

THE HUMAN BEING AS THE IMAGE OF GOD AND SLAUGHTERED IN THE NAME OF GOD: A BIBLICAL SUBVERSION OF ANCIENT AND MODERN CONCEPTS OF HUMAN DIGNITY¹

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Abstract

The biblical basis for human dignity is usually found in the belief expressed in Genesis 1:26 that God created the human beings “in his own image”. This concept, however, does not play a primary role in the Bible. Moreover, the positive general message about human dignity it seems to convey is modified by the fact that in the Bible this dignity is measured according to the quality of the relation with God. The positive idea of human dignity even seems to be contradicted by stories about inhuman violence in the name of God. In the end studying the Bible prevents the reader to adhere to one clear-cut idea of human dignity. Biblical stories can help to subvert superficial and one-sided concepts.

Key words: Creation, Human Dignity, Image of God, Violence

The biblical basis for the teaching in the church and by theologians on the dignity of a human person is found in Gen. 1:26, the first line of which is quoted time and again by theologians reflecting on anthropology.² We should of course read it in its context: The story of creation with the creation of humankind as a climax:

“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

And God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth’ (RSV).

The idea seems simple and is used as an argument by many: If the human being – every human being – looks like God, we cannot think lowly of him/her. We may look at the human being as if through the eyes of God who calls his creation “good” and humankind even “very good”. This quality is not lost with or through sin, because also after the first sin by Adam and Eve, we find the reference to humankind as the image of God repeated in Gen. 5:1 and 9:6. Apparently the human sin as recounted in Gen. 3 and 4 does not deny to all

¹ Paper read at a Stellenbosch University and Protestant Theological University Kampen consultation on “Human dignity at the edges of life” at Stellenbosch, 14-15 August 2006.

² See for a good survey on the history of research the monograph by JR Middleton 2005. *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press. Middleton notes a tension between the results of modern biblical scholarship and the way this text is used in ethics and dogmatics.

subsequent humans the character of the image of God. Humans have not fallen from their dignity.

Gen. 9:6 is an especially important witness. After the flood God started all again over with Noah and his family giving them as a commandment:

“Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image.”

We should have the highest opinion of human dignity and act accordingly. God’s high opinion of the human person is repeated eloquently in Ps. 8:4-8:

“What is man that thou art mindful of him,
and the son of man that thou dost care for him?
Yet thou hast made him little less than God,
and dost crown him with glory and honour.
Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands;
thou hast put all things under his feet,
all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the sea.”

Note that the honour given to human beings by God is related in Ps. 8 to the dominion over the rest of creation. It is closely associated with hierarchy and difference in power.³

One may also quote in this regard a passage from the beautiful Ps. 139 as an example of the close relationship between God and human beings that says so much about how precious humans are according to the Bible:

“O Lord, Thou hast searched me and know me. (...)
For thou didst form my inward parts,
thou didst knit me together in my mother’s womb.
I praise thee, for thou art fearful and wonderful.
Wonderful are thy works!
Thou knowest me right well;
my frame was not hidden from thee,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately wrought in the depths of the earth.
Thy eyes beheld my unformed substance;
in thy book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there was none of them.
How precious to me are thy thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
If I would count them, they are more than the sand.
When I awake, I am still with thee” (Ps. 139:1, 13-18).⁴

³ The reference to honour reminds us of the contribution in this volume by Johan Bouwer.

⁴ An impressive application of this Psalm as a means to keep one’s dignity in a situation of distress is Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s poem, written in his death cell, “Who am I”, ending with the exclamation “Who am I, o God? I am thine” in Bonhoeffer D 2005. *Who Am I?: Poetic Insights on Personal Identity*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Books.

In the New Testament we find the close relationship between God and humankind combined with its consequences for our attitude toward the other expressed in the parable of the separation of the sheep from the goats. In it the heavenly king explains to the blessed:

“And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me’” (Matt. 25:40).

Everyone will agree that this forms a good basis for speaking of human dignity and it may also inspire safeguarding it. So far so good, but would not the first thing to defend human dignity against be the Bible itself?! Where, in the same parable, is the compassion towards those who did not act according to the king’s commands? All their dignity is taken from them in eternal punishment as the king tells them:

“You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matt. 25:41).

And what about the human rights of those who oppose the beloved God of Ps. 139?

“If only you would slay the wicked, O God!
 Away from me, you bloodthirsty men!
 They speak of you with evil intent;
 your adversaries misuse your name.
 Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord,
 and abhor those who rise up against you?
 I have nothing but hatred for them;
 I count them my enemies” (Ps. 139:19-22).

