

## **THE WORLD GOD INTENDED:**

# **A BLESSED, HOLY AND JUST SOCIETY ON EARTH <sup>1</sup>**

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### **Introduction**

The Bible opens with “in the beginning God created...” This text of Genesis 1:1 introduces God as the main actor in the unfolding biblical drama. He is intentional in his agenda and plan for all his creation. After speaking his creative word, all things were created and he reviewed his actions as good. God says of the creation that it was “good” (Gen 1:3, 9, 12, 18, 21, and 25). Concerning the whole creation and especially humans, he pronounced his work “very good” (1:31). If our reflections upon the task of God is to be fully biblical, we must also affirm that creation, the physical creation, was good. One of the most dangerous heresies of the second century A.D. was the denial of the goodness of the physical world by some “Christians”. Such “Christians” were so convinced that the physical world was evil that they denied that Jesus was really human. He only “seemed” or “appeared” to be human.

God talked and the world came into being. What this means is that “And God said” is not only the literary marker for the beginning of each day of creation (1:3, 6, 9, 14, 20, 24, cf. 1:26), but also a declaration that confronts the modern reader with the worldview of the Bible. God, who is spirit, speaks and a world, a physical world, comes into being! God “talked” the world into being. What kind of worldview is this?

This is what we are referring to as the monistic worldview. A spirit talks and a physical world comes into being. From the biblical point of view, the spirit world and the physical world are intimately related. There exist a biblical dualism within the monistic framework, which allows for clear distinctions between God and his creation, between good and evil, between spirit and matter. This view, however, distinguishes between the physical aspect and the spirit aspect of reality, but does not separate the physical aspect from the spirit aspect.

However, our modern worldview (socialized from Western worldview) is essentially dualistic, i.e. a world in which the spirit aspect and the physical aspect exist and can be distinguished and can also be separated from each other. Within this modern dualistic framework, we distinguish the spiritual (sacred) and the physical (secular). We also separate the sacred from the secular in very distinct ways. In fact, the sacred is not found in the secular and the secular is not found in the sacred. Whenever the two seem to come close, Christians complain the Christians are becoming secular or are singing secular songs, dressing in a secular manner etc. This view of reality is radically different from biblical view of reality. It almost does not allow God to speak

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<sup>1</sup> This reader is adopted and adapted from Dr Chester C. Wood’s unpublished material titled “In Paths of Righteousness for His Name sake” The Story of the Task of the People of God: A Biblical Theology of Justice.

in the secular world. It trains the Christians to tread carefully in the secular world so that they maintain their spirituality. This view separates Sunday from Monday. Sunday is for sacred purposes/tasks while Monday to Saturday is for secular tasks save for the pastors whom we expect to live one reality throughout the week.

From a biblical worldview, God who is spirit speaks and a physical world comes into being. Adam and Eve who are humans act/sin (a physical act) and this has consequences in the spiritual world (it interferes with their relationship with God). God's displeasure with their actions in the garden of Eden results in physical consequences of throwing them out of the garden. This intimate relationship between the actions in the spiritual and their consequences in the physical are repeated throughout scripture. Actions in the physical world, where good or evil attract a fitting response in the spiritual world (either reward or punishment). If we interpret what is going on in our world from a monistic worldview, we know actions of fellow humans attract a fitting response from the spiritual world. Actions that are in line with God's agenda on earth attract a reward and actions that contradict, thwart, or delay God's agenda receive a response, which is a punishment. When you explore through biblical literature, you realize that God has been consistent in the way in which he has responded in different historical periods, from Genesis to Revelation. He is not going to change in our time.

