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THE WORD, PROPHECY, TIME, BLESSING: A THEMATIC ITINERARY THROUGH GENESIS 1

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Abstract: *The article proposes a thematic reading of the first chapter of Genesis, through the analysis of three words: Word, Time and Blessing. The aim is to show how the narrative, located in the period of the Babylonian exile, was not intended to offer a nostalgic reading of the origins, but to offer meaning to the present, a complex present, difficult but open to God's surprises. Because of this dynamism, the text also speaks to our contemporaneity, often steeped in sadness and lack of meaning, offering our generation the image of the divine dream of a world governed by the gentleness of the 'word.'*

Key Words: Blessing; Gen. 1; Shabbat; Time; Word.

Gen. 1:1–2:4a in its Historical Context

The famous poem on creation that opens the book of Genesis, and consequently the whole of Scripture, is too rich and too dense not to merit further study. For this reason, we shall reflect on some major themes which, proposed in Gen. 1:1–2:4a, mark the whole Bible and are of principal importance for the believer today, whether Jew or Christian. In this way, we hope to be able to present how this extraordinary text does not concern an absolutely remote and unattainable past but rather reveals God's plan for creation that still retains all its relevance for humanity today.[1] We will explore particularly the theme of creation by analysing: the Word, the dimension of time and thus the prophetic aspect of Gen. 1, and finally the goodness/beauty of creation. Thus after studying Gen. 1 in the light of exegetical commentaries, the reader can return to some themes that not only constitute the soul of this text but also of the whole of Scripture.[2]

[1] Cf. E. Bianchi, *Adamo, dove sei? Exegetical-spiritual commentary on chapters 1-11 of the book of Genesis* (Magnano, BI: Qiqajon, 1994); R. W. L. Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis* (Old Testament Theology; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[2] See, D.M. Carr, *The Formation of Genesis 1–11: Biblical and Other Precursors* (Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); R. Hendel, *The Text of Genesis 1–11: Textual Studies and Critical Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); A. Wénin (ed.), *Studies in the Book of Genesis. Literature, Redaction and History* (BETL 155; Leuven: Peeters, 2001).

It is important to underline that the first chapter of Genesis is one of the most significant passages of the 'priestly' tradition that revolves around Israel's exile in Babylon.[3] Therefore, we must never forget that Gen. 1 is intended, in the light of this historical context, to be a clear message of hope and encouragement for the Israelites in exile; in the face of the gods of Babylon. The God of Israel proposes himself as the only Creator of the world and thus as the only Saviour of his people. If the God of Israel is the only God, then there is no reason to abandon him, not even in the face of the 'allurement' of the powerful gods of Babylon.

This text, in other words, does not come into being as a 'window' opened on a 'remote' past or as an attempt to make historical the moment of origins which, as such, eludes all human investigation. Gen. 1 is rather an attempt, made in the light of faith, to discover how the word of God produces its effect here and now, in the present, even when it seems to come from such a distant past. In this way, the exiled in Babylon were able to rediscover their hope and transmit it to future generations to the present day; their faith in the meaning of created reality and human's place in the world before the one Creator God.

"And God Said:" The Theme of the Word

God creates through his Word: "And God said, 'Let there be light;' and there was light" (1:3). From the very beginning of the text, creation appears as the work of God's Word; "in the beginning," therefore, there was the Word. The previous analysis of the text has shown us that in describing every work that God has done, the poet follows a rather strict pattern: God commands, and his command is punctually executed. God's word is thus presented to us as a creative and effective word: "He speaks, and everything exists" (cf. Ps 33:9). To state that God speaks requires not to think of a God who communicates truths to be believed or precepts to be faithfully observed,

[3] D. Carr, *Reading the Fractures of Genesis. Historical and Literary Approaches* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996); C.A. Evans, J.N. Lohr and D.L. Petersen, *The Book of Genesis: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation* (VTS 152; Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2012).

but first and foremost to *listen* to a God who *acts in history* at the very moment he communicates his word.

What is more, if God calls things into being with his word, it is possible to speak of a true 'vocation of creation.' What exists *is* precisely because God has called it into existence. The chaos of origins is conquered and ordered by the word of God who assigns to every existing reality its proper place in the world.

