DISCIPLINE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT: THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE PRIMEVAL HISTORY, GENESIS 1-11

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Abstract: In the chapters of our study we see that humankind is placed in an environment which makes it possible for it to live in relationship with God. We see humankind as unique in the whole of creation. The relationship in which the creator and the human creature live is a relationship in which the human creature is under obligation to the creator. The human creature is granted freedom of decision and choice in the environment, but the freedom is set within limits; the authority of the creator transcends it. The primeval story does not overlook the difficulty embedded in the exercise of discipline. Nevertheless it affirms that in spite of the difficulty adherence to it bears positive and life-enhancing results. Anything other than that destroys life with the creator.

Introduction

We may begin our study of the Old Testament perspective on discipline by pointing out the fact that the term discipline relates to human beings and direct presupposes human activity and behaviour and conduct. It draws attention to a situation of human life in which certain conditions are in place for a person or people to develop and grow along a certain direction or along a certain line which will enable life to correspond to the demands of the situation in which interactions, activities and behaviours must take place. Response or responses to the demands of the situation determine the receptions (positive or negative) which the responses encounter. With the broad picture of the term in view, we turn to the Old Testament to consider its views on discipline. For this paper we restrict ourselves to the Primeval History recorded in Genesis 1-11.

The creation of humanity

The passages that come into question are Gen. 1:26-27 and Gen.2:7. The first passage strongly affirms that it was a solemn divine decision that mankind was created. Mankind is thus made to stand out prominently

among the rest of creations,[1] and this suggests its uniqueness. To this is added the affirmation that human beings are by nature closer to God than any other object of creation. It is said of them that God created them in his own image and likeness. Whatever this can be perceived to mean it cannot be denied that we have before us a clear affirmation that 'the creator created a creature that corresponds to him, to whom he can speak, and who listens to him.'[2] Mankind is created to be God's counterpart and also that something eventful can take place between creator and creature.[3] In vv28 and 29, God speaks directly to the human creatures. This means that mankind has a special, speech-involving relation with the creator. God has committed himself peculiarly to humanity through speech, and humanity has been granted freedom of response.[4] A situation has thus been created for humanity to live in relationship with the creator. The second passage, Gen. 2:7 talks of the creation of human creature in a very brief compass, in a single verse. What the writer appears to be emphasizing and setting before our eyes are first, the divine creative act that went into play in a special way in the creation of humankind, and secondly, that there is a unique relationship between God and his human creature.

It is clear that unlike other creatures, the human creature is the only living creature that receives the breadth of God directly.[5] We see that in Gen. 1:26-28 and Gen 2:7, the creation of humanity is presented as an inexplicable, indescribable and wonderful process.[6] It is a mysterious primeval event, which is inaccessible to our understanding. It stands humanity out very prominently among the rest of creation. Its creation and its relation with the creator is unique. Its endowed status in the whole of creation sets it next only to the creator. And in this, we see the reason behind the special treatment, which is given to it.

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[1] Cf. Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, SPCK, 1984, pp. 144, 157.
[2] Cf. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/1,* pp 183-187; Westermann, ibid, p. 157
[3] Cf. Westermann, ibid, p. 159; but for a contrary view cf G.J. Wenham, Genesis 1-15, *Word Book,* Waco, 1987, p. 31.
[4] Cf. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis.* John Knox, Atlanta, 1982, p. 31.
[5] Cf. Wenham, ibid, p. 61.
[6] Cf. Westermann, ibid, p. 205.

