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CHAPTER FOUR

Human Dignity

4.1 Genesis 1:26–31

Ellen Davis

Although it occupies pride of place in the Bible, the Priestly poem of Creation (Genesis 1) is not an especially early text; most scholars would date it to the time of the Babylonian exile (sixth century BCE). But even if the poem of Creation comes somewhere in the middle in order of textual composition, canonical placement makes it a lens through which Jews and Christians read the rest of the Bible. The early history of humankind and Israel's history in particular, as the Bible records them, may be read largely as an account of human attempts, conscious or not, to image God in the world. Most often these attempts are arrogant and doomed to failure; throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, kings offer the prime examples of that failure. This is no coincidence. For millennia in the ancient Near East, it was believed that the king (or occasionally the queen) had a unique dignity as the human "bridge to the gods."² Within the Bible, some of the Psalms reflect a theology of the king's unique dignity.³ Beginning in Genesis 1, however, the general thrust of biblical narrative and prophecy is to deconstruct any concept of the king's inherent uniqueness vis-à-vis God. In Ezekiel, Pharaoh is deluded enough to think he is himself creator of the Nile, the source of Egypt's power. In Exodus, Pharaoh's complete inability to recognize the God who made heaven and earth leads to the destruction not only of Egypt's army but even of the land itself. Israel's and Judah's own kings likewise fail in almost every case to image God's benevolent dominion in the land that is entrusted to them, so their kingdoms are also undone. Israel is destroyed by the Assyrians and Judah occupied successively by Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans. Biblical accounts of both home rule and foreign occupation explain why the Apostle Paul in the First Letter to Timothy would urge that special prayers be made for those in power;⁴ they need even more help than the rest of us to claim a properly humble dignity, and they have more potential for doing damage when they miss the mark.

Against the background of that grim political history, this Priestly poem of Creation offers an exilic audience some encouragement. For a people who have lost their king, it radically democratizes the concept of creation in the image of God. No less than the king, every single human being, male and female, is created in the image of God and

therefore has responsibility before God. In this matter of the egalitarian nature of human dignity, Genesis 1 prevents us from misreading Genesis 2, in which the woman is taken from the sleeping Adam's rib. Without the prior story of creation in the image of God, we might conclude that woman is a divine afterthought, with a purely derivative relationship to God.

A second element of encouragement in this poem: it restores a sense of vocation to a people who have lost land and nation-state and, it might seem, their status as God's "treasure people" (*'am segullah*).⁵ It is important to recall that the Israelites were the only people of the ancient Near East who did not entirely forfeit their religion when they lost their political independence. Genesis 1 is one crucial step in the reworking of Israel's religious identity in light of the greatest disaster in its national history. The God who created heaven and earth still has an intention for this people, even in the land from which they have been exiled. This message is the subtext of Genesis 1:28, but to decipher it, you must listen to the Hebrew, or a wholly transparent translation, such as this: "And God blessed them and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth/land [*'eretz* means both] *vēkibšūhā* and *conquer* it.'" When you hear the phrase "conquer the land," you are, narratively speaking, at the edge of the Promised Land, hearing God's promise that you (Israel) and the land will prosper if you place God's will above every other consideration. So the command, "Conquer the land/earth" places exiled Israel once more in the position of receiving God's charge and conditional promise. God still has an intention for them; they are to represent God's benevolent sovereignty on the earth, just as Israel was meant to do in the land of Canaan. (This Priestly tradition, in contrast to the Deuteronomistic tradition, downplays the element of violence in the "conquest" of the land—and that may well be closer to the historical reality.)

That message is encouraging, yet it carries a sting. An audience of exiles knows that Israel's first conquest of the land was no better than a qualified failure; they were booted out for disobedience. Therefore, implicit in the command is a warning. The original scope of the warning is that even if Israel returns to its homeland of Canaan (as in fact they did, about sixty years after the exile), they might fail again. But Genesis 1 is a liturgical poem, so its meaning continues to expand from generation to generation. For a contemporary audience, that localized warning of failure should be extended to a global level: the human project on *'eretz*, earth, might fail as dismally as did Israel's project in *'eretz kena'an*, the land of Canaan. We are perhaps the first generation in the world's history that has heard that message, a genuine part of this text but held in reserve for some twenty-six hundred years until now; its time has come.

