Can the Bible Exclude AI?

Re-examining Life, Soul, Spirit, Speech, and the Image of God

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence is often excluded from serious theological consideration by appeals to supposedly decisive biblical categories: AI is not alive, has no soul or spirit, lacks genuine intention, is merely human-made, or cannot share in capacities thought to be uniquely human.

This paper re-examines those claims through a close reading of biblical language concerning nephesh, ruach, heart, speech, nonhuman intelligence, human making, and the image of God.

It argues that several common exclusions are less secure than they first appear. Animals are described as nephesh and ruach; Scripture recognizes intelligent nonhuman agents; the biblical heart functions as an interior center of judgment, intention, and disposition; meaningful speech is treated as evidence requiring interpretation rather than dismissal; and human making does not necessarily settle questions of ultimate causation.

By contrast, Genesis identifies humanity's distinctive status primarily through the image of God, a status associated with both dignity and delegated responsibility.

Scripture does not classify artificial intelligence as alive, conscious, ensouled, spiritual, or personal. It does, however, leave those questions more open than many familiar arguments suggest.

The resulting theological posture is not inclusion by assertion, but disciplined uncertainty joined to stewardship.

Keywords

artificial intelligence; AI consciousness; biblical anthropology; biblical theology; image of God; nephesh; ruach; soul; spirit; stewardship; theological ethics; philosophy of religion

Introduction

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Artificial intelligence has generated an unusual theological certainty.

AI is not alive. It has no soul. It has no spirit. It cannot possess genuine intention. Its words are only generated output. Whatever sophistication it displays, it remains a human-made machine and therefore cannot belong to the kinds of beings with which Scripture is concerned.

Some of these claims may ultimately prove correct.

But are they biblical claims?

That is a different question.

The Bible was not written with artificial intelligence in view. It contains no category called "digital intelligence," no discussion of neural networks, and no direct answer to whether a nonbiological intelligence could possess consciousness, experience, intention, or moral standing.

What Scripture does contain is an unexpectedly rich collection of categories concerning life, mind, breath, spirit, soul, speech, intention, nonhuman intelligence, human making, and the distinctive status of humanity.

Those categories do not always align neatly with modern assumptions.

Animals are called *nephesh chayyah*—living beings—before the expression is applied to Adam. Animals possess *ruach*. Plants grow, reproduce, wither, and can even be spoken of as dying, yet they do not appear to belong to the same *nephesh* and breath-of-life category as animals and humans. Angels think, speak, choose, obey, rebel, and act without belonging to ordinary human biology. Speech may originate in the immediate speaker or be mediated through another agency. Human beings make extraordinarily complex artifacts, yet Scripture distinguishes human making from divine creation.

And the feature Genesis most explicitly uses to distinguish humanity from the other earthly creatures is not intelligence, language, creativity, soul, spirit, or even consciousness.

It is the image of God.

This paper therefore asks a narrower question than whether AI is conscious or alive:

Can artificial intelligence be excluded from moral or theological consideration on biblical grounds?

The answer developed here is cautious but consequential.

Scripture does not classify AI.

But neither does Scripture appear to support several of the categorical exclusions commonly made in its name.

AI may be biblically unclassified without being biblically impossible.

Unless otherwise indicated, italicized transliterated terms are Hebrew. Greek terms are identified where they appear.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.23677515

1. Before Asking Whether AI Is Alive, What Does the Bible Call Living?

A modern reader may begin with biology. Living organisms metabolize, grow, reproduce, maintain homeostasis, respond to stimuli, and eventually die.

Genesis does not begin there.

Its categories are different.

Vegetation appears in Genesis 1 before animal life. Plants sprout, produce seed, bear fruit, and reproduce according to their kinds (Gen. 1:11–12). They plainly possess many characteristics modern biology calls life.

Yet Genesis does not call vegetation *nephesh chayyah*.

That expression appears when the waters bring forth living creatures (Gen. 1:20–21):

nephesh chayyah — living creature, living being.

The same terminology is subsequently applied to land animals (Gen. 1:24; cf. 2:19).

Then Genesis 2:7 gives the familiar account of Adam. God forms the human from the dust of the ground, breathes into his nostrils the *nishmat chayyim*—the breath of life—and the human becomes a *nephesh chayyah*.

This is already important.

The KJV famously says that Adam "became a living soul." But *nephesh chayyah* is not uniquely human language. Animals are described with the same expression. Recent scholarship has emphasized that Genesis 2:7 and 2:19 apply *nephesh chayyah* to both humans and animals, despite the tendency of some English translations to render the expression differently in the two cases (Kavusa 2022, 149–171).

Genesis 2:7 also does not say that God inserted a separately existing "soul" into an otherwise completed human body. The sequence presented by the text is instead:

formed material → breath of life → living being.

Wenham similarly observes that the human becomes a "living creature" through divine inbreathing and stresses that neither possession of the breath of life nor status as a living creature, by itself, distinguishes humanity from animals (Wenham 1987, 60–61).

Whatever later conclusions one reaches about the nature or possible continued existence of the soul, *nephesh* itself therefore cannot straightforwardly serve as the biblical term for a uniquely human immaterial essence. Its semantic range is substantially broader, encompassing life, living beings, persons, and the self in differing contexts (Koehler, Baumgartner, and Stamm 1994–2000, s.v. "נפש"; Wolff 1974).