Within the Bible we find all too many examples of hated enemies, opposing God and his people, being slain without compassion. Human dignity appears to be limited. Is what the Bible tells us not that we should only respect those who believe in God? What is the value of this beautiful idea of the human being as the image of God within this broader biblical context of both the Old and the New Testament?

I hope to find (the beginning of) an answer to these questions about a possible biblical basis for our thinking about human dignity by first taking a closer look at the text in Gen. 1 about the creation in God’s image and then by defining more closely the relation between the texts speaking so positively about human beings and those in which they seem to be of so little significance. I will give special attention to some of the notorious stories full of bloodshed in the books of Joshua and Judges. Though I concentrate on the Old Testament, I believe there is no basic difference in view on these matters in the New Testament.⁵ I hope it will become clear that it is risky or even wrong to speak of only one biblical view on humanness. Instead of giving us a definitive answer, the Bible helps us to question the various answers given to or to keep open the question about human dignity.

Some Remarks about Gen. 1:26-27

We should first make one thing clear: “The notion of humanity in ‘the image of God’ plays no primary role in Old Testament articulations of humanity.”⁶ We only find it in Gen. 1 and indirectly in Ps. 8. This is in sharp contrast to the central role of this theme in systematic theology. Within the context of Genesis 1 the reference to the humans created in the image

⁵ See also the remarks by Jeremy Punt about the Bible and human dignity in his contribution to this volume. I fully agree with his conclusions about the biblical emphasis on the indignity rather than the human dignity and the focus on human beings as existing in terms of the divine covenant.

⁶ W Brueggemann 1997. *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 452. Cf. JR Middleton *ibid.* 16.

of God is not so much a static statement on some kind of inherent quality of human beings, their work, soul or whatever. It has to do in the first place with their relations and how they work out. It is not about the human status, but about how it functions in relations.⁷

In fact we are dealing here with three relations. The first is the relation between God and humans. Creation in God's image says something about God's motivation for creating humankind: He wanted somebody to relate to. This first relation, however, is not one of full equality. God takes the initiative. God is the Creator, creative in a way impossible for humans.

The second relationship mentioned here is that between male and female. In this relation they are the image of God, because in their relation there is also the element of creation. Together they are like God, acting like God in procreation. This becomes especially clear in Gen. 5:1-3:

“When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God.

Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created.

When Adam had lived a hundred and thirty years, he became the father of a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth.”

Note the relation with Gen. 1:28. The reference to man being like God is repeated after Adam had become a father.

The third relation is the one between human beings and (the rest of) creation. Like the first there is difference in power: Human beings receive from the Creator dominion over the rest of creation. This dominion says much of their dignity and honour. We find it elaborated in the already quoted Ps. 8.

As it is formulated here, within the present context, the qualification of human beings as image of God does not in the first place say something about the humans as such but first and foremost about the interaction between them and God, the Creator and his creation. This also means that according to Gen. 1 one cannot rightly speak of humans without their relation to their Creator. There is no such thing as human dignity without God: Humans can only function properly and can only reach their destiny in relation with God, i.e. with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This also is what the Psalmists and prophets envisioned as the ideal future: All nations will come to Jerusalem to hear the Torah and there enjoy peace together.

The Human Person as Partner of God

In our day many will reject as arrogant and disrespectful of the values of other religions and world views the idea that human dignity is only possible in relation to God. However, according to Walter Brueggemann the biblical tradition about human values may have significance beyond the borders of synagogue and church. He compares the biblical account of “the human person as partner of God” with some observations on the modern ways of man and concludes that even non-believers can profit from the critical biblical view.⁸ Brueggemann first focuses on three aspects of humanness according the Bible that match the three central claims made regarding God: First, God as Creator of every person is sovereign in His relationship with him/her. It is appropriate for humans to respond with obedience, i.e. to live with and in agreement with the Torah. Secondly, the Bible makes

⁷ Fretheim TE 2005. *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 55.

⁸ Brueggemann *ibid.* 450-491.

clear that God is trustworthy and loyal to his creation. After the flood He assures humankind that the earth is safe now (Gen. 8:22). Human creatures may live in a world that elementally leaves them free of anxiety because of the goodness, reliability, and generosity of God, as described, for instance, in Ps. 145:9, 13b:

“The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made (...). Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and thy dominion endures throughout all generations. The Lord is faithful in all his words, and gracious in all his deeds.”

