

Being Made in the Image of God as an Empty Concept

Hendrik Bosman's survey of the recent scholarly interpretations of the Old Testament texts about man being created in the image of God is both illuminating and frustrating. He clearly shows that we are dealing with different concepts in the texts and also that the modern exegetes are far from a consensus in describing these concepts and the way they are related. So one must fear that it is not likely that there will soon come a convincing answer to the question posed at the beginning: has the Old Testament any contribution to make to the modern debate about human dignity? In this connection Bosman quotes John W. Rogerson, who in his recent book on the theology of the Old Testament also seems to be very reluctant in these matters. Rogerson states that the central question of the Old Testament is posed in Psalm 8:4: "What does it mean to be human?" (Rogerson 2009:171). He states that at first sight the study of the Old Testament itself seems to contribute nothing to the modern discussion about the quality of human life. But then again, the whole book of Rogerson is an attempt to show that the Old Testament is relevant for today. He invites the reader to take the Old Testament view on humanity as something dynamic. Texts about the human being in its relation to God are not meant to describe a fixed situation but to open new perspectives and to encourage processes of change. In this connection the idea of man as the image of God plays a central part. Rogerson wants "to demonstrate the thesis that the more human humans become (whatever is meant by that), the closer they become to what the Old Testament calls the 'image of God' (Genesis 1.27) and, in what may seem a curious way, the more God and his purposes are realized in the world" (Rogerson 2009:174). In his interpretation of Genesis 1:26-27 he goes against the view, as it usually found in traditional Jewish and Christian theology, that it would say something about the nature of man. He follows the view of Claus Westermann who maintains that this passage primarily concerns the divine act of creating man as someone with whom God can communicate. Following this line, one can say that man becomes the human being he was meant to be in relation with God. In this connection Rogerson speaks of the image of God as an "an 'empty' concept", "which has to be filled with meaning in the light of human history and what can be learned from it" (Rogerson 2009: 192). One could say that the Old Testament time and again testifies of this process. It shows the many trials and errors of mankind on its way to reach this goal. It even more shows God's patience with man and God's perseverance to help mankind to fulfill its potential. Without that the project would fail. The Bible is full of the stumbling-blocks to the realization of the vision of a politics of human transfiguration. In order "not to create despair but hope" the Bible speaks "of possibilities which belong fully to a different world but which may be available in this world – divine forgiveness, divine love and divine grace. These are properties which become most apparent at the point when humans recognize their limitations and weaknesses. Even in an imperfect world they can bring hope and transfiguration" (Rogerson 2009:195).

The way Rogerson presents his view his view is refreshing and stimulating, certainly also for our project on human dignity. The contribution by Bosman, however, cautions us for simply using one of the many possible interpretations of Genesis 1:26-27. At this point it is important to note an important difference in approach compared to the work of Rogerson. Bosman based his observations on a strictly historical-critical analysis of the biblical text, distinguishing between different sources and traditions. Rogerson does not deny the fruits of historical-critical research, but treats the texts as one coherent narrative, the product of cultural memory. One could say that Rogerson suggests that the Priestly tradition has become dominant or that for us as modern readers in our situation the Priestly tradition is the most relevant of the different voices in the Bible. Within the history of research, as outlined by Bosman, one could see Rogerson's interpretation as just one of the many

possible. I see, however, a tendency in recent publications towards precisely this view. Rogerson indicates that his interpretation is in line with the conclusion of Westermann in his monumental commentary on the book of Genesis. I also see some interesting correspondences with a recent German collection of essays on human dignity (Baldermann 2000). This book in the series *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie*, mentioned neither by Rogerson nor by Bosman, certainly deserves our attention.

