

TEOLOGIA

Ryan S. PETERSON, *The Imago Dei as Human Identity: A Theological Interpretation*, Journal of Theological Interpretation Supplements 14, Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake, Indiana 2016, xiv + 194 p., ISBN 978-1-57506-433-8, \$ 33,95.

This doctoral dissertation, written by an author of the evangelical tradition, proposes a theological interpretation of the image of God founded in a canonical reading of Scripture. In the first chapter (1-22), Peterson, in a selective *status quaestionis* on the *imago Dei*, presents the important contributions of Clines, Bray, Gunton, Watson, Middleton, and McFarland. In his own approach the creation narrative is closely related to the NT, especially to Pauline Christology; in the author's view, exclusive consideration of either the OT or the NT would be reductionist (16). His suggestion is that, rather than beginning with human attributes in order to see how they might be considered as God's image, the reverse procedure must be adopted: «What does it mean for God to create a being with the *imago Dei* as its identity? When this question is answered, then one is able to understand why humans are spiritual, rational, physical, and relational, and why humans have the particular set of relationships we do. In other words, the abilities and attributes of human existence are subordinate to human identity» (17).

What does this thesis mean with respect to the most common interpretations of the image of God? To answer this question, the second chapter (23-52) presents the main models of the image as substance, function, and relationship, stressing that in all approaches the conception of the image should respect God's transcendence. Thomas Aquinas is chosen as a representative of the substantial model of the *imago Dei*. The criticism here focuses especially on

the (relative) limitation implied in this approach to the spiritual soul and in regard to the Trinitarian interpretation, but the author is favorable to seeking the image in the creature's existence. The functional model is presented in dialogue with Middleton's *The Liberating Image*. There is clearly a human mission to rule that can be interpreted in terms of care and responsibility for creation. However, against Middleton, Peterson argues convincingly from a biblical point of view that ruling is not the image as such, but rather a consequence (and not the only consequence) of the image. In other words, to rule and to take care of creation flows from our being made in God's image. The relational model of the image is presented and welcomed, according to Karl Barth. The criticism in this instance is primarily directed to exegetical positions such as the claim that the male-female relation can be understood as a definition of the image of God. The author does nonetheless accept the idea that the image does not consist in human attributes or qualities.

The third chapter (53-83) introduces Peterson's own proposal, i.e. human identity as image of God. The author opts, against Brubacker and Cooper in the field of social sciences, for a conception of strong identity, that is not to be construed, but is to be discovered. In this perspective, the *imago Dei* is the common identity of all human beings, even if it is not known. Taking up Ricœur's narrative identity, Peterson relates this narration to biblical revelation and especially to Gen 1:26-30 where the image of God can be interpreted as human identity (66-79). In a short and important paragraph the author develops *imago Dei* as human identity and as personhood. For certain authors, such as Bray, to be an image of God simply means to be a person (79). In Peterson's view, however, personhood should be understood as a phenomenon or a "symptom" of human identity in its relation to God (80f.): «Like the "symptoms" of rationality, creativity, and freedom, human personhood can be properly appreciated and situated only when human identity is understood in light of humanity's relation to God.» (81)

In chapter 4 (84-112), human identity is shown to have an inner dynamic and its proper realization. In a first step, identity is conceived as accessible only through divine revelation, in discussion with several contemporary approaches to revelation (Thiemann, Gunton, Placher). In a second step, the realization of this *imago Dei*-identity is declared to be an *imitatio Dei* which in an OT-perspective implies worship and ethical behavior. The fifth chapter (113-143) offers a canonical reading of the *imago Dei* in an attempt to show the consistency of the link between OT and NT texts. Many passages in the NT

insist on the realization of the image of God as a conformation to Christ (Col 3:9f.; 2 Cor 3:18; Rom 8:29 etc.). At the same time, non-realization of the image does not mean its non-existence, as is clearly stated not only in Gen 1, but also in Gen 5 and 9, along with other texts. In this perspective, sin cannot destroy the image, but only impede its realization. The sixth and last chapter (144-172) focuses on four authors (Irenaeus, Athanasius, Augustine, and Luther) and shows how Peterson's «identity interpretation can accommodate a number of key theological insights from the Christian tradition» (144). The human identity-interpretation enables us to consider the image of God as implying a development of the image towards its realization, and as including the question of the fall, without denying the image in creation. Peterson concludes in a brief summary (173-174) that his focus on human identity reaches beyond the substantial, functional, and relational interpretations of the *imago Dei*.

I would now like to briefly discuss two points in Peterson's book. The first concerns the idea that personhood should be considered as a symptom of human identity or simply as a human attribute. In my opinion, it is necessary to understand that the adjective "human" in human identity refers to the human person. Human identity then means the identity or sameness of the human person in its temporal unfolding (cf. the definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary* quoted page 54). The person supports various human attributes and *is* the image of God, but in relational and functional unfolding the person *becomes* this image through conformation to Jesus Christ by grace. In other words, I think that an identity-interpretation is synonymous with the human person as image of God, which allows for a more specific focus on the temporal aspect of the image. The second point I would like to address concerns the connection between image and kinship. In various places (79, 131 and 135), Peterson notes the analogy between the two terms, but doesn't speak of a creational kinship, although this is suggested quite clearly in Gen 5:1-3. In his view, «unbelievers may not be children of God, but this does not mean that they were not created to be God's children» (131). I would hold, along with several exegetes (Niskanen, Crouch, McDowell), that, in *Genesis*, the image of God implies being a son or a daughter of God, and it would therefore be more coherent and in tune with the identity-interpretation to say that human persons are created as children of God, but that they still have to become sons/daughters of God in a personal divine-human relationship that, given the fall, is possible only through and in Jesus Christ, who opens up the way back to the Father. I am aware that my view here has yet to be developed and exposed

in more detail, and I do not want to conclude this review without recognizing the inspiring value of Peterson's book and especially its contribution to the development of a systematic approach to the image of God in constant dialogue with Scripture. This work happily succeeds in showing the human (person's) identity with its internal dynamism of both being and becoming the image of God.

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