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A POSTCOLONIAL CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE *IMAGO DEI* IN GEN 1:26-28[1] IN NIGERIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The concept of 'subdue the earth' and of 'dominion' given a literal interpretation in the Priestly text of Gen 1:1-2:4a is linked to an interpretation of the 'Imago Dei' or the image likeness of God in Gen 1:26-28 to mean that humans occupy the unique role of 'rulers' of the earth under God. It has served the West as the 'magna carta' of imperial rule and neo-colonial domination. A critical exegesis of the concept of 'subdue' and 'rule' in especially Gen 1:28 do reveals a more liberating conception of 'imago Dei' with implications for human rule and dominion. In this paper I have attempted to critically assess the imago Dei from the point of view of archaeology and Old Testament postcolonial critical exegesis through a re-reading of Gen 1:28 which, with an Ogba (African) based world-view, provides new insights for addressing the problem of oil exploration, exploration and exploitation in Nigeria's Niger Delta.

Key Words: African World View, Dominion, Gen 1:1 - 2:4a, *Imago Dei*

Introduction

There is a fruitful resource for today's Old Testament ethicists in Gen 1:26-28 which can benefit us in our quest for a responsible exercise of human dominion over nature and the earth (Barton 1998:2). In these verses is contained the concept of the *imago Dei* which evidently points to a creative, caring and protective representation of God, and which reflects an anthropocentric rule over nature in a humane and responsible manner (Middleton 2006:66-7). Scholars are not so comfortable with Old Testament ethics generally because of some of its unblemished laws, especially those that seem to support mass destruction of lives and property, which isolate the infected, that demand an eye for an eye, and that tolerate certain amount of interest on loans. Although Genesis is programmatic to the Old Testament in general, it does not specifically hint at such puritanical laws.

Instead Gen 1:26-28 introduces the concepts of the *imago Dei* and of 'rule' and 'dominion' which have attracted the interest of Biblical scholars across the ages. In what follows we are giving first, a postcolonial critical assessment of the *imago Dei*, followed by a postcolonial close-reading of our pericope with a view to a critical assessment of the implications of 'rule' and 'dominion' in the creation narrative and its relevance for addressing the ecological and environmental problems generated by multinational oil and industrial operations in the Niger Delta.

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[1] This article has been adapted from a paper which I read during the Old Testament Society of South Africa Annual (OTSSA) Conference at the University of Pretoria from 22-24 August 2007.

A Postcolonial Critical Assessment of Gen 1:26-28

In order for a postcolonial critical assessment of Gen 1:26-28 to provide the much needed understanding of anthropocentric interpretation of creation (Akao 1993:53; von Rad 1996:139-141), it is necessary to re-establish the true meaning of for instance the *imago Dei*, especially in the light of recent archaeological discoveries in the ancient Near East. The views of most Old Testament scholars generally favor an *imago Dei* discussion which more or less reflects ancient Near Eastern royal ideology. The concept is the product of a culture of representation of kings by images in provinces in which they themselves could not be present (Curtis 1984:35-36).

For instance, the excavation of the *Fakhariyah* Aramaic inscription in 1979 at *Tell Fakhariyah* in northeast Syria (Bordreuil 1997:301) – a statue which stands 1.65 meters high with bilingual inscriptions, in Akkadian and Aramaic – was clearly a confirmation of similarity of traditions and historisation between the ancient Near East and ancient Israel's Genesis account (Mikaya 1981:52). The Akkadian text of the *Tell Fakhariyah*, 39 lines long, is engraved on the front of the statue's tunic; the Aramaic, 23 lines long, is on the back. The inscriptions are similar in structure: they are presumably dedicated to the storm god Hadad; the identity of the dedicator is Hadad-yis'i, son of Shamash-nuri king of Gozan. In its first line is the earliest occurrence of *dmwt in* Aramaic which approaches a virtual proposition when combined with *demuta* 'image, likeness', or even with its parallelism with *ṣelem* in Genesis 1:26-27 (cf. Ezek 23:14-15) and is revised in Gen 5:1, 3.

