

## THE DIALECTIC OF HUMAN DIGNITY AND HUMAN FINITUDE IN THE PSALMS AND THE WISDOM LITERATURE

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### Abstract

*The creation stories in Genesis, when read together, suggest that humans are marked by both dignity and finitude or frailty. This same dialectic appears paradigmatically in Psalm 8 and, it is argued, also in the rest of the Psalter. In spite of the major difference in perspective, the same anthropology is presupposed in Proverbs. In a section of Job and in Qoheleth, however, there are attempts to dissolve the dialectic. In the culmination of his argument, Job speaks of a form of human dignity that stands apart from human frailty; in Qoheleth human frailty eclipses human dignity. It is argued that the main line in the Old Testament maintains the dialectical tension and that Christian theologians should do likewise. Theologically one should indeed go further and speak of human queenship and sinfulness. The paper ends by suggesting that room should also be left for forms of human indignity that stand apart from finitude and sinfulness.*

**Key Words:** Dignity, Finitude, Psalm 8, Job, Ecclesiastes

### Introduction

In commenting on the first chapters of Genesis, Van Selms twice refers to the author's 'dialectische kijk op het geschapene' (1973:43, cf 93), which, he says, also applies to the view of humanity. "De mensch is uit de aarde aards, gelijk de dier; maar slechts de mensch krijgt een goddelijke opdracht... De mensch is kragtens zijn opdracht het hoogste schepsel op aarde en tegelijk om zijn zonde het diepst vernederde" (1973:92). The very words 'human dignity' give an intimation of a creature that is at once image and representative of God and a thing of dust destined to return to dust. The smell of the soil (*humus*) clings to the word 'human', as it does to the word אדם (from אדמה). If humans are 'common as dust', what dignity can they have? If they are, as it were, 'dust under our feet', how dare they 'tread on' (רדה, Gen. 1:28) other creatures?

Though I use 'dignity' and 'finitude' to express an inescapable tension within the human condition that can be discerned without recourse to theology, neither word is theology-cally quite adequate. No doubt 'all things are beautiful [and dignified] in their time', but humans, regarded as large land animals, do not excel among 'creatures of the sixth day' in dignity: cats outdo them effortlessly. Cats, however, are not made in the image of God, receive no divine commission and are not held accountable for their 'incatality' as humans are for their inhumanity. If cats can hear God's voice, we cannot hear it with them. Cats may be gorgeous; humans should be glorious.

If 'dignity' fails to scale the heights of the human creature, 'finitude' fails to plumb its depths. Finitude, because it pertains in a painfully obvious way to all earthly things, cannot capture the uniquely human predicament. On the whole humans are neither more nor less

finite than other mammals, but they – apparently they alone – experience their limitations as intolerable shortcomings. What on the naturalistic view is merely contingent, humans find anomalous. Without a doctrine of sin, that is, of anomaly in the strict sense, our fretting over human frailty would itself be anomalous. Were it not for our frailty, we could come to terms with our fragility.

### **The Charter: Psalm 8**

Van Selms, without denying the presence of sources in Genesis (1973:89ff), ascribes the final text to an *author* (1973:17). This allows him to see deliberate dialectic where those who ascribe the final text to an *editor* see different, possibly conflicting, perspectives. Fortunately one can detect a ‘*dialectische mensbeeld*’ in the Old Testament without fighting this battle. It is patent in Psalm 8, a psalm exhibiting clear affinities with Genesis 1.<sup>1</sup> Not only does the dialectic stand out clearly (cf Terrien 1993:131; Schnieringer 2004:483); it is also artfully woven into the larger context of Yahweh’s overwhelming glory. What we often get skewed at great length is here brought into balance with brief precision.

Yahweh’s majestic strength (אֲדִיר is more than the visually impressive) embraces all of creation, humanity included. The framing verses 2 and 10 bracket האדם with the rest of creation as ‘domain and subjects of the King’. The specifically human condition has to be considered within this ‘first order’. But even within creation humans are by no means the most impressive phenomena: Yahweh’s הוד (royal splendour) is in a sense better reflected in the heavens (verse 2c), which envelop humans within a ‘second order’, further cutting them down to size. The psalmist’s sense of insignificance under the ‘starry sky’ has little to do with Kant’s famous dictum. Rather, it is to be read in the light of Genesis 1 seen as a polemic turned against pagan beliefs. Although the celestial bodies inspire so much awe that Israel’s neighbours deified them (Terrien 2003:131), they are to Yahweh mere ‘fingerwork’ – a masterly touch. Why should the One who crafted the stars as if they were tiny baubles bother with a few specks of dust?

