‘Subdue the Earth?’ (Genesis 1:28)

In 1972, the journal Orientierung published a detailed essay devoted to the topic, ‘the limits to growth,’ in response to the Club of Rome study commissioned by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. At the end of his article its author, Paul Erbrich, expressed his conviction that the Christian churches in particular, drawing on their tradition, could offer practical systems of values that might serve to bring about the necessary changes in fundamental human attitudes.

Dennis L. Meadows, an author of The Limits to Growth, has a different opinion on this point. For him there are two ultimately conflicting images of the human being. In a lecture given at Frankfurt on 15 October 1973, he formulated his point of view as follows:

The one image of humanity, maintained by the supporters of unlimited growth, is that of homo sapiens, a very special creature whose unique brain gives it not only the capability but also the right to exploit all other creatures and everything the world has to offer, for its own short-term purposes. This is an ancient view of humanity, solidly grounded in Jewish-Christian tradition and recently strengthened by the magnificent technical achievements of the last few centuries. . . . According to this belief, the human being is all-powerful . . . The contrary image of the human being is also ancient, but it is closer to Eastern than to Western religions. It assumes that the human, one species among all the rest, is

3. Orientierung 1972 no. 20, 236. For further discussion, cf. also Orientierung 1973, nos. 18 and 19, pp. 198-200, 212-16 (article by Heinz Robert Schiette).
embedded in the fabric of natural processes . . . It acknowledges that humanity, as regards its ability to survive, is one of the more successful species, but that its very success leads it to destroy the supporting fabric of Nature, which it scarcely understands.4

How much is Included in Genesis 1:28?

Historically speaking, Meadows may be right. Often enough, Christians themselves have claimed that the great technological and imperial explosion of the West in modern times rests ultimately on an impulse given in the first chapter of the Bible (Gen. 1:28: ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth’).5 But impulses can also issue from misunderstood statements. It may not be unimportant to consider on which side Christians feel they should stand when, in our own time, a decision is to be made about the conditions under which the next generation or two of human beings will experience themselves and the world around them. Therefore, in what follows, we will propose the apparently academic question: what, from the point of view of a contemporary biblical scholar, do the statements about the creation of humanity in Gen. 1:26-28 cover, and what do they not include? To anticipate the conclusion: Meadows and all those who think like him had no real need to push Jews and Christians into the wrong camp; and, to the extent that those two groups are already on the wrong side, it may be that a description of the original meaning of their own earliest traditions can lead them to forsake that camp for the other.

‘Image of God’ in the Context of the Priestly Document

Our analysis of the statements about the creation of human beings in Genesis 1 must begin with vv. 26 and 27:

26 Then God said, Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over

6. There is a text-critical problem in this verse. We do not expect to find the earth in the midst of the various groups of animals. The old Syriac translation read: ‘cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing . . .’ [The NRSV chooses the Syriac version. Tr.] But it is probable that there was no corresponding Hebrew Vorlage, and that the translator simply corrected the text. Nevertheless, the Syriac could be a correct reconstruction of the original. In that case, ‘dominion’ over the earth, as such, would be mentioned only in v. 28. Since it is certainly stated there, the uncertainty of the text at this point is not so decisive for the discussion of our topic. In what follows, we will avoid drawing any particular conclusions based on this passage. Even if ‘all the earth’ is original, the reference can only be to the living creatures on the earth, since the verb relit, ‘to rule,’ always refers to living things (even at 1 Kgs. 5:4 and Pss. 72:8).

7. Literally: ‘every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ But this group of words, taken together, frequently serves to encompass a variety of kinds of animals, once even referring to all of them (Gen. 9:2), so that it seems appropriate to employ a somewhat broader translation.

8. What is at stake here is the fact that there are two genders. The text moves then to the blessing of fertility that follows immediately in v. 28. This need not refer to a single human couple, in the sense of Genesis 2; one may just as easily think of a number of original couples - as in Mesopotamian texts - or of humanity as a whole. That is why the phrase at this point is not so decisive for the discussion of our topic. In what follows, we will avoid drawing any particular conclusions based on this passage. Even if ‘all the earth’ is original, the reference can only be to the living creatures on the earth, since the verb relit, ‘to rule,’ always refers to living things (even at 1 Kgs. 5:4 and Pss. 72:8).