The relationship between God and humanity

Humanity is granted authority to rule the world on God's behalf. By means of its special creation and endowment, humanity is God's counterpart, and having been granted capacity to correspond to God, humanity can act as God's representative over the rest of creation and treat it in the same way as God created it.[7] In the exercise of its authority to rule and subdue creation, however, humanity is to act responsibly and in full consciousness of the supreme authority of the creator and its accountability to him. All this is clearly set for forth in Gen.1:26-28 and 2:15. Gen 2:15 spells out a little more clearly what human dominion of creation entails. A strong element of service is embedded in the Hebrew verb, which is translated 'till.'[8] It basically means 'to serve' and this basic meaning in the passage should not be lost to us, otherwise its relation to the next verb in the passage which is translated 'keep'[9] will not be seen. That verb also basically means 'to watch, to guard.' Both verbs are used in the passage to strongly bring home to humanity that its authority over the rest of creation must be seen as authority to be exercised in the spirit of service, watchfulness and preservation. Human existence is presented as existence, which is rooted in and charged with occupation and work. In this connection it has been observed, and correctly so, that 'work is regarded here as an essential part of human existence. Life without work would not be worthy of human beings. God-giving human existence follows a pattern of duty'.[10] And it is intended for mankind to reflect in its life creator's own activity which manifests itself in work. Human work is thus seen as duty and obligation to the creator. This directly implies a relationship between the creator and his human creature, a relationship which is charged with a life force which binds the human creature to the creator and makes its existence through the exercise of its obligation to the creator meaningful. The relationship is not one of equality. Verse 15 is submitted in a way which clearly indicates a charge from a superior to a subordinate. The human creature is therefore pictured as under obligation to the creator in the context of the relationship and situation created for both to interact in. Verse 16, however, stipulates the condition which should bind the human creature in the context of the relationship. Verse 16a carries the verb which has been translated "command" in connection with the release of trees of

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[7] Cf. Wenham, ibid, p. 33

[8] Cf. TWAT V, Kohlhammer, Stuttgart, 1986, p. 985; Wenham, ibid; p. 67.

[9] Cf. TWAT VIII, Kohlhammer, Stuttgart, 1994, p. 281.

[10] Cf. Westermann, ibid, p. 220.

the garden to the human creature for food.[11] All the tress of the garden except one is given to the human creature to feed on. The verb with its imperative sense is used apparently to picture the creator as Lord and benefactor. All the trees of the garden came and he does so by the authority which he alone wields.[12]

Accompanying the authoritative command is the freedom which it grants to the human creature. The creator's divine authority has been presented in no uncertain terms. But that is not meant to be coercive force against the human creature is also made clear. But the relationship created for both to interact and respond to each other in it requires that the human creature acknowledges that in spite of it the freedom granted to, it the one who granted the freedom wields authority that transcends the bestowed freedom. make this abundantly clear to the human creature, the command is To extended to convey the consequence of the breach of commitment in the relationship. A limit is set to the freedom of the human creature by means of a prohibition, which is imposed in connection with a particular tree. Thus in v.17, the freedom of the human creature is, as it were, placed in a certain situation where enlargement of human potential is not prevented but rather calls for consideration as to whether enlargement of potential in the direction in mind will let the interaction with the creator continue in the way it is intended to go. We may therefore see v.17 as intended to help the human creature for both the creator and the creature. One is inclined to subscribe to Westermann's position that the statement in v.17 which says that 'in the day that you eat of it you shall die' 'is not in fact a threat of death, but rather the clear expression of the limit which is the necessary accompaniment of the freedom entrusted to humanity in the command. To say no to God- and this is what freedom allows- is ultimately to say no to life, for life comes from God'[13]
One cannot deny that all that has been studied so far points to the fact that for life to be enduringly meaningful there is the need for community and that within the community duty and obligation are indispensable, and that freedom which is the life-force of interaction must be exercised in full awareness and recognition of the sovereignty of the creator who by his

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[11] Cf. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, Westminster, Philadelphia, 1961, p. 78.
[12] The verb is used in the majority of cases with God or Yahweh as the subject, signifying his authority and power. Cf. TWAT VI, Kohlhammer, Stuttgart, 1989, pp. 936-959.
[13] Cf. Westermann, ibid., p. 224.

authority has granted the freedom but at the same time has set it within limits to enable human potential to be enlarged in the direction that corresponds to the will of the creator. It has thus been demonstrated to us that humanity has been created with the capacity to exercise discipline in the environment created for it within which the creator himself condescends to let his presence be felt to direct and control creation and humanity in ways that are beneficial to both as their respective natures require. We will see in what follows the primeval historian's testimony to humanity's response to the relationship which the creator has been presented as having created for them to interact.