When the speck of dust is made little less than God, crowned with כבוד and דָּדָר (a word pair used most frequently of the divine or human king),<sup>2</sup> the words should be given their full weight, yet one should not imagine that a ‘human essence’ is postulated. The surprising reversal of what seems to be the ‘natural’ order is a manifestation of Yahweh’s astonishing אֲדִיר. Humans are commissioned to rule over *all* the works of Yahweh’s *hands* (a deliberate contrast with verse 4). The list that follows moves from the evident, human rule over domesticated animals, to the frankly utopian, human rule over the mysterious אֲרֵצוֹת יָמִים עֶבֶר. Far from being a celebration of the human capability to ‘conquer’ nature, this is a dizzying leap of faith.

Considering that the list in verses 8 and 9 more or less reflects the order of creation in reverse and ends, most probably, with a veiled reference to Leviathan,<sup>3</sup> one could hazard a

<sup>1</sup> It is usually accepted that the psalm is dependent on the creation story and is thus post-exilic (Hossfeld & Zenger 1993:77), but Kraus (1972:67) rightly says that one cannot assume that the psalmist knew Genesis 1 in its final form. Many leave the question open and Terrien (2003:132) argues for a date in the late-pre-exilic period. Schnieringer (2004:492ff), however, presents detailed arguments, first worked out by Deissler, for a post-exilic dating.

<sup>2</sup> The words are used together of Yahweh in Psalms 21:1, 96:6 and 104:1 (cf Hossfeld & Zenger 1993:80; Schnieringer 2004:252ff)

<sup>3</sup> Cf Kraus 1972:71; Craigie 1983:193; Hossfeld & Zenger 1993:77; Terrien 2003: 131 and the different view of Schnieringer 2004:283f. Compare also Ps 91:13, where the list of creatures that the worshipper will subdue end with the mythical תנין.

guess as to the meaning of the enigmatic verse 3. The ‘infants’ here are none other than humans, the ‘babies of creation’, who are given the task of subduing Yahweh’s enemies, primarily the vengeful forces of chaos, still smarting under the defeat they suffered at the creation. They do so by their praise of Yahweh, that is, humans rule, as it were, through the humility of worship.

Psalms 8 is a hymn, not a reflection on the human condition.<sup>4</sup> In the context of worship, the recognition of human fragility and insignificance<sup>5</sup> comes first, but it is followed, just about inevitably, by the recognition of a human dignity which is, however, *entirely derivative*.<sup>6</sup> Human beings have no dignity *an sich* or *für sich*; they are dignified by being ‘remembered’ and ‘visited’ by Yahweh, by receiving a commission to praise and to *serve* as rulers. The notion that the נפלא of humanness is itself a cause for praise is found also in Ps 139:14, a psalm that applies the theme ‘the wonder of creation’ (exemplified in Ps 104) specifically to the human creation.

### Between Honour and Frailty: the Psalter

One would not expect the situation of the psalms, the situation *coram Deo*, to yield many references to human dignity. The worshipper who approaches Yahweh either to praise and give thanks or to lament and express trust<sup>7</sup> is invariably in the position of a servant, figuratively and possibly often literally prostrate before Yahweh. It is therefore significant that the theme of human כבוד is not entirely absent.

That there is a certain honour (כבוד) which is entirely proper to the human person is particularly evident in some of the laments. The need for honour is not, I believe, merely the counterpart of the fear of overt shame (which is mentioned very often in the laments). What is at stake is the ‘rechtliche und soziale Integrität’ (Janowski 2003:145) of the person. Without honour one suffers social death (Janowski 2003:47), involving both the loss of self-respect and the loss of the respect of others. Thus in Psalm 7:6 one finds כבוד used in parallel with הוה and in Psalm 16:9 with לב. In other cases human honour is linked to ‘proper’ social positions, for instance, the ‘right’ of a man to a place in the assembly of elders and of a woman to children (Ps 113:7-9). Those who are socially isolated and not recognized are for practical purposes in Sheol (cf Ps 88:4-9, 19). Each one should ‘carry some weight’ (not necessarily all equal weight) and be able to ‘lift one’s head’ (cf Ps 3:4) to remain human and not to become a mere animal.

The emphasis on appropriate human honour gains significance when one considers that the Psalter (and the Old Testament generally) has little good to say of human pride. A number of words denoting pride or arrogance are used solely or predominantly in a pejorative sense. The proud are paradigmatically those *against* whom Yahweh acts. Nevertheless, Yahweh is also the giver of כבוד to worshippers, as we can see from, for instance, Ps 3:4, 21:6, 73:24, 84:12 and 91:15. Yahweh even confers on humans greatness

<sup>4</sup> “Nichts in Ps 8 ermuntert den Menschen zum Selbstruhm, aber alles zum Lobpreis Gottes des Schöpfers” (Irsigler, quoted in Janowski 2003:vii). Or, as Childs (1969:22) put it long ago, the divine commission to rule does not issue in “a eulogy on mankind...but in a hymn”, for what is said in verses 4-5 sounds like “a form of insanity”.