9. See the bibliographic references in Werner H. Schmidt, Die Schöpfungsgeschichte der Priesterschrift, WMANT 17 (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1964), 132, n. 1. There is a typology of the various explanations in Oswald Loretz, Die Gottebenbildlichkeit des Menschen (Munich, 1967), 9-41. Both will be found also in Claus Westermann, Genesis, BK 1 (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1966ff.), 203-14.

10. To give some examples of the various arguments advanced for this thesis: the Jewish exegete Benno Jacob argues from the context (Das erste Buch der Tora, Genesi [Berlin, 1934], 59); the Catholic exegete Heinrich Groß argues from the
place within the world. This assertion is based primarily on Egyptian texts that describe the Pharaoh as the image of the deity. This idea of the king as image of God is said to be somewhat ‘democratized’ in the biblical creation text, i.e., it is here applied to the role of humanity with respect to the whole sub-human creation.\footnote{5}

The biblical statements must be illuminated by the language and culture of the world of their own time, and to that extent there can be no objection to adding Egyptian texts. But the situation is more complicated at the point where an initial idea like that of human beings as ‘image of God’ in the ancient Orient is found to appear in different cultural regions and, in part, within different contexts and with different meanings. Then we must pose the additional question: where exactly do we find a context corresponding to the biblical use of this idea?\footnote{12} This kind of complication of the inquiry appears in the present case, i.e., the idea of the human being as ‘image of God.’

The first chapter of Genesis is part of the so-called ‘priestly document,’ the latest source document of the Pentateuch. It was probably written during or shortly after the Babylonian exile, and quite likely in Babylon.\footnote{13} It is less concerned with Egyptian than with Mesopotamian commentary on Genesis 1 in Pss. 8:5-6 (Die Gottebenbildlichkeit des Menschen,’ in Lec tua veritas, Festschrift for H. Junker [Trier, 1961], 89-100); the Lutheran exegete Hans Wildberger comes to a similar conclusion on the basis of extra-biblical, especially Egyptian sayings about the king as image of the deity (‘Das Abbild Gottes,’ ThZ 21 [1965]: 245-59, 481-501).

In the mean time, the Egyptian material has been more thoroughly examined: Erik Hornung, ‘Der Mensch als “Bild Gottes” in Ägypten,’ in Loretz, Gottebenbildlichkeit (see n. 9 above), 123-56. There was also a ‘democratization’ of the idea in Egypt, but it can be documented even before the statements about the king as image of God, and is apparently independent of them (Hornung, p. 150). Where the saying is most intensively interpreted, it does not refer to dominion, but to the similarity between human and divine activity: ‘Human beings are images of God in their custom of giving ear to a man’s response’ (Hornung, p. 153). Thus it may be that the comparable Egyptian material does not support the proposed thesis as readily as we may have thought, quite apart from the question that must now be raised about the appropriateness of using it at all.

\footnote{11} Westermann makes the same methodological demand: Genesis (see n. 9 above), 214; idem, Genesis 1-11, EIdP (Darmstadt, 1972), 25-26.

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\footnote{13} On the state of the text of the ‘priestly document’ in the sense of a ‘priestly history’ (without the narrative additions and legal complexes inserted at a later time), cf. Karl Eiliger, Kleine Schriften zum Alten Testament, ThB 32 (Munich, 1966), 174-75. Typical texts from the priestly document are, e.g., Genesis 17, Exodus 6 and Exodus 24-31, and Exodus 35 to Leviticus 9.
she formed an image of Anu in her heart.
Aruru washed her hands, pinched off clay and threw it into the wilderness;
. . . she made Enkidu the fighter.18

There is a very extensive account of the creation in the Sumerian myth of ‘Enki and Ninmah’. Here we read, at a crucial point:

