

“IMITATIO DEI” – THE OLD TESTAMENT WAY OF KNOWING GOD

Abstract

Created in the image and likeness of God, man has as his ultimate reference the divine model, being called by his very nature to reflect the character and attributes of his Creator. Man as “imago Dei” is called to “imitatio Dei”. His call to holiness is at the same time a call to imitate God, a call to become like God. Even if in his transcendence God remains unknowable by his being, man can know him by the way God reveals himself through his works in the world. Imitation of God therefore enables man to move beyond speculative, abstract knowledge to a true form of knowledge which presupposes a recognition of God from His works in the world.



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Introduction

The concept of “imitatio Dei” generated a very intense debate among biblical scholars in the first half of the last century. Unexpectedly, the intensity of this debate has not been lost over time, but has, on the contrary, increased and continues to this day. Thus, although the scholarly world seemed to have assumed that the concept was of major hermeneutical importance for the understanding of the moral character of the Old Testament, in recent times more and more voices have emerged that challenge this claim and try to downplay it. After the efforts of M. Buber (1948, 66-77) who initiated the project, other scholars of the same stature followed, such as J. Hempel (1965), W. Eichrodt (1967, 373) or E. Otto (1991, 3-37), who strengthened it and took it further. They were followed in our day by E. Davies (1999, 99-115) and J. Barton (2003, 15-31),

who have enhanced the "old project", highlighting new and very important aspects of the concept of "imitatio Dei" for Old Testament morality.

Contrary to general opinion, however, there have also been voices that have bucked the "trend", either denying the importance of the concept in defining the moral character of the Old Testament, as C. Rode does (2001, 65-76), or restricting or limiting it, as W. Hudson does (2007, 1-25). These studies, and C. Rode's in particular, revived the debate, prompting J. Barton to respond in his valuable work on Old Testament ethics.

In our Orthodox theology, the topic is addressed by G. Mantzaridis in his work on moral theology, which is limited to a biblical and patristic foundation of the concept of "imitatio Dei" and then shifts the focus to the concept of "imitatio Christi" in which it practically extends and reveals the mysteries of the former. For Mantzaridis, "man, although he cannot know God by his being, can know and imitate his works" (2006, 217). The biblical basis he uses is, of course, the making of man in the image and likeness of God (Acts 1:26), to which he associates the call to holiness that God himself makes to man: "Be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lv 19:2 – ESV). On their basis, "the imitation of God must have the character of integral relationship to Him" (Mantzaridis 2006, 216).

So, God wants His nature to be reflected in man, His character and attributes can serve as a model and paradigm for man that can make the "imago Dei" become a call to "imitatio Dei".

Man is the image and likeness of God

Man, according to A. Lacoque, is "like the Elohim", being created according to the celestial model which takes him out of the sphere of the visible and makes God "the ultimate reference of the human being stretched towards the Other [...] everything in him is a call to enter into communion with the divine model" (Lacoque, Ricoeur 2002, 2).

According to the divine pattern, man is crowned with glory and honour (Ps 8:6), destined to rise to the full likeness of God. Psalm 8, a text commonly recognized as paraphrasing the theme of man's creation from Genesis 1:26-27, paradoxically reveals how man is likened to God in a context that emphasizes the clear distinction between God and his most precious creation, man. Of course, when we speak of the imitation of God, we must consider what M. Buber considers to be the central paradox of Judaism –

In fact of the Old Testament – which reveals God both as unique and immeasurable in His transcendence, but also as the One who comes to man with a character that can be imitated by His creature.

At. Negoită also uses Psalm 8, which he regards as "the oldest commentary on the expression *in our image and likeness*" (Negoită 92-93), to argue that man's likeness to God lies mainly in his moral attributes.

Thus, we can understand, as most commentators do, that the imitation of God, or rather of His attributes, is based on making man in the image and likeness of God. The fact that man is created in the image of God becomes in the Old Testament conception an incentive to imitate God, the notion being understood not only because of the creative act but also as a call for man to become like God (Davies 1999, 111).