On a more textual note, the Priestly editor locates the Gen 1:26-28 events on the 6th day of God's creative fiat. The opening word of that day marks its uniqueness in the whole creation saga in the 24th verse: "And God said, 'let the earth bring forth…' and ends in the 31st verse with 'And God saw that it was good'" (Cassuto 1978:53-54). Briefly stated, "The sixth day completes the work that was begun on the third day". On the third day the earth was created and on the sixth day the living creatures of the earth were made. Again, on the third day, immediately after the organization of inanimate nature had been completed, the plants were brought into being, so also on the sixth day when vegetation and animal life had been fully established, humans who bear rule over all created life on earth were formed (Cassuto 1978:53-54). Human rule and dominion were to be exercised in a proactive and ongoing way. Scholars such as Fretheim (2005:4) prefer to describe this as a process of continuous creation rather than of blessing.

In my own opinion the understanding of blessing and of continual creation in the views of both Westermann and Fretheim is more a matter of semantics than of exegesis. The dynamics of being the *imago Dei* literally issues in blessing itself which in Genesis 1:26-28 lead to continuity of creation and vice versa. Again, Fretheim's (2005:4) idea of the confinement of creation as the ultimate meaning of providence does not tell the whole story. It is fairer to view Westermann's category of blessing as not being necessarily synonymous with creative *'inertia'*. It will be inconceivable to think of blessing where the character of God is lacking. The implication of this in Genesis 1:26-28 is that the procreative process of humans becomes more meaningful within the context of a reproduction of the divine image in humans, and this image is godly character! (cf. Westermann 1984:160). This fact becomes clearer, especially considering the measure of autonomy associated with 'rule' and 'dominion' in Genesis 1:28 critically assessed from the point of view of a postcolonial critical close-reading interspersed with insights from a translation of our text into Ogba, an African language.

A Postcolonial Critical Close-reading of Gen 1:28

The following is New International Version rendering of the text:

> *And God blessed them and said, be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.*

Limited space necessitates a postcolonial critical re-reading which highlights the salient features of our periscope, and from which we might take a critical look at certain key words in the text in the course of this discussion, including its rendering in an African (Ogba) language.

We start with the Divine utterance of blessing in Gen 1:28 which in Hebrew is translated *wayəbarek* 'and blessed them'. By this utterance alone God is said to mean, procreation in general. However, a postcolonial critical re-reading of this text suggests a duality of meaning as well. Man is to reproduce God's character by virtue of his being the image *'enyege'* of God as well as procreate himself in socializing with the opposite sex, by virtue of which they are made male and female *'okno ya nnwurne'* (cf. Sarna 1989:13). Furthermore, man is to be in relationship with God in living out the divine blessings in order to rule and control nature and other created things in a partnership that is both responsible and accountable. As God's conversation partners both in reproducing God's character and in procreating themselves, humans are elevated to a realm in which they share in God's sovereignty but live responsibly before Him (Preuss 1995:114-140). The importance of human reproduction of the divine character and procreation of physical offspring, in fulfilling the dual mandate, which God has commanded, as part of creation ordinance and blessing, cannot therefore be overemphasized (Birch 2001:303ff).

Of course the blessings are bestowed on them at the time of creation, and seem to be primarily one of increasingly imaging the Deity and of fertility at the same time. In other words, there is an underlying increase in expressing the divine character that runs *in tandem* with procreative functions. The latter once again is important because dominion can only be exercised over the living creatures and over nature generally to the extent that humans occupy the earth physically in a manner that truly reflected the divine image and likeness (Cassuto 1978:58-59).

Again *pəru* is a verb consecutive perfect second person plural as is implied in the translation. Koehler and Baumgartner (2000:778) refer specifically to the fruit of the vine, or of the fig tree but more importantly to the fruit of the womb, resulting from intercourse between the male and female. In addition, Brown, Driver, and Briggs (2000:826) interpret it as fruit of the ground generally, and as fruit that results from labour (Pr 31:16-31). It could also refer to the product of a wise action (Pr .8:19) or a wise speech (Pr 18:21). Its meaning in this context is a kind of fruitfulness that results in a 'branching out'.