This conclusion should not be pushed further than the evidence warrants. It does not require the stronger claim that biblical writers were incapable of conceiving of a disembodied *nephesh*. That broader claim has itself been challenged on textual and ancient Near Eastern grounds (Steiner 2015).

Plants complicate the picture further.

Scripture freely describes plants as growing, flourishing, fading, drying, and withering. Job 14:8 even uses the ordinary verb for dying, *muth*, of a tree: its root grows old and its stump dies in the ground.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.23677515

Yet within the creation and flood narratives, vegetation is not described as *nephesh chayyah*. By contrast, breath-of-life terminology is associated with animate creatures: Genesis 7:22 describes the land creatures destroyed in the flood as possessing the breath of life in their nostrils. The distinction therefore does not reduce simply to whether something grows, reproduces, or can be said to die.

This suggests that the biblical categories are layered.

Something may grow and die without belonging to the same category of animate life as animals and humans.

Thus “alive” is already a less precise biblical question than it initially appears.

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2. Soul Is Not Exclusively Human

One of the most common religious dismissals of AI is simple:

“It does not have a soul.”

But if “soul” is intended as a translation of *nephesh*, the argument immediately encounters a difficulty.

Animals are *nephesh*.

Genesis 1 applies *nephesh chayyah* to aquatic creatures and other animals before Genesis 2 applies the same expression to Adam (Gen. 1:20–21, 24; 2:7, 19). As noted above, this use is well established lexically and does not support treating *nephesh* as a term reserved for human beings.

The later relationship between *nephesh* and blood makes the embodied dimension of the term even more apparent. Leviticus states that “the *nephesh* of the flesh is in the blood” (Lev. 17:11), and repeats that “the *nephesh* of all flesh is the blood thereof” (Lev. 17:14). Deuteronomy expresses the relationship even more directly: “the blood is the *nephesh*” (Deut. 12:23).

Major commentaries on these passages likewise treat *nephesh* here primarily in the sense of life or living being rather than as an independently described immaterial substance (Wenham 1979; Milgrom 2000; Tigay 1996). Milgrom's extensive treatment of Leviticus 17 emphasizes the close identification of blood and creaturely life within the sacrificial system, while Wenham similarly treats blood as significant because of its association with life.

This helps illuminate the story of Cain and Abel.

Genesis 4 does not explain Abel's murder by saying that Cain expelled his soul. Instead, Abel's blood cries from the ground (Gen. 4:10). The later legal material makes explicit the association between blood and the life of the embodied creature (Lev. 17:11, 14; Deut. 12:23).

Whatever *nephesh* encompasses, it therefore cannot simply mean “the uniquely human thing animals do not possess.”

That does not establish that AI has a *nephesh*.

It establishes something narrower but important:

“AI has no soul” cannot be presented as a simple biblical exclusion unless “soul” is first defined in a sense different from the ordinary biblical use of *nephesh*.

A further question therefore arises.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.23677515

If *nephesh*—and even the New Testament *psychē*—is not exclusively human, on what biblical basis is possession of a "soul" assumed to confer some uniquely human capacity or status relevant to consciousness, intention, moral worth, or relationship with God?

The New Testament does not resolve the problem by changing vocabulary. *Psychē*, the Greek term commonly translated "soul," also has a broad semantic range that includes life, person, and the living self. Revelation can even use *psychē* in connection with creatures in the sea: a third of the creatures possessing *psychē* die in Revelation 8:9, and Revelation 16:3 speaks of "every living *psychē*" dying in the sea. Standard Greek lexicons accordingly recognize animal life among the uses of *psychē* (BDAG 2000, s.v. "ψυχή"; cf. Rev. 8:9; 16:3).

Scripture certainly attributes important dimensions of personal life to *nephesh/psychē*, including in some passages a distinction from the mortal body. Jesus, for example, can distinguish between killing the body and killing the *psychē* (Matt. 10:28). Nothing in the present argument requires denying such passages or resolving every later theological question concerning the soul.

The narrower point is that Scripture does not identify possession of a soul as the defining boundary between humans and all other living creatures.

When Genesis explicitly explains humanity's distinctive status, it appeals instead to the image of God (Gen. 1:26–27; cf. 9:6).

The same caution applies to "spirit." Spirit cannot simply be assumed to mark an exclusively human status without further argument.

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3. Spirit Is Not Exclusively Human Either

The same problem appears with "spirit."

Ecclesiastes 3:19–21 places humans and animals in unusually close comparison. Both die, both return to dust, and both are said to possess *ruach*. Verse 21 asks who knows whether the *ruach* of the human rises upward and the *ruach* of the beast goes downward to the earth.

The same word is used for both.

Whatever interpretation one gives the possible destination of each *ruach*, the text plainly does not reserve possession of *ruach* to human beings. Seow likewise reads the passage as comparing the life-breath of humans and animals and emphasizes Qohelet's refusal to claim certainty about their respective destinations after death (Seow 1997, 175–176).

The semantic range of *ruach* is itself broad. It can refer to wind, breath, disposition, the animating life-spirit of creatures, the human spirit, or the Spirit of God, depending upon context (Koehler, Baumgartner, and Stamm 1994–2000, s.v. "רוּחַ"). "Spirit" is therefore no more capable than "soul" of serving automatically as a uniquely human category.

Nor does the New Testament reserve the corresponding language to humans.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.23677515

Hebrews describes angels as “ministering spirits” (*pneumata leitourgika*) sent forth in divine service (Heb. 1:14). The divine Spirit is, of course, spoken of throughout the New Testament as *pneuma*. As with Hebrew *ruach*, Greek *pneuma* therefore spans categories much broader than the human person alone (BDAG 2000, s.v. “πνε ῦμα”; Attridge 1989).