In the tradition of the Eastern Church, for the Church Fathers, the imitation of God reveals its mysteries in the imitation of Christ, who is not only an imitator of the Father, but an image (icon) of the unseen God (Col 1:15) (Mantzaridis 2006, 218). "By the revelation of the Word of God in the person of Christ as true God and true man we have not only the revelation or unveiling of the divine ethos but also the revelation of the perfect human ethos," (Mantzaridis 2006, 220) and by this "it is shown that the divinized body of the Lord Christ is the leaven of our human nature" (Popa 2018, 225).

Relationship of filiation between God and man

If we pursue to the same hermeneutical approach, such as that used by Augustine, for whom the New Testament is hidden in the Old and the Old Testament opens in the New, we can go further in understanding the concept of "imitatio Dei" based on the observation of the relationship of filiation between God and man. Children naturally follow their parents, in whose care they find themselves and entrust their lives, imitating their character and attributes. Often in the Old Testament, God acts towards his people as a parent who cares for, rebukes or forgives his children (Dt 14:1; 32:2), and the prophet Jeremiah warns his fellow countrymen like mindless children for having strayed from the knowledge of God: "And all this is only because my people are without mind and do not know me; they are children of no understanding, and have no understanding; they are skilled only in evil, and do not know good" (Jer 4:22).

The prophet Hosea expresses himself in the same vein, emphasizing the fatherly love and boundless love that God shows to His people: "Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk; I took them up by their arms, but they did not know that I healed

them. I led them with cords of kindness, with the bands of love, and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws, and I bent down to them and fed them." (Hos 11:3-4). Divine fatherhood is also highlighted by the Psalmist in the context of invoking God's boundless mercy towards his children: "As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him." (Ps 102:13). Here, "the motivation for observing the law is not fear of punishment, but the desire to conform to God's will" (Lacoque, Ricoeur 2002, 96). The prophet Isaiah specifically calls God "our Father" who has the task of redeeming us: "You, O Lord, are our Father, our Saviour" (Is 63:16), and then the prophet invokes the Creator quality of the heavenly Father: "But now, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand." (Is 64:7). Man is called to entrust himself to God, who not only gives life and protects his sons, but, like a potter, shapes the character of his sons by his care. G. Mantzaridis points out that: "If the imitation attempted by the believer does not resemble the imitation attempted by the child, who entrusts himself completely to his father, then it is not authentic and does not bear fruit. Through absolute entrustment to God, man makes himself the recipient of his grace and a sharer in his ethos or conduct" (Mantzaridis 2006, 218). Divine fatherhood is reflected in God's love for his children, from whom he expects them to respond in the same spirit of their love, thus imitating his loving character.

Imitating God is a human vocation

The making of man in the image of God indicates that imitating God is part of the human vocation. The anthropomorphisms attributed to God, or in other words, the way the Old Testament describes God's presence and work with all his attributes in human terms, make it easier for biblical man to imitate him. This attitude, however, does not imply an imitation of a humanized image of God, but that of a personal God who comes to man and is present in his life. The description of God in explicitly personal terms, E. Davies points out, paved the way for the understanding that both the character and actions of God can be reflected in human behaviour (Davies 1999, 110). Man is called to strive to imitate God, but at the same time to be fully aware of the gulf that separates him from Him in the plane of holiness.

However, the reference text that is generally used to present the notion of "imitatio Dei" in the Old Testament is that of Lv 19:2: "Be holy, as I the Lord your God am holy", which is a true *leitmotif* of the Code of Holiness (Lev 17-26). The text of

Leviticus 19:2, like all the other similar texts recorded in the Leviticus (11:44; 20:7, 26; 21:8), represents a true call addressed both to the chosen people as a whole and to each member of it, to behave in a manner reflecting God's character. Yahweh – W. Zimmerli points out – comes to His people desiring that His nature be reflected in their nature, the closeness between God's gift and His command being unmistakable (Zimmerli 2000, 142).