At the word of his mother, Nammu, Enki arose from his bedchamber; the god walked about in the sacred space, and thought, as he struck himself on the thigh;
the wise, the knowing, the prudent, the one who knows all that is necessary and beautiful, the creator (and) the one who shapes all things, emitted the Sigensigšar;
Enki brings him the arm(s) and forms his breast;
Enki, the creator, permits his wisdom to enter into the innermost parts of his own (creation);
he speaks to his mother, Nammu:
‘My mother, impose on the creatures you have called forth the arduous work of the gods;
when you have mixed the interior of the clay on Apsu, you will form the Sigensigšar (and) the clay; let the creature be present, (and) may Ninma— be your helper;
may Ninimma, Egizianna, Ninmada, Ninbara, Ninmug, Sarsadu, Ninigimna, whom you have borne, be at your service;
My mother, decide his (= the creature’s) fate; let Ninma— impose (on him) the slave’s tasks.’19

The text may well be understood to mean that Enki first creates the model of the human being, from which the mother goddess and Ninmah are then to make the human being.20 It contains Enki’s bodily form and Enki’s wisdom. Any idea of the human being’s having a ruling role is completely foreign to the text. Instead, the quoted portion ends with the determination of a totally different purpose for the human being’s existence: enslavement to the gods. This text is by no means unique in this regard. Rather, it represents the universal Mesopotamian opinion.21

It should not be deduced from its use of the idea of the human being as image of God that the biblical priestly document understands what it says about the human being as image of God in precisely the same sense as the Mesopotamian tradition it is adapting. For it also takes the liberty of altering its statement about the purpose of human existence, which in both cases follows immediately: according to this document the human being exists, not to do the gods’ tedious and exhausting work for them, but to rule over the animals. As far as the saying about the image of God is concerned, it offers no further clarification - in contrast to the text from ‘Enki and Ninmah’, but in agreement with other Mesopotamian texts, such as those cited from the Gilgamesh epic. It simply makes use here of a fixed component in traditional discourse about the creation of humanity. In doing so, it emphasizes the human being’s special closeness to God, in contrast to all other creatures. But it does not explicate the matter further.22 With regard to our own question we can say that the description of the human being as ‘image of God,’ in itself, permits no conclusions about a ruling position given to humans or any ‘responsibility for the world’ on their part.

The Blessing of Creation

The statement in v. 26 about human sovereignty over the animals is repeated in v. 28 in a more elaborate context; therefore it will be discussed first of all in this latter connection. Verse 28, God’s blessing of humanity, reads:

28 God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth; take possession of it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’

The blessing of fruitfulness requires no further commentary, except to say that it is a blessing and not a ‘commandment.’ The increase of

19. ‘Enki and Ninmah’, 2-38, quoted from Pettinato (cf. n. 18), 71.
20. Thus Pettinato (see n. 18), 39-40. He understands the Sigensigšar as ‘the human form created by Enki’. Cf also Kilmer, ‘Overpopulation’ (n. 16 above), 165-66.
21. On this, see Pettinato’s whole book (n. 18 above), though he probably makes too sharp a distinction between the Sumerian and Akkadian conceptions.
22. Cf. the remarks in Westermann, Genesis (see n. 9 above), 214-18.
humanity also played a major role in Mesopotamia, especially in the Atrahasis epic. However, we should be cautious in using the blessing of fruitfulness in Gen. 1:28 to legitimate one or another position on our present problem of population explosion. For in the thinking behind the priestly document, the ‘blessing of creation’ is by no means a blessing that applies to all future human generations. The priestly document supposes that some day the blessing of fruitfulness will have achieved its ‘purpose, that humanity will have reached the necessary numbers and that it will then no longer need to increase any further. It expresses this idea quite simply. In the expository technique of the priestly document, every word of God is followed, at some point, by a statement that it has been carried out or been fulfilled. That applies to this blessing as well. Of course, the story of humanity is told only for a single nation, Israel, to the point at which the necessary number of people has been reached. But undoubtedly Israel serves, in this regard, as an example for all the peoples of the earth. It is said of Israel, at a point when it had been living in Egypt for several generations:

But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them (Exod. 1:7).

