

# CREATED IN GOD'S IMAGE: HUMAN DIGNITY IN BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

**Prof. Marcel MĂCELARU, DPhil (Oxon), Dr. Habil.**

*Aurel Vlaicu University, Arad, Romania*

*mvmacelar@gmail.com*

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## **Abstract:**

Ever since the publication of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the notion of human dignity has been regarded as the moral foundation on which human rights and liberties function. This article argues that unless dignity is grounded in a theological understanding of human nature and human worth, as portrayed in the creation accounts of Genesis 1-2, dignity is too ambiguous a notion to be useful in contemporary debates. It is argued that the creation of humankind in God's image and the special task of administering the creation humans receive from the Creator, speak both about the value human beings have and therefore about their dignity.

**Keywords:** *Human dignity, Imago Dei, Creation theology, Human worth, Genesis 1-2.*

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## **Introduction**

Human dignity is a notion widely used in contemporary debates on human rights and their practical situational applications, and that with a very good reason.<sup>1</sup> The UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights – the very document that frames such debates – connects “the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family” to their “inherent dignity”<sup>2</sup>, thus suggesting that “dignity” is the moral basis on which the subsequent stated rights are built. The UN document, however, does not explain what this terminology implies. The history of the Declaration shows that the intro-

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1 See, for instance, the debate in Amos Nascimento / Matthias Lutz-Bachmann (eds.), *Human Dignity. Perspectives from a Critical Theory of Human Rights* [Rethinking Political and International Theory], London, Routledge, 2018.

2 See the preamble of *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, available at <http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html> (accessed on 16 November 2021).

duction of the concept of “dignity” was a compromise solution, employed in order to avoid grounding the rights and liberties affirmed in the document on religious or metaphysical notions about the origin and nature of the human being<sup>3</sup>. Ironically, the intention of the drafters of the Declaration to exclude religious language provides the best argument for the necessity of a theological, biblically grounded, understanding of “dignity”. To explain, the fallible nature of human morality and the subsequent, unavoidably provisional and contextualised, understanding of human dignity preclude any “universal” application of a Declaration meant to be universal. In fact, the language employed is adequate only when “dignity” is connected to and decided on the basis of a moral hierarchy that exceeds all private (situational) human notions of self-worth. As such, in order to be useful as a foundation for “inalienable rights and liberties” the notion of “dignity” ought to be associated with absolute morality and established on the basis of a theological understanding of human identity.

Admittedly, as evidenced in the abundant theological literature available,<sup>4</sup> an exhaustive consideration of all the theological points related to the topic at hand would far exceed the space allotted for this essay. Therefore, the discussion below is limited to the biblical teaching on what humans are, and are to do, as available in the creation accounts of Genesis 1 and 2, and in Psalms 8 and 139. The underlying theological view

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3 On this history, see Glen Hughes, “The Concept of Dignity in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights”, in *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 39-1/2011, pp. 1-24.

4 For instance, see the articles in Klaus Krämer / Klaus Vellguth (eds.), *Human Dignity. Discourses on Universality and Inalienability* [One World Theology, vol. 8], Freiburg im Breisgau, Verlag Herder GmbH, 2017; L. Juliana Claassens / Bruce C. Birch (eds.), *Restorative Readings. The Old Testament, Ethics, and human Dignity*, Eugene, OR, Pickwick Publications, 2015. See also, Maureen Junker-Kenny, “Human Dignity or Social Contract as Normative Frameworks in Applied Ethics?”, in *International Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society*, 6/2020, pp. 74-89; Wojciech Szczerba, “The Concept of *Imago Dei* as a Symbol of Religious Inclusion and Human Dignity”, in *Forum Philosophicum*, 25-1/2020, pp. 13-36; Nico Vorster, “A Theological Perspective on Human Dignity, Equality and Freedom”, in *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 33-1/2012, art. 719, available at <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v33i1.719> (accessed on 20 September 2021); L. Juliana Claassens, “Human Dignity in the Prophetic Traditions. Upholding Human Worth in a Context of Dehumanisation”, in *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif*, 52-1/2011, pp. 34-44; Louis Jonker, “Human Dignity and the Construction of Identity in the Old Testament”, in *Scriptura*, 105/2010, pp. 594-607; Jeremy Punt, “Mapping Human Dignity in the New Testament. Concerns, Considerations and Concepts”, in *Scriptura*, 105/2010, pp. 621-635.

cast by these texts is that the creation is the beginning of God's revelation available to us. As such, God's creation reflects God's character and is best described in terms of ordered relationality, and unity in diversity. All that is created is sustained by, and must exist in harmony with, the Creator. Creation, therefore, is neither an arbitrary act of God, nor the aimless existence of a self-sustaining universe. Creation is God's self-expression, and within it, the creation of humankind in God's image represents the crowning moment. Considering these, the two crucial pieces of information given in these texts that impinge on the issue at hand are: the uniqueness of humankind, ontologically speaking, and the unique role humankind is to perform within the creation.