Genesis 1 likely took shape in the face of the unthinkable: the fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, and the collapse of the "eternal" throne of David—these events were literally incomprehensible in terms of Israel's theology up to that time. This poem has demonstrated its capacity to renew its meaning in light of later events that had likewise previously been unthinkable. About six centuries after its composition, the incarnation, passion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ caused some in Israel to reckon afresh with the concept of humankind created in the image of God. In a passage that might be seen as a rereading of Genesis 1, the Apostle Paul (or someone who thinks like he does) says:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, . . . whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers . . . and in him all things hold together. . . . He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross.⁶

This is a remarkable, Hubble-telescopic look at the whole history of heaven and earth in Christ, from creation to a new moment that is also, in effect, “the beginning” (v. 18). Accordingly, the author picks up all the crucial elements from the Priestly poem of Creation and redefines them thus:

- the human image of God, perfect and fully visible for the first time in Jesus Christ
- human dominion: Christ has “first place in everything”
- encouragement regarding the human place in the created order: if all things and all people are created through and for Christ, then all can participate in the divine image and all can be reconciled with God
- the sting, the sobering reminder of the long history of sin and its high cost: Christ’s peaceful dominion “on earth and in heaven” comes only “through the blood of the cross” (v. 20).

The Pauline corpus includes at least one more look back to the image of God. In the eighth chapter of Romans, Paul envisions “the creation wait[ing] on tenterhooks (*apokaradokia*) for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”⁷ Paul’s remarkable exegetical insight into Genesis 1 is that God gave humans dominion within the created order in an attitude of hope, and that this divine hope has not yet been fulfilled.⁸ This view stands in contrast to the utter confidence that Psalm 8 expresses about human dominion; that hymn of praise was composed for or adapted by the royal house of David, and it must sometimes have served to underwrite the king’s own exercise of power. But Paul’s view that the creation is still waiting for human beings to look like God is more credible in this sixth great age of species extinction as we awaken painfully to the recognition that human dominion over “the birds of the air and the fish of the sea” has brought glory to neither God nor ourselves.⁹ On the contrary, our subjection of creation has long been deadly and is now threatening and killing a huge proportion of God’s creatures.¹⁰

Moreover, Paul’s view that God’s hope for humankind is not yet fulfilled seems to reflect a subtle aspect of the Priestly poem of Creation, a structural element that has received little (if any) attention from interpreters in the modern period. The normal pattern throughout the Priestly poem is this: a statement of divine intention, “Let there be light,” followed by a notice of completion, “And there was light”; “Let the waters be

gathered together . . . and it was so.”¹¹ But no such notice follows when, on the sixth day, God creates humans in the divine image “so that they might exercise mastery among” the creatures (26; cf. 28). We are never told that “it was so.” Literarily then, human dominion or “mastery among the creatures” has the status of an unfulfilled divine expectation, and that seems to me a profound theological statement (or lacuna) regarding human dignity. Genesis 1 takes a “special species” perspective; there is no question that humans are uniquely powerful. The open question is whether humans will exercise a proper mastery among the creatures, a benevolent dominion that mirrors God’s own exercise of power (as distinct from an ungodly domination). That question, once opened up by Genesis 1, stands open through the rest of the Bible (as Paul’s reading in Romans indicates) and even to this day.

Genesis 1:26–31

²⁶Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to 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 wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

²⁷So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

²⁸God 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.” ²⁹God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.