Here the individual expressions in the blessing of fruitfulness are reprimed. From this point on, the priestly document has nothing more to say about fruitfulness and increase. The topic is exhausted.

The end result of the increase in the number of human beings is to be that humanity fills the earth. From the continuation of the priestly document, especially in Genesis 10, the so-called list of nations, we can see that the growth of humanity is conceived as unfolding itself in various races and peoples. According to the divine plan, these nations may each take possession of their own regions. It seems to me that this is precisely what is intended in Genesis 10, the so-called list of nations, we can see that humanity fills the earth. From the continuation of the priestly document, every word of God is followed, at some point, by a statement that it has been carried out or been fulfilled. That applies to this blessing as well. Of course, the story of humanity is told only for a single nation, Israel, to the point at which the necessary number of people has been reached. But undoubtedly Israel serves, in this regard, as an example for all the peoples of the earth. It is said of Israel, at a point when it had been living in Egypt for several generations:

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24. Previously, the blessing of fruitfulness had been frequently repeated: after the Flood (at which point the verb ‘to be prolific’ is added to the others in Gen. 9:7; it is then taken up also in Exod. 1:7), and at other places in the history of the patriarchs. In addition, it is only to this point that we find the genealogies that are connected with the blessing of fruitfulness; these are intended to illustrate the growth of humanity. On this, cf. Peter Weimar, ‘Die Toledot-Formel in der priesterschriftlichen Geschichts- darstellung’, BZ 18 (1974): 64-93, at 89-90.

which is usually translated ‘subdue it [i.e., the earth].’ In exegetical literature we often read, as regards the verb kbš that is used here, that it is a very strong expression for ‘conquer’ or ‘subjugate,’ and thus means something like ‘trample down.’

We may regard Benno Jacob’s exposition as typical: With this one word, echoed again in Pss. 115:16, humanity is granted unlimited sovereignty over the planet earth; therefore no work that is done on it, for example drilling or the levelling of mountains, drying up or diverting rivers, and similar things, can be regarded as a violent ravaging that is repugnant to God.

It is true that, immediately after this, Jacob points out that another important Jewish exegete, S. D. Luzzato, understands the verb kbš in a ‘much more limited’ sense. According to him, human beings are intended to ‘occupy’ the earth, ‘to take control of it, namely from the wild beasts,’ in continuity with their filling of the earth. And here Luzzato may, in fact, have come closer to the sense of the text than Jacob and many others. This is true not only because it yields a single, clear and direct series of statements, leading from the growth of humanity to their extension throughout the whole earth, while taking possession of the territories of the earth in which previously only beasts have dwelt, and exercising a function of rulership with respect to the animal world, nor only because this avoids an interpretation that would simply outstrip the imaginative horizon of the author of the priestly document. Rather, Luzzato’s point of view seems, in addition, to correspond more closely to the other instances in which the Hebrew word kbš is used.

The word must have had an original meaning something like ‘place one’s foot on something,’ ‘step on something.’ But it occurs in Hebrew only in two derived meanings, both mediated by visual metaphors dependent on the original meaning. With ‘sins’ as its object, the verb means ‘to forgive sins.’ Sins are like a fire that God crushes underfoot. With people, nations and lands as its object, the verb means ‘to take

25. B. Jacob, Genesis (see n. 10 above), 61.

26. The meaning is similar in the other Semitic languages as well, especially Akkadian (kabas), Arabic (kabasa). In what follows I will omit the probably corrupt instance in Zech. 9:15. With that exception, I will treat all the occurrences of the word in the Old Testament.