<sup>5</sup> The precise words “fragility” and “insignificance” are used in connection with the psalm by Terrien (2003:129) and Childs (1969:29) respectively.

<sup>6</sup> Hossfeld & Zenger (1993:77) say that the כבוד of verse 5 is “das, was wir heute ‘Menschenwürde’ nennen”. This does not hold across the board, for this dignity cannot be separated from creation faith.

<sup>7</sup> Here I follow Westermann’s classification of the main genres of the psalms (cf Westermann 1981a, 1989:10ff).

(גדולה, Ps 71:21) and the might symbolized by a horn (Ps 92:11, 112:9; cf 30:8). The linkage of honour and the relationship of the person to Yahweh culminates in the pronouncement the Yahweh *is* the כבוד of the worshipper (Ps 62:8).<sup>8</sup>

It is therefore no surprise that human honour, derived as it is from Yahweh's gracious acts, issues in praise.<sup>9</sup> It is the worshipper's כבוד that praises Yahweh in song and music (Ps 30:13, 57:9; cf 16:9). Since human honour remains Yahweh's gift, it is possible that what brings social shame may be honour *coram Deo* (cf Ps 4:3). Thus human honour cannot stand on its own, as it were, even as a social category. It remains intertwined with the attitudes and acts of the person before God: personal integrity, sincerity or 'authenticity' (תם), loyal devotion (חסד) and 'uprightness' (ישר) in word and deed. In the laments this is perfectly plain.

Nor can one speak about human honour without considering the ramifications of human frailty. The temptation to focus solely on the indignities people suffer as a result of social evils or natural contingencies should be avoided. Indeed, in the laments worshippers often enough portray themselves as victims of, for instance, oppression, persecution, slander and disease, but human frailty goes beyond human vulnerability. Psalm 39, for instance, speaks of human transience and insignificance (verses 5ff, 12f) and human sinfulness (verse 9). Both these themes are also intertwined in Psalms 49 and 90, and, to a lesser extent, in Psalms 102 and 103. In Ps 144:3f the question of Psalm 8 is worked out only in the negative sense: humans are insignificant. Psalm 143:3 states it as clearly as possible that humans cannot possibly justify themselves before God.

Appropriate human honour does not trump human sinfulness, insignificance or transience; it does not eliminate the need for equally appropriate human humility and meekness; it does not imply that humans can ever be other than suppliants before Yahweh. The dialectic of human finitude and human dignity found in Psalm 8 is thus maintained in the rest of the Psalter, albeit refracted in different ways in individual psalms. This dialectic cannot be reduced to the tension between what is and what should be, nor is it (in the Psalter) the paradox of *simul iustus et peccator*. Though the Psalter is indeed permeated by the 'exodus theology' of liberation, it is equally rooted in the creation theology of Psalm 8.<sup>10</sup>

### **Honour and Frailty in Sapiential Terms: Proverbs**

Much as Proverbs differs from the Psalter in genre, it does not, I believe, express a radically different view of the human condition. The prominence of human capabilities is as natural here as the lack of focus on them is in the Psalter. Once allowances have been made for the different contexts of the worshipper and the sage respectively, it becomes plain that the two shared basic anthropological presuppositions<sup>11</sup>. Honour is something worth striving for

<sup>8</sup> "Wenn der Psalmist Jahwe als seine Ehre...anspricht, sieht er ihn ebenfalls als Geber, Garanten und Wiederhersteller menschlicher Ehre an" (Irsigler 1984:49).

<sup>9</sup> McKay (quoted in Irsigler 1984:264) thus call human כבוד a "God-given vitality, a faculty of praise".

<sup>10</sup> On the still valuable distinction between the exodus theology of salvation and the creation theology of blessing, see Westermann 1982:35-117. I am not sure Westermann consistently follows through on this insight.

<sup>11</sup> This is *not* to deny other significant differences. Hausmann's thorough and balanced study (1995) of Proverbs 10ff bears this out. Her conclusion is that this section has its own character, determined by a specific focus, but is not a *Fremdkörper* (373). "Züge des JHWHglaubens warden nicht deshalb ausgeblendet, weil die Proverbienautoren diese negiert, sondern weil sie anderen Fragestellungen und Anliegen zugeordnet sind" (361). See also Frydrych (2002:127-134) and notes 13 and 15 below.