For E. Davies, at first glance, it seems that this commandment represents a utopian, abstract ideal, but from the verses that follow in chapter 19 the "holiness" spoken of here was intensely practised. It involves the fulfilment of specific social obligations, such as sons' respect for their parents (Lv 19:3), generosity to the poor (Lv 19:9-10), compassion to the sick (Lv 19:14), integrity in legal proceedings (Lv 19:19), or honesty in commercial transactions (Lv 19:35-36) (Davies 1999, 103).

Thus, we can see that this call to holiness cannot be limited only to cultic duties, such as observance of the Sabbath or rituals of purification but concerns the entire moral behaviour that must be guided by this commandment in daily life (Zimmerli 2000, 102).

J. Milgrom himself, who insists so much on the distinction between the holiness of God and the holiness of men, emphasizing the separation implied using the term *qadosh*, recognizes that in Leviticus 19 holiness, described in positive terms, implies the imitation of God as a life well pleasing to the Lord (Milgrom 2000, 1396-8). Moreover, J. Milgrom points out that holiness involves not only "a separation from" (as is the case with separation from other peoples), but also „a separation to", by which he means the imitation/ emulation of the divine character which means living a life by the divine will (Milgrom 2000, 1604).

Man imitates God through mercy and knowledge

To live according to the divine will is to conform to the law by keeping the commandments. However, as we see in the prophet Hosea, man is called to "tend towards" God, to come to the knowledge of God through mercy (*hesed*), an expression of the selfless, loving fulfilment of the commandments: "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." (Hos 6:6). With the help of mercy, man imitates God or makes himself like God, mercy thus becoming for him a way of knowing God, his profound, merciful and merciful character. But this knowledge also has the gift of transforming man profoundly from within, sanctifying

him in the true sense of the word. Imitation of God implies a continuous advancement on the path of knowing God while sanctifying one's personal life. We can therefore say that mercy enables man to reach the hidden God (Is 45:15), working and keeping his deeds in secret without falling into the hypocritical side of cultic formalism. If we bear in mind the repetitive nature of the Hebrew language, to which the Old Testament authors often resort to reinforcing an idea, we see in the text of Hosea 6:6 that "mercy" (*hesed*) corresponds to "knowledge of God" (*da'at Elohim*), just as "sacrifice" corresponds to "burnt offering". God does not reject sacrifice, but the formal act that does not spring from the merciful heart of a man who shows his love for God, first, through mercy and love for others. Only in this way can he receive the reward of the knowledge of God, living and working in His image.

For most commentators, old and new, the knowledge of God of which Hosea speaks is not "speculative knowledge" but a form of "religious recognition" that leads to obedience to His will, to the observance of His law: "Hear the word of the Lord, O children of Israel, for the Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land; there is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed." (Hos 4:1-2). Although we fully agree with this interpretation, we must admit, like Rev. Ioan Chirilă, that this knowledge of God is also presented to us "as a gateway to true life and eternal life" (Chirilă, 1999, 147). The distinction between the "knowledge of the Lord" (*da'at Yahweh*) (Hos 2:22) and the "knowledge of God" (*da'at Elohim*) (Hos 4:2; 6:6) with which Hosea operates can also open the prospect of "knowing God" "from His works, from the fruit of the manifestation of His energies, which would lead to the totality of divine attributes" (Chirilă, 1999, 148).

"Although God loves (*'hb*) Israel, when He speaks of their response He demands knowledge (*'yd*), even though we would expect love to demand love" (Brown, Fizmeyer, Murphy 2009, 35): "And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the Lord" (Hos 2:21-22). God's betrothal/ union with His chosen people is to know God, which is achieved by following the divine example of faithfulness (*emet*) and merciful love (*hesed*). Love demands faithfulness and fidelity to God and is expressed in the fulfilment of the commandments.