27. There is only one instance of this: Micah 7:19. However, its meaning is fairly certain, since there is a corresponding development in Akkadian. There we find the neo-Babylonian instance kabasan la ṭītuš, ‘extinguish guilt, forgive’ (cf. Wolfram von Soden, Akkadisches Handwörterbuch [Wiesbaden, 1965ff.]: 1415).
possession of.' It is easy to understand how this meaning arose, if we consider that the word *kehrēs*, ‘footstool,’ is a related substantive. Conquered foes throw themselves to the ground before the victorious king, and he places his foot on them. In Egyptian pictures of the Pharaoh we can see how lands conquered by Egypt, depicted as persons or war bows, are made the footstool of the enthroned king. This expresses the fact that they have lost their freedom and have become his possession. However, we must consider that in using the Hebrew expression *to place one’s foot on something’ people did not give much more scope to it than we do when we speak of ‘laying hands on something.’ The image can be revivified, but normally it is rather pale. Thus the word is used in a great variety of contexts: when free persons are enslaved and thus become someone else’s property, when nations or lands, after losing a war, are in a state of dependence, when, through intercourse, a man makes a woman his possession.

Precisely in a text in which the verb *kehrē* appears in a context that has a priestly echo and that has the *land* of Canaan as its object, namely Num. 32:22, 29, the parallel biblical passages in Deut. 3:20, 31:3; Josh. 1:15 show, with the word *yrd* used in the corresponding place, that what is at issue is that the land has become the possession of YHWH or of the Israelites. It is therefore best to translate the text of Gen. 1:28 also as undramatically as possible, somewhat as I have done above: ‘Take possession of it [i.e., the earth].’ And that is to be understood in such a way that humanity, when it has grown so great that it consists of many peoples, is to expand over the whole earth, and each people is to take possession of its own territory. Therefore for the people Israel, too, once it has been established, in Exod. 1:7, that the blessing of fruitfulness has been fulfilled, the next question is how it is to come into and take possession of the land of Canaan, which God has planned for Israel. God immediately offers an answer to this question by giving a promise, in Exod. 6:5-8 (only a few verses later in the priestly document), that Israel will be delivered from Egypt and will be led into the land of Canaan, which will become Israel’s possession.

The Human Being and the Animals

If the peoples possess their lands, they should rule there, and that means ruling over the animals. Gen. 1:28 closes with this idea. What does it mean? We can begin by excluding every kind of exploitation of the animal world by hunting or slaughter, for according to Gen. 1:29 human beings are permitted only vegetable food. Only after the Flood does God alter this law and also permit animals to be eaten. But at that point the formulation is different: ‘the fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth,’ (Gen. 9:2). Thus in the passage we are dealing with the subject must be something much more peaceful and normal. But in the works of most biblical interpreters we read something different. They say that here the verb that is used, *rdh*, has the basic meaning of ‘tread down,’ still clearly retained in Joel 3:13 [Hebrew 4:13], which talks of the stamping of grapes by those who tread the winepress. Therefore in Gen. 1:28, human beings would also be authorized to exercise a violent, indeed a positively cruel domination. But here again, a more careful examination leads to a less daring conception.

It does not appear to me clearly established that the verb *rdh* is to be found at all in Joel 3:13. It is equally possible that what we have is a form of the verb *yrd*, ‘to climb down.’ In that case, we would find here a demand to go down into the winepress that has been cut into the floor and filled with grapes - of course, for the purpose of stamping and treading the grapes, but that would have nothing to do with the word *rdh.* Once we are free of any dependence on Joel 3:13, we can organize the remaining occurrences of the verb with relative ease.

There can be no doubt about the dependence of these texts on one another. It is irrelevant for our purposes to know in which direction the dependence exists. *Yrd* in its basic form, in deuteronomistic and deuteronomistic language, simply means ‘to take possession of’, and is a stereotypical expression.