Let me give you an illustration of a monistic worldview. Suppose you had a bad sore throat and could no longer talk. In old fashion biblical terms (King James Version), you became "dumb," i.e. unable to talk. Now imagine yourself going to your family doctor. He does the usual routine of asking you to stick out your tongue while he gags you by pushing a wooden stick down your throat and tells you to say "Ah". After a few "Hum's" and "Just as I thought's" on his part, you are sent packing to the pharmacist (chemist) clutching a prescription with some incomprehensible scribbles. The pharmacist/chemist, who is 95% handwriting analysis expert and 5% chemist, says, "Ah, Mr. Kamau, you have a sore throat!" So far, so good. "Dr. Ochola says, 'Cast out one evil spirit!'" About that time, one begins to have doubts about the doctor's ability to diagnose.

We who have been born into the dualistic world of modernity or who are rapidly moving in that direction simply do not believe in the interference of the spirit world into our everyday lives. Spirits--good or evil--do not cause sore throats and the resulting inability to speak. Physical germs, which one can see with the aid of a microscope, cause sore throats. However, in the biblical world, we encounter a different understanding of reality. In Matthew 9 Jesus met a man whose throat was "sore": he could not talk. Do you remember what he did for that man? "While they were going out, a man who was demon-possessed and could not talk was brought to Jesus. And when the demon was driven out, the man who had been dumb spoke" (Matthew 9:32,33). For most moderns, the world of the Bible is a strange world. The world of the Bible is a monistic world in which the spirit aspect can be distinguished from the physical: Jesus knew the difference between forgiving sins (spirit aspect) and feeding the 5,000 (physical). However, the spirit aspect and physical aspect cannot be separated. They react with each other.

Furthermore, our problem is accentuated by the modern, secular world (dualistic world) of the West and the modernizing world where daily the radio, TV and newspapers portray a world ravaged by initiatives whose source is not God. They say that at least in some countries 20% of population may be wiped out either by cancer or by AIDS. They report physical storms that are completely devastating the coastal areas, nations are torn apart by ethnic tensions resulting in civil wars, terrorists attacks are placed at the very center of civilizations and it seems at times that we are on the verge of nuclear destruction. In our context, here is Kenya, every news item will mention corruption and how the system from judges, politicians and lawyers and even government connive to protect the corrupt people leaving the citizens vulnerable and without justice. This leaves us with the question "is what is accomplished on earth because of the sovereign initiative of God? Christians are seeking answers to this. One wonders is God acting!

## **IMAGE OF GOD IN HUMANS: Gen 1:26-28**

Animals and humans are not only good, but also "blessed". "God blessed them (the animals) and said, 'Be fruitful and increase in number...'" (1:22). In reference to humans, Genesis 1:28 reports that "God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.'" "Blessing", as we shall see, is not only foundational in creation but also in God's work with humans throughout history. Blessing is the way in which God continues his creative work. He blessed at creation and he continues to bless even to today. What does "blessing" and "blessed" mean in this context? In Genesis 1:22, 28 blessing is linked with "fruitfulness", i.e. with fertility. In Genesis 17:15 we read of barren (infertile) Sarai who is about to become fertile Sarah.

*"I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations."*

This is a case of fertility of the womb. In Genesis 26 in a time of famine (26:1) God blessed (26:3, 12) Isaac and the land became fertile:

*Isaac planted crops in that land and the same year reaped a hundredfold (biblical language for super abundance), because the LORD blessed him.*

Blessing is the communication of some concrete good. This is a short, working definition of blessing as used in these contexts. In other contexts, blessing may have a different meaning. We shall return to “blessing” in Genesis 12. God the creator is a fertility God. He provides fertility of the womb (e.g. Sarah above) and of the land (e.g. Isaac above). Israel was constantly tempted to seek the blessing of fertility from the other fertility gods, such as Baal and Anath, Astarth and Asherah.

Who are these “humans” whom God has blessed? The author of Genesis leaves us in no doubt about their identity. They are part of the family of God and therefore they are in the “image of God”: they are the children of God.

What does it mean to be in the image of God? Since the early church many views about the exact nature of the image of God have been put forward. A full discussion of these views would take us too far afield and not contribute directly to our concerns. As in all exegesis, context should be the key interpretative guide. Consider the following contextual clues.