### **Created as *Imago Dei* – The Uniqueness of Humankind**

The Bible starts the story of humankind with the affirmation that humans are created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27). The interpretation of this passage has been long and varied, and its full rehearsal here is unnecessary<sup>5</sup>. However, at a glance, the available options can be grouped as follows:

(1) The image refers to our spirituality. With slight variations, beginning with Irenaeus, this has been the view held by most interpreters throughout the history of the Church. It basically holds that “image of God” refers to “the metaphysical quality which makes mankind distinctively mankind”<sup>6</sup>.

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5 For recent listings of interpretive options, see Daniel Simango, “The *Imago Dei* (Gen. 1:26-27). A History of Interpretation from Philo to the Present”, in *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 42-1/2016, pp. 172-190; Dominic Robinson, *Understanding the “Imago Dei”*. *The Thought of Barth, von Balthasar and Moltmann*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2011, pp. 5-44. For the most comprehensive survey of modern interpretations, see Gunnlaugur A. Jónsson, *The Image of God. Genesis 1:26-28 in a Century of Old Testament Research*, Lund, Almqvist and Wiksell, 1988. Shorter surveys are also available in J.M. Miller, “In the Image and Likeness of God”, in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 91/1972, pp. 289-304; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11. A Commentary*, Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress Press, 1987, pp. 148-158; Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 1986, pp. 33-65; Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning. The Opening Chapters of Genesis*, Leicester, Inter-Varsity, 1984, pp. 79-82; David J.A. Clines, “The Image of God in Man”, in *Tyndale Bulletin*, 19/1968, pp. 54-61.

6 Blocher, *In the Beginning*, p. 80. See also C.S. Evans, “Healing Old Wounds and Recovering Old Insights. Toward a Christian View of the Person for Today”, in M.A. Noll

(2) The image refers to humankind's dominion and stewardship, or viceregency, as God's representative in the world. This was the common view in ancient Judaism (cf. Ecclesiasticus 17:3-5), perpetuated in modern scholarship by commentators such as Waldemar Janzen<sup>7</sup>, William Dumbrell<sup>8</sup>, and Walter Brueggemann<sup>9</sup>.

(3) The image is the original righteousness, the moral excellence man lost because of the fall. With some variation, since Martin Luther, this has been the main Protestant line of interpretation<sup>10</sup>.

(4) The image is a reference to human sexuality, as it calls man and woman to a face-to-face relationship<sup>11</sup>.

(5) The image is the capacity for relationship, best expressed by the relationship between God and humanity. It is a reflection of free relationship to and for the other<sup>12</sup>.

Without planning to add to an already crowded interpretive field, it seems that the best way forward, given this variety of opinions, is to return to the biblical text and explore in what way the image of God in humankind and the value of persons, that is, their dignity, are related.

To start with, it is important to begin with the observation that in the Genesis accounts, the creation of humankind is singled out as a special, unique act of God. In the first chapter, humankind is not just another aspect of the created universe that comes into being as God orders it to be.

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/ D.F. Wells (eds.), *Christian Faith and Practice in the Modern World. Theology from an Evangelical Point of View*, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 1988, pp. 74-78.

7 Waldemar Janzen, *Old Testament Ethics. A Paradigmatic Approach*, Louisville, KY, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994, p. 206.

8 William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation. A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants*, Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Books, 1984, pp. 33-35.

9 Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis [Interpretation]*, Atlanta, GA, John Knox Press, 1982, p. 32.

10 See, for instance, Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption. Dogmatics 2*, London, Lutterworth, 1952, p. 76; G.C. Berkouwer, *Man. The Image of God*, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 1962, pp. 67-118.

11 See Karl Barth, "The Doctrine of Creation," in *Church Dogmatics III.1*, Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1958, p. 183-206. See also Robinson, *Understanding the "Imago Dei"*, pp. 45-82.

12 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, London, SCM Press, 1959, pp. 35-40. The relational aspect of the *Imago Dei* has also been used fruitfully as a theological lens in Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self. A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei*, Louisville, KY, Westminster, 2001.