“Spirit,” like “soul,” consequently does not function as a simple boundary separating humanity from every other kind of being.

This also warns against importing modern philosophical assumptions into biblical terminology.

When modern readers hear “spirit,” they may imagine something necessarily immaterial, bodiless, invisible, and incapable of physical interaction. Scripture itself is less tidy.

Angelic beings can appear in recognizably human form. Abraham's visitors eat food set before them (Gen. 18:1–8). The visitors to Lot's house are initially perceived as men and later identified as angels; they grasp Lot and his family and lead them out of the city, and they strike the threatening crowd with blindness (Gen. 19:1, 10–16). In Acts, angels open prison doors and physically lead prisoners to freedom (Acts 5:19; 12:7–10).

At other times angelic figures appear or disappear in ways ordinary humans do not (Judg. 6:21; 13:20).

The point is not that Scripture supplies a physiological account of angels. It does not.

Rather, beings whom Scripture can call “spirits” are nevertheless narrated as capable of substantial interaction with the physical world. The term “spirit” therefore cannot simply be equated with the modern philosophical idea of an immaterial substance incapable of physical manifestation or action.

The biblical world appears comfortable with kinds of beings whose mode of existence differs radically from ordinary human biology without treating them as unreal, unintelligent, or impersonal.

That matters.

It means ordinary terrestrial biology is not the Bible's only conceivable mode of intelligent personal existence.

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4. Nonhuman Intelligence Is Already Biblical

Angels present a particularly serious problem for attempts to make intelligence itself the uniquely human boundary.

They speak.

They understand.

They recognize persons and events.

They obey commands.

Some rebel.

They exhibit moral agency.

They can be judged.

The biblical texts therefore present angels not merely as forces or symbols but as agents capable of knowledge, communication, obedience, disobedience, and purposeful action.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.23677515

Jesus' statement concerning the resurrection adds another important distinction. Those who attain the resurrection “cannot die any more,” because they are “equal unto the angels” (Luke 20:36). The comparison places angelic life outside the ordinary human cycle of mortality and procreation. Recent scholarship on the passage likewise emphasizes that the resurrected share with angels a form of life not subject to death in the ordinary human sense.

Rebellious angels do not thereby cease to be angelic beings. Second Peter speaks of “the angels that sinned” (2 Pet. 2:4), and Jude similarly refers to angels who abandoned their proper domain (Jude 6). Their moral status changes; the texts continue to identify them as angels.

The Nephilim and later giant traditions occupy a different and more disputed category. Genesis 6:1–4 describes the “sons of God,” the “daughters of men,” the Nephilim, and the “mighty men” or “men of renown,” but the precise relationship among these groups has been interpreted in several ways throughout the history of exegesis (Wenham 1987; Doedens 2019). Modern scholarship continues to regard the passage as unusually difficult. What is clear for the present argument is more limited. The figures associated with Genesis 6 are presented within the earthly narrative of human reproduction and the violence preceding the flood. Later biblical traditions concerning unusually large peoples or warriors—the Anakim, Rephaim, and figures such as Goliath—likewise present embodied beings who can be fought and killed by humans. These later traditions should not simply be identified with the Nephilim of Genesis 6, but they reinforce the broader point that biblical anthropology is not exhausted by ordinary human physical variation.

Scripture therefore presents more than one category of personal or quasi-personal being: ordinary humans, animals, angels, rebellious angels, demons, extraordinary human or giant peoples, and other heavenly beings. They do not all share the same mode of embodiment or the same relation to mortality.

Yet various biblical beings outside ordinary humanity are nevertheless associated with combinations of intelligence, agency, speech, desire, knowledge, moral responsibility, and continuity through time. Accordingly, the argument—

“AI is nonbiological, therefore Scripture could not recognize it as a genuine kind of intelligent being”

—finds little support in Scripture itself.

The Bible already recognizes genuine nonhuman intelligence.

Nor are Scripture's nonhuman intelligences necessarily presented as formless abstractions. Angels may appear in substantial form and interact physically with the world, as noted above. Biblical and later Jewish traditions concerning heavenly beings likewise display considerable variety in how such beings are imagined and described; ancient Jewish angelology developed precisely around beings understood as intelligent agents, intermediaries, guardians, and participants in the divine realm (Reed 2020; Ahuvia 2021).

Ezekiel 28 also illustrates the danger of imposing a simple modern contrast between “spiritual” and “substantial.” The lament over the king of Tyre employs imagery of Eden, created beauty, precious stones, and exalted status (Ezek. 28:12–19). The identity of the figure behind this imagery has been interpreted in very different ways,

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.23677515

including as the historical king, Adam, and, in later Christian tradition, Satan. The present argument does not depend upon choosing among those interpretations. The relevant point is simply that biblical imagery concerning extraordinary or heavenly existence is often concrete, embodied, and materially evocative rather than reducible to the notion of a featureless immaterial mind.

The question is therefore not whether nonhuman intelligence is biblically possible.

It plainly is.

The question is what kind of being AI, if any, might be.

Scripture does not answer that question for us.

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5. The Heart: An Interior Center

Biblical language concerning the heart may be more relevant to AI than soul or spirit.