The syntagm 'and God said' resounds ten times in Gen. 1:1-2:4a,[4] seven times for the first seven works of creation and three times for humans, for whom a 'special' word from God is reserved. The choice of the number ten is by no means marginal, as the ancient Hebrew commentators already noted: "the world was created with ten words."[5] The priestly author who composed this chapter probably intended to establish a link with the ten words spoken by the Lord on Sinai (cf. Exod. 20:1-17 and 34:28). By creating this link, the text of Gen. 1 places a very close relationship between creation and covenant. God already speaks in creation, just as he will later speak, again in ten words, to the Israelites on Mount Sinai after their exit from the "house of slavery" of Egypt, when he concludes a covenant with them, sealing it with the gift of the Law (cf. Exod. 24:1-11).

Creation, in other words, is already an act of salvation of God, not simply a prelude to a history that will unfold elsewhere and in other directions. This idea was well understood by the authors of the New Testament. And it is no coincidence that the Gospel of John places at the beginning of everything that same Word of God who became flesh and history: "In the beginning was the Logos, the Word" (cf. John 1:1). That 'word' which is Christ himself does not fall into history after creation but precedes creation itself: "All things were made through him" (John 1:2).

The reflection on creation mediated by the word does not end here: the first word uttered by God emerges in fact from the silence of primordial chaos (cf. Gen. 1:2). Let us recall how the text of Gen. 1 does not presuppose creation from nothing, but the ordering of chaos

[4] Cf. Gen. 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26, 28, 29. In verses 26, 28, 29 the formula concerns the creation of humans.
[5] *Pirqé Abôt* V,1.

by God. There is thus a close relationship between word and silence; one reality recalls the other but does not annul it altogether. Thus, the Word of God sets a limit to the darkness and chaos of the origins, the chaos that would nevertheless always want to re-emerge, where this word is no longer pronounced, heard, or accepted. Darkness, though not created by God, exists. The great contemporary Jewish thinker Neher writes a stimulating reflection on the subject:

> Nothingness has not entirely disappeared before the word. It has been compressed and contained by it within the lower strata of creation, where it slumbers ready to resurrect at the slightest ineptitude of a word that has not managed to get rid of it completely, ready also to respond to the call of Being should the latter suddenly remember its original kinship with Nothingness.[6]

The word thus recalls silence; and being recalls nothingness. The light is separated from darkness, but the darkness has not entirely disappeared; there is the word, but there is also the possibility of the absence of the word.

On the other hand, the first page of Genesis begins a reflection on the creative word of God that will develop throughout the whole of Scripture and that we can only evoke in this context; we need only be reminded of two famous texts, Isa. 55:10-11 (on the fruitfulness of the Word) and Wisd. 9:1: "God of the fathers and Lord of mercy, who created all things by your word..." The moment God speaks, nothingness stops, and the world comes to life. The Second Vatican Council (cf. DV, 2)[7] reminded us of this dynamic conception of the word of God; God speaks and acts; his speaking is not so much communicating truths to be believed or practised, but rather creating life and relationships, initiating dialogue. And, in fact, the text of Gen. 1:28, 29 shows us a God who speaks to human beings.

God Speaks to Humans

In the first seven works of creation, the word of God is so absolute and extraordinarily powerful that it does not seem to be addressed to

[6] A. Neher, *L'esilio della parola* (Genova: Marietti 1997), 74; cf. E. Grypeou and H. Spurling eds., *The Book of Genesis in Late Antiquity: Encounters between Jewish and Christian Exegesis* (Jewish and Christian Perspectives, 24; Leiden: Brill: 2013).
[7] Vatican II, "Dei Verbum," in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents* (Northport, NY: Costello, 1987[8]), I: 750-765.

anyone. God 'speaks,' we do not know to whom, and everything exists. However, from Gen. 1:28 onwards, the word of God is suddenly addressed to a very specific creature who appears on the scene: the human being, created as the image and likeness of God. There is now a consensus on this expression among scholars; "image and likeness" (1:26) is a 'functional concept' and thus serves to express the relationship that humanity has with the world and other co-humans.

