

## MAN'S IMAGE IN CREATION NARRATIVES

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## I

The title of this paper sounds rather unfamiliar, because one usually deals with man as being created in or after the image of God. And that is also the core of biblical anthropology, namely that man is created by God in or according to God's likeness or image. More than anything else the discussion of the meaning of these concepts *demut* (an abstract noun from *dmb* - likeness) and, *selem* (image, statue) have dominated the theological reflection regarding man in the creation narratives (Barr 1968:11).

However, it would seem that we have hardly made any significant progress in defining what God's image in man actually entails. Consensus of opinion seems to be as evasive as these two words themselves. Earlier it was thought that the Egyptian (Hornung 1967:123) and Mesopotamian parallels would help us to understand their meaning and recently also the occurrence of these words in the bilingual inscription of Tell Fekherye (Millard & Bodreuil 1982:135). It would seem that the meaning of "representative" or "steward" was embodied in the respective terms *selem* / *salmu*, *hnty* (Clines 1968:821; Angerstorfer 1984:36). Contrary to Egyptian theology where they are used only with regard to the king and not every human being, Old Testament scholars apply these notions with this difference that in Ancient Israel the terms are democratized (Schmidt 1967:139).

## II

The pericope referring to the creation of humankind (Gen 1:26 ff) deals with the creation of humans as inhabitants of the earth (Loretz 1969:114). Man's destiny and tasks on the same earth are expressed by two metaphors, namely, (a) man as the image of God; and (b) man as ruler over the living creatures (Zenger 1983:3). The relationship between these two is characterized by

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*function*, not so much as by *being*, as is shown by, the usage of the copulative noun which combines two imperfecta in a telic clause; it means, insofar as man is *exercising* his function, namely to have dominion over the animals, he is reflecting the image of God. To put it differently, since man bears the image of God, he is destined to have dominion over the rest of the created order (Gross 1981:263). He has the authority to act as God's representative or steward toward the rest of created order in such a way that *it would reflect God's own creative dealing with His creation*. Ps. 8 reflects the amazement of the poet that God has chosen the small and fragile '*enos* to fulfill this function on his behalf. It is to be surmised then that the reference to the image of God in Gen. 1:26 does not concern so much what man *is* as what he is called to *do*.

Moreover, Gen. 1:28 contains God's declaration of blessing which reveals also something of the way in which man - in God's image - should live and conduct this function of dominion. The five verbs can be grouped into two categories: the first three of which concern man's obligation towards himself, the second two of which concern man's duty towards the earth and the animals. The first three imperatives (constituting the blessing) concern the expansion of the human race. The reversal thereof, namely barrenness, lack of family, society or people is normally considered an ordeal or curse. According to Brueggemann (1972: 413) the multiplication of people forms an integral part of God's promises to Abraham (Gen. 17:2), and is fulfilled in Egypt (Ex. 1:7). Thus in order to perform his function as God's steward man needs to expand his numbers.

The second group of imperatives, *kbt* ('*et hā'āres*) and *rdh* qualify and specify *how* man is to exert his God-given task of dominion. Firstly, he is to subdue the earth: *kbt* '*et hā'āres*.

The intimate relationship between man and the earth is nowhere better attested than in Gen. 2 where it is said *man* (*hā'ādām*) is made of the '*ādāmā* (soil). Man's domain or dominion is his dwellingplace, and that is the earth. The more the numbers of man expand, the more he needs to look for other places to dwell in order to perform his function. Jer. 4:22-28 shows that uninhabited earth is like the *ībhā wābōhā* condition before creation. Isaiah 45: 18 emphasizes that "God did not create the earth as *ībhā*, but that He made it to be inhabited" (*lāšēvēt*, from *ysh*, to dwell). Resembling God's image, man is not destined to inhabit the earth in a self-centered way, but also to make the earth habitable for others. His function is to subdue it. Much has been said

about the different meanings of *kbš* ranging from "rape" to "trodden down", "subject", "put under the yoke of" (HAL 439) all very negative connotations of exercising authority (Rütersworden 1993: ).

Recently, however, Koch has shown that the use of the Niphal form of *kbš* (used in connection with *bā'ares* in Num. 32:21-22) deserves a more positive rendering (1983:23f). Num. 32 concerns the *dwelling-place* of the Transjordan tribes. After having helped their fellow-tribesmen to conquer the West Jordan, they were free to return and to take legal possession of "this land that is *nikebe'ā*". Since it was already conquered, *kbš* would convey the meaning of "ready or prepared to be inhabited or to be cultivated". It is foreseen that the rightful settlers would soon also start building their towns and corrals for the livestock.

