THE OLD TESTAMENT IN UNIVERSAL ART: THE HERMENEUTIC ACT BETWEEN THE DESCRIPTIVE AND NORMATIVE APPROACH

Abstract

The subject I am proposing draws attention first to the possibilities universal art presents in terms of the reception and valorisation of biblical texts in theological and cultural environments. Over the years, the transposition of biblical texts into plastic arts has been a hermeneutic act, understood as an "art of interpretation". Thus, how the biblical text was perceived became a mirror of the hermeneutic act, perceived as a process of interpretation, in which both the author and the world before them, which they address, are present. This world entails the (post)modern one, about which the great works of art which tackle a biblical subject are meant to reveal their "kerygmatic nature".

REV. ION REȘCEANU

Faculty of Orthodox Theology
University of Craiova
ionresceanu@yahoo.com

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Introduction

The choice of this subject is motivated by my personal experience, following a course on biblical hermeneutics and universal art that I am giving, based on which I would like to underscore the alternative ways of perception of the biblical text, which we can put forward and which we can use when interacting with the post-modern world. Therefore, this study aims to emphasise concrete ways of perceiving, interpreting, and cultivating the scriptural text through art, bearing in mind the challenges of such a hermeneutic endeavour for the post-modern world.

The interpretation of the scriptural text with the help of works of art originating in the biblical period facilitates the hermeneutic act by offering the possibility to use those clues reflected in art, which are provided by the most common cultural background of the Ancient Middle East. Thus, we are not limited strictly to the culture of Ancient Israel, constrained, depending on the historical epoch it belongs to in terms of artistic expression, by the interdiction of the second commandment of the Decalogue (Ex 20:4-5; Dt 5:8) (Pentiuc 2019, 322; Zimmerli 1978, 120-4; Reșceanu 2018, 166, 170).

In this context, we have chosen to dwell upon a major biblical subject, namely the creation of man and his relationship with divinity, trying to understand the meaning of the act of creating man from the dust from the ground (Gn 2:7), with the help of art and of ancient culture in terms of hermeneutics. Having in mind this desideratum, we should not forget that, even if such a hermeneutic act entails the research of ancient works of art, it must not remain strictly descriptive, but also needs to emphasise its normative character as regards the faith.

The Creation of Man and His Relationship with Divinity in the Context of the Art of the Ancient Middle East

An important help in the interpretation of the act of God creating man from the dust from the ground is provided by *Egyptian art*, to which we can resort not only for its antiquity but also for its great spiritual character. Here, we encounter the image of king Khnum, represented before the potter's wheel, where he creates man (Sarna 1989, 17). Khnum is one of the earliest-known deities, originally the god of water. His image is strongly connected to the flooding of the Nile and the fertilisation of its valley, as it brought the clay, which, as a potter, he used to create man. His most important temple is on Elephantine Island, where we can find many of his representations. The representation of king Khnum as a potter is full of symbolism, showing, through the solemnity of the act of creation, authority, and power, which, using the masterful work of the two hands, seems to share the special dignity that man receives from his very creation.

The same concepts that we can find at the beginning of Egyptian civilisation are also present much later, in the Wisdom of Amenemope. Man is fashioned by the gods out of clay and straw, the focus being, once again, on the almightiness of the gods compared to the relativity of men: "As for man, he is only clay and straw, while the god is the one who fashioned him. The god destroys and the god makes (people)

every day. He makes thousands of people down there if he wishes so..." (Daniel 1974, 172) [our translation].

The relation between divinity and man, as revealed by Ancient Egyptian art, can also be seized, using the same conceptual terms, by observing the suzerain-vassal relationship in the Tell-el-Amarna texts. The over 380 tablets discovered at Tell-el-Amarna, which represent part of the royal archive in the time of king Akhetaten (Amenhotep IV, c. 1350-1334), contain Egypt's diplomatic correspondence with other major powers from the Ancient Middle East (44) and especially with the vassal states of Canaan and Northern Syria (over 300). They use cuneiform writing, and the Akkadian language (East Semitic/Babylonian), which, in the 4th century BC, had become the *lingua franca* in the Ancient Middle East. It was already a foreign language, both for Egyptians and their addressees in Canaan, Northern Syria and even Mesopotamia, who were no longer using it, at that moment being spoken only on its Western outskirts (Na'aman 1992, 171-3).