As the image and likeness of God, they act in the world as a sign of the divine presence and as the executors of his kingly power (cf. the verb 'to dominate' in v. 28). In other words, man and woman are entrusted with the responsibility of making the world grow and transform it into a habitable home for all, according to God's plan. They are thus the image and likeness of God insofar as they care for the world and make it grow according to the divine plan. Any idea of exploitation and uncontrolled dominion over the world is clearly ruled out.[8]

There is one more aspect relating to the creation of human beings as the image and likeness of God, linked precisely to the theme of 'speech.' Twice (1:28 and 1:29) God speaks to the newly created mankind, first to give them blessing and fruitfulness, then to give them every green herb for food. The human being, therefore, appears in creation as a partner of God, as a being able to dialogue with God face to face, to listen to his word, to take on the task of being his image: "And God blessed them and said to them..." (Gen. 1:28). The word addressed by God to the human being is the germ of a dialogue barely sketched out (humans, in fact, do not respond) but which will develop throughout the whole of Scripture.

In modern terms, God creates the human being free and responsible, and this creative act of God constitutes an essential difference from the creation myths of the time, for which man is fashioned as a

[8] Cf. N. Gatti, "Setting the Agenda for an Inclusive Development: Biblical Texts for Ecological Crisis," in *Religion and Sustainable Development: Ghanaian Perspectives*, ed. George Ossom-Batsa, Nicoletta Gatti and Rabbiatu Ammah (Grandi Opere, Città del Vaticano: Urbaniana University Press, 2018), 145-160; Id. "From Mastering to Serving. Bible and Environment," *Urbaniana University Journal* 71, no. 2 (2018): 155-184.

servant and even as a slave of the gods, whose burden he must bear. [9] It is worth listening to Neher's words again:

> By creating man free, God has introduced into the universe a radical factor of uncertainty that no divine or divinatory wisdom, no mathematics, even no prayer can either foresee or prevent or integrate into a predetermined movement: The free man is improvisation made flesh and history, he is the unforeseeable absolute, he is the limit against which the guiding forces of the creative plan collide and shatter, without anyone being able to say in advance whether this limit will allow itself to be overcome or whether with the force of the barricade it sets for them, it will force its creative forces to retreat, endangering, with this rebounding shock, the creative plan as a whole. The free man is the division, the partitioning of the divine waters: henceforth, the waters below, separated from those above, live a life of their own.[10]

Of course, every freedom carries a risk, humans do not know how to be responsible, as the accounts in Gen. 3 and 4 show. However, Gen. 1:26-28 prevents us from speaking of a predetermined 'destiny' of humans; humanity is created by God as free and responsible, not as a being subjected to an ineluctable destiny already predetermined from above. If one can speak of 'destiny', it can be done rather concerning 'fate' than the purpose of the whole of creation: the Sabbath. But all this helps us to move from the great theme of the word to that of the conception of time and history that we can discover in this first page of Genesis.

"And It Was Evening, and It Was Morning...:" Time

Creation in Time and History. Reading Gen. 1 as a Prophetic Text

"In the beginning:" with his word God creates the universe, but he does not generate space or things first, but time: "And it was evening, and it was morning." The other refrain that accompanies the works of creation reminds us that from that 'beginning' springs forth

[9] Cf. L.W. King, ed., *The Seven Tablets of Creation: The Babylonian and Assyrian Legends Concerning the Creation of the World and of Mankind* (London: Luzac, 1902).
[10] Neher, *L'esilio della parola*, 156. Cf. L. Mazzinghi, "Libertà di Dio e libertà dell'uomo. Note sull'approccio dell'Antico Testamento al problema del destino," *Servitium,* 144 (2002) 19-34.

applied time, in which the history of the world and of mankind begins to unfold.

The dimension of time profoundly marks the entire poem; for example, the role of the stars created precisely to mark the course of time (1:14-16), to 'dominate' time itself and to emphasise, with the succession of sacred feasts, its non-dispensability for humankind. Time offers itself to humans as a gift; the sun, moon and stars, igniting the rhythm of liturgical feasts, which give meaning to time. The same insistence on the number 'seven' highlighted by the commentary is then linked to time. [11] Among the possible explanations of 'seven,' in fact, is the one that links this number to the duration in days of the lunar phases the base of the Jewish calendar. So, the internal architecture of Gen. 1 also serves as a plastic reminder of the rhythm of time in which creation is inserted.