(Clements 1992:144; Hausmann 1995:358), yet honour comes only to those who know their limitations and are able to abase themselves (Prov. 15:33; 18:12; 22:4; 29:23; cf 11:2; 31:23). If wisdom consists in knowing certain things *and* applying this knowledge practically, then Proverbs reminds us that humans are limited both in their knowledge (Prov. 27:1; 30:2-4; cf 21:2; Job 28) and in their ability to determine fully the results of their actions (Prov. 3:5; 20:24; 21:31). Pride, therefore, ultimately brings shame – a particularly prominent theme in Proverbs (Prov. 11:2; 16:5; 16:18; 18:12; 21:4; cf 6:17; 8:13; 26:12).<sup>12</sup> Though honour is appropriate to humans, it is not an automatic concomitant of being human. Instead, it depends on certain choices concerning one's conduct, choices that are ultimately religiously motivated.

Whereas the Psalms speak of Yahweh as the Giver of honour, Proverbs tends to regard honour as the fruit of wisdom (Prov. 3:16, 3:35, 4:8, 8:18; cf 3:22; 4:9; 8:35; 24:3-5). The difference, however, is more apparent than real. The idea that wisdom brings honour is particularly prominent in Proverbs 1-9, where the link between wisdom and Yahweh is patent virtually throughout, paradigmatically in the pronouncement that the fear of Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom.<sup>13</sup> Honour, one might say, remains Yahweh's gift, though it is mediated through wisdom. Again, though Proverbs does not speak explicitly about Yahweh's commission to humans, its focus on the royal virtue of wisdom and the ways in which humans can mould their world through wisdom is at least compatible with this commission. This is not surprising if, as Zimmerli (1964:146) proposed, "Wisdom thinks resolutely within the framework of a theology of creation."<sup>14</sup>

In another respect the difference between the sapiential context and the context of worship did open a new possibility. The psalmists speak essentially from within the unity of the cult, where one liturgical element is always balanced by another. The sages reflect somewhat *ad hoc* on the range of human experiences.<sup>15</sup> Whereas the balance may still be there in the *collection*, nothing stops the individual from becoming engrossed in one aspect at the cost of others. A road is therefore opened to the dissolution of the dialectic.

<sup>12</sup> Westermann (1995:43) believes that a theological motive is present: "[T]he frequency with which the proverbs speak of the perils of arrogance is based on the connection between haughtiness and a tenuous relationship to God. Arrogance can scarcely bear honor being given to Yahweh."

<sup>13</sup> Apart from Prov. 1:7 and 9:10, Job 28:28 and Ps 111:10 (see also Prov. 3:7; 12:1; 15:33; 22:4; 28:14; 29:25). This may well be a late formulation, but the view that early wisdom was entirely secular and that the religious saying belong to a later re-interpretation (McKane 1970:11ff) or were added later (Westermann 1995) is open to challenge (see Wilson 1987; Weeks 1994:57-73; Dell 2006:90-124). Weeks (1994:73) concludes that the thesis is "found wanting in almost every respect": Hausmann, who emphasizes that the relationship to Yahweh is peripheral to the intentional focus of Proverbs 10ff (1995:361), nevertheless believes the religious saying fit perfectly well in the wisdom context and in the Old Testament context generally (1995:359)

<sup>14</sup> Some sayings (Prov. 14:31; 17:5; 22:2; 29:13) hint at a form of general human dignity that derives from the Creator (cf Frydrych 2002:128)

<sup>15</sup> Crenshaw (1987b:13) believes that the sages did not accept "the world view of Yahwism". Apart from the assumption that the sages were a coherent group with a single world-view and that "Yahwism" too was a coherent, stable world-view, one could question whether the matter should be dealt with in terms of world-views. There is much to be said for Frydrych's view that the world views (his word) of Proverbs and Qoheleth are incompatible (2002:225f), *because they cover essentially the same ground* (Frydrych 2002:222). When completely different "tasks" are involved, comparisons become dangerous. The specific focus of the sages *largely* excluded the cult (and salvation history); this hardly means they were not active and committed participants in it (cf von Rad 1965:433; Hausmann 1995:368). On the contrary, the overlaps between psalms and the wisdom literature (see Janowski 2003:184; Dell 2006:178-185), for instance the elements of the lament in Job (cf Westermann 1981b:2-13), confirms Westermann's view (1982:104) that the cult too dealt with predominantly blessing rather than salvation. Predictably, Crenshaw (2001:87-94) minimizes wisdom influence on the psalms.