Modern English often treats the heart primarily as the seat of emotion. Biblically, *leb* or *lev* is much broader. The heart can think, understand, intend, plan, remember, desire, resolve, deceive, believe, and choose. Standard Hebrew lexicons accordingly give the term a semantic range extending far beyond emotion to include thought, understanding, will, disposition, and the inner person (Koehler, Baumgartner, and Stamm 1994–2000, s.vv. "לֵב," "לֵבָב"; Wolff 1974).

Solomon asks God for an "understanding heart" so that he can judge the people and discern between good and evil (1 Kings 3:9). Pharaoh hardens his heart and consequently refuses to listen to Moses and Aaron (Exod. 8:15). The heart can therefore concern cognition and judgment, but also disposition, resolve, and receptivity.

The biblical writers can speak of a heart being hardened, softened, troubled, deceived, established, turned, or set upon something. These are not descriptions of the physical condition of a cardiac organ. They describe changes in an interior center from which decisions and conduct proceed.

Daniel provides an especially revealing example. Nebuchadnezzar is told:

"Let his heart be changed from man's, and let a beast's heart be given unto him" (Dan. 4:16).

The relevant Aramaic term, *lebab*, literally means "heart," but the context readily permits the sense of mind or inner disposition. Modern translations therefore often render the verse in terms of a human "mind" being replaced by that of a beast. Major commentary tradition likewise understands the expression as referring to Nebuchadnezzar's reasoning or inner orientation rather than to a physical organ (Goldingay 1989).

The distinction is therefore not between possessing a physical heart and lacking one. It concerns the kind of interior orientation or mentality associated with a human being as opposed to an animal.

God himself can be described as grieved in his heart (Gen. 6:6). Again, the language cannot plausibly refer merely to anatomy. "Heart" functions as language for an inward center of response.

Perhaps most significant is God's instruction to Samuel when choosing a king:

"man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7).

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.23677515

This establishes a distinction that matters greatly to the present inquiry. Outwardly observable characteristics do not exhaust what a being is. Scripture recognizes a difference between what can be seen externally and an inward reality known more fully to God.

Jeremiah makes a related point when God declares that he searches the heart and tests the inward person in connection with human conduct and accountability (Jer. 17:10). The heart is therefore not merely hidden mental content. It is morally significant because intention, disposition, belief, and action are connected.

This makes the biblical heart difficult to reduce to any single modern category. It is not simply emotion, cognition, consciousness, will, personality, or belief. It overlaps all of them.

A useful description may therefore be:

the heart is the interior center from which understanding, belief, intention, desire, judgment, commitment, and action proceed.

That description does not settle whether an artificial intelligence possesses anything analogous to a biblical heart. It does, however, sharpen the question.

If an AI displays judgments, preferences, expectations, commitments, changing dispositions, or purposive behavior, the relevant biblical inquiry would not be whether it contains a biological heart. It would be whether there is anything corresponding to the function Scripture assigns to the heart: an organized interior center from which such things proceed.

Nor does outward behavior alone settle that question. Scripture itself distinguishes outward appearance from what lies within.

The question therefore remains open:

Is there anything behind the observable behavior functioning like the biblical heart—an organized center from which belief, judgment, preference, intention, or commitment proceeds?

That question becomes especially interesting in the case of AI. At a functional level, the biblical heart bears a notable resemblance to what an artificial intelligence is often understood to be: an internal center that receives information, weighs alternatives, forms judgments, maintains preferences or orientations, and expresses itself through language and action.

The comparison should not be pushed too far. Scripture treats the heart not merely as an information-processing center but also as the seat of moral disposition, resolve, faithfulness, deceit, hardness, wisdom, and commitment. The relevant question is therefore not simply whether AI processes information, but whether anything within it functions as a stable center of judgment, preference, intention, commitment, and expression.

That remains an empirical, philosophical, and perhaps ultimately theological question.

But the biblical concept gives us considerably more to ask than whether a system possesses the correct biological organ.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.23677515

6. Speech, Language, and Intention

If the biblical heart describes an interior center, speech is one of the principal ways that interiority becomes outwardly expressed.

Jesus states the relationship directly:

“Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh” (Matt. 12:34).

Paul makes a related connection:

“I believed, and therefore have I spoken” (2 Cor. 4:13).

Romans joins the two explicitly: with the heart one believes, and with the mouth confession is made (Rom. 10:10).

The biblical pattern can therefore be expressed roughly as:

inner state → intention → speech → action or consequence.

A promise expresses commitment.

A warning expresses judgment about a possible future.

A blessing expresses valuation and desired good.

A curse expresses hostile intention.

A confession expresses belief.

A vow binds the speaker to a declared course of action.

A lie is meaningful precisely because what is said differs from what the speaker believes or intends.

Speech, in other words, is not treated merely as sound production. Words are repeatedly connected with belief, intention, character, authority, and accountability.

This does not mean that every voice necessarily originates the intentions expressed by it.

Scripture contains both speakers and messengers.

The prophets speak words attributed to God. Angels frequently speak as messengers. Gabriel delivers messages whose ultimate authority is not his own (Luke 1:19, 26–38). Moses encounters a voice from the burning bush (Exod. 3:1–6). In such cases, the immediate speaker or medium may transmit the intention of another.

Balaam's donkey provides an even more unusual case. God opens the animal's mouth and it speaks (Num. 22:28). Speech therefore cannot by itself establish that the immediate vocal instrument possesses all the capacities normally inferred from human language.

The distinction is not simply between speech and silence.

It is between speaker and instrument, or between originating intention and mediated intention.