The knowledge of God claimed by the "formula of recognition" so often used by the prophet Ezekiel ("They shall know that I am the Lord") is essentially about keeping

the commandments, indicating that without conforming to divine norms one cannot remain in a living relationship with God, whose presence is revealed by His very name: "And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I deal with you for my name's sake, not according to your evil ways, nor according to your corrupt deeds, O house of Israel, declares the Lord God." (Ezk 20:44). Based on his freedom, man is called to fulfil the commandments (Lacoque, Ricoeur 2002, 103) and thereby prove his love for God: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." (Dt 6:5). This love conditional on keeping the commandments, following the way of the Lord and serving Him (Dt 10:12; 11:22) cannot, in W. Zimmerli's opinion, equate man's love with God's love for Israel. Love follows the Lord's call in the paths He traces, Israel's response being a response to God's initiative (Zimmerli 2000, 144). In contrast to Deuteronomy 10:16, where the people are exhorted to circumcise their hearts, enlivening their covenant with God with their inner dedication, Deuteronomy 30:6 promises that it is God Himself who will circumcise their hearts, an act that transcends human initiative, foreshadowing the work of grace flowing from God's boundless love: "And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live." (Dt 30:6). Under their election, the people are called to respond to the love that God has already shown to their fathers and to follow them faithfully after the pattern of His love (Rosenzweig 1981, 210, Lacoque, Ricoeur 2002, 114): "For He loved your fathers and chose you, their descendants." (Dt 4:37) Moreover, the prophet Amos is very clear about Israel's choice and responsibility about the other peoples: "I have known you alone of all the nations of the earth" (Am 3:2).

The knowledge of God therefore includes an intense aspect of personal recognition based on the love with which man is called to respond to God's love for him. God knows you by your heart, by His love, demanding that you use this to acknowledge Him. Hosea 4:1-2 and 6:6 invite us to imitate God, to know/recognize Him from His merciful acts, full of love. Moreover, "every form of loyalty, kindness, love or mercy (translation options for *hesed*) is ultimately rooted in God's loyalty, kindness, love and mercy" (Sakenfeld 1992, 5387). Through such attributes, the image portraying God as the Shepherd Father of His chosen people, whose behaviour can be highlighted by the term *hesed*, is also outlined (Eichrodt 1967, 235).

The *hesed* invoked by the prophet Hosea is and remains, par excellence, an attitude specific to divinity, yet he does not hesitate to ask it of Israel. Hosea's appeal to

the image of marriage or the relationship between parent and children enables him to generate a context of intimacy through which he manages to reverse the natural relationship between God and his people (Sakenfeld 1992, 5387). Thus, Israel is called to behave towards others as God behaves towards him, and this behaviour must be based on a free and voluntary commitment, springing from pure love for his fellow human beings. Just as God, rich in mercy, pours out his gifts to a weak and powerless Israel, so too Israel must be towards the vulnerable and helpless in his midst, surrounding them with his care. This care must be freely assumed and tested by each Israelite, through an active concern for the current needs of the whole community: "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Mi 6:8).

Hesed appears as a summary term for the fulfilment of the provisions of the Act. From this perspective, K. D. Sakenfeld states that "hesed represents the entire Decalogue in a single word" (Sakenfeld 1992, 5387). For the prophet Micah, as for the prophet Hosea, such observance of the Decalogue, in the deep spirit of the covenant relationship, involves not only what God commands, but especially what God desires and imperatively demands of His people (Sakenfeld 1992, 5387). God shows *hesed* to those who, out of love for him, keep his commandments: "I show steadfast love (*hesed*) to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments." (Ex 20:6; Dt 5:10). The Psalmist also paraphrases, in poetic form, the Lord's words spoken in the context of the utterance of the Ten Commandments: "But the steadfast love (*hesed*) of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments. The Lord has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all." (Ps 103:17-19).

