

"Basic demands established in the Christian Bible to assume responsibility for the world."

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Abstract

"In the focus of this presentation I want to investigate the biblical notions of man as an image of God being the background of a theology of responsibility for the world in biblical times.

In the tradition of the Christian Bible, the responsibility for the world is from the beginning strictly related to the monotheism of the Old Testament. Of this we read in the creation story Gn 1:1-2:4. The author describes the origin of the world as connected with God, but also differed from him. He combines monotheism directly with an anthropology that finds its concise expression in the idea of man as an image of God. This concept is an innovation that is clearly distinguished from other similar ideas of the ancient Near East. There not the man, but only the king is the image of God. However, the Old Testament's anthropology is more than an idea, because the concept of man as an image of God is immediately referred to the conflicts in the world. As an universal example of this, the author tells the story of the flood. The concept of man as an image of God is now connected to universal rules, the so-called Noachidic laws, and can be considered as a religious starting point for the idea of the specific dignity of man."

Your Royal Highness, ladies and gentlemen. It is a great honor for me to speak here today at the conference. Before I begin my presentation, I would like to make some short remarks. I am a historian of Old Testament in its ancient Near Eastern contexts. So I am not qualified to make statements about the current situation based on my own research.

Therefore I will limit my presentation to an important theological idea in the Christian Bible, the idea of man as an image of God. This idea is an crucial and fundamental insight of the Old Testament, which is also of enormous importance for Christianity. It is also a significant starting point for the religious discourse on human rights in modern times from the beginning of the Renaissance and the European enlightenment. And as such, it is important for the debate over responsibility for the world.

The development of the biblical concept of responsibility for the world - and, above all, the idea of "the world" - started in the 8th century B.C.E. It were the times when the Assyrians created their empire. Previously in the early first millennium B.C.E. there were many small tribes and nations in the Ancient Orient. They lived together, they merchandised among each other, sometimes they waged war against each other - and every nation had

its own god, the god of each nation: Israel, the Edomites, the Moabites, the Arameans and so on. But with the Assyrians came the Empire - and with the Empire, the idea of the world.

During this time, the prophet Amos heard the voice of God¹. And God spoke to him in a vision and he sent him out to announce his own people the end.

“This is what my Lord God showed me: A basket of summer fruit. And he asked, ‘what do you see, Amos?’ I replied, ‘a basket of summer fruit.’ Then the Lord said to me, ‘the summary hour - and that means in this word-play-vision (summer fruit - summary hour): the end - the summary hour is at hand for my people Israel. I shall pardon them no more.’” (Amos 8:1-2)

The end for Gods own people? What about the religious traditions of Israel? The prophet believed that the religious traditions of Israel weren't of use any longer. In another context Amos mentioned the superior and privileged status of Israel basing in the exodus from Egypt:

„Hear this word that the Lord has spoken concerning you, O children of Israel, concerning the entire family which I brought up from the land of Egypt. You alone I have chosen from all the families of the earth. That is why I shall call you to account for all your iniquities.“ (Amos 3:1-2)

The religious traditions, the privileged status of Israel aren't of any further use, because Israel has violated righteousness and justice. The prophet complains:

“They - the Israelites - turn justice into wormwood and hurl righteousness to the ground” (Amos 5,7).

No longer the exodus from Egypt, but righteousness and justice alone are responsible for the relationship between God and his people, this is the privilege for God's own people. And what does this mean for the other peoples? We can read the answer in Amos 9:7:

„Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O Israelites? – declares the Lord. Of course, I brought Israel up from the land of Egypt. But so, too, the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir.“

¹ See for the following J. Jeremias, Der Prophet Amos, Göttingen 1995; S.M. Paul, Amos, Minneapolis 1991.

In this rhetorical and polemical question the Prophet contradicts the popular belief that Israel as a nation occupies a privileged place before God – precisely because of its exodus from Egypt. God did the same to the distant people - the Ethiopians, that means in the ancient Near East the Sudan - and the near people - the Philistines who came from Crete and the Arameans. The Lord, Jahwe – the God of Israel himself absolutely denies and rejects this assumption of a superior status. In the eyes of the Prophet God is no longer a God of nations, but the Lord of the world.

Let me summarize briefly the importance of the prophecy of Amos in the Old Testament. Two ideas are in the focus of religious experience. And on the basis of religious experience these ideas increasingly define the life and patterns of thought. First, there is the idea that the relationship between God and his devotees is constituted essentially by righteousness and justice. And the unity of the world - not only the unity of the own nation - is guaranteed by righteousness and justice what the God of Israel absolutely demands. Of course: the ethics of ancient Israel is not the categorical imperative of Immanuel Kant or the ethics of virtue of Aristotle - not even the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments. The ethics of Israel is largely the traditional ethics of the time - a lot of the biblical laws and legal or ethical traditions can be found elsewhere in the ancient Near East like in Mesopotamia or Egypt. But the urgency and intensity that made righteousness and justice the measure of God's relation to his people is remarkable.

