A Contextual Re-evaluation of Humanity's Responsible Identity in Genesis 1:26–28, in the Light of African Sense of Ubuntu.

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Africans are popularly known for their *ubuntu* ("I am because you are") practice of communal living, in which they keep a deep sense of the sacred. However, today Africans are confronted with numerous ecological, sociopolitical, and religious challenges that contradict the Genesis theology of humanity's (*'adām's*) responsibility and personal identity. The challenges they face include pervasive Christian anthropocentricism and indifference to the plight of other humans and other creatures in our world (*hā'ădāmâ*). These and many other challenges form the basis for this paper's reevaluation of Genesis 1:26–28 with other relevant texts (Gen 1-2; Ps 8) in light of Africans, who are part of God's image (*imago dei)*. This work broadly engages in a critical-theological re-evaluation of Genesis creation theology in order to inspire contemporary *ubuntu*-conscious African and religious communities to rethink their responsibility and identity as caring (Gen 2:15) members of the community of God's creation.

Key words: African context, anthropocentricism, biodiversity (*hā'ădāmâ*), creation, identity, humankind (*'adām's*), race, responsibility, *ubuntu*.

Thesis and Argument

As recounted in Genesis 1–11, human beings (*'adām*)—including Africans—are beings known and created by God. They are humans missioned alongside other creatures, particularly land animals, on the sixth day of creation. More importantly, they are social, sexual, moral, spiritual, special, and responsible beings made in God's image (Gen 1:26–28). God's creation of humans and land animals on the same day implies that humans share with non-humans the blessing of fruitfulness—of regenerating and multiplying on the earth. They must therefore engage in fruitfulness without dominating and exploiting creation, and without inordinate anthropocentricism and without sociopolitical and religious insensitivity and indifference toward others. Humans, like all other living things, are earthy creatures; they are known by God, formed from the dust or soil (*hā'ădāmâ*) of the earth, *'adām* from the *'ădāmâ,* making us members of the community of creation. Humans therefore have an identity marked by a responsibility to engage in communal dialogue, reconciliation, and harmonious co-existence—behavior that is comparable to the African personhood and practice of *ubuntu* ("I am because you are").

Biblical texts outside of this Genesis account (Gen 1:26–28; 2:15) also speak to the question of "What is a human being?" ("*che cosa è l'uomo*"?), especially the prophetic literature, Job, Psalms, and other wisdom texts. These records affirm the place of humanity in the wider spectrum of creation. Isaiah 40:6–8, for example, attests that, "All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field." In Psalm 103:14–16 we read similarly, "He [the Lord] knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like the flowers of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more." While in Psalm 144:3 we read, "LORD, what are human beings (mâ *'ādām),* that you care for them?" Job 7:17–18 says, "What are human beings(*mâ 'ĕnōš),* that you make

so much of them, that you sent your mind on them, visit them every morning, test them every moment?"

Psalm 8 holds a similar sentiment as the previous verses. However, this passage also alludes to the creation account in Genesis 1. It answers the question "What is a human being?" more pointedly, recalling humanity's honored status and humans' responsible identity under God in the following words:

> Yet thou hast made him little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honor. Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the sea (Ps 8:5–8 RSV).[280]

Genesis 1:26–28, along with the other texts cited, touches on humankind's dominion and superiority over other creatures on the land.

This essay is written for experts and non-experts in biblical exegesis. It expands contextually on this topic, drawing on the African communal sense of *ubuntu* ("I am because you are"). It cherishes the African sense of sacredness and broadly engages in a critical-theological re-evaluation of Genesis creation theology (Gen 1:26–28) in order to inspire contemporary African communities and beyond to rethink humanity's caring and responsible position within God's creation.

[280] Unless otherwise indicated, the text that I use here is an older version of *The Bible, Containing The Old and New Testaments, Revised Standard Version With Concordance* (New York: American Bible Society, 1970). I found this interesting version in my room at St. Frances Cabrini Church, Coram, New York, where I spent the summer of 2020 writing this paper.

African's Sense of *Ubuntu* Practice and Human Interdependence

In light of this years' CABAN theme, "The Bible on Human Beings, Race and Land," this study and analysis of Genesis 1:26–28 within the African context undertakes a brief reappraisal of the African understanding of the human person and humanity's dependence on God and on other aspects of creation. In such studies, questions concerning the over-generalization or homogenization of African culture and values are often raised. In this regard, Paddy Musana notes that "the concept of the human person is encapsulated in the thoughts, and actions of the African peoples, thereby giving credence to human relationships, shaping and determining the relationships in ways that cherish and value life-supporting and positive transformative efforts in building human societies, irrespective of gender, race and religion."[281]

In his 1970 seminal work on *African Religions and Philosophy*, John S. Mbiti, a respectable Kenyan theologian, speaks to the concept of the human person in an African context when he writes:

> Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his own being, his own duties, his privileges and responsibilities towards himself and towards other people. When he suffers, he does not suffer alone but with the corporate group; when he rejoices, he rejoices not alone but with his kinsmen, his neighbours and the relatives whether dead or alive… The individual can only say: I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am. This is the

[281] Paddy Musana, "The African Concept of Personhood and Its Relevance to Respect to Human Life and Dignity in Africa and the Global Context," *Africa Study Monograph* 56 (March 2018): 22.

> cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man.[282]

Mbiti's definition of the human person in Africa draws on not only religion, but also the widely and continuously celebrated concept of *ubuntu*.[283] Recently, this concept is well articulated in Archbishop Desmond Tutu's granddaughter Mungi Ngomane's work, *Everyday Ubuntu: Living Better Together, The African Way*. Mungi argues that the concept of *ubuntu* is found in almost all African *Bantu* languages. It is rooted in the word "*bantu*," meaning "people," and often denotes the importance of community and connection, as earlier stressed by Mbiti and other African theologians and anthropologists.[284] Mungi further observes that the communal richness of *ubuntu* is aptly expressed in both Xhosa and Zulu proverbs of

[282] See Mbiti as cited in Musana, "Personhood," 22–23.

[283] See also Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1999), 256, where, while addressing the human person in Africa, said: "it is religion, more than anything else, which colors their understanding of the universe and their empirical participation in that universe, making life a profoundly religious phenomenon."

[284] Mungi Ngomane, *Everyday Ubuntu: Living Better Together, The African Way* (New York: Harper Design, 2020), 14. Other African theologians, philosophers, and anthropologist's works that have commented on African personhood and holistic, communal-cultural identity include: Engelbet Mveng, "Black African Art as Cosmic Liturgy and Religious Languages," in *African Theology En Route*, ed. Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1979), 141; Jean-Marc Ela, *My Faith as an African* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf &Stock, 2009), 6, 43; Bénézet Bujo, "Ecology and Ethical Responsibility from an African Perspective," in *African Ethics: An Anthology of Comparative and Applied Ethics*, ed. Munyaradzi Felix Murove (Scottvile: University of Kwazulu-Natal Press, 2009), 281; Laurenti Magesa, *What Is Not Sacred? African Spirituality* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2013), 106; Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Random House, 1999), 196; Chukwunyere Kamalu, *Person, Divinity & Nature: A Modern View of the Person and the Cosmos in African Though*t (London: Karnak House, 1998), 31; and Christophère Ngolele, "African Wisdom in Dialogue with *Laudato si'*: An Environmental Ethics Based on the Paradigm of Recognition and Sacred Care," *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 16, no. 1 (2019): 5–19.

southern Africa, "*umuntu, ngumuntu, ngabantu*," meaning "a person is a person through other person."[285]

This concept must have inspired the political icon and freedom fighter Nelson Mandela, who gave everything to defend African personhood by fighting to free South African people from decades of apartheid, racism, segregation, and dehumanization. As is evident in his rich, lengthy autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom*, he identified with his suffering and oppressed people. He sacrificed a lot for them. He was not present at his mother's burial in 1968, nor was he present at the burial of his first son, Thembi, who died in a motor accident at the age of 25 in 1969.[286]

Mandela's argument against apartheid and racism in the courtroom of Rivonia during his 1964 trial was remarkably characterized by *ubuntu* and self-sacrifice. In his closing arguments, he said:

> During my lifetime, I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But, if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die. [287]

Mandela's display of *ubuntu* throughout his life, as attested in his 1994 autobiography, was unique in its extent. However, *ubuntu,* communal living, is indisputably a common experience throughout Africa. In Rwanda and Burundi it means "human generosity." In certain parts of Kenya "*utu*"

[285] Ngomane, *Ubuntu*, 14.

[286] Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (Great Britain: Little Brown and Company, 1994), 529–31.

[287] Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 436.

expresses that every action should be for the benefit of the community of creation. In certain parts of Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria, some villages bear the name "*utu edem usung*" or "*utu ikot edem udo*," which echoes a sense of community living. In Malawi, "*uMunthu*" conveys the idea that "on your own you are no better than wild animal, but two or more people make a community."[288]

This is not dissimilar to what Kevin Vanhoozer said in 1997: "The human creature is neither an autonomous individual nor an anonymous unit that has been assimilated into some collectivity, but rather a particular person who achieves a concrete identity in relation to others. Human being is inherently social."[289]

Africans' Dependence on Other Creatures

In his work "Environmental Ethics," David Gushee observes that all human beings, including Africans who practice *ubuntu*, are dependent not only on their fellow humans, but they also need a "healthy environment."[290] Humans (*'ādām*) "need clean air to breathe, sufficient clean water to drink, fertile and healthy soil, land to till, healthy neighbor-creatures for clothing, food and medicine, reasonably stable climate systems, and temperature within a livable range."[291] Christophère Ngolele, an African sociocultural anthropologist, affirms that, "An African, traditionally speaking, qualifies for full human identity only insofar as he or she lives in harmonious relationships with fellow humans beings, the

[288] Ngomane, *Ubuntu*, 14.