"I doubt whether more is intended here than the basic needs of settlement and agriculture. *Mañ* is to fill up the earth, take possession of it and take control of it. Basically what is intended is tilling" (Barr 1972:26).

The similarity between the expression "subdue the earth" and man's toiling the garden of Eden is evident. To "subdue" means to make habitable by means of cultivating and by watering the earth (Berg 1988:32). This explains also why in the final allocation of land to the different tribes this word turns up again (Josh. 18:2) thereby signifying the realization of the land promise to Abraham. When the tribes had settled and began to cultivate the land they show in an exemplary way what is meant by "subdue the earth", namely to take control over it by, settling there and by cultivating the land.

The second term referring to man's task is *rdh* (HAL: 1110). Its objects are all sorts of animals ranging from the birds in the air, the wild beasts, ordinary land animals, fish in the sea and crawling animals. This term constitutes the relationship between man and all other living creatures (incidentally, plants were not thought of having a *nefesh*/ life).

The question remains, what does *rdh* mean? Most dictionaries allude to the negative and aggressive notion this word conveys (Zenger 1983:91). It refers to the way in which a king treats his enemies, by subjecting them harshly (I Ki. 5:4; Ps. 110:2; 72:8; Isa. 14:6; 4:2; Joel 4:13). The term is also accompanied by qualifying expressions such as *beperek* or *bebozqā* (Lev. 25 :43, 46, 53; Ezek. 34:4), *bā'ap* (Isa. 14:6), or by parallel verbs such as *nkb* (Isa 14:6), *ml* (Num.

24:19), etc. It is, however, not exclusively or even predominantly, royal language. The term emphasizes superior position and power, and, as in the case of Gen. 1:28, describes rule over those who are not of the same kind or order and who may even be viewed as potentially hostile (Bird 1981:154). Also Lohfink (1974:140) and Koch (1983:25) have argued that *rdh* does not necessarily embody only that which is negative. In Akkadian the term *rēdū* means *inter alia* to guide animals or even a caravan or to steer a ship (AHW, 965). According to HAL: 1110, "herrschen ist nicht die Grundbedeutung des Verbes. Das Wort bezeichnet eigentlich das 'Umherziehen des Hirten mit seiner Herde'..." (cf. Zenger 1983:91). Reading the metaphor of the *bad* shepherd (Ezek. 34:1-6) it becomes evident that the negative association is determined by the adverbial phrases, namely *beperek* and *bebozqā*. Without them *rdh* designates the way in which a shepherd usually treats his flock by taking care of their needs in terms of water and food, by protecting them from going astray, by treating their wounds, etc. In fact in Ps. 49:15 the term is used parallel to *ʾh* ("to shepherd"). This metaphor of *shepherding* a flock surely does not cover the full range of meaning of *rdh* (Rüterswörden 1993:81). It does, however, show that superiority, does not exclude man's responsibility, to take care of the animals, as e.g. Noah did (Harland 1996:201). Also Gen. 2:19 alludes to the intimate relation between man and the animals, which he was assigned to name! It is also clear that far more than the domestication of animals is intended by *rdh* (as Lohfink would suggest [1974:139]). To have dominion over the wild beasts of the earth, including the birds and crawling animals (and of course the fish - how this was to be achieved is not said!), means to take care of and to control them, in such a manner that all the animals will have their dwelling abode to delight their creator (Ps. 8). A commentary on Genesis 1 (Snaitch 1979-80.20), Psalm 8 depicts man as God's vice-regent who rules over creation (Harland 1996:196) and who sees to it that all animals have a dwelling place.

### III

It has been argued that man reflects the image of God insofar as he acts out of sheer obedience by making the earth habitable and by ruling over the animals. It would be profitable to ask how the implied hearers would have understood these expressions which are associated according to most commentaries with *royal* ideology (Westermann 1967 : 201)? In short, what image of *man* is envisualized in the Genesis narratives?