It also means a fruitful expansion of and from the prototypical nature of a tree as through its branches and leaves. In this sense *pəru* is more than six times juxtaposed with *shōresh* 'root' (2 Kgs 19:30; Isa 14:29; 37:31; Ezk 17:9; Hos 9:16; Am 2:9). Some such as Ginsberg[2] would object to it meaning a literal fruit, though that is part of it. In actual fact *pəru* can literally mean the 'fruit' of a relationship between action and its consequence as there is between a plant and its seed or vice versa (Hamilton 1980:734). Similar to the ways

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[2] See the article by HL Ginsberg 1963 "'Roots Below and Fruit Above' and Related Matters" in *Hebrew and Semitic Studies* Oxford: Clarendon, p. 72-76. See also VP Hamilton 1980 "Pārâ" in Harris *et al* (eds.) *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. Chicago: Moody, p.733-35

trees grow roots below and produce fruits above [Ps. 104:13; Pr 8:19; 11:30 (KJV)], humans are to be rooted in God so that they can reproduce and 'branch out' his life, character, wisdom, and super-nature[3]. Humans are commanded to be fruitful, that is to branch out in and as the image of God so as to reflect in their relationship to him a character that is similar to his original character. On the basis of this also they are to do what follows next in the tex

Similarly, *urəbu* 'and multiply' comes from the root rābâ which literally means to become numerous. It is a West Semitic form of a very common term cognate to Ugaritic *rb* and Akkadian *rabû*. This root initially occurs in Gen 1:22. 'Multiply' is read by all the versions, but in subsequent usages a variety of translations appear. In Gen 17:17-18 *rābâ* is translated as 'increase', or 'be many' in 1 Chr 23:17; and as 'so much' in Gen 43:34. In the Hiphil stem the standard and the most common meaning is 'multiply', but a variety of other translations are also given which space does not permit us to list here (White 1980:828).

Suffice it to say that the wide range of meaning shows the latitude of the original Hebrew root. It is a word used mostly in quantitative contexts, but sometimes also in a metaphorical sense like in Job 29:18 'live long', and 1 Chr 7:4 'to have many children'. As so aptly depicted in BDB (2000:913) *rābâ* can also mean 'influence' such as of a ruler over his people or of a speaker over his/her audience. In comparison with *pəru, rābâ* specifically is linked to child-bearing in order to extend the human influence throughout the habitable earth (cp. KB 2000:867-8).

This word *umil'u:* 'and replenish' literally means to fill or to be full (KB 2000:523), such as when the earth is said to be full of violence or on the other hand to be full of the glory of the LORD (Gen 6:13; Hab 3:3). In the Niphal perfect *nimalu* would literally mean to be filled with people or a house filled with people as smoke fills a kitchen so to speak (BDB 2000:570). Thus, when Jacob foresees a time when Joseph's children would become a multitude of nations *məlo* is used. The NRSV sticks with 'fill' in its translation, while the NIV uses the more figurative 'replenish'.

The verb *kābash* occurs in the Old Testament 15 times, and is also cognate with Akkadian *kabāsu* 'to thread down' and Arabic *kabasa* 'to knead, stamp, and press'. In the Old Testament it means 'to make to serve'. Read against the background of Gen 1:26 in which humans are made in the image and likeness of God, then *kābash* implies 'to subdue' in an effective, but unobtrusive and beneficent manner. It is used with regards to subduing the land of Canaan (Num 32:22), and in the *piel* it is used with regards to subduing peoples (2 Sam 8:11). This is a *qal* perfect second person singular of the root *kābash* 'subdue'. It literally means to subdue or subjugate, if possible with force, implying that the one being subdued is hostile to the one who subdues, and would not do the bidding of the latter unless under subjugation. The implication for the use of such a strong verb is that "creation will not do human bidding gladly or easily and that humans must now bring the creation into submission by the sheer use of strength" (Oswalt 1980:430).