The correspondence with the great kings of Babylon, Assyria, Mitanni or Hatti, often called "great king" or "brother", is done by following the equality of political status. For the correspondence with the vassal kings of Canaan or Northern Syria, the tone used was always humiliating, to underline the superiority of the Pharaoh compared to the inferiority of the addressee (Na'aman 1992, 174-6). The same humility forms of address are also used by the vassal king when addressing his suzerain. Such an example is that of Milkilu, the Canaanite king of Gezer, who addresses the Pharaoh as follows: "Say to the king, my lord, my Sun, my god: Message of Milkilu, your servant, and the dirt at your feet, the ground you tread on. I prostrate myself at the feet of the king, my lord, the Sun from the sky 7 times. May the king, my lord, be informed that the war against me and Šuwardata is severe. The king, my lord, cast your land from the hands of the Khabiru! May the king, my lord, send chariots to fetch them, lest our servants kill us!" (Moscati 1975, 110).

We, therefore, see that, about his suzerain, the vassal king is associated with the dust and dirt from the ground. He prostrates himself at the feet of his master, in token of humility and acknowledgement of the full authority the latter has over him.

The same reality of the relation between the suzerain and the vassal is also present in *Assyrian art*. In the Ancient Middle East, Assyrian art stands out through its concision, through its direct way of expressing forms and especially ideas, which make Elie Faure characterise it as showing "a terrible simplicity" (Faure 1988, 103)

[our translation]. However, precisely due to "this simplicity", Assyrian art is characterised by force and vigour, in terms of artistic expression, making the scenes presented lively and dynamic. In a society dominated by a strong warlike spirit, these representations are dedicated especially to the king and his royal court; through the fighting or hunting scenes, they speak about his power, heroism, and majesty. A similar posture of the king is also present on stars and obelisks on which various laws, treaties, diplomatic relations, or other important political events from the life of the king are noted down (Bourke 2018, 174-5).

When representing a relation of absolute obedience to the suzerainty of the other king, the Assyrian king is rendered in a posture like that of his counterpart. This is also the case of the meeting between king Shalmaneser III and the Babylonian king Marduk-Zakir-Shumi, represented on the throne of Shalmaneser III from Nimrud (The Iraq Museum). This is not the case with the representation of the relation between the Assyrian suzerain and his vassals on the famous black obelisk of Nimrud, currently found at the British Museum in London, which presents, among others, the meeting between the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III and the Israeli king Jehu (Reade 2019, 62-4).

History records the fact that, after the battle of Qarqar (853 BC), where a coalition made up of 12 kings, including the Israeli king Ahab, managed to hold back the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III, the latter resumed the attack and, in 841 BC, he laid siege to Damascus. In this context, various kings from the Syrian-Palestinian region pay homage to him, among whom king Jehu of Israel (some believe it was Joram, the last king of the House of Omri (McCarter1974, 5-7; Thiele 1976, 19-23). As mentioned above, the moment is reproduced on the black Obelisk (198 cm h/45-60 cm l), erected around 825 BC to immortalise the majesty of king Shalmaneser III about his neighbours. The artistic record of the homage paid by king Jehu to king Shalmaneser III is also a confirmation of the fact that Assyrians considered Jehu an important king in the region. The representation of king Jehu prostrating himself before Shalmaneser III recalls a common practice in those times, hence, the mentality of that epoch, which we thus see represented in art as well. The focus is on acknowledging authority through a gesture of complete humility. We can notice this attitude much later, in the context of the New Testament, when Simon "fell at Jesus' knees" (Lk 5:8) after the miraculous catch of fish, in the sign of humility before the manifestation of divine power, the correct translation of the expression is that he fell to the ground at the Lord's knees, "with his whole body" (Bădiliță 2016, 289). Through his gesture, Simon Peter shows his

obedience and repentance before Jesus, Whom he acknowledges as the Lord (Kyrios) and to Whom he confesses his condition of a sinful man.

The Creation of Man from the Dust from the Ground According to the Old Testament

In the Old Testament, the creation of man from the dust from the ground is described in a similar way to that of Egyptian art. In the act of creation, God is indirectly portrayed as a potter who shapes clay: "Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature" (Gn 2:7). Both the Hebrew term "wayyițer" and the term used in the Greek translation (the Septuagint) "*plasso*" point to the work of a potter. The Romanian translation follows the Hebrew text (the Bible following the Hebrew text, 2017, 95) and the one following the Greek text of the Septuagint (Septuagint, 2004, 56), which uses the term "l-a plăsmuit" ("formed"), are much closer to the actual text and its meaning, even if those which use the established formulas "l-a făcut" ("fashioned") (the synodal edition) and "l-a zidit" ("made") (the jubilee edition-Bartolomeu Anania) do not discard it.