The life scenario that the text seems to reflect, I would suggest, is that the image of man in the narratives is nothing other than that of the humble farmer eking out an existence in the central hill country of Palestine during the Iron Age II - III period, and not that of a king or warrior. The farmer struggled to uproot the shrubs (Josh. 17:17) in the untamed regions of Ephraim, Manasseh and later Judah, which had prevented any form of permanent settlement and agriculture (Callaway 1984:55). By building terraces, hewing out cisterns and silos, erecting thorn bush fences, etc. he would be doing precisely that which is envisaged by *ʾabʾs* in Num. 32. In taming the wild mountainous landscape and by creating the means to prosper there the activities of the Iron Age farmers of Palestine imitated to a certain extent God's creative acts which culminate in the earth as dwelling-place for man and for the living creatures. According to Hopkins the farmers needed labour in order to construct fences, silos and cisterns (1985:178). Where the population had increased, labour became cheaper and as such, means for the production of surplus were established (Hopkins 1987:179).

It is inconceivable that the ancient farmers could exist without some domesticated animals. They needed sheep for wool, goats for milk, cheese, curds, hides, dung, donkeys and occasionally cows for draught labour. The symbiosis between animal husbandry and agriculture remained a characteristic feature of the subsistence mode of the inhabitants of the central highlands (Chaney 1983:47). Undoubtedly they would have experienced constant trouble with wild animals, birds, insects, predators preying on their flocks, trampling down their wheat, ravaging their grapes, etc. which would require aggressive action to be taken in terms of *rdʾb*.

The pastoral and agricultural life of ancient Israel, which of course continued later, is thus reflected in the way in which man as the image of God is being portrayed. Israel saw her daily work as a God-given task and expressed her relationship to God by precisely these terms (Olivier 1988:13). Healey (1984) argues convincingly that extrabiblical texts confirm that agricultural terminology found in literary contexts is derived from *everyday* usage. Agricultural imagery reflects conditions of life and modes of existence. This also holds true of the creation narratives which thus could allude to man's modes of existence, namely as that of a farmer working in the fields and orchards and tending to his flocks.

## IV

The surveys by Zertal, Finkelstein and others are substantiated by social-anthropological studies intending to reconstruct the life scenario of the early inhabitants of Israel (Broshi & Finkelstein 1992:47). They confirm the drastic increase of settlements in the uninhabited highlands of Canaan during the Iron Age I and II periods (Finkelstein 1988:348). It also shows the tremendous effort by which the region was converted into a number of self-supporting farming villages, practising initially dry-farming crops in the narrow valleys. As the landscape became dotted with these hilltop villages, newly developed techniques such as terrace and silo construction and sealing of cisterns enabled the introduction of horticulture. This would have required manpower, the absence of outside interference, and the will to succeed. The villages consisted of 90 to 100 inhabitants on average. Stager argues that these people in the villages mostly formed part of one large extended family (1985:31). All these farming communities (cf. Ein Yalu and Sataf near Jerusalem) reveal the close interaction between animal husbandry and agriculture (Edelstein & Milevski 1996:23).

In the early stages of the polymorphic society the shepherds and agriculturalists could thus be members of the same family, living in the same village, but performing different tasks. Lemche (1994:119) has argued that a village's social structure was based upon a patron-client relationship when the family ties were not dominant. The relationships between town and city, village and nomad camp, reflect an intricate balance of alliances, interdependence, trade, etc., as is shown by Liverani (1990:70).

Of course we should not romanticize their lifestyle - it was pretty much a marginal subsistence living with minimum protection against cold and heat, uncertainty of food supply, constant threats and diseases, exacerbated by political and economical exploitation, especially later on by the kings, as Samuel so wisely foresaw (I Sam 8). They needed the sort of encouragement that Gen. 1:28, Ps. 8, etc. provide, namely assuring them they are indeed God's stewards and had to perform God's work.

## V

We need not believe that royal ideology lies at the root of man who is destined to act in God's image, but that the humble farmer of the central highlands

could just as well have been envisaged portraying God's image. Man relates to God by being his representative in the world and by exercising dominion. The image speaks of dignity, care and responsibility. Independent, hard working, creative and self-sufficient people reflect the ideal image of man as is portrayed in the Genesis narratives.

## Endnote

The Babylonian myth *Ennima dū anēlum* ("when the Gods were Man") tells the fascinating story of the creation of mankind, of the attempts of Enlil, king of the gods, to reduce the overpopulation by plague, drought, famine and the disastrous Deluge. A recent discovery by the late Dr. Walid Al-Jadir in the Neo-Babylonian temple of *Samārs* at Sippar casts more light on the leader of the mutinous gods, Alla, whose flesh and blood he mixed with clay, to make mankind after he had been slaughtered.

Let the mother goddess create human-kind  
so man can bear the soil-basket of the gods.  
Let her create human-kind  
so it can carry the yoke.  
the task imposed by rulership  
(11 IM 124649, lines rev 69-72).

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