God's command and human freedom of choice

In the first five verses of chapter three, humanity is presented as having full knowledge and understanding of the command of God to it stated in Gen. 2:17. Humanity is also presented as fully aware of having in itself the power of decision and choice. Our statement that humanity has full knowledge and understanding of the command imposed on it does not necessarily mean that humanity has full comprehension of the command. Orders that are given to be carried out are understood, but they are not comprehended. The non-comprehension is meant to evoke respect, reverence and obedience, elements which are vital in relationship. The prohibition in v.17 is God's word. It is a command whose implications only the one who issues it has the full grasp of. But God who issues it issues it in full awareness of the benefit its execution by the one to whom it is issued will bring to such a one. The latter's understanding of the command does not bring him comprehension of the command.

Obedience to the one who gives the command is what the command demands.[14] It is he who bears authority, authority which demands unqualified obedience.[15] The prohibition does not, however, undermine or override the freedom of decision and choice granted in the relationship. If That were the case, humanity could not have had the courage, confidence and the openness with which it enters into conversation. Whatever the primeval historian seeks to communicate through the serpent imagery,[16] it

[14] Cf. von Rad, ibid, p. 78.

[15] Cf. Brueggemann, ibid, p. 46.

[16] On diverse understandings of the serpent cf. von Rad, ibid, p. 85; Bruce Vawter, On Genesis, *A New Reading,* Douldeday, New Yourk, 1977, pp. 82-

is clear that the Serpent is an indication that humanity is endowed with the capacity to learn through the environment around it and let whatever it learns inform the decisions and choices it makes. The environment around it is pictured as dynamic and as having capacity to address humanity in ways which are understandable to humanity. To the peculiar address humanity is able to respond and make use of it as it deems fit. Verse 6 testifies to this. The verse is a clear testimony of the primeval historian to the fact that humanity is endowed with potentialities, sensitivities and urges, which are vital for its full growth and maturity. These may be used in obedience to the authority of the creator, which ensures enlargement in the direction of the creator or in breach of the bond of relationship established between the creator and the human creature which vitiates the spirit of community between the creator and humanity.

The close and passionate 'study' of the tree which is pictured in the verse leaves us in no doubt of what humanity is made of and is capable of. The verse, however, does not stand in isolation from the prohibition made earlier by the creator. The use of what humanity is made of therefore demands one of two choices, namely acting in response to the authority behind the prohibition, or acting in response to the voice from within. The result of the action that was taken is presented to bring home to the reader that to have one's way and act accordingly to it leads to fearful and regrettable consequences, but to put one's freedom of action in check in response to the authority community with the creator. By means of all this attention is drawn to discipline that is issued and is willingly accepted and lived by. By implication the writer admits the difficulty of discipline but does not overlook the positive fruits which adherence to it may produce.

The necessity of discipline

A further presentation of discipline as a constituent of human life and existence from the very origins of creation is encountered in Gen. 4. The chapter largely deals with fratricide and its consequences. We are made aware that they are possible where there is human community. It is first of all affirmed in the chapter that the creation of the human race in terms of procreation is an act in which both the creator and the human creature are involved. In 4:1b we are made to see that in spite of human disobedience (ch. 3) the consciousness of the presence of the divine creator in the life of

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83. Warther Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology in Outline*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1978, pp. 169-170; Westermann, ibid, pp. 237-239.

the human creature was not lost to the human creature. It had been stated that 4:1b is 'a cry of triumph of praise' uttered to acknowledge that the creator with his blessing has bestowed a gift or power of fertility on humanity.[17] The creator's relationship with humanity is joyfully realised as still there for humanity. Apparently humanity sees that it is better to live under the creator's authority than to seek to live in freedom that is a bed-fellow of disobedience.