This conception is also reinforced by the author of the Book of Job, who recalls the act of man's creation from the ground as resembling the work of a potter: "Your hands fashioned and made me" (Jb 10:8) and "Behold, I am toward God as you are; I too was pinched off from a piece of clay" (Jb 33:6). Prophet Jeremiah uses the same terms, explicitly comparing God to a potter Who has the power to shape Israel according to His own will: "So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. 4 And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do. Then the word of the Lord came to me: 'O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the Lord. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.'" (Jer 18:3-6).

We thus notice that the word țărână/pulbere (dust/dirt – *apar*) is a synonym for pământ/lut (ground/earth – *adamah*). The Hebrew term *wayyițer*, used in the Romanian translation as *l-a făcut/plăsmuit/zidit* (fashioned/formed/made) points to the work of a potter/yoțer (Gn 2:7) (Sarna 1989,17; the Bible after the Hebrew text 2017, 207), God is compared to a potter who shapes clay in the act of creation. The image expresses both the glory to which man has risen through the act of creation

(Resceanu 2013, 243) and his pettiness and relativity about his Creator. The association made with the dust/dirt from the ground is meant to underscore the state of humility in which man must find himself about God.

Numerous texts from the Old Testament which recall the creation of man from the dust/dirt from the ground refer to this state of humility that man must show about his Creator. Thus, after Adam's fall into sin, God tells him: "you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust, you shall return" (Gn 3:19). These words are also reinforced by Eliphaz, who, looking into Job's righteousness, rhetorically asks himself: "Can mortal man be in the right before God? Can a man be pure before his Maker?" and his answer is: "Even in his servants he puts no trust and his angels he charges with error; how much more those who dwell in houses of clay, whose foundation is in the dust, who are crushed like the moth" (Jb 4:17-19). Just like his friend, Job is fully aware of his origin before God: "Remember that you have made me like clay; and will you return me to the dust?" (Jb 10:9).

Just like the psalmist, he exclaims: "For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust." (Ps 103:14), man and the world are completely relative before God's almightiness: "When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground" (Ps 104:29-30).

Similarly, after being sceptic about man's fate after death, which he associates with the fate of animals, recalling the fact that "All are from the dust, and to dust all return. Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward, and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth? (Eccl 3:20-21), the Ecclesiasticus clarifies the situation by saying that: "and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it" (Eccl 12:7), also resorting to the meaning of the term dust/dirt from the ground, which is well-established in Hebrew thinking.

Likewise, the act of sprinkling dust on the head (Jb 2:12) and of sitting in the dust (Jb 7:21; Ps 7:5; Is 47,1; Jon 3:6) were considered acts of humility and deep repentance performed by those in trouble, with the hope that God will forgive their sins and will have mercy on them. In this regard, the psalmist shows that the Lord our God, "Who is seated on high", is the One Who "looks far down" and "lifts the needy from the ash heap" (Ps 113:5-7).

Therefore, in the Old Testament and the world of the Ancient Middle East, the creation of man from the dust from the ground is a true leitmotif, which first of all

denotes man's ephemeral character about his Creator (the Bible following the Hebrew text 2017, 207).

However, starting with the Philo of Alexandria, the interpretation is more nuanced and acquires new characteristics, which are considerably different from the previous tradition. Gradually, in the spirit of matter-spirit dualism, which is specific to Greek thinking, the focus moves to man's bodily and spiritual constitution and the description of its characteristics. Thus, Philo "claimed that the sensitive and individual man was made up of a substance like earth and the holy spirit. For the body appeared when the Craftsman took dust from the ground and formed a human form, but the soul does not come from any created matter, but from the Father and ruler of all things" [our translation] (Philo 2016, 181). In fact, Philo is the one who distinguishes between the man who is made (Gn 1:26) and the man who is "formed" (Gn 2:7), the former being the ideal, spiritualised man, neither a man, nor a woman, but an androgynous – an aspect which was later on criticised by Blessed Augustine (Septuagint 2004, 57) –, in the image of God (the Logos), and the man who is made of dust, having a sensitive, corruptible body (Philo 2016, 181). As John Behr also notices, these terms were replaced by Origen with those of the Pauline contrast between the "man within" and the "man without", the same distinction being kept (Behr 2016, 118; Septuagint 2004, 57).