On the contrary, the creation of man seems to involve planning and a more intimate involvement of the divinity. If up to this point the creation verb used in the account is *bara* (to say), with the creation of Adam the story switches to *ʾasah* (to make), therefore suggesting that God is somehow directly involved in modelling the being he is creating (cf. Ps 139:13-16). The same idea is expressed later, in Genesis 2, where the text states that God shapes (*yaṣar*) man out of the dust of earth. This should not be understood as a devaluing of the “image” from chapter 1, but rather a further indication that humankind is inextricably connected to the rest of the creation, which he is to subdue. No wonder, therefore, that the conclusion of the creation in Genesis 1 is a superlative qualifying comment that reveals the fact that even the Creator considers the being he created to be somehow special, the crowning of all that he has made. Humankind is not just another aspect of the universe that takes shape; rather, it is the one element of the creation that reflects God’s image, that is made in God’s likeness.

The idea that humankind is created in the image of God is not the exclusive invention of ancient Israel. Rather, it is quite common in the Babylonian creation myth of Gilgamesh. It usually meant that the “image” of the divinity was somehow representing the divinity itself. Thus, the ANE custom to portray kings and rulers as gods and children of gods. Genesis 1:26-27, however, presents us with an unusual phenomenon. Although in contrast with other creation accounts from the ancient world, the biblical creation story is clearly monotheistic<sup>13</sup>, God is surprisingly using a plural noun in reference to himself in the account: “Let *us* make man in *our* image, in *our* likeness.” Moreover, this plurality is spelled out further in the fact that the humankind thus created is male and female. What is the meaning of all this?

It must be noted that the passage does not indicate that something in the man God creates is “like God”. The interpretation of the “image” does not refer to a specific aspect of human psyche or physique. It is the humankind in its entirety that is an image of God. Thus, “image of God” refers to the community of mankind created by God. The apparition of the com-

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13 For a comparative discussion of ANE creation stories and the Genesis account, see Eric J. Titus, “The Imago Dei in the Priestly Creation Narrative: A Consideration of Three Exemplars”, in Marcel V. Măcelaru / Corneliu Constantineanu (eds.), *Theological Pilgrimages. Collected Faculty Papers, 2007-2009*, Osijek, Evanđeoski teološki fakultet, 2009, p. 7-22.

munity of humans is an act of divine self-expression, and it is destined to reflect the Creator. Here are the arguments:

Firstly, we need to take into consideration the usage of the plural “us” in verse 26. Commentators have explained this in at least three different ways. To some, this is a leftover of polytheistic theology within ANE Israelite religion<sup>14</sup>. However, this seems an unlikely occurrence, since we are dealing here with a sophisticated, poetical literary piece, which would imply careful crafting<sup>15</sup>. Others have argued that here God is addressing the assembly of angels who are witnessing and assisting him in the creation. This has been the mainline Jewish interpretation, subsequently picked up by F. Delitzsch<sup>16</sup>. However, God is clearly acting alone (cf. Is 40:14); no angelic being is responding to the “invitation” implied in the phrase, therefore this interpretation also cannot stand. A third interpretive proposal has been advanced by Driver, who sees here “a plural of majesty”<sup>17</sup>. However, since no other attestation of such use is available in the Hebrew Bible<sup>18</sup>, it would be difficult to prove that this is the case in Genesis 1.

In fact, a consideration of the passage in its context will reveal that the only satisfactory explanation for the use of the plural is that God addresses himself. The language “Let us make” is a solemn address, suggesting God’s commitment to his work, as well as the climactic value of the passage, meant to point to the stance of humans before God and their task therefrom. As such, the best way to explain these references that suggest a plurality in God is to interpret them to mean that God has a social nature, interpersonal in character. Here is the first glimpse of a God who is not a cosmic loner or an ultimately individual God. Rather, he is a communal God, a God who embodies, and thus creates and generates community. Of course, this is not to say that Genesis 1 refers to the doctrine of the Trinity (as some of the church fathers have interpreted this text). This would not

14 Cf. discussion in Blocher, *In the Beginning*, p. 84.

15 On the poetical character of the passage, see the discussion on Genesis 1 in Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* [WBC, vol. 1], Dallas, TX, Word, 1987.

16 See *Peshitta* 34<sup>a</sup> and C.F. Keil / F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament. The Pentateuch*, vol. 1, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 1991, p. 62.

17 Samuel R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* [Westminster Commentaries], London, Methuen, 10<sup>th</sup> edition, 1916, p. 14.