So we can turn to the important texts that comprise the idea that man is an image of God. One of the most eminent texts of the Old Testament at all is the Primeval History of the Genesis, the first book of Moses, the history of mankind, before the history of Israel and its neighbours begins.

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The Primeval History presents the famous description of the creation of the world in seven days by the Word of God including - apart from many other aspects - a fundamental explanation, an aitiology of the *conditio humana*. According to the author of the story the world is created very well from the beginning:

I quote Gen 1:31: “God looked at everything that he made and found it very pleasing”.

² Compare for the following M. Arneht, *Durch Adams Fall ist ganz verderbt. Studien zur Entstehung der alttestamentlichen Urgeschichte*, Göttingen 2007, with further literature.

On the one hand, the world is created very well from the beginning but nevertheless leads to disaster. The story of the flood, the big catastrophe in primeval times reports of this. We find it in Gen 6-9:

Gen 8:23: "All existence on earth was blotted out - man, cattle, creeping things, and birds of the sky; they were blotted out from the earth." Of course with one exception: "Only Noah was left, and those that were with him in the ark."

How could this disaster happen? Many peoples of the ancient Near East like the Babylonians and the Assyrians knew the story of the flood. We find the story in the legendary Plate 11 of the Gilgamesh-Epic or in the late Babylonian Atramhasis-Epic dating back to the 2nd millennium B.C.E. But their explanations for the flood were very different. They spoke of fate or caprice of their gods. They tried to give the disaster a reasonable sense like the regulation of overpopulation and so on.

In the Old Testament they run a different path. And that diverse interpretation of the story of the flood is linked together with a different anthropology. But the anthropology of the Primeval History in the Bible is complex. I won't bore you with the current debates on the literary problems of the Genesis or the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses, in Germany and elsewhere. I'll only make some brief comments.

According to most of the scholars the complex anthropology is the result of an intense literary process. Traditionally³ it is assumed that there are two sources (a priestly code, P, and an older Yahwistic source J) in the Primeval History, that have been connected redactionally. To the priestly code belongs the first creation story in Gen 1:1-2:4a, to the older Yahwist (or: nP = non P) the second story of creation in Gen 2:4b-3:24, the story of paradise and fall. The story of the flood Gen 6-9 is a combination of both layers.

However, I want to focus my lecture on the literary basis of the primeval History, especially the creation story in Genesis 1, the so-called P-Code. And this includes very important statements to anthropology, which have been the starting point of Christian anthropology for many centuries. I'm speaking of the doctrine of the man as an image of God. I quote:

³ The modern history of biblical research begins with Jean Astruc, *Conjectures sur les mémoires originaux dont il paroît que Moïse s'est servi pour composer le livre de la Genèse*, 1753. The most important contribution is still: Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels*, Berlin ⁶1927; a translation into English is available.

“Then God said, ‘I (or we?) will make man in my image, after my likeness; let him subject the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky, the cattle of every kind, and all the creeping things of the earth, whatever their kind’. And God was pleased with what he saw.

And God created man in his image; in the divine image created him, male and female created he them.

And God blessed them, saying to them, ‘Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and subdue it; subject the fishes of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that move on earth.’

And God further said, ‘See, I give you every seed-bearing plant on earth and every tree in which is the see-bearing fruit of the tree;

And to all the animals on land, all the birds of the sky, and all the living creatures that crawl on earth (I give) all the green plants as their food.’ And it was so.” Gen 1:26-29.

There the text raises many problems: I will just mention a few. The main problem is: what does the “image of God” mean exactly? If we look at the Christian tradition beginning with the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the so-called Septuagint, there are many interpretations, especially because there are used two different words for image - in Hebrew *selem* and *demut*, in Greek *eikon* and *omoiosis*, in Latin *imago* and *similitudo*. But the terminology changes in the Old Testament in all three places where the idea “the man is the image of God” appears - only in the primeval History (Gen 1:26-27; Gen 5:1-3; Gen 9:1-7). But: If we look to the ancient Near East traditions, contemporaneous to these texts of the OT, we see that there is no problem at this point: the idea of man as an image of God is not unusual at this time.

Much more interesting is who is referred to in the ancient Near East as the image of God. In Egypt, Babylonia and Assyria, only the king is considered to be the image of God. “Image” means “statue”, a plastic picture. And this statue represents power and majesty. If the king is the image of God, then he consequently represents the power and majesty of God over his people. The issue is not whether the king looks like a God. A statue of a king looks in the ancient Near East not even necessarily like the current king. Important are only the royal attributes.