Perhaps, for the avoidance of any doubt, I must emphasize that this part of the creation mandate was given before the fall of humans in Gen 3. Previous colonial readings of '*kābash'* have literally meant 'forced servitude' with the result of a fierce and destructive

[3] This resonates with the New Testament imagery of the Vine and its branches in John 15 in which disciples of Jesus are commanded to be fruitful in the sense in which a tree reproduces itself through fruit-bearing branches (Jn 15:1-5). Fruit-bearing in this case also means more of a godlike character which Apostle Paul later describes as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness and self-control against which there is no law (Gal 5:22-23).

delight with which humans have treated the animals. In my opinion, unless human iniquities are themselves subdued (Mic. 7:10) '*kābash',* the intention of the Creator God for clean air, green environment, freedom of movement and sustainable development will be a far-fetched dream!

Some think that *Rada* implicitly conveys the idea of royal rule not over creation but over hostile nations and their forces (White 1980:833)! The idea of *Rada* is generally seen as not implying 'rule' in a pagan sense, but rule through service (Ashokoto 2006:11). Humans were to be self-governing beings who are in need of minimum external government. Their rule was to be exercised in a humane and responsible manner only over other living creatures, but not at all over fellow human beings because these are made in the image of God. Our fellow human beings bear the image of the Creator and thus are not to be dominated but to be served (Ashokoto 2006:11). At best, dominion could be equated with a meaning such as the building of settlement and the practice of agriculture. This is borne out by the fact that 'subdues the land' in Gen 1:28 is a semantic parallel to 'till and keeps the land' in Gen 2:5, 15 (Hamilton 1990:139-140). The text not only confers the 'power of attorney' on humans, but also does so with the implication for responsibility and accountability as the experience of Israel has shown. Having been granted the land of Canaan as a gift from Yahweh, it was Israel's responsibility to utilize its resources in a humane, sustainable, and accountable manner, similar to the way good and faithful stewards would.

Moreover, this responsibility underscores the distinctiveness of humans over the rest of creation. In contrast, the fish for instance are blessed with physical fertility, but not in the same way in which humans received a two-fold blessing comprising both spiritual elevation and physical fecundity. In those two blessings is depicted the roles assigned to humans, namely to reproduce God's character, as well as procreate their kind through child birth on the one hand, and on the other hand to exercise dominion and subdue the earth not in the sense of absolute use but absolute care and preservation (Hamilton 1990:139). There is a sense of respect for nature, which pervades our text and is underscored by the fact that like the Ogba proverb puts it *nnwa ayie didi a yi nne o bo yi po enye?* "a child not like his mother not like his father will be like who?" Humans are to tend the earth in the same way God tends, but never destroying it (cf. Gen 1:28). Otherwise, a misplaced emphasis on human dominion over the natural world and encouragement of the human race to exploit its resources for its own selfish ends would result in humans loosing their dominion, while at the same time ruining their own estate (Brueggemann 2002:1-2).

It is therefore evident that the creation account is explicit on the point that humans were to be responsible for the care and preservation of the terrestrial world (Gen 1:28; 2:15, 20). It is a dual responsibility disguised in a language of 'subjugation' of the created order. However, this responsibility or mandate was to be implemented through active moral reproduction, intelligent procreation and responsible conservation. This seems to be the most objective and critical interpretation even when a text such as Gen 9:1 is brought into the picture: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth"! Instead, Genesis presents us with a scenario of interrelationships among various created things in a way described as three-dimensional (Brueggemann 1982:11-12). Firstly, creation is here treated together without distinctions or differentiations. "All stand before God in the same way as the single reality of creature vis-à-vis Creator" (see Gen 9:9-10). Secondly, human is treated as superior and non-human as subordinate (Gen 1:25-30; 2:15). In this way human creatures are designated to order, rule and care for the other creatures; creatures are to obey and to be responsive to

the human creatures. Thirdly, the text is generally predominated by human issues to the total exclusion of the rest of creation.