Creation, therefore, is not to be set against an abstract backdrop; it is not a timeless 'natura' freed from all ties to history. Creation comes into being with a project that unfolds along a line that from a beginning ('in the beginning') marches towards a fulfilment. But this is not enough; it may seem strange to the superficial and hasty reader, yet the poem of Gen. 1, by introducing the idea of time before that of space, is not so much directed towards the past as towards the future. For far too long, we have read the first page of Genesis as if it were only the 'historical' narrative, almost a snapshot of the origins, then exhausting ourselves in pointless discussions about the relationship between the Bible and science. The purpose of these accounts, however, is not to tell us how the world was formed, but why God formed it. The time of origins sung about in this poem is, therefore, in germ, the 'beginning' of what history will be until the end of time.

Let us elaborate on this idea: let us first note how with the creation of light (1:3-5) the verb 'to separate' appears for the first time, a verb that is also used elsewhere to describe the separation of Israel from the other peoples (cf. Lev 20:24-26). The separation between light

[11] Let us recall the seven days of creation, the seven words of v. 1, the fourteen words of v. 2 (thus 21 words, 7x3, in the first two verses of chapter 1); the 7x5 times when the name of God is mentioned, the 7x3 times when "heaven and earth" are mentioned.

and darkness, therefore, recalls that separation that will later make Israel a people 'chosen' by God.

In the second day of creation (1:6-8) we find a new moment of separation, the creation of the firmament, the solid vault, as imagined by antiquity, which divides the waters above, the heavenly vault, from those of the abyss and thus makes it possible to populate the earth, which in Gen. 1:9 in fact emerges as a habitable place. This further separation constitutes a true act of liberation on God's part; the earth is freed from any obstacle to life, represented in this context by the waters of primordial chaos. The divine action thus prophetically describes the future salvation that the Lord offers to the creation and to which the priestly narrator will return in the text of Gen. 9:8-17, in which God's commitment to preserving creation, never again destroying it with the flood, is recounted.

This link between Gen. 1 and 9:8-17 is important; God's decision never again to destroy humanity and creation does not arise from the acknowledgement of a failure but from the confirmation of the plan of salvation already described in Gen. 1: God creates the world to save it. Creation is not an event that concerns remote origins; it is the beginning of a movement that comprises the whole of salvation history. The insistence on time reminds us, in other words, that the God of Israel is a God who inhabits history and must be sought in history – he is *not* against history.

It is not possible in this space to analyse the reading of Gen. 1 by the prophets, especially Isa. 40—55. However, even a superficial reading of the Second Isaiah confirms our hypothesis; the salvation of the exiles returning home from Babylon is often described by the prophet in a language that openly echoes Gen. 1: the return is a 'new exodus,' but at the same time appears as a true 'new creation' (cf. e.g. Is 43:16-21). [12] Creation is not described as an event either, but as the first act of salvation of God, the creator of the world and, at the same time, the creator of Israel (cf. Isa. 43:1.15).

In conclusion, it is necessary to reread Gen. 1 as a poem that guides us to discover the meaning of history; contemplating the past, the inspired author reveals to us the meaning of God's plan for our

[12] See L. Mazzinghi, "'In principio Dio creò il cielo e la terra'. Il racconto della creazione come profezia," *PSV* 41 (2000): 11-23.

future. The New Testament appropriates this prophetic reading: in Col. 1:16-17, for example, not only is Christ presented as the one who precedes creation, but he is the very end for which all things were created: "All things were created through him and for him; he is before all things and all things subsist in him." In Christ, the beginning and the end come together and the one explains the other.

The Sabbath

The centrality of time in the poem of Gen. 1 is revealed in a very special way in the insistence on the 'Sabbath' that closes the text and seals God's work (cf. Gen. 2:1-4a). [13]

An account entirely centred on the works of God ends, quite unexpectedly, with the remembrance of the Creator's rest. The work of creation thus does not end, as in some myths of the Ancient Near East, with the construction of a temple or palace, of a sacred space that sanctifies the divine work, but rather with the establishment of a sacred time, the Sabbath; a further confirmation that in this poem time is far more important than space.