So if the king himself is “image of God”, then his special position and function are emphasized. This becomes even clearer when we behold Mesopotamian creation traditions of the first millennium B.C.E. We have notice of one text in which the human race is created in two steps. First, the man as such is created, but the king in a second, very special act of

creation. Thus, the special position of the king is emphasized already at the very beginning of the world.

In the Bible things are different. The creation of the king is not mentioned in the story of creation in the Genesis. All human beings are the image of God, men and women. All people have the same function, namely to represent God in his creation. Since all have the same mission and purpose, human beings are not allowed to dominate each other. Only over animals they are meant to rule - like a shepherd over his flock. But - an important restriction - they are not allowed to eat them. This is a very optimistic state which the Bible describes on the first page.

But the Bible, the Holy Scripture is not unrealistic. We know the experience the Prophet Amos has made: Only on the basis of righteousness and justice, God is the Lord of the world over all people. And that has consequences for the interpretation of the primal catastrophe, the old traditional flood story we know from Mesopotamia. I have already pointed out these traditions and I quote again Amos 8:1-2:

“Then the Lord said to me, ‘the summary hour - and that means in this word-play-vision (summer fruit - summary hour): the end - the summary hour is at hand for my people Israel. I shall pardon them no more.’ (Amos 8:1-2)” - this said the prophet Amos.

And accordingly it is mentioned at the beginning of the flood narrative:

I quote Gen 6:13: “Then God said to Noah, ‘I have decided to put an end to all flesh, for the earth is filled with lawlessness because of them.’”

Not fate or caprice of the gods is the cause of the flood, but the crime on earth. The man of the ancient world is always thinking from the retrospect. If all living beings have to die in the flood - except the fishes in the water, they cannot die by the flood -, they altogether must have committed crimes. Only the righteous Noah and his family are saved due to a covenant with God.

The flood disaster - the disaster caused by men - of course, has implications for the construction of the creation - and thus for anthropology. The idea of man as the image of God is mentioned again at the end of the flood pericope. Manhood has not lost its likeness to God through the sin and the punishment by flood. But the idea of man as an image of God is expanded

now. I'll read a short passage from the end of the story of the flood which is known as the Noachidic commandments:

Gen 9:1-7: ¹And God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, 'Be fertile and increase and fill the earth. ² Dread fear of you shall possess all the animals of the earth and all the birds of the sky - everything with which the ground is astir - and all the fishes of the sea: they are placed in your hand. ³ Every creature that is alive shall be yours to eat; I give them all to you as I did with the grasses of the field. ⁴ Only flesh with its lifeblood still in it shall you not eat. ⁵ So, too, will I require an accounting for your own lifeblood: I will ask it of every beast; and of man in regard to his fellow man will I ask an accounting for human life. ⁶ He who sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God was man created."

Some things we know from the account of creation. The commandment "Be fertile and increase and fill the earth" is not new. But the dominium animalium - the dominium over the animals - has changed. Now the man is permitted to eat animals; note: not from the beginning of creation - but only as a result of sin. And the divine likeness of man is placed in a new context:

"He who sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God was man created." Gen 9:6.

He is no longer only the representative of God within creation, which is the original meaning of the idea of man as an image of God. "Image of God" is now a kind of taboo, a picture of the unique dignity of man. And the unique dignity of man must be protected. Therefore, life of man is to be given special protection - paradoxically, by the death penalty. This is a contradiction, I know - but the threat of death penalty has the function to prevent the murder of the people.

This is the biblical view of man from the beginning of Genesis. Let me summarize and add some reflections.

Perhaps in the Old Testament the world itself is not (as) holy (as the temple in Jerusalem). Of course there are very expressive texts, that allow us to imagine the religious experience of nature and the awe of creation like in Psalm 8 – in the translation of KJV.

"1 O LORD our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth! who hast set thy glory above the heavens. 2 Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength because of thine enemies, that thou mightest still the enemy and the avenger. 3 When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; 4 What is man, that thou art

mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him? 5 For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour. 6 Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet: 7 All sheep and oxen, yea, and the beasts of the field; 8 The fowl of the air, and the fish of the sea, and whatsoever passeth through the paths of the seas. 9 O LORD our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!”

But in view of Genesis 1 Max Weber, the famous German sociologist of the last century, speaks in this context of “Entzauberung der Welt” - disenchantment of the world, which was set in motion by the Old Testament and was completed by the Protestant ethics and the spirit of capitalism. And of course, according to Gen 1 the world is free for use and misuse by human beings. “Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and subdue it”. This can be misunderstood as a very dangerous commandment, a dangerous invitation to plunder the Earth - with devastating consequences as we know and fear in our times. The world itself is not holy in the Old Testament - but the man is holy and sacred, as we can read in Gen 1 and Psalm 8. I think it is fruitful just to pick up this idea, which is connected with the man as image of God, with his own dignity without reservation. And I think it may be a good basis for the dialogue between different religions and cultures too.