily conflict with scientific evidence that seems to rule out the concept of a “special creation” for the human body, however, as Kent Jackson comments:^[27]

Whatever the process for creating humans may have been, the scriptures are clear in differentiating between that process and the process by which other life was made.

“In Our Image, After Our Likeness”

Unlike the earlier creatures who were each made “after [their] kind,”^[28] man and woman were made in *God’s* image and likeness.^[29] The Prophet Joseph Smith made it clear that this phrase applied not only to the physical appearance of Adam and Eve, but also to their spiritual nature which was, in the beginning:^[30]

innocent, harmless, and spotless, bearing the same image as the God’s. And when man fell he did not lose His image, but [only] His character, still retaining the image of his Maker ... And through the atonement of Christ, and the resurrection and obedience in the Gospel, we shall again be conformed to the [full] image of ... Jesus Christ, then we shall have attained to the [full] image, glory, and character of God.

About this “double movement” of image and likeness, Faulconer observes: “humans begin like God and, at the same time, they come to be like him.”^[31] Notice that these phrases are reversed when the birth of Seth is described: “in his [Adam’s] own likeness, after his own image.”^[32]

Moses 6:9 is more specific than 2:26 in saying that man was created “in the image of his [God’s] own body.”^[33] Joseph Smith spoke very plainly about the meaning of these words:^[34]

God Himself who sits enthroned in yonder heavens is a Man like unto one of yourselves— that is the great secret! If the veil were rent today and ... you would see Him in all the person, image, fashion, and very form of a man, like yourselves. For Adam was a man formed in his likeness and created in the very fashion and image of God.

Non-Latter-day Saint scholar Philip Munoa concurs, citing Levison who concluded that “The image itself consists of physical similarity to God.”^[35] He recalls the tradition in *Genesis Rabbah* 8:10 that:^[36]

Adam's likeness to God is so exact that Adam must be put to sleep so that the angels might worship the right person. ... In [*Yalqut Shim'oni*] 1:20 on Genesis 2:9 the angels exclaim, when they notice Adam's resemblance to God, 'Are there two powers in heaven?'"

Jacob Neusner finds it "stunning" that the rabbinical commentators took this idea so literally, affirming that even "the angels did not know man from God," stating, "I cannot imagine a more daring affirmation of humanity."^[37]

Moses 2:27 equates the image of God to the image of the Only Begotten: "in mine own image, in the image of mine Only Begotten."^[38] This recalls similar teachings in Philo and the Gnostics that "the Logos is the Shadow/Image of God,^[39] [while] the man of [Moses 2:26-7] is the shadow/image of the Logos, a shadow of a shadow, as it were."^[40]

Conclusion

We close with a statement from the great Hebrew Bible scholar, Nahum Sarna, who described the import of the Genesis description of man's creation in the image and likeness of God in terms that will ring true to Latter-day Saints. He comments:^[41]

The words used ... to convey these ideas can be better understood in the light of a phenomenon registered in both Mesopotamia and Egypt where the ruling monarch is described as "the image" or "the likeness" of a god. ... Without doubt, the terminology employed in Genesis 1:26 is derived from regal vocabulary, which serves to elevate the king above the ordinary run of men. In the Bible this idea has become democratized. All human beings are created "in the image of God"; each person bears the stamp of royalty.

This article is adapted and updated from Bradshaw, Jeffrey M. *Creation, Fall, and the Story of Adam and Eve*. 2014 Updated ed. In *God's Image and Likeness 1*. Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2014. <https://archive.org/download/140123IGIL12014ReadingS>, pp. 88, 111–114.

Further Reading

Bradshaw, Jeffrey M. *Creation, Fall, and the Story of Adam and Eve*. 2014 Updated ed. In *God's Image and Likeness 1*. Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2014, pp. 88, 111–114.

Brown, S. Kent, and Jeffrey M. Bradshaw. "Man and Son of Man: Probing Theology and Christology in the Book of Moses and in Jewish and Christian Tradition." In *Tracing Ancient Threads in the Book of Moses*, edited by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, David Rolph Seely, John W. Welch and Scott Gordon, in preparation. Orem, UT; Springville, UT; Redding, CA; Toole, UT: The Interpreter Foundation, Book of Mormon Central, FAIR, and Eborn Books, 2021.

Draper, Richard D., S. Kent Brown, and Michael D. Rhodes. *The Pearl of Great Price: A Verse-by-Verse Commentary*. Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2005, pp. 211–217.

Notes on Figures

Figure 1. Public domain. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Michelangelo_-_Creation_of_Adam_\(cropped\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Michelangelo_-_Creation_of_Adam_(cropped).jpg) (accessed September 7, 2020).

Figure 2. No known restrictions. <https://www.tucucu.com/en/2020/06/27/the-mystery-in-the-sistine-chapel-is-behind-the-finger-of-god/>

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Endnotes

[1] P. De Vecchi *et al.*, Michelangelo, p. 163.

[2] See B. Blech *et al.*, *Secrets*, p. 200. On the seeming "brainlike" shape of God's mantle that encloses the divine personages and its possible symbolism relating to the origins of the future descendants of Adam and Eve, see J. M. Bradshaw, *God's Image* 1, Endnote 2-21, pp. 128-129.