Like Rogerson the editors are positive about the possible contribution of biblical theology to modern discussions about human dignity. Not only do they state that in our civilization human dignity is part of the heritage of the Jewish-Christian faith, but they also see an important role for biblical theology in modern discussions about the quality of human dignity: "Mit der neuzeitlichen Artikulation der Menschenwürde (...) ist nicht etwas Fremdes auf das Christentum zugekommen, das heikler Integrationsbemühungen in den christlichen Kontext bedürfte. Vielmehr hat hier ein ureigener Impetus jüdisch-christlicher Überlieferungen säkulare Ausdrucksformen und Begründungsweisen gefunden. Sie rufen eine christlich-biblische Theologie zu ihrem Proprium. Indem die christlich-biblische Theologie ihr Proprium auf die neuzeitlichen Problemstellungen hin auslegt, läßt sie sich über traditionelle Begrenzungen hinausführen, übt aber ihrerseits auch Kritik an der rationalistischen Flachheit und moralistischen Engführung moderner Begründungen von Menschenwürde und Menschenrechten" (B. Hamm, M. Welker, in: Baldermann 2000:V-VI). The contributions on biblical theology and also on church history, systematic and practical theology in this volume demonstrate that this goal formulated in the introduction is not aimed too high. In his contribution on the interpretation of Genesis 1:26-27 and 9:6 Walter Groß emphasizes that being created in the image of God does not point to what a man is, but to what he has to do. Like Rogerson he pays attention to the importance of the repetition in Genesis 9:6. Although things had changed so much as man had proven to be imperfect, the assignment of man towards other men and to the animals remains the same. Apparently this also means that man still has the ability to do so and can live up to the expectations related to this concept of the image of God, but only when he stays in close relation with this God (Spronk 2007:198-201).

It is often remarked that the idea of man being created in the image of God does not seem to play a primary role in what the Old Testament has to say about humanity. Next to the passages in Genesis we only find in Psalm 8 an indirect reference to this notion. But this does not have to mean that there is no relation to other texts in the Old Testament about the human nature. The study by Rogerson shows that it is fruitful to relate it to biblical stories about man finding his way by trial and error in the direction which God has pointed out. This is also the story of God coping with man who constantly disappoints him.

In Genesis 5:1-3 it is reported that mankind functions as expected. The qualification as being made in the image of God is repeated and it is added that he now is indeed acting like his creator, namely in procreating:

"This is the book of the generations of Adam. In the day that God created man, in the likeness of God made he him, male and female He created them and blessed them and called him Adam, in the day when they were created. And Adam lived hundred and thirty years, and begat a son in his own likeness, after his image and called him Seth."

This suggests that everything went exactly according to God's plan. It also offers the basic explanation of the expression "image of God". As in Genesis 1 it is balanced by the reference that "man" is created "male and female". It indicates that only in this combination man can function as the image of God. To this is added in Genesis 1:28 the command to "be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth". All this clearly indicates that the expression being made in the image of God in the first place points to the human power of procreation. This is underlined in Genesis 5 describing how Adam's actions copy God's. He begets a son "in his own likeness, after his image". These are the

same words used in Genesis 1:26 (in reversed order). In Genesis 5:3 this is followed by the same action undertaken by God in verse 2: he gives him a name.

Genesis 5 seems to indicate that everything is still in the same order as it was presented in the description of the creation. The only exception is that death has come in. There is no reference to sin. Things are different the next time we read about man as the image of God. That is in Genesis 9:1-6, where God after the flood blesses Noah and repeats the command to fill the earth:

“So God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them: ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be on every beast of the earth, on every bird of the air, on all that move on the earth, and on all the fish of the sea. They are given into your hand. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. I have given you all things, even as the green herbs. But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. Surely for your lifeblood I will demand a reckoning; from the hand of every beast I will require it, and from the hand of man. From the hand of every man's brother I will require the life of man. Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed; For in the image of God He made man.’ ” (NKJV)

It is clear that the relation between man and the animals has changed. Fear has come in. Killing has become part of life on this earth. On the one hand God gives man the room to kill, on the other hand He comes with restrictions. He sets a border again: people are not supposed to kill each other. In this context the reference to man as the image of God has a different meaning. It does not say something about the human potential, but puts the emphasis on the value of human life. It is now also connected with God's commandments. Only in fulfilling these commandments the image of God is safeguarded. With the change of the situation, after sin has come in, also the concept of man as the image of God appears to have changed. It still testifies of the close relation between God and man, but it has become clear that within this relation choices have to be made and it is all but certain that God can recognize himself in what man makes of his opportunities.