28. This is found in 2 Chr. 9:18, in the description of King Solomon’s throne.
29. Cf. Othmar Keel, *Die Welt der altorientalischen Bildsymbolik und das Alte Testament. Am Beispiel der Psalmen* (Zürich, 1972), plates 341, 342, and 342a. Cf. also the other biblical expressions for the same thing, in 1 Kgs. 5:17 and Pss. 110:1. In three places (Num. 32:22, 29; Josh. 18:1, 1 Chr. 22:18), the original image behind *kehrē* also emerges through the syntactic construction. Here we must translate literally: ‘[the land [or some similar word]] found itself trodden underfoot, in the presence of NN.’
30. Jer. 34:11, 16; Neh. 5:5; 2 Chr. 28:10.
31. Num. 32:22, 29; Josh. 18:1; 2 Sam. 8:11; 1 Chr. 22:18.
32. Esther 7:8. It does not seem to me to be necessary here to suppose a third path of development from treading down to oppression to rape.
33. There can be no doubt about the dependence of these texts on one another. It is irrelevant for our purposes to know in which direction the dependence exists. *Yrd* in its basic form, in deuteronomistic and deuteronomistic language, simply means ‘to take possession of’, and is a stereotypical expression.
34. This was the usual interpretation of earlier scholars, and it is still reflected in Salomon Mandelkern’s concordance.
35. However, in some instances the text is so uncertain or the content so obscure that we can do little with it: Num. 24:9; Pss. 49:14 [Hebrew v. 15]; Lam. 1:13.
the verb are sheep,36 slaves,37 laborers,38 conquered peoples or their kings.39 When there is an intention to express a special severity in the action referred to, an extra expression must be added.40 We may infer from this that the word in itself does not express any special severity or cruelty, but simply means: to rule, to command, to lead, to direct.

There is just one passage that does not clearly fit into this picture: Pss. 68:27 [Hebrew v. 28], ‘There is Benjamin, the least of them, leading them, the princes of Judah in a body, the princes of Zebulun, the princes of Naphtali.’ This is a description of a festal procession. Undoubtedly, at this point, Benjamin does not rule or command, but simply goes at the head of the line. This recalls the Akkadian word redû, which has a related root, and for which the meaning given is ‘accompany, lead [with oneself]; go.’ 41 It is also used, in particular, for driving and leading animals.

Thus we are led to ask whether the Hebrew meanings of rdh may not have developed out of a fundamental notion of accompaniment, particularly of animals. Pasturing a flock is a favorite image for the activity of a king. Gen. 1:26 and 1:28 can be assumed to contain the normal meaning ‘to lead, to rule’ from the human sphere, but in such a way that the application of the word to animals serves to reactivate the original meaning. Thus the human beings are designated as those who, on settling in their own land, are to govern the animals, and that apparently is done by leading them to pasture, making use of them as beasts of burden, giving them commands to be obeyed, or, in other words: domesticating them. This seems to be what is intended here, and the implied goal appears to be the domestication of animals in all spheres of reality: in the water, in the air, and on the earth.

When, in the context of the blessing of fruitfulness, the topic is later repeated quite frequently, and finally concluded, and when the direction to take possession of the various realms of the earth shapes the priestly
document to its end, we should ask whether an extension of the theme of human rule over the animals might also yield insight into the precise meaning of the last part of Gen. 1:28. But, surprisingly, the topic is not reintroduced, unless we can regard the new formulation in Gen. 9:2, already mentioned above, as a continuation: ‘The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand [or: power] they are delivered.’

We should probably regard this text, in fact, as a revision of the relationship between human beings and animals as originally defined. The formulations ‘fear and dread,’ and ‘to deliver into [someone’s] hand’ are part of the language of war.42 In the oracle that is reflected here the divinity gave the enemies ‘into the power’ of those making war on them, and in the battle itself the god took part and thus threw the enemies into ‘fear and dread.’ The permission to eat meat thus creates a hostile relationship between human beings and animals, in which the human being is the victor. The possibility that whole species of animals might be exterminated, of course, is not considered here, either. With regard to Gen. 1:28 we can only say that there the universal domestication of the animal world is conceived in terms of something like a paradisiacal peace among all species which, however, is no longer possible after the Flood. Whatever measure of animal domestication still existed after the Flood must probably be regarded as a remnant of that peace. But it is always mixed with war.

A Pre-Technological Horizon of Experience?