The importance of such a three-dimensional relationship among created things is that it motivates a critical hermeneutic for a re-reading which expounds on the stewardship of nature's resources involving humans who are not only creatures, but conscious beings (Vawter 1997:58-59). In their creaturely status, humans are capable of a conscious and constant dialogue with their Creator (Gen 3:8-9; Psa. 8:4-5, 6-9). Being in communion with their Maker who is spiritual, would of necessity entail that at least the humans would have been made in an image of Deity that transcends their physical features and which resonates with the Spirit of their Maker. As so aptly depicted in Fretheim (2005:39) "as God breathes God's own breath of life into the nostrils of a human being (Gen 2:7), something of the divine self comes to reside in the human – and in an ongoing way". A postcolonial critical assessment of Gen 1:26-28 demands a re-reading which for want of space we have limited to Gen 1:28 in order to demonstrate a dialogical and corrective, if meaningful exegesis of a text capable to rid the creation narratives of erstwhile colonial aberration. In respect of creation and human destiny it stimulates a recollection of the text and context from all colonial trappings in two ways.

Firstly, it underscores the origin of Genesis 1:1-2:4 and particularly Gen 1:28 from a Priestly hand being a narrative with a creation motif, possibly emanating from the post-exilic period. The extent to which the experiences of the exilic and post-exilic community can be read into the creation narrative found in this pericope is only a matter of conjecture. Nevertheless, its emphasis on ruling the earth and taming the animals serves as a reminder that even the animals and lower creatures are in need of a responsible care and nurture by humans. Secondly, it highlights right from the onset that 'rule and dominion' does not necessarily imply an absolute rule which results in the decimation of animal species. Many theologians and ecologists today do wonder if there is any clear mandate in Genesis which supports any such wanton abuse of the lower creatures – especially animals and birds. Moreover, it helps us to critically address the post-colonial problem of marginalization, environmental pollution, land degradation and *latifundia* prevalent in the industrial sector whereby valuable forests and wet land are removed from the use of animals and birds and replaced by industrial installations of multinational oil companies in for instance the Niger Delta, thereby imposing untold hardship on human and material creation.

Although the Genesis text does not warrant any interpretation inimical to the presser-vation of the natural order, it has been accused of being responsible for the present ecological crisis rocking our planet today (White 1994:45-57). Again, the Biblical text does not explicitly favour a rule and dominion by humans over the earth which results in ecological distortion, land degradation and environmental pollution such as being unleashed on creation by multinational companies. Neither does the concept of the *'imago Dei'* promote humans into a ruling position in which all creation is at their beck and call. Instead, the concept is one that imposes a responsibility of a humane and responsible stewarding of nature on behalf of *Elohim* in a proactive, procreative and sustainable manner. Therefore those who are perpetrating acts of 'terrorism' on creation must give reasons for their actions, other than the flimsy excuse that humans have been authorized to do whatever they wish with creation. A critical assessment of what is meant in the text by the words 'rule' and 'dominion' will falsify that notion.

Implications for 'Rule' and 'Dominion' in Gen 1:28

In order to understand the Priestly narrative and the words 'rule and dominion' a postcolonial hermeneutics and a more humane interpretation of Gen 1:26-28 is needed (Sarna 1989:12-13). This brings two important points to mind with respect to the creation of humans and animals. First, the human race is not inherently sovereign, but enjoys its dominion solely by the grace of God. Second, the Priestly narrative reflects a royal ideology and the model of kingship depicted in the text is Israelite. According to ancient Near Eastern customs, the monarch does not possess unrestrained power and authority. The limits of his monarchical rule has been carefully defined and circumscribed by divine law, so that kingship is to be exercised with responsibility and is subject to accountability.