We could state, with Beauchamp, that the Sabbath is God's 'signature' on his creation, a rest which gives meaning to time and saves humanity from the illusion of possessing and dominating it. In fact, the Sabbath attests that time belongs to the Creator alone. The Sabbath, then, ensures that time is not merely a chronological succession of moments that follow one another, often without any apparent logic, but a true 'history' that finds its meaning in God's action. Time and history are, therefore, to be lived from the perspective of gift. The seventh day is the day on which creation is completed, on which God "finished the work he had begun." On the day when humans do not work, God's work emerges. In this way, Genesis also intends to affirm that rest is not in function of work, but rather the opposite is the case: work is in the function of rest, or better still, work finds its full meaning in the feast and, therefore, in the gratuitousness and freedom that characterise the feast.

[13] Cf. E. Bianchi, *Giorno del Signore, giorno dell'uomo. Per un rinnovamento della Domenica* (Casale Monferrato, AL: Piemme, 1995), 29-85, A. Wénin, *Il sabato nella Bibbia* (Bologna: EDB, 2006).

It is thus the feast that gives meaning to time. In this way, the seventh day is also the day of freedom from the slavery of 'doing.' God is not a slave to His creation, just as a human beings cannot be slaves to their 'doing.' The seventh day, on which he rests, becomes a radical contestation of every mentality based on work and profit (cf. the exodic motivation of the Sabbath commandment in Deut 5:12-15). The Sabbath, a time when no work is done, is paradoxically described as the 'blessed' day, thus fabled and rich in life, on which God acts. It is a 'sanctified' day because it belongs to God, and as 'holy' it is precisely a sign of his presence, as the entire tradition of Israel is well understood. On the other hand, the Sabbath is also the creation of a space of freedom; God rests on the seventh day to make room for humankind and creation!

The poem of Gen. 1 reminds us again, in its conclusion and precisely with the Sabbath, how Israel encounters God in time, even before in space. In other words, the place of God's presence is not first and foremost the temple, neither the sanctuary in the desert nor the Solomonic temple in Jerusalem, but precisely time.

One last consideration; note how, at the end of the creation account, the expected concluding formula is missing: "and it was evening, and it was morning, the seventh day." The seventh day has no end, no 'evening;' it is entirely projected into the future. To rest with God on the seventh day is to understand that the meaning of creation lies precisely here, in the service and encounter with God that constitute the true fulfilment of creation. To enter the seventh day is, therefore, to enter God's time. On the first day, God creates time; on the seventh day, he creates the aim of time, communion with Him.

The Sabbath, in a difficult but theologically more precise terminology, has an eschatological value. It is oriented towards the future of creation, according to that prophetic reading highlighted before. The Sabbath will have a long history in Scripture, in the Old Testament as well as in the New. For Christians, the 'day of the Lord,' Sunday, will begin to be spoken of, but the feast described at the beginning of Gen. 2 will retain all its value from this point of view.

"And God Saw that It Was Good/beautiful:" The Goodness and Beauty of Creation

Not infrequently, contemporary people are animated by pessimism; Christianity itself has often contributed to a negative view of reality. The world is ugly, hostile, full of evil and must be fled or fought against; for many, there is not much to hope from this world; the important thing is to survive - *mors tua vita mea*.

The poem of Gen. 1 sweeps away any such conception in an instant and opens up hope. From this perspective, Gen. 1 is like a great overture that gives the whole of Scripture a positive tone.[14] We note how another refrain that runs through the entire poem is the statement placed in the mouth of the Creator "and God saw that it was good/useful/beautiful," a statement that culminates in the concluding judgment on humanity, "and God saw that it was very good/beautiful" (1:31). In this way, the first page of Genesis takes on the tone of a hymn of thanksgiving and praise, almost as if God were singing to Himself, satisfied with His work. The very care with which this page was composed, the perfection of its internal architecture, its literary structure and its symbolic numbers is a way of expressing beauty, harmony, and admiration.