If one reflects on *ideal* human capabilities, that is, the capabilities that pertain to the human species though not necessarily to the human individual, one could light upon the notion of an *inherent* human dignity – a dignity that assumes the status of a fact. It would then be possible to ‘maintain’ or ‘insist upon’ this dignity without reference to Yahweh *and even in the face of Yahweh*. This, I believe, is the view Job advances in his culminating speech.

If, however, one reflects on the purely contingent limits imposed on humans by their world, one could arrive at the view that humans are ‘radically continuous’ with the rest of creation and therefore devoid of any special dignity. One might still think of oneself as living under God’s rule, but this ‘rule’ is then an absolutely determining force that allows for no particular divine commission. This, I believe, is the view Qoheleth espouses more or less throughout the book.

### **Eclipsing Frailty: Job’s Integrity**

That Job is closely linked to both the creation stories and to Psalm 8 (to which there is an ironic reference in Job 7:17f) is clear (see Bergant 1975:65ff; Janzen 1985:12f). Equally clearly loss of honour plays a major role in Job’s suffering. The ‘social death’ that he has to face is described graphically in Job 13:5-20 and again in Job 30, where his present situation is contrasted with his former honourable and duly honoured life (Job 29). Moreover, God, the traditional refuge of the afflicted and the social outcast, seems to be, if anything, his prime enemy (Job 6:4; 7:20; 10:3, 16f; 13:24; 19:6ff). God, far from giving honour where it is due in the context of a divine commission, simply wields irresistible power in an arbitrary way (Job 12:13-25). It is not the irresistibility of the power but its arbitrariness that makes a mockery of human honour – manifest sinners receive honour (Job 21:6-18, 28-33; cf Habel 1985:57f). Job cannot resign himself to human finitude because there is apparently no ‘proper place’ for humans *within* their limits.

Being unable to force either his friends or God to confer honour on him, Job stakes his claim primarily on his *integrity* (יָשָׁר). It is part of the irony of the book that God acknowledges Job’s integrity in the prologue (1:8, 2:3), although Job does not know this. The point is that Job’s integrity can be seen as not merely proper but as his *property*, his accomplishment: it does not require social recognition. Even if Job falls short according to God’s impossibly high standard – as he acknowledges that *everyone* does (9:1-20) – he can maintain *his* integrity (9:21!) according to human standards. In this sense, then, he would be ‘in the right’ *for this is how God made humans to be*.

In chapter 31 Job issues his challenge based on his integrity (cf 31:6). The ‘covenant with my eyes’ in verse 1 is more than a charming metaphor; it indicates that here Job is the covenant maker, the setter of rules. This theme of self-regulation returns in verse 30. But can Job live up to his rules? In verses 33-34 Job brilliantly turns this possible objection to his own advantage.<sup>16</sup> His code of integrity is no guarantee that he will never transgress, but it does include the stipulation that guilt should not be hidden, *even if confession involves*

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<sup>16</sup> It is widely acknowledged that verses 38-40b are out of place after the climax in verses 35-37. It would not, however, do to shift them so that they stand after verse 34, as Fohrer (1963:424f) and Clines (2006:1014) do. Verses 33-34 have to appear just before the challenge, since they reflect on all that goes before.

*loss of honour* (verse 35). The point here is not that individual ethics replaces communal ethics,<sup>17</sup> but that the individual's integrity can be maintained even in the face of God.

This comes out clearly in the somewhat enigmatic verses 35-37. The logic of the oath of innocence is that Job will accept punishment if his *oath* is false. If, however, his *code* – which includes the stipulation about confessing occasional transgressions – is judged to be inadequate, Job accepts no blame. An accusation in the form “This is indeed how you lived, but wrongly so” will be no accusation in his eyes, *irrespective of who makes the accusation*. On the contrary, he will regard this as a glowing testimonial and wear it as a *crown* (the nominal form of which the verb appears in Ps 8:5). Wearing this crown, he will approach his accuser ‘like a prince’ (נָגִיד).<sup>18</sup>

Here, then, we have a human dignity, a human royalty, which (so it appears to Job) has nothing to do with a divine commission, but rests solely on integrity as a personal accomplishment. Though human finitude is not by any means denied, it no longer is dialectical tension with human honour.<sup>19</sup> Job's claim is not that he has overcome human limitations, but that he has achieved ‘perfection in his kind’ – and that in spite of God's apparent enmity.

Chapter 31 is, of course, a mere episode in a complex book; I shall not attempt to indicate how precisely we should understand the further unravelling of the plot. I tend to agree with those who believe that the end of the book signals a return to the theology of meeting found in the Psalms (cf Job 42:5)<sup>20</sup> and also with those who suggest that Job emerges from the battle with considerable honour.<sup>21</sup> In fact, he comes close to winning his case. Perhaps all he has to concede is that human integrity and the dignity that goes with it is never quite a human accomplishment; it has to be rooted in a relationship to God.