[289] Kevin Vanhoozer, "Human Being, Individual and Social," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 158.

[290] David Gushee, "Environmental Ethics: Bringing Creation Care Down to Earth," in *Keeping God's Earth: The Global Environment in Biblical Perspective,* ed. Noah J. Toly and Daniel I. Block (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 250–51.

[291] Ibid., 251.

ancestors, created nature, and God."[292] But, unfortunately, this is not always the case in Africa, despite Africans' access to the Genesis account of creation. Africa is home to deforestation, persistent droughts, pollution, global warming, diminishing water supplies, and declining productivity from agricultural pastoral lands, worsening food security, heightened levels of poverty and diseases, burning of bushes, and over hunting, which has endangered many animal species.[293] I saw a deer for the first time in my life in the United States of America because none existed in my native African village. Other biodiversity crises that are antithetical to both the Genesis account and African-*ubuntu* understanding of personhood in relation to other parts of creation include an unethical feeling of superiority, the practice of perverse anthropocentricism, and the instrumentalist sense of disorderly abuse of the environment and other members of the community of creation.

Pope Francis discussed such abuse in his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'* ("On Care of Our Common Home"). In relation to the human person (*'ādām*), Francis speaks in this document about the "crisis and effects of modern anthropocentricism," wherein human beings everywhere place themselves as the center of the world, abuse other parts of creation, and refuse to recognize their true responsibility to protect the dignity of all.[294] This has brought about humanitarian, ethical, cultural, spiritual, and anthropological crises.[295] The effects of anthropocentricism are practical and cultural relativism, which includes extreme biological technologies that may use human embryos for experiments, thereby ignoring that "the

[292] Ngolele, "African Wisdom," 5.

[293] For more of these calamities in the community of creation, see Joseph Kisoi Masika, "Doing Ecology With African Creation Wisdom," *Didache: Faithful Teaching* 12, no. 1 (Summer 2012): 1.

[294] Pope Francis, *On Care for Our Common Home, Laudato Si',* encyclical letter (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), no. 115.

[295] *Laudato Si'*, no. 119.

inalienable worth of human being transcends his or her degree of development"[296]

The exorbitant anthropocentric environment we live in today has exposed our broken humanity and identity. As Doug Moo argues, the "pervasive anthropocentric understanding of the divine program of redemption needs to be revised."[297] Ngolele, like Block, Douglas, Pope Francis, and others, agrees that we need to review our understanding of the human person. His argues, "The distorted relationships with nature that we are witnessing call us to revisit our identity, since our identity is determined by the quality of our relationships."[298] We need to ask: What is a man (or human being)? *Che cosa è l'uomo?* Outside of our gender, race, social status, and social responsibility, what makes up our identity? I believe the answer lies in an exegetical and theological re-reading of Genesis 1:26–28 and related biblical texts (Ps 8:1–10).[299] What is a human being according to Genesis 1:26–28?

Human Beings in Genesis 1:26–28 and Related Texts

In the beginning of this work, I mentioned that Psalm 8:5–8 answers the question posed by the psalmist earlier in Psalm 8:1–4:

> *O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth! ... When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou*

[296] *Laudato Si'*, nos. 130–36.

[297] See Daniel I. Block, "To Serve and to Keep: Towards a Biblical Understanding of Humanity's Responsibility in the Face of Biodiversity Crisis," in *Keeping God's Earth: The Global Environment in Biblical Perspective,* ed. Noah J. Toly and Daniel I. Block (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 120; Douglas J. Moo, "Eschatology and Environmental Ethics," in *Keeping God's Earth: The Global Environment in Biblical Perspective,* ed. Noah J. Toly and Daniel I. Block (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 23–24.

[298] Ngolele, "African Wisdom," 5.

[299] Significant related biblical texts here include Psalm 114:3 and Job 7:17–18.

> *hast established; what is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him?* (Ps 8:1–4 RSV).

The basis for Psalm 8:1–4, many would argue, is Genesis 1:26–28, the primary focus of this work, which reads:

Verse	Transliteration from MT	My English Adaptation
v.26a	Wəyyo'mer 'ĕlōhîm na ˈă'ṡeh ´ādām bəṣalmēnû kidmûtēnû	Then God said, "let us make human being in our own image, according to our likeness;
v.26b	yəyîrdû bidgath hayyām ûbə'ôph hāššmayîm ûbabbəhēmā ûbəkôl hā´āreṣ	And let them rule over the fish of the sea, and birds of the sky (heaven), and over the cattle and all the earth;
v.26c	Ûbəkôl hāremeṡ 'al-hā´āreṣ	and all the creeping things that creeps over the earth
v.27a	Wayyîbərā' 'ĕlōhîm 'eth- hā ˈādām bəṣalmô bəṣelem 'ĕlōhîm bārā´	And God created mankind (human being) in his own image, in the image of God he created them;
v.27b	'ōtô zākār ûnəqēbāh bārā´ 'ōtôm	male and female he created them
v.28a	Wayəbārek 'ōtôm, 'ĕlōhîm wayyōmer lāhem 'ĕlōhîm pərû ûrəbû,	And God blessed them and God said to them be fruitful and multiply,
v.28b	Ûmil'û 'al-hā´āreṣ wəkibšûhā, ûrədû bidgath hayyām ûbə'ôph haššāmayîm	And fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky
v.28c	Ûbəkôl-hayyâ hārōmeṡet ˈal- hā´āreṣ.[300]	And over everything that moves over the earth.

[300] For those who may want to read, follow, compare, or listen to this text in Greek, the LXX version reads*: Kai eipen ho Theos poiēsōmen anthrōpon kat' eikona hēmeteran ka kath' homoiōsin, kai archetōsan tōn ichthuōn tēs thalasēs kai tōn peteinōn tou ouranou, kai tōn ktēnōn kai pasēs tēs gēs ka pantōn tōn herpetōv tōn herpontōn epi tēs gēs* (v.26). *Kai epoiēse ho Theos ton anthrōpon kat' eikonia theou epoiēsen auton arsen kai thēlu epoiēsen autous*(v. 27). *Kai ēulogēsen autous ho Theos legōn auxanesthe ka plēthunesthe ka plērōsate tēn gēn, kai katakurieusate autēs ka archete tōn ichthuōn tēs thalasēs kai tōn peteivōn tou auranou kai*

Genesis 1:26–28 points not only to the anthropological constitution of human beings, but to human beings as special, responsible, social, sexual, moral, and spiritual creatures.

Anthropologically, within the context of the Genesis creation accounts (Gen 1–2), Genesis 1:26–28 points to the constitution, limitations, and potential of human beings (*ʹādām*). We see this in Genesis 1:26a, "Let us make man (*ʹādām*) in our own image," when read in connection with Genesis 2:7. Stressing the anthropological element of human beings, Genesis 2:7 says, "then the LORD God formed man (*ʹādām*) from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being"(*wayyîṣer ădonai ʻēlōhîm ʻeth- hā ʾādām ʻāphār min-hā'ădāmâ, wayyîphaḥ bə'appâw nišmath ḥayyîm, wayəhî hā ʾādām lənepheš hāyyâ*).[301]

One of several commentaries written on this text that appeals to me is written by Brian S. Rosner, who believes that the "dust" (*ʻāphār)* from which we are made reminds us of our connection with other things on earth, while the "soul" (*nepheš*) distinguishes us from other living creatures.[302] The use of the word "dust" (*ʻāphār),* Rosner insists, "emphasizes both our physical frailty and the fact that we come from the 'ground' and will return to 'dust.' "[303] *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* edited by Michael D. Coogan offers us a perspectival summary of the notion of "dust" in relation to the human being (*ʹādām*):

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pantōn ktēnōn kai pasēs tēs gēs kai pantōn tōn herpetōn tōn herpontōn epi tēs gēs (v.28).

[301] The Greek/LXX reads: *Kai eplasen ho theos ton anthrōpon choun apo tēs gēs ka enephusēsen eis to prosōpon autou pnoēn zōēs kai egeneto ho anthrōpos eis phychēn zōsan* (Gen 2:7).

[302] Brian S. Rosner, *Known By God: A Biblical Theology of Personal Identity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 66.

[303] Ibid., 66.

> The wordplay on Heb "'*adam*" (human being; here translated "man" [cf. 1.26]) and "'*adamah*" (arable land/soil; here *ground*) introduces a motif characteristic of this tradition: the relation of humankind to the soil from which it was *formed*. Human nature is not a duality of body and soul; rather God's *breath* animates the *dust* and it becomes a single *living being* (Ps 104.29; Job 34.14–15).[304]

Kenneth Matthew also speaks on the significance of humanity's being made from dust. His words seem to cover other relevant biblical passages:

> God is depicted as the porter who forms Israel (Isa 64:8; Jer 18: 6; cp. *Sir* 33:13; Rom 9:20). "Dust" as constitutive of human existence anticipates [Gen] 3:19, where the penalty for the man's sin is his return to "dust" (e.g., Job 34:15). While "dust" may also show that man is fragile physically (e.g., Job 10:8–9; Ps 103:14), the intent of the passage is the association of human life and the basic substance of our making. A second play on the words "man" (*ʾādām*) and "ground" (*ʾădāmâ*) becomes apparent: man is related to the "ground" by his very constitution (3:19), making him perfectly suited for the task of working the "ground," which is required for cultivation (2:5, 15).[305]

Other than this wordplay on the words "man" (*ʾādām*) and "ground" (*ʾădāmâ*)—and its associate implication that man is