God does not condition, but rather He is conditioned by the response of His people, by their steadfastness in covenant relationship. God is conditioned by the covenant made with Israel, to which, not infrequently, he is obliged to show *hesed* (Eichrodt 1975, 232-3), the term automatically implying divine forgiveness (Ex 34:6). Forgiveness springs from God's firm commitment to his covenant with Israel, without which it is not possible to restore and continue the relationship with his people. "For individuals as well as for the whole community – says K.D. Sakenfeld – God's forgiveness, as an act of *hesed* that continues the divine-human relationship, is fundamental and underlies all other manifestations of *hesed*" (Sakenfeld 1992, 5387). Not infrequently, the Psalmist

asks God to pardon him, implicitly invoking his forgiveness: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions." (Ps 51:1-2). Divine forgiveness is understood as an act freely offered and a gift from God, and his mercy can be invoked continually: "The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands." (Ps 138:8). Manifested as *hesed*, divine forgiveness can go beyond the borders of Israel and embrace all people, as is the case with the Ninevites, who repent for their sins (Jonah 3:10). God's mercy is highlighted by contrasting it with the wrath of Jonah, who cannot understand how God can forgive even such an unworthy people associated with unbelief: "And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?" (Jonah 4:11). The saintly author does not wish merely to point out human weaknesses concerning the long-suffering and great divine mercy, but, aware of man's limitations, he also wishes to call upon him to follow the divine example by imitating his deeds. As Maimonides pointed out, "God is what he does" and so man can become like God when he imitates him according to his works in the world.

The justice of the Lord – a model for human justice

God demands "behaviour that will stand the test in real life" (Zimmerli 2000, 139). It is not by chance that the term *hesed* is often accompanied, as we have seen from previous biblical texts, by *sedaqa* (righteousness), which calls for appropriate behaviour according to the order willed by God. The term *sedaqa* should not be confused with justice in the legal sense or righteous retribution, because *sedaqa* (justice) in the Old Testament can be understood neither as a norm nor as an absolute ideal (Krauss 1992, 154). "Justice is not a norm, but a relationship" (Krauss 1992, 154) that must be preserved and cultivated within the covenant relationship. The character of each person is shaped in the community to which he or she must show full responsibility (Zimmerli 2000, 138). *Sedaqa* (righteousness) reflects this reality very well on the level of concrete personal life. In the context of Israel, God's chosen people, *sedaqa* constitutes for man the standard to be followed not only for his relationship with God but also for his relationship with his fellow human beings (von Rad 1962, 370). *Sedaqa* covers a broad field of social, ethical and religious behaviour, implying appropriate conduct in all areas of life that opens the concrete possibility for man to truly know God, making himself practically like Him: "He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then

it was well. Is not this to know me? declares the Lord" (Jer 22:16). Israel is often called upon by the prophets (Jer 22:3; Is 16:5) or by the psalmist (Ps 72:1-2) to do judgment and justice like the Lord, to judge the world according to the measure of God's mercy (Rabbi Akiba). In other words, by his actions, by his behaviour towards his fellow men, man is called to find himself in the logic of divine behaviour, summed up so beautifully in the words of the psalmist: "He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord" (Ps 33:5).

Human justice has its source in the justice of Yahweh, who becomes the source and model, the divine nature being projected through *sedaqa* onto the life of the community: "But let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord" (Jer. 9:24). It is not by chance that man, humbly seeking righteousness by fulfilling the deeds of the Law, finds himself on the path of true knowledge of God: "Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, who do his just commands; seek righteousness; seek humility; perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the anger of the Lord." (Zeph. 2:3).

Conclusions

Imitation of God involves continual advancement on the path of knowing Him while sanctifying one's personal life. By walking in the way of the Lord, the believer has the possibility of reaching the hidden God (Is 45:15), working and keeping his deeds secret, without falling into the hypocritical side of cultic formalism. Man is called to humbly seek righteousness by fulfilling the deeds of the Law, to find himself on the path of true knowledge of God. The knowledge of God also includes an intense aspect of personal recognition based on the love with which man is called to respond to God's love for him. God knows you according to your heart through His love, demanding that you use this to know/recognize Him. Hosea 4:1-2 and 6:6, but also the other prophets (Jer 9:24; 22:15; Ezk 20:44; Am 5:5; Mi 6:8; Zeph. 2:3, etc.) invite us to know/recognize God by imitating His merciful, loving acts.

Note

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