### **Ichabod: Qoheleth's Disillusionment**

In Qoheleth the creation stories are also called to mind right from the start, but in an essentially negative way.<sup>22</sup> There is neither a meaningful cosmos nor a meaning to human life, for, as Dell (2009) again pointed out recently, Qoheleth assimilates humans to the rest of nature. Human life resembles the other processes of nature, processes that continue endlessly without going anywhere (1:3-11). Qoheleth systematically dissolves distinctions: between the sage and the fool (2:12-14), between the just and the unjust (3:15f, 4:1, 9:2f),

<sup>17</sup> Job's code is not idiosyncratic; it is merely the existing social code in its highest manifestations. Job probably does stem from a time when the focus on the individual and the individual's choices became more prominent, but personal integrity was always a theme in Old Testament ethics.

<sup>18</sup> “Yet in himself he is still a prince, and that even before God” (Clines 2006:1036)

<sup>19</sup> Hunter (2006:117f) aptly points out that Job's reflections on the negative aspects of human life (all connected to human finitude) tend to disappear after chapter 19: the focus shifts to Job's integrity. Finitude obviously remains, but it is no longer dialectically related to the honour due to a person of integrity. But Hunter (2006:139) goes a little too far when he speaks of Job's “peculiarly egocentric notion of righteousness”, for Job still calls for recognition from Yahweh.

<sup>20</sup> Cf Fohrer (1963:535); Von Rad (1972:209); Westermann (1981b:128) and on the centrality of the meeting with Yahweh in the Psalms Kraus (1978:12f); Janowski (2003:11).

<sup>21</sup> Fish (1990:33) delightfully imagines Yahweh as saying: “I am going to make it up to Job”. Cf also Zimmerli (1978:165) and particularly Habel (1985:578-583), who says that Yahweh acknowledges Job as hero, that “his oath of clearance remains unchallenged”: “Job may be ignorant, but he is innocent. Nowhere does God or the poet say otherwise” (1985:282). More tentative are the views of Pope (1965:350) and Dell (2002:2008f), while Ngwa (2005:134ff) merely speaks of the “restored relationship” and a “new beginning”.

<sup>22</sup> Thus Brown (2000:23) speaks of “cosmos without creation”; cf Perdue 1994:234ff, who speaks of “decreation” in the book as a whole.

between rich and poor (5:7-15), significantly also between humans and animals (3:17-20).<sup>23</sup> As for the distinction between life and death, the dead and the unborn may have the edge over the living (4:2f). Otherwise one could also say that the sole advantage of the living is an ironic one: they know that they must die, whereas the dead know nothing (9:4-6).

Qoheleth does not deny that God works to a plan, but denies that this plan can be discerned by humans (3:11), therefore events are, from the human perspective, not to be distinguished from the workings of fate. If there is a 'divine commission' at all, it is simply to toil on without hope of any significant 'profit'. Whereas the Red Queen in *Through the Looking Glass* has to run very fast simply to remain in the same place, Qoheleth argues that human effort cannot halt the inexorable *backward* movement towards feeble old age and ultimate death. All is vanity!

That Qoheleth is aware of human finitude is never in doubt. Some try to make a virtue out of this, arguing that Qoheleth simply reminds us to stay within our limits and be satisfied with what befits us (Scott 1965:206; Zimmerli 1980:134-35; Whybray 1982; Garrett 1993:284; Conradie 1996). Whybray (1989:39f) ingeniously argues that 1:3-11 does not imply that human life is meaningless, even if it is not clearly distinguished from the processes of nature. The courses of the sun, the winds and the rivers *are* meaningful and so is human life if not too much is expected of it. Gordis even says that to Qoheleth "joy is God's categorical imperative" (1978:129) and that he calls for "vigorous and full-blooded enjoyment of all [life] affords" (1978:128).<sup>24</sup> When we have curtailed our ranker ambitions, we may rejoice in our 'portion'.

I do not deny that Qoheleth's 'prescription' is a life of serene disillusionment; I do deny that he offers this as something he or we can embrace gladly. The very style of 2:3-11 suggests the tedium, the sheer repetitiveness of life 'beneath the sun'.<sup>25</sup> There may be 'nothing better' than taking your pleasures where you find them, but these pleasures are not guaranteed and the rest of life is a cycle of toil (cf Longman 1998:34f). Moreover, Qoheleth consistently explains the purportedly higher in terms of the lower: superior skill is the product of envy (4:4) and a live dog is better than a dead lion (9:4). This strategy is particularly evident where he quotes earlier sayings in order to give them cynical twists. For the joyful or anguished meeting with God there is no place in Qoheleth's world (Lauha 1978:60; Michel 1989:286ff; Longman 1998:35).