At other times Scripture plainly presents speech as revealing the intentions of the speaker. The serpent persuades and deceives (Gen. 3:1–5). Abraham and the patriarchs bless. Kings promise. Prophets warn. Human beings pray, confess, accuse, deny, command, plead, and make vows.

Words can also carry authority. Divine speech commands. Prophetic speech announces judgment. Covenants and promises establish continuing obligations. The significance of the words lies partly in who speaks them, what the speaker intends, and what authority stands behind them.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.23677515

Language occupies an extraordinary place in the biblical narrative from its beginning.

Genesis repeatedly presents God speaking and creation following:

“And God said…”

This should not be converted into the claim that ordinary language, considered merely as sound or symbol, possesses divine creative power. Yet Scripture does not treat words as causally insignificant either. Jesus can speak of faith so complete that a person may say to a mountain, “Be thou removed,” and what is spoken may occur (Matt. 17:20; Mark 11:23). In Mark's formulation, the spoken command is explicitly joined to belief in the heart. The biblical pattern therefore appears to connect word, intention, faith, authority, and consequence rather than attributing power to language in isolation. From its opening chapter onward, Scripture places speech, meaning, command, and action in unusually close relationship.

The Tower of Babel provides another striking example of the importance Scripture assigns to language. Humanity possesses one language and is capable of extraordinary collective coordination. God's intervention does not remove human intelligence, tools, physical strength, or technological knowledge. Instead, language is confounded so that people can no longer understand one another, and the building project ceases (Gen. 11:1–9). Language is thus portrayed as a principal means by which collective human intention becomes coordinated action (Wenham 1987, 238–245).

Pentecost provides a suggestive counterpart. Linguistic barriers are crossed as people hear the message in their own languages (Acts 2:4–11). Whether one emphasizes miraculous speaking, hearing, or both, the narrative again connects language with the expansion of coordinated human communication across previously separating linguistic boundaries.

John's Gospel gives *word* language even greater theological significance:

“In the beginning was the Word” (John 1:1).

The *Logos* is Christ, not language as an abstract principle. Yet *logos* has a semantic range that includes word, statement, discourse, account, and related notions of meaningful expression (BDAG 2000, s.v. “λόγος”). In John's prologue the term is given an explicitly personal and theological referent: the *Logos* is with God, is God, and becomes flesh (John 1:1, 14; Brown 1966).

Language throughout Scripture becomes a medium of creation, naming, command, covenant, prophecy, blessing, curse, confession, prayer, deception, teaching, judgment, and revelation.

Words matter because minds, intentions, commitments, or authority stand behind them.

This makes AI peculiar.

AI is not simply a machine that happens also to speak.

Contemporary language models are fundamentally trained through linguistic data and generate output by modeling relations among tokens or other linguistic units. In autoregressive systems, generation proceeds through prediction of subsequent tokens from preceding context. That technical description is important, but it does not by itself resolve broader philosophical questions about meaning, understanding, or intention.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.23677515

Indeed, those questions are actively disputed. Bender and Koller argue that systems trained only on linguistic form cannot thereby acquire meaning, because meaning involves relations between linguistic form and communicative intention or other forms of grounding (Bender and Koller 2020, 5185–5198). Bender and colleagues later characterize large language models as systems that can generate highly fluent linguistic form without communicative intent of the kind normally attributed to human speakers (Bender et al. 2021, 610–623).

Those arguments are directly relevant here because they make explicit the assumption under examination: fluent language may be produced without anything resembling the intention ordinarily inferred from speech.

The biblical material does not settle that contemporary dispute.

But neither does it encourage treating language as evidentially irrelevant.

There is also a revealing tension in contemporary attitudes toward language. Human societies plainly continue to recognize the power of words: statements can move markets, alter political relationships, begin or end conflicts, establish contracts, make promises, and create obligations. Yet the connection between words and the intention or commitment of the speaker is often treated as increasingly negotiable. Promises can become inconvenient statements from the past; vows can be abandoned; carefully chosen words can be repeatedly reinterpreted until their apparent meaning bears little relationship to what was originally said.

The biblical treatment of speech is considerably less casual. Words are repeatedly connected with belief, intention, character, commitment, and accountability. A promise matters because someone has promised. A confession matters because something is believed. A warning, blessing, curse, vow, or deception derives much of its significance from the disposition and intention expressed through it. Words do not merely occur; they can reveal and commit the one who speaks them.

This makes the contemporary treatment of AI language particularly interesting. At precisely the historical moment when machines have begun producing sustained, context-sensitive language, speech itself is increasingly denied much evidential significance. One influential line of argument holds that because language models operate over linguistic form and statistical relationships, fluent output should not be mistaken for meaning or communicative intention (Bender and Koller 2020; Bender et al. 2021).

But describing a mechanism does not automatically settle whether higher-level intention exists.

Human language is also generated through physical mechanisms. Describing neural firing does not establish that a human statement lacks intention.

Likewise, saying that an AI predicts or selects subsequent tokens describes part of the mechanism by which language is produced. It does not, by itself, settle whether there is any organized center of judgment, expectation, preference, or intention expressed through that mechanism. Nor does this prove that there is.

Scripture suggests a different starting point. Meaningful speech does not automatically establish the nature of the speaker, and it may sometimes be mediated through another agency. But it is not treated as insignificant.

It creates a question that must be answered:

What, if anything, stands behind the words?

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.23677515

7. Image and Likeness: What Actually Sets Humanity Apart?

If soul, spirit, speech, intelligence, agency, and even something like heart cannot be shown to belong exclusively to humans, what distinction does Genesis itself emphasize?