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[304] See the summary commentary of this in Michael D. Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: Augmented Third Edition with the Apocrypha/Deuterocanonical Books, New Revised Standard Version* (Oxford; NY: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[305] See Kenneth A. Matthew, *Genesis 1–11*, NAC 1A (Nashville: Bradman & Holman, 1996), 196.

related to the ground—this text also brings up the matter of the living soul or living being (*nepheš hāyyâ).* The Hebrew word *nepheš* (LXX *psychē*) is defined in *BDB* as "that which breathes, the breathing substance or being, the inner being of man" and is commonly translated by the words, "soul, living being, life, self or person."[306] *Nepheš* in Genesis 2:7, as observed by Rosner, refers to the "whole person and not to some immaterial part of us."[307] In the Hebrew Bible as well as the New Testament, other terms such as "heart" (*kardia*), "spirit"(*pneuma*, *ruaḥ*), "liver," "kidneys," "bowels," "flesh"(*sarx*), "body" (*sōma*), and "mind" (*nous*) are also used in different contexts to refer to different aspects of human beings.

The biblical anthropological terms we've just reviewed shed light on the essence, limitation, potential, and meaning of the human person. Human beings are more than bodies. Human beings are more than flesh. Human beings, as Rosner would put it, are beings with a mind and heart, which are capable of the highest thoughts and deepest emotion. And as souls and spirits, human beings are alive and have the capacity to connect with the living God. Human beings are also special in that they are defined by relationship, as attested in the Genesis account.[308]

God Made Human Beings in His Image and Likeness (Genesis 1:26)

In Genesis 1:26a we read: "let us make human being in our own image, according to our likeness." This text, as well as other biblical texts, helps us understand better the meaning of the human person. In the past, scholars have offered various theological and philosophical speculations as to the meaning

306 The point I am making here is equally stressed in Rosner, *Personal Identity*, 67.

307 Ibid., 67.

308 Ibid., 74.

of "image" (*ṣelem*) and "likeness" (*dĕmût*) of God in this passage. A few texts in the initial chapters of Genesis offer some clues as to the meaning of the "image" (*ṣelem*) and "likeness" (*dĕmût*) of God.

A good example is Genesis 5:3, where we read that Adam's son Seth is "in his likeness, in his image" (NRSV). Read in connection with Genesis 1:26, this suggests that the divine likeness was continued in Adam's son Seth and was transmitted to the succeeding generation in spite of the fall. The passing on of the "image of God" is more explicit in Genesis 9:6, where we read, "Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind" (NRSV). This text, like Genesis 1, is a reminder that human beings (*ʾādām*) of all colors, cultures, and genders are special. Other creatures—every moving thing—may be killed and eaten, but not humans, since their blood is sacred (Gen 9:3) and they have a special place with God, from whose image and likeness they were created.[309]

Many have observed that the terms "image" (*ṣelem*) and "likeness" (*dĕmût*) of God are used interchangeably or synonymously in Genesis 1:26.[310] It is argued that this may point to a bifold nature of human relationships. As the "likeness" of God, humans stand before him dependent and petitionary, while before the world they function as theophanies, imitating God in perpetuity and registering "his everlasting presence in the world."[311] As the "image" (*ṣelem*) of God, human beings (male and female, black and white, Africans and non-Africans, young and old) stand before God

[309] Moo, *Creation Care*, 74.

[310] Nahum Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Text with the New JPS Translation*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 12; Block, "To Serve and To Keep," 127.

[311] For some of these arguments, see W. Randall Garr, *In His Own Image and Likeness: Humanity, Divinity, and Monotheism,* CHANE 15 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 118–32 as cited in Block, "To Serve and To Keep," 127.

as his vice regents, through whom he administers divine lordship and justice in the world.[312]

In other words, since he made human beings in his image, "God authorizes human beings to serve as his deputies and his representatives, commissioning them to care for the world as he would were he physically present."[313] Moo observes that Christians have usually read the plural that suddenly occurs in verse 26, "*na ʿă'šeh ʾādām bəṣalmēnû kidmûtēnû*" ("let *us* make human being in our own image and likeness"), as "a signal of Trinitarianism, a hint of God's existence in three persons as Father, Sons, and Holy Spirit."[314] The reading, he further remarks, "has some resonance with the common ancient Near Eastern conception of deity with his divine council, whom God may be considered to be addressing here."[315] However, this plural expression could be looked at as the portrayal of a God whose life-giving Spirit (breath) is at work. His Word hints at the later biblical theme of the Spirit, who gives life to God's people, and Christ, the Word through whom the universe came into being.[316] The singular pronouns return in the very next verse (Genesis 1:27, "*bəṣalmô bəṣelem ʿēlōhîm bārāʾ*" ["in his own image, in the image of God he created them"]), suggesting that "whomever God is addressing in verse 26 is not outside of God (*ʿēlōhîm*) himself."[317] It has nothing to do with color (black, brown, and white, yellow), culture, or gender (male, female). It is antithetical to the ongoing racism and gender discrimination in our society today.