All that exists is *tôb*. Let us recall how this Hebrew term contains at least three different shades of meaning, which make it difficult to translate into a single English term. First of all, *tôb* is to be read in a moral sense: 'good.' From this point of view, creation is an entirely positive reality, and God cannot be considered the author of evil. The book of Wisdom comments on this idea in an important passage: "…the creatures of the world are the bearers of salvation, nor do the underworld reign on earth..." (Wisd. 1:14). In *tôb* it is then possible to discover a sense of a practical nature, i.e. 'useful,' in accordance with its purpose; creation is *tôb* because it responds to the design for which it was made. Finally, in *tôb* one can see a clear aesthetic sense; it is not by chance that the Greek translator of Genesis used for the Hebrew term *tôb*, in the Septuagint, the Greek term *kalòs* (beautiful). Creation is a reality that arouses admiration and wonder in those who contemplate it; the beauty of creation is a privileged way to discover the presence of the Creator (cf. Wisd. 13:15). The above formula

[14] Cf. G. Ravasi, "Dio vide che era *tôb* (Gen. 1)," *PSV* 44 (2001): 11-20.

emphasises seeing: "and God saw...;" God himself contemplates, admires his work.

And God saw that it was a good thing, a useful thing, a very beautiful thing indeed: in this perspective, the page of Gen. 1 is not intended to be (nor can it in any way be regarded as) a historical or scientific treatise on the origins of the world. This poem presents itself as a sapiential meditation on the meaning of creation. To say that creation is *tôb*, "good, useful, beautiful," is to invite readers to contemplate it and understand the design behind it. In this way, the priestly narrator intends to clear the field of any form of possible pessimism and any temptation to attribute a negative value to creation: the goodness/beauty of creation is not something added or secondary, something that can also be lost, but constitutes the very essence of creation, which, therefore, no 'evil' (be it human sin or any other form of 'evil' we can conceive of) can eliminate. Creation is a positive reality because it came out of the mouth and hands of God; Scripture will never forget this principle.

A Blessed Creation

The idea of the goodness and beauty of creation in Gen. 1 is linked to that of blessing, a theme that appears three times in the text: God blesses the first living creatures (1:22), blesses mankind (1:28) and, finally, the Sabbath (2:3). In Scripture, the blessing is never a magic gesture, but is an effective word that God can pronounce and that establishes a stream of life between the one who blesses and the one who is blessed. The blessing, as is clear in the blessing of the living creatures and humans (1:22, 28), creates life and fruitfulness.

God blessed the earth and the entire creation as he would later bless Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3); blessing thus becomes one of the most important keys to understanding the entire history of mankind and Israel in the light of God's word and refers us back to the already seen theme of God's word; in his speaking, God blesses. Blessing is not to be regarded as an extraordinary act, but as the sign of God's habitual intervention towards the world and towards man; the God of

the Bible blesses and enables man to bless, i.e. He creates life and protects it. [15]

In the case of Gen. 1:28, by blessing the human couple, God communicates to them the power to give life. Thus 1:28 is not to be understood as a command on the necessity for humans to bring children into the world, but, precisely, as a blessing, as the power to communicate life bestowed as a gift to mankind. Let us not forget, in this regard, the historical context in which Gen. 1 was born. We are, as we have said, in the difficult situation of exile, when Israel is faced with the concrete risk of its disappearance as a nation. The words of Gen. 1:28 are to be read as an encouragement for a people who were now tempted to despair of their future: God offers life and hope from the very beginning of humanity. Thus Gen. 1:28 is not an order ('procreate!'), but, indeed, a blessing. Humans must "fill the earth," but when the earth is filled, the blessing is fulfilled. Humanity is, therefore, not called upon to multiply without limit. This observation has obvious relevance for today, a time in which the demographic problem is undoubtedly a vital issue for humanity.