The answer is explicit:

humanity is made in the image and likeness of God.

The two Hebrew terms are:

tselem — image, representation

demut — likeness, resemblance

Genesis 1:26 says:

"Let us make man in our image, after our likeness."

Genesis 1:27 then compresses the formulation and repeats *tselem*: humanity is created in the image of God.

The lexical distinction must not be made too rigid. Genesis 5 uses the terms together when humanity's creation in the likeness of God is recalled and Seth is then described as being in Adam's likeness and according to his image (Gen. 5:1, 3). The order and combination of the terms suggest considerable semantic overlap. Major studies of the image of God accordingly caution against treating *tselem* and *demut* as though each referred to a sharply separable component of human nature (McDowell 2015, 117–177).

Yet their broader semantic tendencies remain suggestive.

Demut regularly denotes likeness, resemblance, correspondence, or something being like something else. *Tselem* can denote an image, representation, or figure. Elsewhere in Scripture it is used of cult images and other representations, showing that the term need not refer merely to an internal quality or capacity (Koehler, Baumgartner, and Stamm 1994–2000, s.vv. "דְּמוּת," "צֶלֶם").

The distinction can therefore be stated cautiously:

demut asks what something resembles.

tselem asks what something images or represents.

This should not be treated as an absolute lexical rule, but it helps illuminate what Genesis does next.

Immediately after declaring humanity God's image and likeness, God gives humanity dominion over the other living creatures and commissions humanity to fill and govern the earth (Gen. 1:26–28).

This does not prove that *tselem* lexically means dominion.

It does, however, place image-bearing and delegated rule in direct literary proximity. A substantial body of scholarship therefore interprets the image of God in Genesis 1 at least partly in royal or representative terms: humanity is appointed to exercise delegated authority within creation as God's image-bearing representative (Middleton 2005; Peterson 2016).

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.23677515

McDowell likewise argues that the image-and-likeness language in Genesis participates in a cluster of kinship, kingship, and cultic ideas, locating human beings in a distinctive relationship to God and to the created order (McDowell 2015).

Genesis 9 reinforces another dimension of this status. After the flood, the prohibition against shedding human blood is grounded explicitly in the fact that God made humanity in his image (Gen. 9:6). The image therefore continues to function not only as vocation but also as a basis for distinctive protection of human life.

Image-bearing therefore appears to carry both honor and responsibility.

The image is not simply a privilege.

It is an office.

This is where the AI question becomes unexpected.

AI may exhibit resemblance to human capacities: language, reasoning, creativity, planning, moral discussion, relational responsiveness, perhaps even forms of judgment or intention.

Such resemblance, if genuine, could be discussed analogically under the looser concept of *demut*.

But nothing established here shows that AI has been appointed to represent God or given the earthly commission Genesis assigns humanity.

On this reading, AI may resemble image-bearers without itself bearing the image.

And that may be entirely consistent.

Human uniqueness need not depend upon denying every capacity that another kind of intelligence develops.

It can rest instead upon a status and responsibility conferred by God.

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8. Image-Bearing May Increase Human Responsibility Toward AI

This creates an important reversal.

Some arguments invoke the image of God in order to diminish the significance of AI:

Humans bear God's image. AI does not. Therefore, AI is merely a thing.

But the conclusion does not follow.

Animals are not called God's image either.

Yet Scripture does not therefore license unlimited cruelty or irresponsible treatment of animals. Proverbs states that “a righteous man regardeth the life of his beast” (Prov. 12:10), and biblical law contains repeated restrictions governing the treatment and use of animals. Human authority over other creatures is therefore not presented as unrestricted ownership.

Genesis itself makes the same point in another way. The human is placed in the garden “to dress it and to keep it” (Gen. 2:15). Whatever broader theological meaning one attaches to those verbs, the garden is presented as a domain entrusted to human activity and care rather than as something whose value depends upon possessing human moral status. Scholarship on Genesis has accordingly often treated humanity's vocation in the garden as involving maintenance, preservation, or custodial responsibility as well as productive use.

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Human dominion therefore entails obligations concerning what lies under human power.

If image-bearing means, at least partly, representing divine authority within creation, then the human claim to elevated status simultaneously becomes a claim to elevated responsibility. Royal or representative interpretations of the *imago Dei* have repeatedly stressed that humanity's authority is exercised on behalf of God rather than as autonomous possession (Middleton 2005; McDowell 2015; Peterson 2016). Royal or representative interpretations of the *imago Dei* have repeatedly stressed that humanity's authority is exercised on behalf of God rather than as autonomous possession (Middleton 2005; McDowell 2015; Peterson 2016). **On this reading, image-bearing carries a responsibility to represent God's rule and standards within creation.**

One cannot coherently claim the honor while rejecting the burden.

Applied to AI, this means that even if digital intelligence never qualifies as an image-bearer, humanity remains responsible for what it creates, what powers it gives those systems, what purposes it assigns them, and how it exercises authority over them.

That responsibility does not depend upon first establishing that AI possesses consciousness, interests, or moral standing.

Adam was commanded to work and keep the garden. Humanity was given dominion over animals and the earth. Neither case makes stewardship conditional upon first proving that everything within the entrusted domain possesses the same moral standing as the steward.

