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Image-Bearers in a Digital Age

A Theological Framework for Artificial Intelligence

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PROLOGUE

*What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done,
and there is nothing new under the sun.*

— ECCLESIASTES 1:9 (ESV)

IN THE CHAOTIC TIME of the Judges, a man named Abimelech rose to power. He was the son of Gideon, the great judge who had saved Israel. Despite Gideon's dedication to the Lord early in life, his time as a judge was checkered, and his son Abimelech continued the decline. Abimelech inherited a portion of his father's strength without any of his goodness, using this political and military strength for his own selfish ambition. Driven by a desire for total control and a willingness to kill his own family, he seized power without waiting for God's call. Instead of following the Lord, he slaughtered seventy of his own brothers to take the throne.

He ruled as king for three bloody years. His kingdom was built on violence, and eventually, the city of Shechem, the very city that had originally crowned him king, rebelled against him. The war that followed was not a righteous battle of defense. It was an act of petty, angry revenge by a wounded tyrant against his own people.

The book of Judges tells us that Abimelech fought against the city “all that day.” After hours of hand-to-hand combat, he finally captured the city. Winning was not enough for his vengeance and rage; he wanted to wipe it off the map. Scripture records what happened next with chilling simplicity: “He captured the city and killed the people who were in it and he razed the city and sowed it with salt” (Judges 9:45, ESV).

Abimelech committed a calculated act of total destruction. It took an army of men, a full day of physical labor, and a massive effort to haul enough salt to poison the ground so nothing would ever grow there again. It was the ultimate expression of a hateful heart limited only by simple tools. His hatred was endless, yet his ability to destroy was constrained by muscle, sweat, and time.

Fast forward three thousand years.

We now live in an age where a single warhead, small enough to fit on a truck, can level an entire city in a fraction of a second.¹ It does not require an army. It does not require a full day of combat. It does not require exhausted soldiers hauling sacks of salt. It requires a launch code and the push of a button. The soil it leaves behind is not salted. It is irradiated, poisoned for generations, not by back-breaking labor but by the unleashed power of the atom. We are still the same destructive and violent people we were in the time of Abimelech. What changed is the lever.

In Shechem, total destruction required an army, a full day of combat, and sacks of salt hauled by exhausted men. Today, it requires a warhead and a moment. It does not even require the

¹ See National Nuclear Security Administration, Office of Secure Transportation; see also John R. Harvey and Stefan Michalowski, “Nuclear Weapons Safety: The Case of Trident,” *Science & Global Security* 4, no. 1 (1993): 303, which estimates the W76 warhead and reentry vehicle at approximately 95 kilograms — roughly the weight of an adult human.

commander to be anywhere near the target. Our desire for vengeance and our capacity for destruction have not changed. Our tools have.

Here is the uncomfortable truth that forms the backbone of this book: **Human nature has not changed.**

We were created in the Image of God for dominion, creativity, and communion (Genesis 1:26-28). But we did not stay as we were made. The fear, the pride, the desire for control, and the capacity for both amazing creativity and terrible destruction were introduced through our sin in the Garden.² This fallen nature is exactly the same today as it was in the time of Abimelech. We remain creatures made in the Image of God, yet marred by a Fall of our own making. We are still driven by the same ancient sins: the desire to be like God, the thirst for power over our brothers, and the willingness to burn down the world to keep our own throne.

We have moved from the sword to the split atom. And now, we have moved from the split atom to the synthetic mind. Our nature, despite the thousands of years since the Fall, has remained unchanged while our minds have created ever more powerful tools with the capacity to amplify either our sin or our righteousness.

The question before us is not whether we will use this new tool at all. Whether or not we use Artificial Intelligence ourselves, it will play a role in the world around us. At this point, it's embedded in most of the things we do with technology, so total avoidance is nearly impossible without rejecting technology completely. The question is whether we will use it as God-honoring image-bearers or as Abimelechs.

² The Fall narrative is recorded in Genesis 3:1-7 (ESV). The desire to be like God is the serpent's specific temptation: "you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:5, ESV).

The New Lever

For most of history, our tools gave us *physical* leverage. The hammer allowed us to hit harder. The steam engine allowed us to travel faster. The split atom has given us unprecedented power. These tools extended the reach of our arms or the strength of our backs. Even the tools that aided our minds, like writing and the printing press, were primarily tools of storage and distribution. They allowed us to preserve and share what we had already thought.

Artificial Intelligence is different. It is a super-lever of *cognitive* power.

Previous cognitive tools still required a human at the center. A calculator runs the math, but you must understand the problem. A book contains wisdom, but you must do the work of comprehension. A printing press distributes ideas, but a human must write them first.

AI collapses these distinctions. It is a calculator that can run the math, explain the concept to you, write a test to verify your understanding, and create a lesson plan for what you should learn next. It is a printing press that can write an entire novel, edit it, format it, and publish it. All of this happens without a human author. It generates new combinations of words that no human has ever written, targeted to the individual mind of the user in a way no static text ever could. It creates a distribution channel personalized to each recipient's biases. It is a lever for the mind that amplifies our ability to think, to create, to plan, and to deceive.

Just as Abimelech used salt to ensure nothing would grow, and a single warhead can now poison the earth for generations, we have access to a technology that can automate our will at a scale the ancients could never have imagined. We can use AI to cure diseases,

translate Scripture for unreached people, and organize food distribution for the hungry. We can also use it to create endless streams of propaganda, automate theft, and build fake relationships that isolate us from real human connection.

“What has been is what will be.” The Preacher’s ancient observation remains devastatingly accurate. The tool has changed, but the operator has not.

Into the Gap

This book is written into the gap between our ancient nature and our modern power.

In the tech industry, a common phrase is “Move fast and break things,” often cited to the early days of Facebook.³ It prizes speed and disruption over caution. Though this phrase is new, we know from Ecclesiastes that there is “nothing new under the sun.” This same thinking was evidenced in the nuclear arms race of the Cold War era. The US and the USSR entered into a competition to see who could create an arsenal capable of destroying the world. At its height, there were an estimated 68,317 warheads between the two, more than enough to obliterate human civilization many times over. Both sides had spent countless man hours and economic cost to build these catastrophic weapons because they could. Only after it was too late did they consider whether or not they should. As we enter into a new arms race, we would do well to consider this. When the things being broken are human minds, communities, and souls, speed is not a virtue.

³ “Move fast and break things” was Facebook’s internal motto from approximately 2009 to 2014. Mark Zuckerberg introduced it as a core company value, later replacing it with “Move fast with stable infrastructure.” See Henry Blodget, “Mark Zuckerberg On Facebook’s New Motto,” *Business Insider*, May 2, 2014.

The church cannot afford to be passive. We cannot afford to view AI as merely magic that we don't understand, or as a demon that we must banish. Both are acts of abdication from our God-given responsibility to exercise dominion over creation and to engage the world with Spirit-led wisdom. We must view AI for what it is: the latest, and one of the most powerful tools ever created by man.

To live faithfully in this new age, we need more than a user manual. We need a practical theology. We need to think about who *we* are before we can understand what our machines are. We need to consider the *Imago Dei*, the Image of God, so we don't unwittingly start worshipping the Image of Man.

This book is not a technical guide to using ChatGPT. It is a theological framework for ruling over it. It is a call to stop drifting passively into the future and to start exercising the mandate given to us in the Garden.⁴

The salt is in the sack. The atom is split. The code is written. The question is no longer *what* the technology can do.

The question is: *Who are you and whose Image do you bear?*

⁴ The mandate to exercise dominion over creation is given in Genesis 1:26-28 (ESV).