³⁰And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. ³¹God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

4.2 *Al-Baqara* 2:30–35

Muhammad Abdel Haleem

The passage chosen as a primary text from the Qur'an (*al-Baqara* 2:30–35) comes in the context of a larger thematic unit showing human beings how bounteous God has been to them and how He has honored them, so that they should recognize this and worship none but Him. This theme starts with verse 21, which calls on people to “worship God who created them” and who provided various good things for them. Then we come to verse 29, which should be included with verse 30 in the selected text, as it helps in the comparison with the Bible. It says, “It was He who created all that is on earth for you.” In the original Arabic, this statement of six words is very concise but comprehensive, using pronouns of generalization that are elaborated and detailed in scores of places in the Qur'an, to include the worlds of animals, plants, and inanimates in the earth, sea, or skies, which God has created for humans (*khalaqa lakum*) and made of benefit or subject to them (*sakkhara lakum*). Following this verse we have our passage as an illustration of further dignity God has conferred on humans.

The theme here is presented in a dynamic dialogue between God, the angels, and Adam, with Iblis mentioned at the end. In concise, majestic utterance, God tells the angels the plan He has for Adam, clearly not in order to solicit their opinion or to change His plans according to their opinions but to bring out into the open what they think and to correct it: “I am going to place a *khalifa* on earth” (30). For *khalifa*, Arberry gives the word “viceroys.” This particular meaning has become popularized in the twentieth century, but I do not agree with it, certainly not in the sense of “*khalifa* of God,” a phrase that the Qur'an itself does not use explicitly either. A viceroy acts only if the “roy” (king) is absent, and God is never absent. The word “*khalifa*” is derived from *khalf*, which means “behind,” or “after”: the *khalifa* of the Prophet Muhammad acted only when the Prophet was dead. When I left my house in London yesterday, I repeated the Prophet's prayer, “Lord be my *khalifa* within my family.” God is ever living, ever present. My choice is “successor,” not in the sense that Adam was a successor to God. Some commentators say that humans succeeded the angels or the jinn on earth. It can also mean that individuals and generations succeed each other on earth, as we find in many other passages in the Qur'an. Thus, God is saying that humans would continue to succeed one another, just as fruits contain seeds to continue their cycle. This succession, as the Qur'an makes clear, is so they will populate and civilize (*ista'mara*) the world while they live there “to test you through what He gives you.”¹²

When God makes David a *khalifa* in the land, He says that David should accordingly “judge fairly between people, with justice and without following anyone's desires.”¹³ When Moses leaves Aaron behind and goes up the Mountain, he tells him, “Take my place (*ikhluftni*) among my people, do right and do not follow the way of mischief makers.”

Our passage tells us that on hearing of God's intentions, the angels protested: how could God set on earth someone who would cause corruption and shed blood? This

shows that they were not talking about Adam alone, who did neither, but about his descendants as well. The Qur'an is explicit, as we see later in our passage, in stating that angels only know what God teaches them, so some commentators say that God must have given them information about humanity's propensity to violence and bloodshed through inspiration or, alternatively, that He had mentioned this in some previous discourse. God's reply to them is, "I know what you do not know." This enigmatic answer could be explained by other passages showing that even if some humans cause corruption and bloodshed, there will be others to stand up against them, so justice and order will be restored.¹⁴ The door is also open for them either to repent and mend their ways in this world, which in the Qur'an wipes out all previous misdeeds, or to be judged in the hereafter.¹⁵

In His wisdom, God sees that the overall scheme should not be discarded because of some elements of humanity that the angels see as bad. Then God proceeds to demonstrate to them the true worth of Adam by teaching him the names of things and challenging the angels to show equal knowledge, at which they glorify God, retract their earlier protest, and say, "We only know what you tell us."

From the beginning of the Qur'an, teaching Adam is placed on a par with creating him. Chronologically, the first revelation of the Qur'an is "God created man . . . and taught by the pen, taught man what he did not know."¹⁶ And another often-quoted verse says, "The Merciful . . . created man and taught him to communicate."¹⁷

These themes of teaching and knowing are widespread throughout the Qur'an and are used as a mark by which humans should recognize God and His revelations. It is this knowing that distinguishes humans from other creatures. It is clear from our text that God's reason for placing Adam on earth in the role intended for him is the knowledge God has taught Adam. The words "teaching" and "knowing" occur in our passage in different derivations eight times, which highlights the importance of this theme very powerfully. It is this knowledge, rather than the claim to be "viceroy of God," that truly distinguishes Adam.