How would Qoheleth, or a reader who has entered into the spirit of the book, respond to a question about human dignity? I see only one possibility: first the smile, somewhat sardonic, more than a little weary, infinitely knowing; then some quotations from the tradition, all impeccably orthodox; finally the witty 'deconstruction', showing that the old sayings contradict themselves or have unpalatable implications, that what appears to be 'higher' is really something quite low disguised in fancy dress<sup>26</sup>.

Apparently, then, Qoheleth leaves us with human finitude unalleviated by any promise of human dignity. This might fall just short of the truth. Here and there, between the lines of the text, one catches a glimpse, so I believe, of a striving that has not been brought to

<sup>23</sup> I agree with Dell (2009:188) that this is so; unlike her (2009:189) I find nothing positive in it.

<sup>24</sup> For an almost exact echo, see Lee (2005), who speaks of the "normativity of enjoyment" in Qoheleth (125): enjoyment is "a religious duty" and "whole-hearted and full-blooded enjoyment" is "sanctioned, even commanded by God" (126).

<sup>25</sup> Dell (2009:185) says that there is "something endless and indeed pointless about such cycles" and Garrett (1993:284) speaks of a "monotonous prison". See also Lauha 1978:37; Crenshaw 1987a:67; Perdue 1994:210.

<sup>26</sup> It is thus understandable that Hunter (2006:174) asks whether Qoheleth is not "an arrogant book", written by someone with "not enough real cares to occupy".

rest. In the notorious last instance Qoheleth does not seem to be satisfied with his own account. He *sees* (a key word in the book) no grounds for speaking of human dignity, yet he cannot, it seems, shake off the feeling that human life *should* be more than animal life. I shall not expand on this, but leave the idea to the reader to ponder.

### Speaking of Human Dignity – Theologically

Since theologians are always somewhat embattled within the academy, it comes as no surprise that they should eagerly latch on to fashionable themes whenever these promise them the chance to ‘make a contribution to the debate’. At worst, these contributions amount to showing that the Christian faith has – unbeknown to Christians – always been in line with whatever the latest trend is. But even when the theme is as perennially relevant as human dignity undoubtedly is and when the Christian scriptures and tradition patently have something to say, caution is called for. Honour within the academic community should not be pursued at the cost of integrity.

Right now ‘human dignity theology’ has to jostle for space with postmodern theologies of the dispersed subject with disturbingly deterministic undertones, evolutionary theologies that may end up emphasizing a value-neutral process of change and ecological theologies that seek to save the planet by stressing the ‘radical continuity’ of humans with non-human nature. It is fortunate that, according to popular opinion at least, postmodernism has freed us of the Kantian obligation to be consistent, for these different projects cannot readily be wedded.

To summarize what can be spun out at length: It is hard to see what dignity the interstitial (or interpellated) subject can have. Evolutionary logic allows us to speak of a dignity that pertains to humans as a ‘favoured race’, but it fails to tell us why we should save less fit species – unless they are helpful to us. If we are merely animals, no better and no worse than others, we can rescue the notion of dignity by generalizing it (all things have equal dignity), but this would make the term ‘human dignity’ vacuous. It would not, for instance, explain why we may eat plants but not people. The list can be expanded endlessly.

When contradictory notions run amuck, all projects, including worthy ones, suffer. Thus no amount of earnest hectoring about human dignity will be persuasive if juxtaposed to portentous theorizing to the effect that humans are products of textual economies. ‘Compensatory humanism’, as Burke named it, starts by reducing humans to animals (machines, effects, etc) and then adds, by way of ‘humanitarian afterthought’ that we should not treat them as animals (see Burke 1952:54, 112). Those intelligent enough to read academic works on human dignity in the first place will not be fooled. Burke’s suggestion is that we should prefer a ‘consistent humanism’ of the kind that is found in religious traditions (Burke 1952:55).

Though only rank Biblicists would say that the Bible is without inconsistencies, the ‘main line’ in the biblical witness seems to maintain the dialectical tension between human honour and human frailty. Neither is ever naturalized in the sense that it is portrayed as a ‘thing’ standing alongside other things. *Both emerge in their biblical sense solely in the meeting with God.* Doubtless one can, without breaking any rules of grammar or logic, also speak of human dignity and human finitude without referring to the meeting with God. In such discussions theologians *qua* theologians would have no special expertise. Those who end up as *de facto* Kantians will at least be following a great thinker along with many worthy disciples; others may be less fortunate.