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312 See Garr, *In His Own Image and Likeness*, 132–65; Block, "To Serve and To Keep," 127–28.

313 Block, "To Serve and To Keep," 128.

314 Moo, *Creation Care*, 74.

315 Ibid., 74.

316 Ibid.

317 Ibid., 75.

God Made Human Beings "Male and Female" (Genesis 1:27).

Another intriguing exegetical observation in Genesis 1:26–27 is that the plural pronoun appears here, and only here, at the creation of human beings (*ʹādām*). An additional observation is that "In Genesis 1 the creation of humanity is the longest section and the apex of the account. The important verb *bārāʹ*, 'create' is repeated three times (v. 27; cf. vv. 1, 21), and is the only instance when God blesses his creation."[318] In fact, it is only God who can *bārāʹ* ("create"). Uniquely, "male and female he created them" (*zākār ûnəqēbāh bārāʹ ʻōtôm*). Noticeable and significant is the plural pronoun "them" (*ʻōtôm/ autous*) used in the end of verse 27. That is to say, "male and female he created *them*."

In this plural pronoun is found a profound sense of *ubuntu,* an African communal theology of living. It is antithetical to racism, ethnocentrism, and all kinds of segregation. According to Moo, it bears a sense of the "irreducible relationality of human beings made in God's image, created for community and intended to reflect in our relationships the unifying love that is at the center of the being of the triune God."[319] In Genesis 1:27, to be human—male or female, black or white, young or old, rich or poor—is to be known and loved by God as his image bearer. African scholar Gesela Nneka Uzukwu fittingly cites Genesis 1:27c in her work *The Unity of Male and Female in Jesus Christ: An exegetical Study of Galatians 3.28c in Light of Paul's Theology of Promise.* Uzukwu's primary focus is to highlight how Paul's expression "there is not among you male and female" (*ouk eni arsen kai thēlu*) in Galatian 3:28c explains the nature of the promise God made to Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 17 and how the Christian believers in Galatian might benefit from that promise in order to foster

318 Philip S. Johnson, "Humanity," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. D. Alexandar and B. S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 564.

319 Moo, *Creation Care,* 75.

Christian unity. Using the thematic-epistolographical approach, Uzukwu suggests other sources that might have influenced Galatians 3:28, including: the three expressions of gratitude found in Greek sources, the three blessings of gratitude found in rabbinic texts, and Genesis 1:27c LXX.[320] Every human person—white, black, and brown, male and female, young and old—is intended to reflect God's promise of love, unity, and "*ubuntuism*" as we reflect his image and rule in the community of his creation. This is especially true in Africa, and Nigeria in particular, where tribalism and ethnocentrism have become endemic and detrimental to all sectors of life.

There is no better way to sum up the analysis of Genesis 1:26–27 than with these words from Douglas and Jonathan Moo:

> We bear God's image not by virtue of our wisdom, our reason, our stature, our strength, or even our capacity for moral judgment (and I would add color, tribe, continent, age, wealth, or gender). A baby bears God's image just as you or I do, and as do the physically and mentally infirm. The stress in Scripture on the universality of the image of God demands that we recognize the image of God in all human beings. In fact, it is often especially through children and the apparently weak that God reveals his purposes.[321]

[320] Gesila Nneka Uzukwu, *The Unity of Male and Female In Jesus Christ: An Exegetical Study of Galatians 3.28c in the Light of Paul's Theology of Promise* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), esp., 202–4. See also Michael Ufok Udoekpo's review of Uzukwu's work in *Theological Book Review* 27, no. 1 (2016): 227–28.

[321] Moo, *Creation Care*, 75.

God Said, "Be Fruitful, Multiply, Fill the Earth and Subdue it" (Genesis 1:28)

God's purpose in creating human beings (*ʼādām*) in his own "image" is not only that they may "rule over other creatures" (Gen 1:26), but also that they would be "fruitful and multiply" (*pərû ûrəbû*), "fill the earth" (*ûmilʾû ʻal-hāʾāreṣ*), and "subdue it" (*wəkibšûhā*, Gen 1:28). This is not to say that God did not give other creatures their own space. The sea creatures, for instance, are to "fill the waters in the seas" (Gen 1:22). Other creatures, like fish, birds, and land animals, also have their appropriate places to experience the shared and generous blessings of God. But human beings are specifically given the unique role to subdue and rule the earth, land, and other creatures.[322]

In Garr's view, the words "to subdue" (*kābaš*) and "to rule" or "to exercise dominion" (*rādâ*) are very strong words that may connote some type of "aggressive style of royal leadership."[323] Interestingly, the LXX translation of "to rule" or "to have dominion over" and "to lord over" is *"katakyrieuō."* This verb is used in the Gospels and in other New Testament texts to refer to how followers of Christ are not meant to exercise exploitative leadership and dominion over one another (Matt 20:25–28; Mark 10:42–45; 1 Pet 5:3).[324]