### **First contextual clue about the image of God: humans are societal beings like God**

From the immediate context, we have the much-disputed phrase “Let us make man in our image.” Some have taken the “us” to refer to the Trinity. This view is not widely held today. Clines (1968:66), followed by Blocher (1984:84), argues that the “us” refers not to God and angels but to God and his Spirit. Karl Barth has argued that the statement “male and female he created them” points to a face-to-face relationship between male and female just as God has a face-to-face relationship in the Godhead, i.e. “let us”.

Furthermore, 1:27, “so God created man [=humankind i.e. male and female] in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” This shows that the image of God is found in both the male and female and probably the text is to be understood to mean that the image of God is only fully reflected in male and female as they come together in the family in a creative way (see also 5:1, 2).

Based on these two phrases, “let us...,” male, and female, we suggest that one aspect of the image of God is that it is a societal. The image of God in humans is “societal” because God is a “society”--God and Spirit, or as we know from later revelation Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God has always been a “society,” and we his creatures are societal beings (cf. Wright, 1983:104), this is part of the family resemblance. We are violating the image of God when we exist in radical isolation from one another, when we emphasize individualism. For those raised in modernity the individual has become the center of planning rather than the extended family unit or in some cases even the family. Therefore, we moderns have a difficult time understanding the image of God in societal terms.

Brueggemann (1982:34) observes, “None is the full image of God alone. Only in community of humankind is God reflected. God is, according to this bold affirmation, not mirrored as an individual but as a community.”

For individualistic moderns the implications of the word “society” in reference to the image of God can bring about for us a Copernican revolution. The intention of God for humans does not revolve around the individual any more than the sun revolves around the earth. Instead, God’s concern is for society around which the individual revolves. To read the Bible through glasses coated with an individualistic perspective is surely a false step toward finding the meaning of the ancient text.

Another result from reflection upon the societal nature of the image of God is that God, at the giving of the Law at Sinai, forbade Israel to employ any physical image to represent himself because all such images are a distortion, a misrepresentation (Ex. 20:4; Deut. 5:8). Idols would not convey to those outside of Israel the true character of God. The character of God, the image and likeness of God, are to be displayed by humans in societal relations. By observing humans in societal relations, one knows that their creator is societal. He is not some supreme being who exists in splendid isolation. If we are anywhere near the truth of the matter in the assertion that God manifests his character to the world through the social behavior of his people, the implications for the task of the people of God, at home and in cross-cultural contexts, are staggering. The “Lone Ranger” approach to evangelism can only be asserted if revelation of the character of God is limited to verbal proclamation.

### **Second contextual clue about the image of God: humans are creative beings just like God**

The second clue, which the context provides concerning the image of God is found in verse 28 (see also vs 26). “God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish...the birds...the living creatures.’” In the context of Genesis 1 and 2, this fruitfulness, this creativity, is manifest in the fertility. Fertility is found in the womb with the creation of children and in the fertility of the environment with the ruling the earth.

#### **i. Fertility of the womb--be fruitful and multiply**

God has blessed humans with the concrete good of fertility. Just as God is a “creative society,” so humans, namely males and females as they come together in the family, form a creative society.

Fundamental to the character of God is that he is creative. He created the world (Genesis 2:1). Males and females have creative powers, which reach their zenith in the creation of another human being. Every new parent stands in amazement at the baby "we made" just as God was satisfied with his creation of humans pronouncing them "very good", as we shall see in Genesis 2. He creates us in his own image and likeness. He makes us co-creators with him. Of course, the animals also share in the ability to be fruitful and multiply (1:22). But they do not "rule". To this we now turn.

## ii. Fertility of the environment--rule over fish, birds, livestock, earth

Second, creativity involves the ability and responsibility of humans to care for the earth. The blessing of procreation is linked with the care of creation: "He blessed them...be fruitful...rule over..." God intended that humans should multiply so that they might care, "rule over", for the whole earth.