Thus in its original meaning Gen. 1:28 is anything but a justification of the belief that human beings are all-powerful and possess a brain that gives them not only the ability, but also the right to exploit all other creatures and everything the world has to offer, without regard for the consequences. Of course, one might say that the harmless character of Gen. 1:28 in its original meaning was simply conditioned by the authors still innocent horizon of experience. But in principle the authorization to take possession of all parts of the earth and to domesticate the whole animal world could be said to contain the germ of everything that later,

36. Ezek. 34:4. This is a metaphor for the Israelites. In Pss. 49:14 there appears to be a parallelism with r’h, ‘to pasture,’ which also indicates that we are in the context of a pastoral culture.
38. 1 Kgs. 5:15 [Hebrew 5:30]; 9:23; 2 Chr. 8:10.
39. Lev. 26:17; 1 Kgs. 4:24 [Hebrew 5:4]; Isa. 14:2, 6; Ezek. 29:15; Pss. 72:2; 110:1 [Hebrew v. 2]; Neh. 9:28.
42. For this entire linguistic field, see Gerhard von Rad,  Der Heilige Krieg im alten Israel, AThANT (Göttingen, 1952); Manfred Weippert, “Heiliger Krieg” in Israel und Assyrien, ZAW 84 (1972): 460-93.
with a more developed rationality and technical knowledge, reveals itself to be humanity’s limitless demand to exploit the cosmos. For in any case, human beings have been promised a unique place in the universe.

This kind of argument cannot be dismissed out of hand, for we must translate from an earlier horizon of experience to our own if we want to understand the real meaning of a text. However, in this concrete instance we must immediately raise the counter-question whether the author of the priestly document really had such a simple, pre-technological horizon of experience. After all, he lived in the highly-organized urban and irrigation culture of Babylon. The world into which exile had thrown him had already been struggling with the problem of overpopulation for several millennia. In the process, it had acquired experience with technology, rational organization of community life, and the limits of human possibility. It had ancient and highly developed traditions of civilization and culture. If the author omits technology from the blessing of creation, it appears that in his opinion it does not belong there. Was he rejecting it?

Again, this appears not to be true. He simply did not find it appropriate to include it within the blessing of creation. But later, at the point when he describes the phase after the expansion of humanity, but before the final stabilization of all nations in their territories as exemplified in the case of the people Israel, he illustrates it in two different contexts, one negative, the other positive.

At the beginning of the book of Exodus, technical civilization is sketched in its negative aspect. Ancient technology was based on slavery and hard manual labor. The people of Israel fell victims to that fate when they had reached their full number, but had not yet entered into their land. The Egyptians ‘made slaves of them. They made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. Thus the Israelites were forced to do the hard labor of slaves’ (Exod. 1:13b-14: from the author’s translation). This kind of technology, which required slaves in order to reach a higher level of civilization, was of no interest to the God of Israel. The artistic preparation of the sanctuary is evidently meant to express the culmination of human reshaping of the world. In contrast to the remaking of the world that was taking place in Egypt, based on the principle of slavery, in Israel everything rests on the principle of voluntariness. Moses asks that those ‘whose hearts move them to do so’ should donate the materials for the sanctuary (Exod. 35:5-9). Those who ‘are skillful’ are requested to come forward and carry out the work (Exod. 35:10). The leading technician is introduced with great enthusiasm:

See, YHWH has called by name Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and has filled him with divine spirit, with skill, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, in every kind of craft’ (Exod. 35:30-33).

The Real Meaning of Technology

Technology appears in a positive light in the priestly document’s description of the events at Sinai. It is true that Israel has not yet arrived in its land, but the most significant expression of life in the land is already being prepared: the gift of the sanctuary, through which God will dwell in the midst of the people as its own God. The artistic preparation of the sanctuary is evidently meant to express the culmination of human reshaping of the world. In contrast to the remaking of the world that was taking place in Egypt, based on the principle of slavery, in Israel everything rests on the principle of voluntariness. The priestly document really had such a simple, pre-technological horizon of experience. And to the extent that, at the present time, human beings are exploiting other human beings when, supposedly, their intention is merely to extend their control over nature, it can assuredly never be said that this situation (if not explicitly, at least in germ) is based on the blessing of creation in Gen. 1:28. The priestly document’s description of the exodus proves the contrary.