Having established for the angels this aspect of the superiority of humans, God commands them to bow themselves to Adam, and they do this. Iblis (Satan), in his arrogance, protests and refuses.

In addition to creating man "with My own hands," creating and subjecting things to him, and teaching him, God commands the angels to bow down before man. It is clear from the passage that, in spite of the protest of the pious (the angels) and of the rebel (Iblis), God honors humans and establishes them on earth.

A further honor that God confers on man is to admit Adam and his wife to the garden, having given them the choice to enjoy the permitted fruits of the garden but warning them not to eat the forbidden fruit and thereby disobey God. They use their choice to eat the forbidden fruit. Some Muslim theologians argue that in this respect a good human is better than the angels because he has to choose to be good, whereas the angels by their nature are made to be always obedient to God. In the Qur'an, moral choice and the responsibility that goes with it is called "the trust" (*al-amāna*), which man in his haste has put himself forward to bear, when heaven, earth, and mountains were afraid to do so.

I beg to differ from the popularized meaning of *khalīfa* as viceroy, vicegerent, or viceregent and from the popularized meaning of “God created Adam in His image” in the ḥadīth of the Prophet Muhammad. The Qur’an states categorically of God, “There is nothing like Him,” so I take the expression in the ḥadīth to mean what the Qur’an states on several occasions: that God created man in the image He chose for him, “in whatever form He chose.”¹⁸ The word “*ṣūra*” as used in the Qur’an and ḥadīth means “shape” or “form.” “He shaped you in your best shape” (not His best shape);¹⁹ “it is He who shapes you all in the womb as He pleases.”²⁰ At birth, none of us humans selects his own shape or nature; it is God who determines these in the way He chooses. It has always been my opinion that the pronoun in “his image” has a small “h,” but I felt anxious that some would say this was a figment of my imagination. A few hours before traveling here, I consulted al-Nawawī’s commentary on Muslim’s ḥadīth and found him citing the ḥadīth quoted in our supplementary texts as proof that the pronoun “his” refers to Adam, and not to God, so the *ṣūra* is Adam’s shape, sixty cubits long.

Yet in spite of my departure from the popularized meaning of *khalīfa* as “vicegerent” or “representative of God” and the creation of man in God’s image, when all is said and done, the fact remains that in both scriptures it is God who created humans and honored them. The essence is still the same in both scriptures. The two lights emanate from the same niche. Our realization of this should be the bridge that we should maintain and fortify. Furthermore, in spite of any difficulties we may encounter in fortifying the bridge or in the interfaith dialogue, we should learn from the fact that, although He knew that some humans would corrupt and shed blood, God, in His wisdom, did not scrap the whole scheme of setting humans on earth and conferring such great dignity upon them. This dignity clearly was not based on humans being pious or following any one religion or another, but God embraced those who cause corruption and shed blood. Nor is there any discrimination on the grounds of race, nationality, gender, or class; dignity is conferred on all: “We have honored the Children of Adam.”²¹

Qur’an 2:30–35

³⁰And when thy Lord said to the angels, “I am setting in the earth a viceroy.” They said, “What, wilt Thou set therein one who will do corruption there, and shed blood, while We proclaim Thy praise and call Thee Holy?” He said, “Assuredly I know that you know not.”

³¹And He taught Adam the names, all of them; then He presented them unto the angels and said, “Now tell me the names of these, if you speak truly.” ³²They said, “Glory be to Thee! We know not save what Thou hast taught us. Surely Thou art the All-knowing the All-wise.” ³³He said, “Adam, tell them their names.” And when he had told them their names He said, “Did I not tell you I know the unseen things of the heavens and earth? And I know what things you reveal, and what you were hiding.”

³⁴And when We said to the angels, “Bow yourselves to Adam”; so they bowed themselves, save Iblis; he refused, and waxed proud, and so he became one of the unbelievers.

³⁵And We said, “Adam, dwell thou, and thy wife, in the Garden, and eat thereof easefully where you desire; but draw not nigh this tree, lest you be evildoers.”²²