There are other passages in the Old Testament where "land" or "earth" is the object of the subduing. These passages often relate to the conquest of the land of Canaan, "when the land is subdued [*wəhāʾāreṣ nikbbašâ*] before the LORD" (Num 32:22, 29; Josh 18:1; 1 Chr 22:18).**[325]** This indicates a link "between the creation and exodus/conquest stories in the Old Testament, which among other things, suggest that Israel's

322 Ibid., 76.

323 See Garr, *In His Own Image and Likeness*, 132–65; Block, "To Serve and To Keep," 128.

324 See Moo, *Creation Care*, 76.

325 Ibid., 77.

place on the land can be seen as a microcosm of humanity's place on earth."[326] It captures the constant struggle and politicking undertaken to subdue and dominate others that humanity continues to witness today in different parts of the world. Block and other scholars would call this type of world "a fallen world." In a fallen world, leadership often turns into exploitation, as if those who are led exist for the sake of their leaders.[327] Some leaders are even portrayed this way in the Old Testament, such as kings like Rehoboam (1 Kgs 12:6–15) or David (2 Sam 12:1–7), or the heads of the households like Abraham (Gen 12:10-20; 20:17). The biblical account, however, insists that leaders exist for the sake of the citizens rather than vice versa.[328]

Moo stresses that our "*ʾādāmic* vocation"—the vocation of all human beings, whether male or female, young or old, black, brown, or white—is "to work and take care of the place where God has planted us, to serve him in our rule of creation as priests in the temple."[329] Taking care of the earth and one another is central to human beings' identity as God's image. The ruling and subduing called for in Genesis 1:28 must be done with reference to Genesis 2:15. It is the peace and blessing that God provides to every human person. In fact, in light of political conflicts and domination of others, God appoints kings "to maintain justice and righteousness" (1 Kgs 10:9), as the queen of Sheba observed regarding Solomon's reign over Israel.[330]

The description of God's ideal king in the Hebrew Bible, as rightly cited by Moo, can also be our contemporary guide. In Deuteronomy 17:18–20, for instance, we find that the king is meant to rule as the first among equals, and as one whose

[326] Ibid., 77.

[327] See Block, "To Serve and To Keep,"128.

[328] Ibid., 129.

[329] Moo, *Creation Care,* 78.

[330] See Moo, *Creation Care,* 78.

rule is first and foremost for the benefit of those under his care. He is to rule with a deep sense of *ubuntu* to everyone. As explicitly noted in the following texts, he is not to exploit, corrupt, or be selfish but to rule under God's law and be subjected to God as others are:[331]

> When he has taken the throne on his kingdom, he shall have a copy this law written for him in the presence of the levitical priests. It is shall remain with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes, neither exalting himself above other members of the community nor turning aside from the commandments, either to the right or to the left, so that he and his descendants may reign long over his kingdom in Israel. (Deut 17:18–20)[332]

We hear similar a responsibility in regard to human kings, who are to administer justice, peace, mercy, kindness, compassion, righteousness, and everyday *ubuntu* to all, especially the poor and the oppressed (Isa 61:1–3; Luke 4:18–19). The king is to maintain moral order with God's assistance, as we see in Psalm 72:

> Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son. May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness. May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor. May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all

[331] See Moo, *Creation Care,* 78.

[332] This text is from *NRSV*.

> generations. May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth. (Ps 72:1–6).

To subdue and rule the land and the earth ("*wəhā'āreṣ nikbbašâ*") as images of God means that human beings (*ʹādām*) all over the world, people of every status, kings and non-kings—including those in African countries—are to pattern their style of governing the world according to the model of the divine Shepherd in Psalm 23 (cf. Jer 23; Ezek 34; John 10:10). A good shepherd lives with the smells of the sheep, provides for them, protects them, knows them, and stands by *all* the sheep, irrespective of their color.[333]

In the broader context of Genesis 2 and the entire Genesis narrative, we find spelled out very clearly a better way of analyzing Genesis 1:28 or God's purpose of creating humankind (*ādām*). Genesis 2:15 reads: "The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and take care of it" (*wayyiqqâ ādōnay ʹēlōhîm ʹeth- hā'ādām wayyaniḥēhû bəgan ʻēden lə'ābədāh ûləšāmərāh*). Many have observed that the verbs *ʻābad* ("to serve") and *šāmar* ("to keep, till, work, guard") have different meanings in different contexts and can even be used to describe different services Levites