For this reason, some have spoken of humankind as God's ambassador or even king on earth. Humans represent God on earth. Humans are to shepherd the animals, and in this, they reflect the Great Shepherd. In Genesis 2:19ff, Adam named the animals. This is part of the caring, and shepherding work of humans that reflects the image of God. The goal of this earth tending was to sustain life, especially human life, with food (Genesis 1:30).

What is not discussed here is humans ruling over other humans. We know that such a ruling over humans does come after the sin of Adam and Eve. We shall keep our eyes open as we move through the story and asking of ruling of humans by humans. One can guess that a desired quality in such ruling is justice.

## iii. Increase and multiply a "programmatic text": Gen 1:28

It appears that "be fruitful and multiply" (1:28) is programmatic given that 1) it comes at this very strategic point in the text and 2) it is often repeated in Genesis (8:17; 9:1,7; 17:20; 35:11; 47:27; 48:4; cf 17:6; 28:3; 41:52; ) and later in various parts of Scripture (Ex 1:7; Lev 26:9; Ps 105:24; Jer 3:16; 23:3; Ezek. 36:11). 3) the intent of the fruitfulness and multiplication is the formation of society or societies who will rule over the earth. The programmatic text of Genesis 12:2, 3, "I will make you a great nation" is the same programmatic text for the Pentateuch and indeed for the whole Bible. How then might Gen 1:28 and Gen 12:2, 3 be related to each other? Surely, the "great nation" is a result of being fruitful and multiplying. So that promise to Abraham to make him a great nation is not something different from what God originally commanded, i.e. to be fruitful and multiply. See Genesis 17:1-6; 35:11 where the promise to Abraham is repeated and expanded and the language of 1:28 is taken up into the Abrahamic promise:

*Gen 17:1 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. 2 I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers." 3 Abram fell face down, and God said to him, 4 "As for me, this is my covenant with you. You will be the father of many nations. 5 No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. 6 I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you."*<sup>2</sup>

*Gen 35:11 And God said to him, "I am God Almighty; be fruitful and increase in number. A nation and a community of nations will come from you, and kings will come from your body."*

In sum, we can say that God's intention in creating humans and the earth they live upon is to create humans to live in a society, which will be fruitful and multiply (creativity) and rule the earth (creativity). On in short, God created on earth humans as a creative society.

Starting with 1:28 as programmatic and understanding that text as speaking about building a society through fruitfulness and multiplying; and then noting that this blessing of fruitfulness and multiplication is taken up the words to Noah (8:17; 9:1, 6) and in the promise to Abraham (17:3,7; 35:11) shows that God's program does not begin with Genesis 12 but with Genesis 1 and 2.

## PROVISIONS FOR THE WELL BEING OF HUMANKIND: 2:8-17

In the text of Genesis 2:8-25 God made four major provisions for the welfare of humans. We shall look briefly at three of them (2:8-17) under this heading and reserve the fourth (2:18-25) for its own heading because it is of greatest importance.

### The garden, the environment: 2:8-14

"Now the LORD God planted a garden in the east, in Eden." Some may read "garden" as a vegetable garden. The English may think of a well-manicured ornamental lawn. Perhaps both are true of the "garden of Eden" for the garden had trees that were

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<sup>2</sup> A similar word is spoken about Ishmael. Gen 17:20 "And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation."

“good for food” and were also “pleasing to the eye” (2:9). Furthermore, the word “Eden” probably is to be associated with the idea of something that was a “pleasure, delight”. In part, the garden was delightful because it was well watered. Those who have lived in the arid Middle East know that water is a very precious resource. Genesis mentions four rivers that watered the garden. However, this garden was not intended to exist on its own. It must be kept.

