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## Response to the article of dr Piet van Staden:

### Image(of God) as ethical injunction: A social-scientific perspective

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Christian Strecker and I were working together on this short response to Piet van Staden's paper and first of all we would like to thank Dr Van Staden for his interesting paper. We really enjoyed reading it. The paper is an important contribution to the widespread debate on the Biblical expression 'image of God' mainly because Dr Van Staden adds a very new perspective to it. On the basis of the exegetical discourse on Genesis 1,25-27, 2 Corinthians 4,4 and Colossians 1,15 for example he develops a social-scientific perspective, which in our opinion facilitates answering some of our questions concerning the meaning of the syntagma *εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ*. By treating the syntagma as a symbol and employing a model which he borrowed from the discussions on the meaning of symbols — as exhibited especially by Foster and Brandes and Ortner — he is equipped to analyze the use of the expression both in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. By means of his model the expression can be conceived 'as different types of symbol in the two contexts' (cf 4). Perhaps we will differ about the elaboration on the difference between the First and Second Testament in using the expression 'image of God,' but it goes without saying that there is a difference and that this difference is important. We've learned of this insight from the paper of Piet van Staden. And insofar as the paper makes it clear that the difference can be recognized with the help of the employed symbol model, the result approves the application of that specific social-scientific tool. Exegesis sometimes seems to be like putting old wine into old wineskins. The paper shows that it will be possible for us scholars to perform a kind of miracle: try only to put the old wine into a fresh skin and then you will recognize a sort of changing the old wine into new.

#### Some remarks to Genesis 1:25-27.

By applying his model to the use of the expression 'image of God' in Genesis 1 Van Staden points out that due to the fact that no image or concrete symbol of God will be tolerated in Israel, the Israelites had to conceive of God in terms of abstract symbolism, so God himself became the summarizing symbol for the whole of the Israelite religious

and social life (cf 4.1). On this basis he asks the question: If God is taken as the key symbol, what is the relationship between God and humanity according to this symbol mode? Van Staden's answer is as follows: Humanity belongs to the genus God and human beings are symbolically an extension of God. As a result of these premises Van Staden defines the relationship between God and humanity in terms of 'kinship.'

Obviously Van Staden is using the term 'kinship' symbolically (cf 4.1). Nevertheless — in our opinion — this particular identification of the relationship between God and humanity needs to be reconsidered.

The Hebrew expressions  $\text{בְּצַלְמֵי}$  and  $\text{דְמוּת}$  in Genesis 5:3 which we find also in Gn 1:26 can probably be understood in terms of kinship relationship: 'Adam became the father a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth'. But it is explicitly stated here, that Adam procreates a son. The Masoretic text reads the Hebrew word:  $\text{דְּוִיָּלָד}$ , and the translation of the Septuagint is:  $\epsilon\gamma\epsilon\nu\nu\eta\sigma\epsilon\nu$ . But in the relevant passage concerning the creation of humanity in Genesis 1:26-27 we will find the Hebrew words  $\text{אֶרְבָּא}$  and  $\text{הַשִּׁבְעָה}$ , which to our knowledge are never used in the sense of to beget or to procreate. The Septuagint translates both of them with the word  $\rho\omicron\iota\acute{\epsilon}\omega$ .

If this wording is significant, then the following question will remain: What does the expression 'image of God' mean for the relationship between God and humanity? We agree with Van Staden, because in our view also we have to reckon with a concrete resemblance between God and humanity, since especially the word  $\text{בְּצַלְמֵי}$  refers to a concrete copy or image, a kind of representation of the 'original'. In German we use the words *Abbild* and *Urbild*. God is the *Urbild* (original) and human beings the *Abbild* (image). The *Abbild* represents the *Urbild*. But let us turn to the *tertium comparationis* between God and humanity: We suggest it signifies dominion, rule or sovereignty. Let me give some short arguments for this suggestion:

According to Psalm 8 God has made human beings little less than God (*elohim*). In this context it probably means what the following verse says: 'Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands etc'. In Gn 1:28 God blessed human beings and gave them dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds, every living thing. According to this context it is possible to conceive of the relationship between man and humankind in terms of dominion, government or control. Whereas in Akkadia, Assyria or Egypt the king was understood as  $\epsilon\iota\kappa\omega\nu\ \tau\omicron\upsilon\ \theta\epsilon\omicron\upsilon$ , in Israel the phrase denotes humanity in general. The Priestly document is so to say democratizing royal attributes. And if it is correct to say that humanity belongs to the genus God, then it is important that this is said of all human beings, not only of the kings. We think that this means more than only the 'ability to rule' — as some scholars stated. That human beings are created in

the image of God means according to the creation story of Genesis 1, that they have got the commission, mission or mandate to rule the world.

### Some remarks to Colossians 1,15

Turning to the Second Testament's use of *εικὼν τοῦ θεοῦ* Dr Van Staden convincingly detected a shift in the relationship between God and human beings, since Christ symbolically has to be conceived of as sharing with God being the summarizing symbol. This is especially true for Colossians 1,15. Here the relationship between God and Christ is one of identity.