This creates life space for human freedom in the world: Freedom to eat and drink and exult in a world of goodness. It also offers humans the freedom to take initiative with God, to insist on their right over against God. The best example of this is Job in whom all humanity is gathered and mobilised against God.

The third aspect of the character of God and the way man reacts to Him has to do with the tension between the first two. There is indeed a tension between God being sovereign and being faithful. This invites the human person to what Brueggemann calls “the dialectic of assertion and abandonment”. Man should have the courage to assert and the confidence to yield. The Bible teaches that humankind is a covenantal-transactional creature who both yields in obedience and asserts in freedom.

The human person as partner of God as described in the Bible can be contrasted with modern man in his, as Brueggemann calls it, “commodity-driven society that is fundamentally alienated through an ideology of consumer individualism”. Firstly, considering the human person’s well-being: Humans as partners of God are described as obedient to God, i.e. as listening to the command to love God and neighbour; preaching justice. This is contrasted by Brueggemann to the present day emphasis on autonomy, which denies accountable relatedness. Furthermore, a person after God’s heart not only is obedient but also wise and discerning, like Solomon. The Bible knows of wisdom that pays attention to the generous mystery that drives reality. It is a guard against slavish obedience. It is a way of enjoying life, seeing reality as God’s generous, fragile gift. This can be contrasted to the technical knowledge of our time and our “can-do” society, in which as a rule everything that is possible is also done (“I want it all and I want it now”). In this way humankind damages the earth for immediate private gain, denying a fabric of order according to which some things may be more important than our instant satisfaction. The difference is rooted in the contrast between the primal trust in the loyalty of God to his creation the Bible speaks of, and modern anxiety.

Things become even clearer in extremis, at the edges of life. The Bible testifies that the human person can complain to his Creator, often followed by a petition, addressing God commanding Him to do justice. This lament or petition is contrasted by Brueggemann to the docility and resignation he sees in so many modern persons in need, lacking the transformative power that is characteristic of the relationship with God. One who has a God to complain to and to urge also has someone to thank when the situation changes for the better. This can be contrasted to the modern tendency of self-sufficiency. And finally, there is the person who sees him-/herself as delivered from the pit (as we often read in the Psalms), who lives on “borrowed time” is able to praise and has hope, based on the conviction that he/she has a trustworthy Helper. This can be contrasted with the modern feeling of satiation, when things turn out right. This often leads to one realising that one has everything but is still not happy.⁹ Whereas praise is linked to hope this satiation can turn into despair.

⁹ Cf. the title of the famous book of Harald S Kushner 1986. *When all you’ve ever wanted isn’t enough*. New York: Summit Books.

Of course, this is no more than an outline with all too many generalizations, but it may be enough to show that there are resources in the Old Testament for a notion of humanness that can be used as an alternative to some modern concepts, perhaps even help subvert them. All this was partly based on a close reading of Gen. 1:26-27. We should be careful in using these verses, but should not dismiss them in our discussion.

Biblical Texts Showing Little Respect for Human Dignity

Gen. 1 clearly is a positive statement. But what about the texts which seem to show so little respect for the persons living without or acting against God and his elected? Let us look at them from the perspective of human dignity by starting in Egypt. The later leader of Israel, Moses, was saved from premature death (Exod. 1). The king of Egypt showed no respect at all for the lives of his Hebrew slaves. Innocent little boys were brutally killed. The exodus from Egypt starts with a reversal of roles. Now the innocent little Egyptian boys are killed, not by soldiers but by the angel of death. God shows no mercy for those who oppose Him. As the story goes the Pharaoh was offered the opportunity to end the conflict without bloodshed, but refused. In fact, God hardened his heart. God let diplomacy fail and opted for confrontation.¹⁰

With regard to the occupation of the Promised Land, it should be clear that it clearly was God's work. Jericho (Josh. 6) serves as example: The Israelites do not have to fight at all, but the inhabitants of the city all die. Was there no other way than this in human history of ending the conflict of those who claim exclusive rights on their alleged homeland? There was one exception in Jericho: Rahab, the whore living on the outskirts of the city. She had helped the enemy by hiding the two spies who had started the exploration of the land in her brothel. For this deed of treason she and her family were saved. This exceptional story has a remarkable counterpart in the story that follows about Achan (Josh. 7).¹¹ This respectable man from the respectable tribe of Judah had failed to resist to the temptation of the riches of Jericho. They belonged to the captor of the city, God, but Achan had taken some of the spoils for himself. He is captured and put to death, together with his family. We do not know whether his wife and children were involved. Was it unavoidable to make this example in this situation?