[3] See B. Blech *et al.*, *Secrets*, pp. 197, 199.

[4] L. Steinberg, *Who's Who*.

[5] G. A. Anderson, *Perfection*, p. 4.

[6] 1 Corinthians 15:22, 45-47.

[7] M. I. Rupnik, *A Arte Como Expressão da Vida Litúrgica*, p. 145. Original text is in Portuguese. Translated freely from an Italian version of the text, with thanks to Solange Bambina Poulaert and Chris Miasnik.

[8] N. M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 12.

[9] S. W. Kimball, *Blessings*, p. 71.

[10] *Moses* 2:26.

[11] *Moses* 4:28. Cf. *Genesis* 3:22.

[12] *Genesis* 11:7. See N. M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 12.

[13] J. Seixas, *Manual*, *Genesis* 1:1, p. 85.

[14] E.g., J. Smith, Jr. *et al.*, *Words*, *Thomas Bullock Report*, 16 June 1844, pp. 378-379. Cf. J. Smith, Jr., *Teachings*, 16 June 1844, pp. 371-372.

[15] R. E. Friedman, *Commentary*, p. 12.

[16] K. A. Mathews, *New American*, p. 161.

[17] E.g., *Doctrine and Covenants* 121:32; *Abraham* 4:26.

[18] D. N. Freedman, *Humanity*, pp. 18-21. See also J. M. Bradshaw, *God's Image* 1, *Commentary* 2:27-b, p. 115.

[19] J. E. Faulconer, *Adam and Eve*, 5. Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Origin of Man* and Chrysostom, *Sermons on Genesis* 2:1, cited in A. Louth *et al.*, *Genesis* 1-11, p. 28.

[20] J. Smith, Jr., *Teachings*, 7 April 1844, p. 348. Cf. J. Smith, Jr. *et al.*, *Words*, *Thomas Bullock Report*, 16 June 1844, p. 379.

[21] R. E. Friedman, *Commentary*, p. 12.

- [22] See M. S. Heiser *et al.*, Exchange; M. S. Smith, Monotheism; J. M. Bradshaw, God's Image 1, Commentary 1:6-f, p. 48; 4:11-b, p. 253; 4:28-a, p. 276.
- [23] E.g., M. Barker, Older, pp. 174-176.
- [24] E.g., M. Barker, Angel, pp. 190-212.
- [25] Sarna, 1989 #296}, p. 11.
- [26] Abraham 4:26-27.
- [27] K. P. Jackson, Genesis, p. 82. See J. M. Bradshaw, God's Image 1, Commentary 3:7-a, p. 157.
- [28] See J. M. Bradshaw, God's Image 1, Commentary 2:11-c, p. 107.
- [29] J. H. Sailhamer, Genesis, p. 37.
- [30] J. Smith, Jr. *et al.*, Words, 9 July 1843, p. 231, punctuation modernized, bracketed words added for clarification. J. Smith, Jr., Teachings 2007, p. 52 interprets and punctuates the citation differently, and changes "retaining" to "retained" (cf. T. G. Madsen, LDS View, p. 105).
- [31] J. E. Faulconer, Adam and Eve, 10. Cf. Irenaeus, Heresies, 5:6:1, pp. 531-532; Moses 4:28. See also Origen, On first principles 3:6:1, Diadochus of Photice, On spiritual perfection 4, Gregory of Nyssa, On the Origin of Man—all three cited in A. Louth *et al.*, Genesis 1-11, pp. 29-30, 33.
- [32] Moses 6:10.
- [33] Cf. Targum Yerushalmi: "in the likeness of the presence of the Lord" (J. W. Etheridge, Onkelos).
- [34] J. Smith, Jr., 7 April 1844, as amalgamated in S. Larson, King Follett, p. 200.
- [35] See also D. N. Freedman, Humanity, pp. 16-17, cited in J. M. Bradshaw, God's Image 1, Moses 2 Gleanings, pp. 123-124.
- [36] P. B. Munoa, Four Powers, p. 101.
- [37] J. Neusner, Confronting, p. 63. See E. J. Hamori, Embodied God and D. L. Paulsen, Embodiment for historical overviews of the doctrine of divine embodiment. See also D. N. Freedman, Humanity, pp. 16-17; J. M. Bradshaw, God's Image 1, Introduction, p. 10; Commentary 1:6-g, p. 48; 1:12-c, p. 53; Excursus 7: Time and Eternity, p. 537; Excursus 30: Adam-God Theory and the Heavenly and Earthly Adam, p. 603.
- [38] Cf. John 14:7-10.
- [39] E.g., Philo, Interpretation, 3, 96, p. 61.
- [40] W. Williams, Shadow, citing Philo, De opificio mundi 25 (1:6). Philo, however, did not have resemblance (see J. Gross, Divinization, p. 76, citing De opificio mundi 69 [1:18]). See also Ether 3:15-16.
- [41] N. M. Sarna, Genesis, p. 12. See also N. M. Sarna, Mists, p. 51; J. M. Bradshaw, God's Image 1, Commentary 6:10-a, p. 482.