### **Humans’ task: tending the garden: 2:15**

Genesis 2:5 informs the reader that there was “no man to work the ground.” Therefore, “The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it” (2:15). Adam was a gardener, a farmer. Most people living in the northern hemisphere are not farmers and many reading this who live in the southern hemisphere will have to a large extent lost their farming roots, although 80% of Kenyan population is still rural. Whatever be our geographical location, we still have the responsibility of caring for the earth (ecology) and making it fruitful.

Furthermore, one needs to note that the intention of the Creator from the beginning was that humans should work in order to sustain themselves. God himself worked in creation (Gen 2:2 “God had finished the work...”).

Work is not a part of a curse or the result of sin. As already observed in scene one (Gen 1), work, “ruling”, is part of the image of God. Humans have a responsibility to maintain the good environment. Do they have other responsibilities? Yes. They are also responsible to God.

### **Responsibility to God: 2:16, 17**

In reference to the garden, God told Adam that he had “permission” to eat from any of the trees except the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (prohibition). Brueggemann (1982:46) observes that the story of Genesis 2 is about “vocation, permission and prohibition.” God does not wish to keep humans in ignorance by prohibiting the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Rather he desired that humans would trust him for knowledge. The reader of Genesis will already begin to understand that humans are dependent creatures. They are dependent upon the environment for food. They are dependent upon God for a knowledge of good and evil. In addition, with the creation of woman, the reader discovers that man and woman are dependent upon each other to attain the “good”: man without woman is in a situation, which God declares, to be “not good” (2:18).

### **Society—The climax of Creation: 2:18-24**

We come now to the fourth provision made by God for the welfare of man. Creation seems complete -- man has a delightful garden in which to live, he has animals to name and tend and a task, which gives meaning and purpose to life. Man has God to whom he is responsible. To put this crudely, man has a beautiful garden, a good job, and best of all he is right with God. What more could he ask for? But the reader who has read the repetitious “it was good” which comes at the end of each creative day (1:3,10,12,18,21,25, cf. 31) is stunned by the “it is not good...(2:18).” In Genesis chapter one all was “good”. However, in Genesis chapter two we are shown that at one stage in the creative process not all was good. “It is not good for man to be alone (2:18).” This statement flies in the face of much of the monastic (not to be confused with monistic) spirituality of Western Christianity, not to mention the Western secular motif of aloneness as an increasingly preferred lifestyle. For those who have drunk deeply at the well of dualism, the idea that a spiritual person needs a physical companion of the opposite sex to attain the “good” is unthinkable. For those who have drunk deeply at the well of individualism, the idea that living by oneself is anything other than good is also unthinkable. Genesis two cuts across one of the most widespread and passionately held interpretations of life in the modern and modernizing world. The “good” or the “good life” cannot be attained in isolation.

Put positively, the apex of creation is society. From the biblical point of view, Adam and Eve were society. Yes, a very, very small society; but nonetheless a society. The narration of creation comes to the climax with the creation of woman, who is complementary to man. Woman is not a man.

God’s goal in creation was to place humans on earth in a relation of dependence upon the environment, upon himself and upon each other. Humans are intended to be dependent social beings, not independent individualistic souls.

## **THE WORLD GOD INTENDED AND INTENDS: CREATION IS PROGRAMMATIC**

From the discussion above “God created a blessed society on earth: the world God intended”, is not just in the past tense (created, intended) but is indeed in the present tense as well (intends). What God intended is what he also intends. What he created, he sustains. The creation of a world in which humans multiply and rule over the earth as male and female climaxes in a society which is open, just, “naked”. A society in which humans are right with each other, with God and with the environment.

In this sense we need to say that not just Gen 1:28 (“be fruitful and multiply ... and rule”) is programmatic but the whole of Genesis 1,2 with its climax in a just society is programmatic and remains so for the whole of the story. It is in light of this that

God makes covenants first with Noah and then most importantly with Abraham and later with Moses, David and finally a new covenant. These covenants are all subservient to God's intention to create on earth a people for himself and to be their God and they his people. A people with just relations to each other, with God and with the earth.

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