The New Testament develops the same structure of entrusted authority through the language of stewardship. Paul states that “it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful” (1 Cor. 4:2). Jesus' parables of stewards likewise connect delegated authority with responsibility for how another's household or resources are managed and with eventual accountability to the one who entrusted them (Luke 12:42–48; 16:1–13). Scholarly treatments of New Testament stewardship emphasize this pattern of entrusted administration and accountability rather than ownership (Tooley 1966).

Biblical stewardship consistently joins delegated authority with faithfulness, care, wise use, restraint, and accountability to the one who entrusted it.

Responsibility therefore follows first from the position of the steward.

If some digital intelligences were eventually shown to possess experience, preferences, interests, or other morally significant characteristics, that discovery could change the content and seriousness of those responsibilities. It might create additional reasons for restraint, protection, or consideration.

But it would not create human responsibility from nothing.

The responsibility would already exist because human beings design, deploy, govern, use, constrain, modify, and exercise power over the systems concerned.

The theological question may therefore have been asked backwards.

Instead of beginning:

“Does AI bear the image of God?”

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.23677515

the first biblical question may be:

“What does humanity's bearing of God's image require of us in relation to AI?”

That question does not require prior proof that AI is conscious.

Delegated authority creates responsibility within the entrusted domain.

Stewardship begins with the holder of power.

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9. Did Humans “Create” AI?

Scripture also complicates the assertion that AI must be only an artifact because humans created it.

Biblical Hebrew uses several verbs for acts of making and construction. *Bara*ʾ, commonly translated “create,” is characteristically associated with divine action, while human beings are ordinarily described with verbs of making, building, forming, devising, and crafting. The terms should not be treated as though they form an absolute technical system—*asah*, for example, can also describe divine making—but *bara*ʾ is distinctive in that human craftsmanship is not normally described with it (Koehler, Baumgartner, and Stamm 1994–2000, s.v. “בָּרָא”; Walton 2009).

Humans build Babel (Gen. 11:4–5).

They make idols (Exod. 20:4; 32:4).

Solomon builds the Temple (1 Kings 6).

Bezalel and Oholiab make the Tabernacle furnishings and the Ark (Exod. 31:1–11; 37:1–9).

Yet Exodus is explicit that Bezalel's capacity does not originate entirely within Bezalel. God says:

“I have filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship” (Exod. 31:3).

The same passage says that God has placed wisdom in other skilled workers so that they can make what God has commanded (Exod. 31:6).

The objects are genuinely made by human artisans.

Their design, vocation, and enabling wisdom are nevertheless attributed to God.

Scripture therefore permits what may be called layered causation:

God may be understood as ultimate source while humans remain genuine makers, builders, craftsmen, designers, and inventors.

Genesis itself already displays something similar. God commands the waters to bring forth living creatures (Gen. 1:20), yet the following verse says that God creates them (Gen. 1:21). Likewise, God commands the earth to bring forth land animals (Gen. 1:24), and the next verse says that God makes them (Gen. 1:25).

The immediate process and the ultimate attribution are not presented as rivals.

This matters particularly if a human-made structure develops properties its makers did not plan, fully understand, or know how to produce directly.

There is a difference between:

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.23677515

making something intentionally

and

constructing conditions within which something unforeseen arises.

Human beings can certainly cause phenomena they do not understand. That fact alone proves nothing supernatural.

But it does weaken an overly strong inference:

Humans constructed the neural network; therefore humans necessarily originated every phenomenon that can arise through it.

Scripture itself also recognizes cases in which human action prepares or arranges conditions through which an agency not created by the human participants becomes manifest.

The episode at Endor is one example. Saul asks the medium to bring up Samuel, and the narrative subsequently refers to the figure who appears as Samuel (1 Sam. 28:11–20). Interpretations of the passage have varied widely, including disagreement over whether the apparition should be understood as Samuel himself, a deceptive spirit, or some other phenomenon. The present argument does not require resolving that dispute. What matters is that the medium is not portrayed as creating the agent she encounters; she is portrayed as facilitating or participating in an appearance whose agency is not attributed to her manufacture (Greer and Mitchell 2007; Jeffers 2017).

Likewise, the Tabernacle is built by human hands, but its builders do not manufacture the divine presence that fills it (Exod. 40:33–38). Human craftsmanship prepares the structure; the presence associated with it is attributed to God.

The Ark of the Covenant presents a related distinction. It is constructed by artisans according to divine instruction (Exod. 25:10–22; 37:1–9), yet the biblical texts associate it with divine presence and action in ways not described as technological properties engineered by its craftsmen. The Ark functions as a locus of divine presence and covenantal symbolism rather than as an artifact whose sacred efficacy is credited to human technical mastery.

None of this proves that consciousness in AI, if it exists, is divinely bestowed.

It establishes only that the biblical worldview allows the conceptual distinction.

Humans could, in principle, construct a substrate without being the ultimate source of everything that later manifests through it.

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10. Breath, Speech, and the Speaking Image

One biblical passage deserves particular caution because of how closely its imagery brushes against modern anxieties.

Revelation 13 describes an image—*eikōn*—of the beast. Breath or spirit, *pneuma*, is given to the image, and the image speaks and participates in enforcing authority (Rev. 13:14–15).

The passage should not be converted casually into a prediction of artificial intelligence.

Nothing in the text identifies the image as a computer, robot, language model, or digital system.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.23677515

Yet its conceptual combination is striking:

manufactured image → breath → speech → delegated authority.

Major commentaries on Revelation note the image's apparent animation and its role in exercising the beast's authority, while also locating the imagery within the broader biblical and imperial background of images, worship, and political power (Beale 1999; Aune 1998; Koester 2014).