What strikes me and even appeals to me is what the combination of these two stories tells me. On the one hand we see Rahab, a marginalised woman with a despised profession. She turns out to be a true believer. This saves her and her family's lives. On the other hand we see Achan, a Judean dignitary, whose greed is bigger than his faith. This costs him and his family dearly. Read together these stories show us that reputations may not be what they seem to be and should be questioned. Human dignity is not something to be defined once and for all. It has to be looked at critically and positions taken have to be criticised and sometimes subverted. This does not make the stories of killing entire populations of cities or of the execution of whole families more acceptable, but these texts do have something to tell us.

We cannot ignore that there appear to be different voices in these biblical stories. Some exegetes suggest that they come from different authors and that sometimes one author may have wanted to correct a predecessor. However this is hard to prove and scholars usually

¹⁰ See for a survey of the reactions to it in the history of interpretation E Kellenberger 2006. *Die Verstockung Pharaos: Exegetische und auslegungsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu Exodus 1-15* (Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament Bd.171). Tübingen: Kohlhammer.

¹¹ See for more details my commentary on the book of Joshua (in Dutch), K Spronk 1994. *Jozua, een praktische bijbelverklaring* (Tekst & Toelichting), Kok, Kampen.

disagree in their reconstruction of the development of the texts. We should be careful, therefore, in making all too bold statements on this matter. And it may also be too simple to assume some kind of evolution from old violent texts to more peaceful ideas about human conflicts. History proves that radicalism, nationalism and other violent –isms with more attention to own ideals than to human rights always return. In this respect there seems to be no progress, no evolution to a more peaceful society. History merely repeats itself.

Should we not read the Bible against this background? The stories of violence, of people as victims of conflicts that cannot be resolved by diplomacy, of dilemmas that can only be solved by violence, are undeniable realities and are not denied in the Bible. They are simply there. We should not be happy about it, but we also should not ignore it, especially not when we – like many of us – live in a seemingly peaceful situation. In a way these terrible stories may help us to recognise that one cannot get rid of violence that easily or that human dignity is not as self-evident as we may be inclined to think it is.

Next to this there are these strange and surprising elements in the biblical stories, like the unexpected contrast between Rahab and Achan. These may help us to keep asking questions and not to submit to the threat of accepting violence and the abuse of human dignity as unavoidable facts of a broken world, but instead to keep searching for creative solutions. I believe we are dealing here with an important biblical theological theme which can be found in many biblical texts, both in the Old and the New Testament. A good example in the New Testament is the story of the Good Samaritan.

In conclusion, I want to give a final example from the book of Judges. It may be lesser known, but I think it is even more telling. In the beginning of the book of Judges there is a sharp distinction between good and bad, and people are treated, punished or killed accordingly. Take for example, Eglon, the king of Moab (Judg. 3:12-26). He is a despicable figure: Fat and dumb, as are his servants. They do not realise that some people are left-handed, and so do not see that the judge Ehud is carrying a sword when appearing before the king. After Ehud killed the king, loosing his sword in the layers of his belly, the servants do not dare to enter, assuming the king is in the toilet: A pitiful sight, a complete absence of dignity.¹²

However, as the book of Judges progresses we time and again see a reversal of roles.¹³ Israelite heroes appear to be less valiant. A woman like Deborah has to take the military leader Barak by the hand. Another woman, Jael, takes the life of the foreign general, Sisera. The mother of Samson proves to be more prudent than her frightened husband. The Book of Judges ends with Israelites butchering each other, not needing foreign enemies to do it any more. In almost every story in the Book of Judges the reader comes across these remarkable and surprising aspects. The violence can and should not be denied, but we should not look away. Things are sometimes different from what they appear at first sight. That is precisely what the Bible teaches us when we try to get a clear view on human dignity.

¹² See on this story the interesting article by Eric Christianson 2003. "A Fistful of Shekels: Scrutinizing Ehud's Entertaining Violence (Judges 3:12-30)." *Biblical Interpretation* 11, 53-78. Christianson draws the interesting comparison with modern "spaghetti westerns" when reflecting on the ideological presentation of violence in the biblical account. In his view it may have functioned as a social satire.

¹³ See on this and other patterns in the book of Judges the monograph by Gregory Wong 2006. *Compositional Strategy of the Book of Judges: An Inductive, Rhetorical Study* (Supplements to Vetus Testamentum Vol. 111). Leiden: Brill. Wong gives a survey of previous research, but note my critical remarks in *Review of Biblical Literature* (2007).