If biblical scholars wish to speak about human dignity as theologians, I believe they should take Psalm 8 as their point of departure. As far as I can see, nothing in the Bible invalidates what is said there, though the New Testament deepens it. In it we meet first utter human insignificance in the presence of Yahweh – not simply natural finitude. Next comes the *commission* of queenship<sup>27</sup> – not merely a degree of dignity and therefore an embarrassment rather than an accolade. The commission ultimately requires us to rule even over the forces of chaos, which is far beyond our power. When other psalms indicate that human frailty includes human sinfulness, the royal task of subduing the forces of chaos *within us* adds to the embarrassment (here the New Testament becomes indispensable). ‘Human dignity’ is rooted in God’s commission; ‘human finitude’ is fully apprehended in our failure to carry out this commission.

Here theologians simply have to ‘speak their own language’. Instead of wistfully musing on human finitude, brace yourself and say ‘sin’. Since the Bible does not allot you a decent, middle-class portion of dignity, swallow hard and get ‘queenship’<sup>28</sup> down your throat. And then start praying in the two ancient modes of praise and lament, glorifying exuberantly and pleading desperately. For only in the presence of God can we come to terms with these ambivalent gifts of God, maintaining the tension that is necessary if we are to avoid either hubris or despair.

Those who wish to speak as Job did, *for themselves and from the position of Job and not moralizing to others from comfortable perches above the fray*, have my unstinted admiration. They are indeed ‘little less than God’ – though the little matters.<sup>29</sup> May God restore the slight imbalance, for Job’s comforters surely cannot begin to do that. Those who wish to speak as Qoheleth did are welcome to my company. Their cynicism is usually amusing rather than dangerous. Since they, like Qoheleth and unlike Job, are not really in dire straits, I won’t take them too seriously and hope that they won’t either. If they ever do, it might help if they read Qoheleth carefully and notice a really serious regret peeping round the corners of the text from time to time, the regret that we cannot, after all, live like perfectly natural little animals.

### **A Brief Plea for Human Indignity**

Earlier I suggested that the dialectic of dignity and finitude belongs even in ‘secular’ debates on human dignity. When Kant said that *all* humans deserve *Achtung* as autonomous, rational beings, citizens of the realm of *ends*, he knew perfectly well that we are not always either free or fully rational. Unfortunately his reservations were not always sufficiently noted. Unfortunately, for though the burdens of freedom and rationality differ from those of

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<sup>27</sup> I use this form partly to be politically correct and partly in view of the older meaning of “queen”, namely “woman”. Thus the feminine form works better to indicate that the title is conferred on humans *qua* humans.

<sup>28</sup> A common objection is that the idea of human kingship/queenship or stewardship has “not worked”: it has led to the destruction of the planet. What Chesterton said quite generally is specifically relevant here: “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried” (*The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* 1979:148). Westermann (1982) makes short shrift of this objection: the commission rules out exploitation (98) and “every form of exploitation of the earth is contempt for God’s commission” (99).

<sup>29</sup> This tension is caught brilliantly by Kierkegaard (1983:212): “Was Job in the wrong? Yes, eternally, for there is no higher court than the one that judged him. Was Job proved to be in the right? Yes, eternally, by being proved to be wrong *before God*” (emphasis in the original). Earlier (1983:207) he makes it clear that “Job, despite everything, is in the right” – by *all* human standards. This is what is acknowledged in 42:7: what Job had said about God was, seen from his position and *any human position*, essentially *true* (בכבוד), not merely honest; what his friends had said was untrue even to their own experience.

queenship, they are still too heavy for frail humans. As Shinn (1969:164f) pointed out, the term ‘humanity’ has both a factual and a normative sense: behaviour that is factually human can be deemed normatively inhuman. If we get the normative standard wrong, we set ourselves up for *unnecessary* failure.

Always maintain your freedom and rationality? Never submit to or be the servant of another? Never obey any laws but your own? Avoid the monkish (slavish) virtues of meekness, pity and self-sacrifice? Never scream for help because you can no longer manage on your own? Never make a fool of yourself? C’mon, ’ave a ’eart, mate! Such doctrines are cruel, unnecessary – and inhuman. If we leave no room for human *indignity*, we deprive ourselves of the solace and succour of others, the joys of serving, rest from overwhelming responsibility, many forms of love, particularly sexual love – and practically all fun. None of this is excluded by the commission of queenship. No doubt we shall make a hash of our commission – as king David and ‘king’ Solomon-Qoheleth did. Let’s make it a relatively honest, human hash.

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