42. The Hebrew expressions are: kol nōdīb lībbī (Exod. 35:5) and kol-hāham-lēb (Exod. 35:10). We could also translate ‘generous people’ and ‘artistic people.’ On the first expression, cf. the still broader formulations in Exod. 35:21 and 35:29. Some of the generous Israelites also bring the fruits of their artistic talent: cf. Exod. 35:25-26. On the other hand, it is emphasized in Exod. 36:2 that the technicians and artists undertook the work freely (‘everyone whose heart was stirred to come to do the work’).
Thus artistic and technical achievement rests on a special giftedness from God that is bestowed on individuals. Perhaps this subject could not be introduced in the beginning, at creation, since there the text spoke of all human beings and not of special individuals. In any case, what is here undertaken as an improvement on nature, differentiated according to the special type of work, but still in a ‘classless’ society based on spontaneity, is described with the greatest solemnity as something introduced by God’s own will into the divine creation. This is accomplished by the priestly document’s taking on the enormous task of reciting the whole story of the building and furnishing of the sanctuary, not once, but twice. First Moses is called up to God on the mountain and is given the most detailed instructions on what to do (Exodus 25-31). Then the carrying out of God’s instructions is narrated in equal detail (Exodus 36-40). Nowhere else is the priestly document so detailed. This whole procedure looks like a human continuation of the first work of creation on the six days. In fact, at the beginning of the events at Sinai, the glory of YHWH covers the mountain for six days, and on the seventh day YHWH calls Moses, in order to reveal to him the sanctuary that the people are to build (Exod. 24:16).

This work is not merely revealed in verbal instructions; rather, Moses is shown a heavenly model of the sanctuary:

‘... make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among them (= the Israelites). In accordance with all that I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle and of all its furniture, so you shall make it (Exod. 25:8-9).’

We cannot help noticing that the human being itself was made in the image of God. The Mesopotamian pre-history of this idea, at least, is acquainted with the notion that this does not simply mean that the human being is an image of God, but that God first produces, from within the Godhead, a heavenly model of the human being who is similar to God, and according to which the individual human beings will then be formed. Of course, the divine model for the sanctuary is not an image of God, but an image of God’s heavenly dwelling. Nevertheless, it is thereby made clear why human beings have been given the ability to alter nature through their own activity. It is so that the earth may be developed to resemble heaven, in order that the earth may become the dwelling place of God. On this basis, we can see what false accents Carl Amery has drawn out of the story in his book, Das Ende der Vorsehung.

Likeness to God is attributed solely to human beings. This privilege is ascribed to no other living thing, to no other creature, not even to the whole harmony of the universe. From the fact that communication with other kinds of living things, as well as with the gigantic, indifferent things of the universe is closed to human beings, it is concluded that a deep cleft has been laid between them and the rest of creation; a cleft that is not regarded as a misfortune, but rather as evidence of the fundamentally higher value of human beings. This is still true today, even for dyed-in-the-wool materialists who consider the origins of our species from a completely physiological point of view. They, no more than believers, have overcome the conviction that the human being, both in theory and in practice, is the culminating point: telos, end and goal of world history.\footnote{Amery (see n. 4 above), p. 16.}

This is the kind of conclusion that is reached when one rips a sentence from the literary context in which it belongs. The priestly document intended Gen. 1:26-28 in a different sense. Its Sinai pericope shows that, while it is true that human beings are meant to change this world, they are to change it into an image of a heavenly model in harmony with the work of the first six days. This alteration is to make it possible for God to dwell among human beings. It is not human beings, but God’s dwelling among them, that, according to the priestly document, is ‘telos, end and goal of world history.’

The doctrine of humanity that is often read out of Gen. 1:28 is thus not to be found there. No one may use this text to legitimate what humanity has inaugurated in modern times, the bitterly evil results of which appear to be showing themselves on our horizon. The Jewish-Christian tradition of humanity is different. It regards human beings very highly, but it would never designate them as absolute rulers of the universe.

\footnote{Amery (see n. 4 above), p. 16.}