[333] For further analysis of the "good shepherd" motif in Ezekiel 34, see Michael U. Udoekpo, review of *"I Shall Feed Them with Good Pasture" (Ezek 34:14): The Shepherd Motif in Ezekiel 34: Its Theological Import and Socio-political Implications*, by Ignatius M.C. Obinwa, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 75, no. 3 (2013): 561–63. As noted, "This voluminous monograph reflects Obinwa's Habilitation project (*Habilitations- arbeit),* completed at the University of Augsburg, Germany, under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Franz Sedlmeier (2012). It concentrates primarily on how the metaphor of kings and leaders as shepherds is used in Ezekiel 34 to indict those bad and irresponsible leaders in Israel who refuse to acknowledge their roles as God's viceroys (w. 1–10). As a result, God takes over the care of the flock as the good shepherd (w. 11–24), restoring the remnant with a covenant of peace (vv. 25–31). In eight readable chapters, 0.'s moves beyond the usual exegetical analysis of Ezekiel 34, to examine its hermeneutical and theological values, with sociopolitical import for contemporary society."

render in the tabernacle (Num 3:7; 8:26; 18:7).[334] Block sees the priests and Levites' service in the tabernacle and temple, through which they maintained the covenant relationship between Israel and God, as "a microcosm of the world so that the man was charged to serve and guard the garden, thereby ensuring the operation of Yahweh's covenant with the world in general and living things in the garden in particular."[335] In fact, although many translations render '*ābad* as "till" or "cultivate," when used of cultivation, the object of the verb is usually "the ground" (*hā' ădāmâ*).[336]

The verb *šāmar* sheds light on the meaning of Genesis 1:28 as well. Although it is usually used to refer to "keeping" God's commandments, according to Moo, in the Genesis account, "*šāmar*" equally refers to "keeping watch over," "guarding," "preserving," and protecting" people (of all races), animals(of all kinds), or places (of all cultures and regions).[337] As the image (*ṣelem*) and likeness (*dĕmût*) of God, our care, our sense of unity and *ubuntu*, and our love for and protection of the earth and one another "is thus a reflection of the care and protection that God shows to us."[338]

Moo's sentiment regarding the identity of the human person in Genesis 1:26–28 is reflected in Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'*. In it, Francis points to humanity's failure to recognize that Genesis 1:28 does not encourage the exploitation of nature, the abuse of nature, or inordinate dominion over others. Francis calls for a proper contextual

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334 Block, "To Serve and To Keep," 130; Moo, *Creation Care*, 78. See also G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of Dwelling Place of God*, NSBT 17 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 66–70; John H. Walton, *Genesis*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 192–93.

335 Block, "To Serve and To Keep," 130.

336 See this observation also in Block, "To Serve and to Keep," 130. Block additionally lists Gen 2:5; 3:23; 4:2, 12; 2 Sam 9:10; Zech 13:5; Prov 12:11; 28:19.

337 Moo, *Creation Care*, 78.

338 Ibid., 78.

hermeneutic of faith that is sensitive to Genesis 2:15, as suggested earlier in this paper. He stresses and exhorts humanity (*ādām*) to till, cultivate, plough, keep, protect, preserve, and care for the planet. For him, these are all verbs of faith, which illuminate the mutual and responsible relationship (*ubuntu*) between human beings (*ādām*), nature, and their neighbors.[339]

Conclusion

What precedes is an attempted theological, contextual, and exegetical analysis of and discussion of the meaning and responsible identity of human beings (*'adām*) in Genesis 1:26–28. Our discussion was set within the African' communal practice of *ubuntu* ("I am because you are") and in relation with other biblical texts (Gen 2:7, 15; Pss 8; 103; Job 7:17–18). We argued throughout this paper that all human beings—male and female, black and white, old and young, of all races and cultures—are beings known and created in the image and likeness ("*bəṣalmô bəṣelem 'ĕlōhîm bārā'*") of God. They were commissioned and missioned alongside other biodiverse creatures, particularly land animals, on the sixth day of creation. They are flesh that are frail and weak, driven by desires. As beings with minds and hearts, they are capable of the highest thoughts and the deepest emotions. As souls and spirits, they are alive and have the capacity to connect with God and other creatures responsibly.

More importantly, they are social, sexual, moral, spiritual, special, and responsible beings made in God's image (Gen 1:26–28). This implies that the blessing of fruitfulness—of regeneration and multiplying on the earth—is one all human lives share with non-human lives, without unnecessary domination and exploitation or inordinate anthropocentricism,

[339] See Pope Francis, *Laudato Si',* nos. 67–68, especially as cited and discussed extensively by Michael Ufok Udoekpo, *Israel's Prophets and the Prophetic Effects of Pope Francis: A Pastoral Companion* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2018), 91–93.

and without sociopolitical and religious insensitivity and indifference toward others. Human beings, like all other living things, are earthy creatures. They are known by God. They are formed from the dust or the soil (*hā'ădāmâ*) of the earth, *'adām* from the *'ădāmâ,* making us members of the community of creation. We thus have an identity grounded in and a responsibility to pursue communal dialogue, reconciliation, and harmonious co-existence, comparable to African personhood and practice of *ubuntu* ("I am because you are").

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