Cain and Abel grow with the sense of the creator's presence and authority and pursue their respective occupations conscious of the creator's blessing on life. Their sacrificial worship is thus a natural acknowledgment of the fact that 'there is a power at work in the produce as it comes to fruition.'[18] Their sacrifice is therefore a genuine demonstration of their respect for the creator whose blessing they see as having accompanied them in their occupations. The brothers therefore act appropriately and bring their best to honour the creator.[19] The relationship between the creator and the human creature is thereby recognised and the creator's authority acknowledged.

The acceptance of the sacrifice of each of the brothers, however, is not a matter for the brothers to decide. They do not determine the operation of the authority of the creator in their relationship with him. The rejection of Cain's sacrifice is not explained and is inexplicable. The creator is free to act in any direction. Whether it is correct to describe the decision of the creator as the result of 'capricious freedom'[20] is difficult to say. The creator's authority is his sovereign right and its use until now and in what follows indicate that the creator's authority or sovereignty operates in his relationship with the human creature in ways that are meant to lead the human creature into maturity. Cain's resentment and the creator's reaction to it make it difficult for us to see the creator as operating his sovereign authority in capricious freedom.

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[17] On the supposed difficulty of the half-verse and attempts to solve it cf., Westermann, ibid, pp. 290-292; Wenham, ibid, pp. 101-102.
[18] Cf. Westermann, ibid, p. 295.
[19] Cf. Brueggemann, ibid, p. 56; Westermann, ibid, pp. 296-297.
[20] Cf. Brueggemann, ibid, p. 56.

When Cain becomes aware of the disregard of his sacrifice he wakes up to see a potential in himself. The creator confirms to him the reality of the potential by describing to him what it has made Cain look like. The creator, however, makes him aware that there is another potential in him which he can use to check the one now raging in him. The creator thus intervenes to open, as it were, avenues for Cain to control himself to eliminate the possible negative result of the activation of the first potential. The first potential breeds alienation as a result of its power to produce envy, but the second potential had power to suppress the effect of the first and maintain community relationship. Thus v. 7 makes it clear that it all depends on Cain. He has power to put himself under control[21] and prevent the possible negative consequence of activating the first potential. Cain is strongly urged to see the positive effect of self-control and take the path of discipline, for it is the only means to the preservation of life and community.[22]

In the context of v. 17-26 another element of discipline is brought to our notice. The passage is generally taken as setting forth the beginnings of civilization: urbanization and the development of husbandry, music and metal working. It is here made clear that culture is necessary and indispensable for existence. However, its development and employment must proceed with full consciousness of the sacredness of the object it is intended to serve, namely, life (v. 10). Life is not placed under human control (v.9). Any human development must therefore see itself as in the service of human life and meant to preserve community relationships. In the song of Lamech (vv. 23-24), Lamech is presented as a human character who employs arts and culture in disregard of control. The consequence is the destruction of human life, and the creation of fear and anxiety in community relationships.[23] Lamech is apparently not unaware of the rightness of self-control for the good of the community. He rather chooses the path of indiscipline, and he does so by a wrongful employment of arts and culture, having convinced himself that the voice of self-assertion must

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[21] Brueggemann thinks otherwise: there is 'no appeal for self-control' here, he says. It is all because of his making the story rest on 'the unexplained arbitrariness of God who evoked the crisis,' ibid, p. 61.

[22] For views on the textual nature of vv. 6-7 and various proposed interpretations of the verses cf. Westermann, ibid, pp. 298-300, Wenham, ibid, pp. 104-106.

[23] Cf. Brueggemann, ibid, p. 71.

be obeyed rather than the mystery of self to preserve life and community. Discipline is thus seen in the context of the passage as a necessary containment of self for the maintenance and integrity of community and for the acknowledgement of life as sacred and under the sole control of the divine creator.