Although he does not use Philo's distinction between the *making* (Gn 1:26) and the *fashioning* (Gn 2:7) of man, St. Irenaeus of Lyon highlights the simultaneous making of man's body and soul, just like other Fathers who follow him. Moreover, he resorts to the patterns of Philo's thinking when he describes the quality of the matter out of which man is created. Thus, just as Philo considered that God "took out what is best out of all the earth and what is purest and most select out of pure matter so that it would especially be appropriate for His work", so does St. Irenaeus show that God "fashioned man with his own hands, taking the purest, the finest and the most delicate (elements) of the earth, mixing with the earth, in due measure, his power". St. Irenaeus' choice to follow Philo is the result of the support provided by his belief that "the representation of a model of absolute beauty (the divine Logos) is itself absolutely beautiful" [our translation] (Philo 2016, 181). It was on this desideratum that St. Irenaeus based his theological endeavour to highlight the creation of man in the complete image of God, God being the One Who "sketched upon the handiwork his form – so that what would be seen should be godlike" (Behr 2016, 118). Along the same line, Clement of Alexandria emphasises the creation of man in the image of God, based on the complete

model of the divine Logos (Behr 2016, 183).

To understand the act of man's creation from the dust from the ground (Gn 2:7), St. John Chrysostom seems to refer less to the patterns of Greek thinking and resorts instead to the patterns of Hebrew thinking, to which the dualism between matter and spirit was completely unknown (Wolfson 1994, 19), not meaning that the two overlapped in Hebrew mentality (Mihăilă 2011, 352). In the exegesis of the text in Gn 2:7, St. John Chrysostom, being deeply connected to the Eastern world and mentality, easily becomes the representative of Hebrew biblical thinking, which, in most of the instances in which it is used in the Old Testament, associates the dust from the ground with a state of humility:

"What is that you say? Taking dust from the earth he shaped the human being? asks himself the great Antiochian exegete. Yes, it says; it did not simply say "earth" but "dust," something more lowly and substantial even than the earth, so to say." (..) "Whenever we consider where our nature derived the beginning of its subsistence, we are humbled and chastened..." (John Chrysostom 1987, 143-4). We thus notice that St. John Chrysostom is in clear contrast with Philo of Alexandria and with those who followed him and who saw in the dust the most valuable part of the earth, thus trying to emphasise the beauty and special quality of man's material, bodily constitution. To St. John Chrysostom, who was aware of the other forms of understanding the text, the act of man's creation from the dust from the ground has a clear, concise meaning. He even seems to insist on the reception and understanding that he puts forward to his audience: "Instead, to communicate to us lasting teaching through the manner of creation to avoid an impression false to reality, everything is explained precisely in this way, and the text reads, 'God formed the human being, taking dust from the earth'" (John Chrysostom 1987, 148-9).

Paradoxically, however, St. John Chrysostom doesn't want to underscore only the state of humility which should be proper to man when speaking about his creation, but also the special honour bestowed upon him by God through the act of his fashioning out of something as insignificant as the ashes: "Even in this detail notice the regard for us. He does not simply take some soil, but dust, the finest grains of soil, so to say, and this very dust of the earth by his design he changed into the humankind of body. You see, just as he brought into being the very substance of the soil when it did not exist, so now, at will, he changed the dust from the soil into the body... revealing in all this his loving-kindness. That from dust he produced such a creature and elevated it

to such eminence, and that he displays such marks of regard for it right from the outset." (John Chrysostom 1987, 149).

Consequently, the interpretation of St. John Chrysostom, without excluding others, helps us understand the early literary meaning of man's creation from the dust from the ground (Gn 2:7), which, besides complying with the rule of the context and parallel places in the Old Testament, is also based on solid knowledge and understanding of the cultural context of the Old Testament. As we have noticed, this interpretation is also supported by art and by the culture of the Ancient Middle East, whose aim was that of providing a favourable context to the understanding of the realities and mentalities of the world of the Old Testament, on which we could base our hermeneutic endeavour.

Conclusions

Thus, the interpretation of the biblical text inevitably entails the interaction between biblical and cultural, historical, philological, and theological data. Any approach which perceives the Holy Scripture as a closed system risks limiting the possibilities man has nowadays in terms of interacting with and knowing God. Our motivation should not be limited to the knowledge of the text per se, but, through the text, it should aim to know God.

As to the hermeneutic act, art helps us first at a descriptive level in our endeavour to understand *what it meant*. At a normative level, if the hermeneutic endeavour is carried out within the framework of our faith, art can also help us understand *what it could mean to us nowadays*.

Through images, we help the viewer become a reader and then an interpreter. The image or the visual representation of a biblical scene challenges the viewer to act like a hermeneutist. They thus embark upon dialogue with the scriptural text, which they can study thoroughly and fructify in their relationship with God.

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