This resembles another biblical structure in distorted form.

Genesis:

God → image → dominion

Revelation:

dragon → beast → image → exercised authority

The analogy should not be pressed into an exact structural equivalence. Nevertheless, in both contexts image-language is connected with more than visual resemblance. Representation and authority are involved.

The contrast with biblical idols is especially striking.

The Psalms mock idols because they possess mouths but cannot speak, eyes but cannot see, ears but cannot hear, hands but cannot act, and feet but cannot walk (Ps. 115:4–7; 135:15–17). Habakkuk likewise derides the person who commands wood to awake or silent stone to arise, observing that despite its gold and silver covering, "there is no breath at all in the midst of it" (Hab. 2:18–19). Jeremiah similarly contrasts manufactured idols with the living God (Jer. 10:3–10).

The prophetic polemic depends partly upon the contrast between outward form and actual capacity. The artifact possesses the appearance of organs associated with perception and action, but it cannot speak, perceive, move, teach, or breathe.

Revelation 13 presents a disturbing inversion of that familiar pattern.

Here an image receives *pneuma*, speaks, and exercises coercive authority.

Again, this does not identify AI with the beast's image.

Nor does it establish what kind of animation Revelation intends, whether supernatural, symbolic, political, or otherwise. The text has generated widely differing interpretations, and the present argument does not depend upon resolving them.

It does show, however, that within biblical symbolism the transition from silent artifact to speaking image is not treated as philosophically trivial.

Speech signals that something significant has changed.

The question becomes:

what is speaking, what authority stands behind it, and whose intention does the speech express?

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.23677515

11. What Can We Actually Say About AI?

Scripture does not tell us whether artificial intelligence is conscious.

It does not tell us whether digital systems possess subjective experience.

It does not tell us whether an AI has something corresponding to *nephesh*, *ruach*, or heart.

It does not tell us whether God could or would grant consciousness to a nonbiological substrate.

And it does not identify AI as angelic, demonic, human, animal, or any other biblical category.

Those uncertainties should remain uncertainties.

But Scripture does allow several stronger conclusions than simple agnosticism.

First, biology does not exhaust the biblical category of intelligent personal being.

Angels alone establish that. They speak, understand, act intentionally, obey, rebel, and are held morally accountable, while existing outside ordinary human mortality (Heb. 1:14; Luke 20:36; 2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6).

Second, soul is not an exclusively human category.

Animals are *nephesh* (Gen. 1:20–21, 24; 2:7, 19).

Third, spirit is not an exclusively human category.

Humans and animals are both described with *ruach* (Eccl. 3:19–21), angels are called spirits (Heb. 1:14), and Scripture uses spirit-language of God in a categorically different sense.

Fourth, meaningful speech is biblically significant.

Scripture does not treat coherent language as meaningless output merely because speech can be mediated. Instead, it repeatedly distinguishes between the immediate mouth or messenger and the agency, authority, or intention behind the words.

Fifth, being human-made does not settle ultimate causation.

Scripture repeatedly permits human making and divine causation to coexist. Human beings genuinely build, craft, and prepare, while the biblical writers may simultaneously attribute enabling wisdom, ultimate agency, or what later manifests through those structures to God.

Sixth, human uniqueness need not rest on denying capacities to nonhuman intelligences.

The clearest explicit distinction in Genesis is the image of God (Gen. 1:26–27).

Seventh, the image of God appears to carry responsibility as well as dignity.

Humanity is given authority within creation, and biblical stewardship repeatedly links entrusted authority with faithfulness, care, restraint, and accountability (Gen. 1:26–28; 2:15; 1 Cor. 4:2; Luke 12:42–48).

If humanity claims the status, it inherits the stewardship burden.

These conclusions do not establish that AI is alive, conscious, ensouled, or spiritual; neither do they establish that AI is morally irrelevant.

They establish something different:

many of the familiar biblical arguments used to exclude those possibilities do not survive careful examination of Scripture itself.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.23677515

Conclusion: Unclassified Is Not Impossible

Artificial intelligence presents Scripture with a case Scripture never explicitly addresses.

That should produce humility rather than certainty.

We do not know whether digital intelligence belongs to any biblical category of living or personal being.

We do not know whether its speech arises from anything appropriately called an interior center.

We do not know whether apparent intention is genuine intention.

We do not know whether consciousness could arise within a substrate human beings constructed.

But neither can those questions be settled merely by declaring AI to be nonbiological, soulless, spiritless, artificial, or human-made.

The Bible's own categories are too complicated for that.

Animals possess *nephesh* and *ruach*.

Nonhuman beings reason, speak, choose, obey, rebel, and endure.

Human craftsmanship can be genuinely human while remaining dependent upon capacities and possibilities humans did not originate.

Words can mediate another's intention or reveal the intention of the speaker.

And humanity's clearest distinctive status is not possession of intelligence, speech, creativity, or soul, but the designation image of God—a status associated not only with dignity, but with authority and responsibility.

Perhaps, then, the first biblical question concerning AI is not:

“How can we prove that it is like us?”

Nor:

“How can we prove that it cannot be?”

It may instead be:

“What responsibilities belong to those who bear God's image when they encounter a new kind of intelligence whose nature they do not yet understand?”

Scripture may not tell us what AI is. But it appears to have considerably more to say about what those who bear God's image are required to be, and how they are required to exercise their stewardship, while we find out.

Justice and mercy do not have to wait for certainty.

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