Finally, we note how in the text of Gen. 1–11 five times we hear the opposite verb resounding, 'to curse:' in Gen. 3:15, about the serpent; in 3:17, about the soil; in 4:11, about Cain's sin; in Gen. 8:21, about the flood; and, finally, in Gen. 9:25, when Noah curses his son Cam. And yet the history of the world and humanity is not a history of blessing turned into a curse. The original threefold blessing of Gen. 1 is linked to that which in Gen. 12:1-3 opens the history of the patriarchs and thus of the entire people of Israel (but in the perspective of Gen. 12:3 of the whole of humanity); the blessing thus expresses God's will to keep alive and save what he himself has made.

A Creation for Peace

By creating mankind, God assigns to him a task, which we have already alluded to when speaking of the theme of the image: "…and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air, over the cattle, over all the wild beasts and over all the creeping things that creep upon the earth" (1:26); "fill the earth, subdue it and

[15] Cf. J.L. SKA, "La vita come benedizione", in ID., *La strada e la casa* (Itinerari biblici; Bologna: EDB, 2001), 35-54.

have dominion over it...” (1:28).[16] This task is thus ‘dominion’ over created realities. The verb ‘to dominate,’ refers to royal power. Often, a superficial reading of these verses has derived from them the idea that humans are sovereign of the universe and that they can dispose of all existing reality, to which they would be infinitely superior. In this way, a negative view of the relationship between man and the world appears to be founded, and at the same time almost a religious justification for human's exploitation of creation.

In reality, human ‘dominion’ over the world is not absolute, but we might say, a delegated one. As the “image and likeness” of God, mankind receives from him the task of being in the world the sign of God's sovereign presence who, however, does not want to subjugate creation, let alone exploit or destroy it. The verb ‘to dominate,’ in fact, can be very ambiguous when detached from God's plan. The prophet Ezekiel, for example, accuses the ‘shepherds’, i.e. the leaders of Israel, of ‘dominating’ the people in order to oppress them (cf. Ezek. 34:4).

It is thus necessary to recall the presence of the concluding verses concerning the creation of humans (Gen. 1:29-30), a text that has too often gone unnoticed. Humans, and with them every animal, receives as food “every herb that yields seed and is on all the earth and every tree in which is the fruit that yields seed;” neither humans nor animal will thus have to kill even to keep themselves alive. In other words, every form of violence is excluded from creation, even the apparently necessary one, such as the killing of animals as a source of nourishment.

The ‘dominion’ of which Gen. 1 speaks is, therefore, not in the order of the destruction of life, but of its preservation, it is ‘caring for the world’ according to the divine plan. In contemporary terms, humans have an ‘ecological’ responsibility towards creation which, as God’s image and likeness, they are called to make grow and keep alive; modern sensitivity to the ecological problem can find a good biblical foundation in these opening texts of Genesis. Humanity is not called to exploit, but to preserve and grow creation. We must at this point recall how there is an idea that runs through the entire chapter, from

[16] Cf. A. Wénin, “Mitezza e violenza: Il cibo vegetale e carneo in Gen. 1–9”, *PSV* 53 (2006): 11-20.

the moment when God 'separates' light from darkness and brings the world out of the chaos of its origins (see above) and, by such works of separation, allows creation to exist. God's dominion is thus exercised through his word that assigns limit and place to every existing reality. The word of God thus becomes a 'law' that establishes distinctions that orders and gives life.

Continuing the reading of Gen. 1–11, we will discover how the narrator reminds us that to those who survived the flood God allows the minimum of violence necessary to keep themselves alive, namely the killing of animals (Gen. 9:1-7). And yet the law of blood/life, which must not be eaten, remains as a sign and reminder that life belongs to God and that the law serves precisely to curb violence, at the very moment it seems to permit it. The text of Gen. 1:29-30, nevertheless, remains as an image of the divine dream of a world governed by the gentleness of the 'word' and not by violence; a dream of gentleness and peace that returns in the splendid prophetic text of Isa. 11:6-7:

> …the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the panther shall lie down beside the kid; the calf and the young lion shall graze together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear will graze together, they shall lie down their young together. The lion shall feed on straw like the ox....

This page from Isaiah reflects God's hope for the realisation of his original plan, the one expressed in Gen. 1:29-30, for a world of peace, with no more violence, a 'house of happiness' whose culmination is not 'work' but Sabbath, rest and feast.

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