Our question refers to Van Staden's thesis, that in Colossians 1,15 Christ is substituted for humanity as the image of God. The text predicates Christ a 'first-born of all creation'. He stands on God's side and does not belong to the visible creation. According to 1,17 'He is before all things' — *πρὸ πάντων* — and in him all things were created — *ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα* (1,16).

With respect to this special role of Christ we have the following question: Does the use of *imago dei* in Colossians 1,15 refer to Genesis 1? Many scholars point to the Jewish Wisdom Tradition, which calls the *σοφία* image of God (Philo, *LegAll* 1,43) and understand her as preexistent *Schöpfungsmittlerin* (Proverbia 3,19; 8,22; *Sapientia* 7,21; 9,1; *Sir* 1,4; 24,9; Philo, *Fuga* 109 etc). Philo also calls the *λόγος* image of God (*SpecLeg* 1,81).

But even if Colossians 1,15 refers to Genesis 1 — mediated through Jewish Wisdom speculations — the question remains whether it is correct to take Christ as substitute for humanity in the expression *εικὼν τοῦ θεοῦ*. Gn 1 is dealing with the creation of humanity *κατ' εἰκόνα τοῦ θεοῦ*; Col 1 is dealing with Christ as *Schöpfungsmittler*, as God's middleman or agent in creating the whole world. Therefore he is called image of the invisible God. He represents and manifests God, and the relationship between God and Christ is one of identity, as Van Staden's afore-stated thesis calls it. So it seems to us better to speak of Christ as a sort of substitute for God!

Understanding the New Testament shift in the relationship between God and humanity this way will support Van Staden's important observation about the position of human beings within this new symbolic map. Christ as part of the summarizing symbol God and as *Schöpfungsmittler* has an efficacious function for the *believers*, not human beings in general, as Van Staden correctly observes. According to Col 3,10 the believers have to put on the new human being — *τὸν νέον ἄνθρωπον* — he or she is a renewed person in terms of knowledge — *εἰς ἐπίγνωσιν* — after the image of its creator, Christ. Possibly, the author of the letter to the Colossians speaks of Christ as the image of God alluding to the creation story and featuring cosmological connotations

in order to lay a foundation for the believers as a kind of *καινή κτίσις*, as Paul would call it. The anthropological effect for the believers is a kind of transformation, because they are renewed persons after the image of their creator Christ, and therefore able to put to death what is earthly in them (3,5), all the immoral things like fornication, impurity, evil desire etc. and able to put on compassion, kindness, etc. (3,12).

So it seems to us, that the important shift between the First and the Second Testament's use of the 'image of God' relates to the fact that Christ has symbolically to be conceived of as sharing with God being the summarizing symbol. Christ is a kind of supplement to God as the summarizing symbol, which is perhaps a better definition than substitute, as we stated before. What are the reasons for this obvious difference or for the establishment of a supplement to the summarizing symbol? Van Staden gives very helpful hints to solve this question when he says: 'amongst the Christians it was understood that man has lost his position'. According to Paul — we may add — this loss is a result of the rule or dominion of the *ἁμαρτία* over humanity. The order of God's creation seems to be corrupted and that started with the first human being — Adam. The second Adam, Christ, reveals what the creation was meant to be — humanity in the 'image of God'. Insofar we agree with Van Staden's thesis that according to the Second Testament Christ substituted the human being as 'image of God'. The aim of creation — humanity in the 'image of God' — is revealed in Christ as *εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ* at the end of time. And 'just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven' (1 Cor 15,49). To put it in other words: The major shift concerning the relationship of human beings to God is that they will become heavenly, pneumatic people in Christ. This is really a sort of kinship-relation. But — in our opinion — according to Paul's theology we will gain that status and did not lose it.

Let us add one further question concerning the relationship between Christ and the believers. Van Staden states that Christ functions as the *root simile* and the human beings as *simile scenario* in which the values located in the root simile are dramaturgically acted out. We would like to suggest that the implications of that relationship can be interpreted also in terms of identity like that between God and Christ. Paul particularly talks of transforming the believers into the image of Christ (Rm 8,29; 2 Cor 3,18; Phlp 3,21; 1 Cor 15,49). The dying and rising with Christ which happens symbolically in baptism is for him a kind of process by which the believers gain the same image of God, his *εἰκὼν*, which was known to humanity in Jesus Christ.

So in our opinion Paul is not only speaking of human beings — or perhaps the believers — as acting out moral values incorporated in Jesus as symbol, and he is not — as Alan Segal puts it — 'speaking of an agreement of mind or ideas between Jesus

and the believers'. Paul is speaking of a process of transformation into the image of God — which is Christ. This process implies a growing relationship of identity. Therefore Paul uses the word *συμμορφίζομαι*, which means a spiritual re-formation of the bodies of the believers into the form of the divine image. This process of transformation starts in the present time (Rm 12,2; 2 Cor 3,18: present tense) and will be completed at the parousia (1 Cor 15,49).

So in our view it is important to pay attention to the processual character which is crucial for understanding the concept of *εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ*, especially in Paul's use of it.

But all these are minor objections to a great achievement. Van Staden has made the expression 'image of God' more understandable and therefore deserves the heartfelt thanks of all of us.