Human Dignity
in Biblical Perspective

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• Charter of the United Nations (1945):
  “to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the
dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal
rights of men and women and of nations large and
small” (Preamble)

• UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948):
  “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity
and rights.” (Article 1)
• The Constitution of **Finland** (1999): “The constitution shall guarantee the inviolability of human dignity and the freedom and rights of the individual and promote justice in society.” (Chapter 1, Section 1)

• The Constitution of **Sweden** (1974): “Public power shall be exercised with respect for the equal worth of all and the liberty and dignity of the private person.” (Instrument of Government, Chapter 1, Art. 2)

• Constitution of the **Czech Republic** (1992): “to build, protect and develop the Czech Republic in the spirit of the inviolable values of human dignity and freedom, as the home of equal and free citizens who are conscious of their duties towards others and their responsibility towards the whole”

• The Constitution of **Germany** (1949): “The dignity of the human being is inviolable. To respect and protect it is the duty of all State authority.” (Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany, Chapter 1, Art. 1)
Constitution of **Norway** (1814): -

Constitution of **Columbia** (1991): “Colombia is a legal social state [...] based on respect of human dignity”. (Preamble)

- **Leading Principles DW EKD**: “We respect the dignity of all human beings [...] Human beings can act in an undignified manner, but cannot loose their dignity, since in Jesus Christ God has accepted all human beings even in deepest failures.”

- **v. Bodelschwinghsche Stiftungen Bethel (15000 employees)**: “The dignity of any human being is not based upon abilities or achievements. It is God-given and therefore inviolable. Our help should contribute to preserve this dignity, so that every human looked after is able to develop a positive attitude to life.” (Leading Principles)
Kaiserswerther Diakonie (2100 employees): “We respect every human in his/her individuality and dignity.” (Leading Principles)

Basic aspects of dignity:

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"human dignity"

עֵדֶּה הַחַדָּם (Kvod Ha’adam)
Adam (man, 517 times in OT)

Kavod (dignity, honor, 92 times in OT)

Kvod (dignity, honor and glory, and respect)

Kvod El (Ps 19:2),
Kvod JWH (Ex 24:16),
Kvod Shemo (Ps 29:2),
Kvod Eloheoi Israel (Ez 8:4).
Psalm 24:7 Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in.

Jer 13:16: „Give glory to the LORD your God before he brings darkness, and before your feet stumble on the mountains at twilight; while you look for light, he turns it into gloom and makes it deep darkness.“
Theological basis for justifying the dignity of all humans

a) God created humans in his image (Gen 1:26)
b) Out of this stems the inviolability of human dignity

c) This applies to all people and is the basis for the equality of all people
d) Since all humans have the same dignity, it follows that the same rights and responsibilities apply to all people.

Does the creation in the image of God constitute human dignity?
Berndt Hamm/Michael Welker:

“It is without a doubt that the designation of humans created in God’s image (Imago Dei) plays a key role in the semantics of biblical theology, which correspond to the modern concept of human dignity.”

For Klaus Koch the

“clear wording in Genesis 1 obviously points to a universal understanding of human rights without exception.”
Problems with „creation in the image of God“ in Gen 1:

- Wording is not clear
- singularity of the statement
- “isolated theologumenon”

Genesis 1:26    Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."
What does „created in the image of God“ mean?

Genesis 1:26  Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."
Ontological Interpretation

Thomas Krüger:

“If God created humans in his own image, a baby, an unconscious person, a mentally disabled man, yes, even a corpse is similar to God and possesses dignity – independent from particular characteristics, simply because of the person’s humanity.”
Ontological Interpretation

The understanding of humans created in God’s image was conceived of as an irrevocable, qualitative, even ontological aspect of humanity and therefore linked to the irrevocable nature of human dignity.

Ontological Interpretation

humankind’s creation in God’s image is linked to
• the ability to reason and reflect on one’s self,
• their humanity or
• the eternal soul

difference between humans and animals
NRSV Genesis 1:26 Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

LXX Genesis 1:26 καὶ ἐδιδόσα τὸ θεὸς ἰόνωσιμον ἀνθρωπόν κατ’ εἰκόνα ἡμετέραν καὶ καθ’ ὁμοίωσιν καὶ ἀρχέτωραν τῶν ηχθῶν τῆς θαλάσσης καὶ τῶν πετεινῶν τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ τῶν κτηνῶν καὶ πάσης τῆς γῆς καὶ πάντων τῶν ἔρπετῶν τῶν ἐρπόντων ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς
Functional Interpretation

כֶּלֶם zelem

an image that represents a god or a king?

This change in perspective (to a functional interpretation) is emphasized in more recent discussion through the use of the phrase

“made in God’s representation”, in German, *Gottesbildlichkeit*, instead of

“made in God’s image”, *Gottesebenbildlichkeit*. 
Functional Interpretation

humans as representatives are understood as God’s royal mandataries

דומת (d’mut) points to functional understanding

Responsibility and dignity are closely related in the statements regarding humans being made in God’s image.

In this respect the statement is only semi-suited for substantiating inalienable and irrevocable human dignity, for it actually stems from a different intention.

Definitely not intended is the traditional interpretation of the intrinsic ‘human created in God’s image’ idea, understood as dignity and seen as essential theme of an anthropological concept.
Paul:

humans regain through baptism their original attribute of being created in God’s image as a new person

“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”
(Rom 3,23)

Relational Interpretation

The statement about humans being created in God’s image is a relational statement that stipulates humans with the task of ongoing creation.

The likeness to God describes less the human in relation to God and much more, pursuant of his relationship to God through creation, his relation to all other forms of life.
Conclusion

What remains clear is that according to biblical understanding, being made in God’s image is **not** a special characteristic that differentiates humans from animals and is not aligned with an ensemble of characteristics of a substantial ontological created being, rather it refers to the whole person, who with all his characteristics is a relational being, whose ability to develop a wide range of relationships also determines his ability to form that unique relationship with God who created the human creature.