According to Rogerson the central question posed in the Old Testament is whether the human race can become more human. Can man do this by his own efforts? What part does God's loyalty to his covenant play here? He makes some interesting remarks within this framework about the way God is pictured in the book of Judges: as an attempt to express that God “does not give up his project” (Rogerson 2009:188). He also elaborates on the story of David, especially in the so-called Court Chronicle (2 Samuel 9-20) with its frank portrayal of David as a far from perfect king. According to Rogerson it points to “a breakdown at a decisive point in God's project for the human race through Israel”: it is “a betrayal of what is implied in the creation of the human race in the divine image” (Rogerson 2009:191-192).

It is also possible and in my opinion even preferable to see this story about David in a more favorable light. Compared to the previous stories in the book of Judges it is not a breakdown, but a realistic and therefore also promising example of how man who is not without sin and who is living in a cruel world can make the best of it in close relation to God. My interpretation is based on the assumption that the book of Judges in its present form is meant as an introduction to the stories in the books of Samuel and Kings about the problems with and the blessings of kingship in Israel and Judah (Spronk 2010). The installation of a king is the answer to a situation where every respect for human dignity seemed to have disappeared. This has become obvious in the dreadful story of the brutal murder of a woman in Gibeah (Judges 19). That is also a story about a complete lack of hospitality and the clear parallels with the similar story in Genesis 19 show that Sodom and Gomorrah may have disappeared but not the great sins with which these cities were associated. The victim is cut into twelve pieces, as if she were an animal. One can hardly get any further from the human being as image of God.

The first attempts to get away from this low point are not successful. The Israelites get entangled in civil war, almost eradicating one of their own tribes (Judges 20-21). The refrain in these last chapters is that there was no king in Israel in these days (Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). In the next stories the prophet Samuel at first refuses to give in to the wish of the people to get a king. The traditional

argument against this wish is that God is Israel's king (Judges 8:23). It is also used by Samuel, but God tells him to give in (1 Samuel 8:7). Against the background of the concept of man as image of God this is a very interesting discussion: can the king be seen as God's representative on earth? As Bosman showed in his survey, this was a common conception in the ancient Near East and it also fits in with the way man is presented as the image of God in Genesis. This is indicated by the fact that it is followed in Genesis 1:26 by the command to rule over the animals.

So the stories of the kings of Israel, especially king Saul and king David, can be seen as an answer to the question whether they in their function as ruler can be qualified as image of God. One can find that question already in Judges 19 which contains a number of hints to these future kings. Note, for instance, the important role of the cities of Jebus and Gibeah, which are in later stories closely related to David and Saul. As could be expected from someone who comes from Gibeah, Saul proves to be not fit for this function representing God. David on the other hand is announced as a "man after God's own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14). During his reign David did not always act according to this high title, but it can also be said that unlike Saul he never lost the contact with his God. David is not perfect, but it is not in line with the way he is described and remembered in the Old Testament to speak with Rogerson of a failure or even a betrayal of God's intentions with mankind. When Rogerson suggests to see being made in the image of God as an empty concept, the stories about David can play a positive role in the ongoing attempts to fill it with new meaning.

One may also note the correspondence with the way the concept of the image of God is related in the New Testament to "the son of David", Jesus Christ. In Colossians 1:15 He is called "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation". And in Romans 8:29 it is described that what awaits the Christian believer is "to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers". As long as human beings are struggling to reach this high ideal, they may be comforted and motivated by seeing it as an empty concept that time and again calls for human beings, imperfect as they may be, to fill it in creatively.

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