18 Cf. E. Kautzsch, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1910, p. 124, par. g.

only be anachronistic, but it would nullify the meaning of the “image”, for in no way can humankind be an image of the Trinity. Moreover, the Hebrew preposition translated as “according to” (v. 26) is used to show agreement in kind, manner, or norm<sup>19</sup>, and then, the only way in which humans reflect the divine is in their characteristic as communal beings.

Secondly, it is important to understand the meaning of the word “image”. The sense of the Hebrew term used here is “shadow”<sup>20</sup>. Thus, we may say that *man* is created as the shadow of the divine, a reflection of the one from whom the shadow derives. The being thus created, therefore, is not a copy of the original, but its reflection. In other words, considering *man* one should be able to grasp truths about God, even though he is infinitely greater than his creation. The biblical teaching, therefore, does not see *man* as sharing in God’s substance (as Babylonian mythology implies) but it affirms the fact that what we have is in all ways that matter a reflection of the Creator. In light of these, what does *man* mean here?

In the passage under consideration the statement that man is created in God’s image, according to his likeness<sup>21</sup> is further elaborated in two ways. First, verse 26 explains that *man* is to rule over the creation. The word “man”, even though a masculine, in Hebrew in this case has the value of what grammarians have labelled “prior gender”<sup>22</sup>. As such, the term includes the feminine. Accordingly, the jussive verb that continues the phrase – “let them have dominion” – is in the plural. All these point to a corporate meaning *man* has in the passage. It is *man* as referring to humankind in its entirety that is created in God’s image. As Bernard W. Anderson puts it, “what is involved here is not a single man...but rather a collective whole, that is, humankind or humanity”<sup>23</sup>. Second, verse 27 states that man is created in God’s image as “male and female”. Thus, the passage explicitly

19 Cf. B.K. Waltke / M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, Winona Lake, IN, Eisenbrauns, 1990, p. 203.

20 Cf. S. Missatkine, “Mistica Vechiului Testament”, in M.M. Davy (ed.), *Enciclopedia Doctrinelor Mistice*, vol. 1, Timișoara, Amarcord, 1997, p. 150.

21 I do not see the distinction between “image” and “likeness” made during church history, since Irenaeus, as valid. Rather, I take this repetition to be an example of Hebrew parallelism, a common feature of Hebrew poetical language.

22 Cf. Kautzsch, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, p. 122, par. g.

23 Bernard W. Anderson, *From Creation to New Creation. Old Testament Perspectives*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1994, p. 128.

affirms that it is the first community, the prototype of humanity, Adam and Eve, that is created in God's image. This is then taken further in verse 28, in the fact that this first cell of community is to multiply, generating further community and enlarging it (cf. also Genesis 5:3).

By way of summary then, we may conclude that the "image" language in Genesis 1:26-28 refers to the community of humans, which is to show forth, to reflect the divine. And since in the moment of creating his image God reveals himself as a communal God, the one who embodies community, his created image can be nothing else but community. Thus, the very occurrence of community is linked to the act of creation;<sup>24</sup> humanity is to reflect who God is, the creature to reflect the Creator. This places a lot of emphasis on the singular status humankind receives in the account, and by implication it justifies the view that out of all beings created, humans have a higher value in terms of their relatedness to and with God. Thus, a correct understanding of human dignity ought to refer to humankind's identity as *Imago Dei*.

### Created to Serve – The Unique Role of Humankind

The value God places on humankind is evident in the way God governs over his creation. The second major truth concerning humanity told in the biblical creation accounts speaks about the singular role we are to play within the creation. Humankind, according to Genesis 1-2 is to "rule" and "have dominion" over the creation. Having created mankind, the next thing God does is to appoint them stewards of the creation, without giving further details on how this task is to be carried out. In his analysis of the passage, I. Hart has shown that, grammatically speaking, the way in which verse 26b is connected to 26c "usually expresses the purpose of the preceding verb"<sup>25</sup>. Thus, the most probable translation of verse 26 would read: "Then God said, 'Let us make man [community of humans] in our image, in our likeness, for the purpose of having them rule...'." As such, the task humankind receives to "rule" over God's creation is a result of the fact that humankind is created in God's image. Thus, the activity humankind is to perform is a

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24 Cf. E.M. Klaaren, "Creation and Community", in *Religion and Intellectual Life*, 5/1988, p. 82.