The pull of desire and humanity's rebellion toward God

The element of desire which is first noticed in chapter three (v.6) is taken up again in 6:1-4 and 11:1-9. In all of them it is the driving force of human nature which fights against discipline and bursts the bounds set for the engagement of human freedom. As has been correctly noticed, the subject of both passages is humanity; they deal with humanity fallen victim to desire.[24] The first passage, that is 6:1-4, is undoubtedly presented against the background of the normal marriage practice: men take wives for themselves and have children with them. What is here peculiar is that the marriage is not one that happens within a human group. It is rather a marriage between unearthly and earthly beings. The narrative aims at drawing attention to this strange and unusual union between two groups which are not meant to belong to each other, and marriage is not intended to take place between them. Like humans the desire of beauty draws the unearthly beings to the earthly women. Apparently the humans should not have permitted the union, because both the humans and the non-humans belong to entirely different levels of existence. Each of the two groups is placed within bounds which must not be overstepped. But it is the driving force of desire which leads to the bursting of the bounds. As we said earlier on, the narrative is mainly concerned with human phenomenon. The human is a phenomenon which is created to be within certain bounds within which it is to live in responsibility toward the divine creator.[25] The creator has set limits to humans, but human desire gets the upper hand of humans and leads humans to overstep the bounds of their existence and responsibility. The intervention of God and the punishment of humans leave us in no doubt that the eye of the narrative is set on humans and their existence within the limits set for them and the responsibility they must bear within the limits in relationship with their creator. The humans are presented as breaking the bond of discipline which links them to the

[24] Cf. Westermann, ibid, pp. 365-371, 554-557; Brueggemann, ibid, pp. 70-73, 97-101.

[25] Cf. Brueggemann, ibid, p. 71

creator. This is because humans strive after divinity and 'attempt to seize the mystery of life for their own.'[26]

In 11:1-9 the driving force of desire is again shown as exercising mastery over humans by setting them on fire to burst the bounds of life under the creator. Humans strive to free themselves from the limitations of created existence. They have been overcome by 'the will to greatness' to something 'over and above.'[27] The purpose of the creator for the humans is felt to be an unbearable restriction. There is a basic relationship between Gen. 4:17-24 and Gen. 9:1-11. The basic relationship is seen in the fact of arts and culture. Humans develop arts and culture with the desire to burst created limits. It appears, however, that in 4:17ff the main motif of the human creation of arts and culture is security and self-assertiveness which has no respect for general human life and no sense of reverence for the divine source of life. This overweening self-assertiveness of humanity is carried far beyond limits in 11:1-9. Here the human aspiration is not just to build a city, but in addition to that to 'build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens,' and 'make a name for ourselves' (v.4). Human desire is driven to heights of ambition which rejects any acknowledgment that humanity is a creature standing before the creator. The sense of self-control which is a companion of discipline is thrown overboard and discipline is trampled upon.

The attempt of humans to work against the feared possibility of being scattered far and wide over the face of the earth is a desire for unity which has no respect even for the creator. It is therefore a collective action against anything and against the creator in the interest of human preservation and existence without the creator. Community must be one in which authority and sovereignty is just human, serving human desire and human self-exaltation.[28] The unity which humans are striving for is one that will create for humanity complete emancipation which knows no restrictions and no discipline which community relationship with the divine creator necessarily demands.[29]

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[26] Cf. Brueggemann, ibid, p. 72
[27] Cf. Westermann, ibid, p. 546.
[28] Cf. Brueggemann, ibid, p. 100
[29] Cf. Westermann, ibid, p. 556

Conclusion

We see, therefore, in the apt words of Claus Westermann, that the primeval events of Genesis 1-11 presents something which is an essential element in the idea of the relationship of humans to God and their created state: "humans are to remain within the limits assigned to them. Here alone can their existence find fulfilment. If people overstep them they put heir existence in danger".[30] An ambitious aspiration and unrestricted self-assertion reject the sovereignty of the creator and life under discipline which is of the essence of the community relationship which must exist between humanity and its divine creator.

[30] Cf. Westermann, ibid, p. 554.