Based on this premise, the words 'subdue' and 'dominion' in Gen 1:28 cannot and need not in my opinion include the licence to exploit nature banefully as is currently the vogue in most parts of the world, and with respect to the exploration for, and the exploitation and exportation of crude oil and solid minerals in Africa, particularly in the Niger Delta (Ukpong 2004:83-88). A re-reading of Gen 1:28 in a hermeneutics that is both postcolonial, dialogical and liberating enables us to apply a humane attitude in the kind of treatment we mete out to creation and in particular to animals keeping in view the Creator's intention of a more responsible and nurturing human *imago Dei* (Dube 2006:178f).

This is especially crucial in the economic contexts of the Niger Delta in which environmental pollution and ecological distortion are leading to the extinction of the lower creatures. Such extinctions are the inevitable results of the imperial tendencies such as exploitation, militarism and the production of legitimizing democratic institutions in the developing societies like Nigeria (Ukpong 2004:32ff). It is therefore important to evolve a postcolonial critical understanding of the concepts of rule and dominion capable of addressing the mis-readings of the Biblical text, especially in those contexts in which the Bible has been accused of being responsible for the present ecological crisis rocking our planet. With special reference to oil exploration, exploitation and exportation in Nigeria it is obvious that multinational oil companies have carried out their industrial and chemical operations in total disregard of ecological balance, environmental integrity and geological cohesion of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Some multinational oil companies such as Shell, Total, Agip, Texaco, Globe Oil, and the Nigerian National Petroleum Company (NNPC) have been doing their business of oil mining in very crude and barbaric manner. Conversely a postcolonial hermeneutics suggests an interpretation of Biblical texts that supports human rule and dominion over creation that is humane, responsible and accountable.

Such a postcolonial critical hermeneutic is basic to a re-reading of the Bible in Africa which produces the desired result respectively of human rights and dignity (Ukpong 2004:32ff). Scholars have in this respect endorsed this need to evolve a postcolonial interpretation of not only the Biblical texts in particular, but of religion in general (Perdue 2005:293; Ukpong 2001:582-94). This is done by creating an encounter between the Biblical text and Africa's religious context using a hermeneutics that ignores historical theology and focuses on postcolonial criticism. This is what Ukpong (2004:35) has described as:

> A hermeneutic of appropriation which, in the case of Africa, is concerned to make a specifically African contribution to Biblical interpretation and actualize the creative power of the Bible in African society.

Apparently a post-colonial phenomenon of 'centre-margin' relationship exists in which imperial powers construct or interpret narratives such as the Gen 1:28 as part of the creation account to justify neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism (Dube 1992:121). One indirect

result of this is in the realm of economic power play in which multinational oil companies from the centre explores, exploits and exports mineral resources away from the so called 'margins', (and in the case of Nigeria) with the attendant destruction of wild life and actuarial life in the process of land and wet land excavations all in the name of God. A postcolonial critical assessment of our pericope presents us with a hermeneutics that can be used in elevating the humans and nature to a point of inter-relationship and partnership of mutual care and nourishment on the one hand and of ecological integrity, environmental sanity and the respect of human rights on the other.

Conclusion

In this paper, we critically examined Biblical concepts such as 'rule' and 'dominion' as they impact on the mandate received by man from God to 'husband' the earth. Evidently, Gen 1:28 should never be seen as a self-serving anthropocentric text in a human use of power against other creatures, but it should be understood as depicting the kind of human relationship to the Deity that works out in a humane, responsible and accountable stewardship of nature and creation (Wasike 1999:176). Ultimately, the source of human rule and dominion – or stewardship – has to be in Yahweh's pre-eminent rule. Humans reign with Yahweh as responsible stewards and as accountable users of that with which they have been entrusted.

A postcolonial critique of Gen 1:28 has resulted in profound appreciations of the human mediatorial role in creation. It means that humans are to reproduce God's character in both of their relationship to him, to each other and to nature in general (cf. Brueggemann 2002:184-186). This is in order to create a meaningful atmosphere in which they can multiply, subdue and 'replenish' the earth. What has often been referred to as the cultural or dual mandate can also be called the stewardship vocation: humans are to be stewards of the earth as God's representative image in both character and life (Beisner 1997:184-85).

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