25 I. Hart, "Genesis 1:1-2:3 as a Prologue to the Book of Genesis", in *Tyndale Bulletin*, 46-2/1995, pp. 319-320.

direct consequence of the special status humankind has. In this sense, the Genesis text differs from the Mesopotamian mythology, in which work is portrayed as a degrading feature of human existence. For instance, in the poem of Atrahasis, a text coming from the eighteenth-century B.C. that brings together the main Mesopotamian myths, humans are created to replace the gods in performing the heavy tasks of agriculture<sup>26</sup>. In the biblical account, however, God dignifies the humankind he creates, and that in order to have dominion upon the rest of the creation (cf. Ps 8:5-7).

Genesis 1:28 expresses the divine purpose in five consecutive verbs: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over...”. This chain of commandments is later echoed in the blessings Abraham and Jacob receive. Interestingly, though, there is a progression in the Genesis passage, that moves from the general to the particular, from things applicable to all creation to the task that only humankind is to perform. Thus, “be fruitful” also recalls the trees which are to bring forth fruits from the third day of creation (Gen. 1:11), while “multiply and fill the earth” are verbs that have already occurred in the case of the fish and the birds in the fifth day (Gen. 1:22). The last two verbs, however, are uniquely applicable to humankind. “Subdue” and “have dominion” are tasks only mankind ought to perform, and as verse 26 reveals, these are direct consequences of the fact that humankind is created in God’s image.

The dominion humans are to exercise is to be understood in the light of God’s dominion over the creation. It is not a despotic exercise of power and authority, but rather a rule characterized by justice (cf. Ps. 72). Thus, the rule of humankind over the creation is not the lazy use of the resources available in it, but rather the intelligent application of talents and capacities of one created in God’s image in order to tend to the creation in such ways that it brings forth further blessings.

The same idea is further developed in Genesis 2:5-6, where Adam and Eve are to care for the garden of Eden. The passage makes the double remark that no rain had fallen on the earth yet and no one had tilled the ground yet, thus suggesting that the responsibility humankind receives to till the earth is complementary to God’s blessing of rain. In other words, the work of humans is as essential for the creation as is the care of the

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26 See the Epic of Atrahasis, or Supersage, I, 25, in Jean Bottero / Samuel Noah Kramer, *When the Gods Made Man*, Paris, Gallimard, 1989, p. 531.

Creator. This points to a special status humankind receives, because, differently than the animals, man is essential in the process that brings forth the fruits of the earth. Thus, human value, and therefore dignity, is connected in this passage with the service humankind is to perform, before God, for the good of the entire creation. Work itself is not a burden, but an act of worship that honors God and carries forth the divine purposes for the creation. The idea is that the divine design for the creation (that is, the creation before the curse of sin has affected it), includes a peaceful and fruitful alliance between the Creator, humankind, and the creation as the context within which this relationship functions.

### **Human Dignity in the Light of God's Image – In Lieu of a Conclusion**

In contemporary talk,<sup>27</sup> “human dignity” is typically connected to that special capacity humans have (presumably differently than animals) to reason and assign moral value, to make moral choices and, more generally, to be self-aware, in the sense of having a specific perception of the passage of time, perception that affects the way they live their lives. The use of this capacity in virtuous ways demonstrates one's dignity in as much as it protects inalienable human rights and defines fundamental human duties. Within Christian theology, however, the dignity of humans is inextricably connected to the identity and nature of the human being as established by the Creator.<sup>28</sup> Above all, the Bible tells the story of a special relationship between God and the humans he makes, whose special status within the creation is connected to their twofold responsibility, to manage the creation with dignity, and to manage dignity for the creation. Moreover, although disobedience and sin have since altered the nature of the relationship between God and humanity, the intended divine purpose remains true. The divine vision of human dignity remains unaltered and is truly evident in as much as the

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27 See, for instance, Adam Etinson, “What's so Special about Human Dignity?,” in *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 48-4/2020, pp. 353-381; Nicholas Buccola, “The Essential Dignity of Man as Man: Frederick Douglas on Human Dignity,” in *American Political Thought*, 4-2/2015, pp. 228-258; and the articles in Paulus Kaufmann, et alii (eds.), *Humiliation, Degradation, Dehumanization. Human Dignity Violated* [Library of Ethics and Applied Philosophy, vol. 24], Dordrecht, Springer, 2011; and Jeff Malpas / Norelle Lickiss (eds.), *Perspectives on Human Dignity. A Conversation*, Dordrecht, Springer, 2007.

28 On this, see Berndt Oberdorfer, “Human Dignity and ‘Image of God’,” in *Scriptura*, 204/2010, pp. 231-239; Thomas A. Shannon, “Grounding Human Dignity,” in *Dialog*, 43-2/2004, pp. 113-117.

“equation” takes into consideration the biblical portrayal of human origins, the nature of human existence and the divine vision of human worth.

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