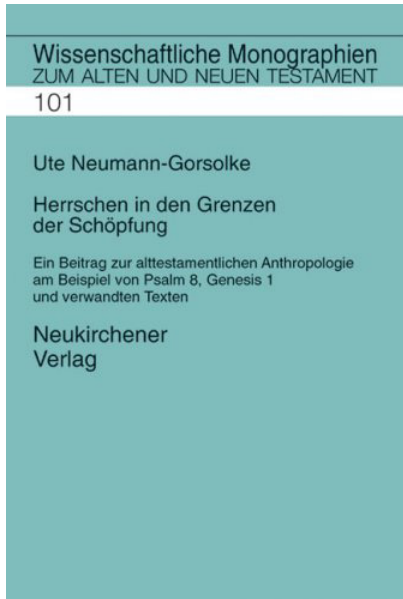


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Neumann-Gorsolke, Ute

Herrschen in den Grenzen der Schöpfung: Ein Beitrag zur alttestamentlichen Anthropologie am Beispiel von Psalm 8, Genesis 1 und verwandten Texten

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This is the slightly revised version of a thesis written at the University of Tübingen (Germany) under the direction of Bernd Janowski. The author starts with remarks on the present expansion of human knowledge and power and the resulting dangers for the natural environment. Sometimes it is maintained that the Jewish and Christian view of human beings as masters of the universe (or, at least, of the animals), derived from Gen 1 and Ps 8, has been taken as a license for the human race to subdue and exploit the extrahuman nature at discretion and without mercy. Like others, Ute Neumann-Gorsolke holds that this is a misunderstanding of the biblical texts, which do not advocate a violent despotism of human beings over the extrahuman nature but hold humans responsible for the well-being of the world.

The author develops her interpretation of the “anthropological basic texts” Ps 8 and Gen 1 in two long chapters that constitute the main part of the book. Her treatment of the texts is exhaustive, with extensive quotes from the secondary literature and numerous indications to comparative material from the ancient Near East that will be useful for future research.

According to Neumann-Gorsolke, human rule is limited by the more comprehensive rule of Yahweh in Ps 8. The picture of the subjects under the feet of the ruler is interpreted as an “ossified symbol” (“erstarrtes Symbol”) that does not evoke the connotation of violence. The ideal and contrafactual view of humans as rulers of all animals (including birds and fishes) is understood as a compensation for the political powerlessness of the Judeans in and shortly after the exilic period. After the Judean monarchy had failed, the psalm raises all human beings to a royal status that comes near to the status of a god.

In Gen 1 Neumann-Gorsolke sees a special status of human beings as “*primus inter pares*” among the other creatures. That humans are the “image of God” is understood in a functional sense: as representatives of God, humans should rule the earth, particularly the animals. (However, the Hebrew text rather seems to indicate that humans are able to rule the earth because they resemble God.) The Hebrew verbs *rdh* and *kbš* do not imply violence but have the meaning of “ruling over” the animals and “taking possession of” the earth. Read together with Gen 6:9ff. and Gen 9, it is clear that the goal of human rule over the animals in Gen 1 is to prevent them from harming each other, among other things by supplying them with vegetable food. As representatives of God, humans are responsible to him. Their rule has to respect and preserve the order of God’s creation.

Neumann-Gorsolke understands Gen 1 as an attempt of exiled Judeans to cope with the breakdown of their state and religion. The text takes over and transforms theological traditions of its ancient Near Eastern environment and thus develops a critical view of Mesopotamian religion and politics. (The repeated assertion that even the plural “let us create human beings” expresses a strictly monotheistic point of view remains enigmatic to me; the least artificial explanation seems to be that God here addresses his heavenly courtiers, the gods or angels.)

One important difference between Ps 8 and Gen 1 seems to be that Ps 8 speaks of human rule over the animals as a present fact, whereas Gen 1 formulates a commission that humans, according to Gen 6, failed to fulfill—with the one and only exception of Noah. Genesis 9, then, no longer speaks of human rule over the animals. Does that mean that humans are no longer responsible for the well-being of the animals and their vegetarian nourishment? Neumann-Gorsolke thinks that Gen 1 as a picture of a world in contrast to the present reality can still function as a kind of “real utopia” that directs human decisions and actions. However, at least the demand of vegetarian nourishment seems to be given up in Gen 9.

Comparing Ps 8 and Gen 1, Neumann-Gorsolke emphasizes what both texts have in common over against the differences between them. Nevertheless, she thinks that both texts are independent from a literary as well as from a tradition-historical point of view.

That all human beings are representatives of the king Yahweh can be understood as a consequence of the breakdown of the Judean monarchy and of the development of a comprehensive notion of Yahweh as the only creator and ruler of the universe.

Following her long (and sometimes a bit lengthy) discussions of Ps 8 and Gen 1, Neumann-Gorsolke proceeds to a briefer comparison of these texts with Gen 2 and Ps 104, which are sometimes alleged as examples of a less-problematic view of the role of human beings in God's creation. She points out that the picture of human beings as gardeners in Gen 2 gives them a royal status, since it resembles common ancient Near Eastern presentations of a king. If the first human being is to name the animals, he clearly has a higher position than they have. (However, Gen 2 does not say that humans are to care for the animals; they are to care for the garden and to protect it—presumably from animals that could destroy its plants.)

According to Neumann-Gorsolke, even Ps 104, which is often alleged as a contrast and corrective of Ps 8, does not contradict the view of humans as rulers as it is developed in Ps 8 and Gen 1 (and 2). Also, in Ps 104 human beings have a special status in the world that distinguishes them from the animals and moves them close to God. Only humans work, and only they have the freedom to do right or to sin. Psalm 104 does not speak of human rule over the animals because it wants to praise Yahweh for his rule, says Neumann-Gorsolke. In her view, Ps 104 is not critical of the idea of human rule; it simply does not mention it. (However, this could be a meaningful silence.) So she can conclude that the views of Ps 104, on the one hand, and Ps 8 and Gen 1, on the other hand, complete each other and should not be separated.

In her final chapter Neumann-Gorsolke discusses the relevance of texts such as Ps 8 and Gen 1 for anthropological, ethical, and ecological problems of today. She thinks that the view of human beings as “rulers within the limits of creation” is not only “a necessary aspect of the discourse on human beings in the Old Testament” but also a necessary aspect of a contemporary theological view of human beings and their position in the world.

Texts such as Job 38–41, where it is expressly denied that human beings have the knowledge and the power to rule the world or even the animals, suggest a more critical evaluation of this idea, as does the thorough critique of human rule in the prophetic and wisdom traditions of the Old Testament and the understanding of the kingdom of God and of Jesus Christ as the true image of God in the New Testament. The concept of establishing or preserving order by means of rule as it is developed in Gen 1 and Ps 8 is at least not free of problems and ambiguities. Perhaps the whole idea that order means to

preserve a status quo and that it is preserved best by rule and power, which underlies Gen 1 and Ps 8, is wrong or at least in need of improvement.

This is true even more if we take into consideration the differences between our view of the world, of ourselves, and of God (or the gods) and the viewpoint of the biblical traditions. We do not even know all the kinds of animals living on our planet, to say nothing of our universe (and possible parallel universes). We lack the knowledge and the power to care for all living creatures on our planet, and there are living creatures, such as some bacteria, viruses, or mosquitoes, we do not like to care for at all. As far as we know, there is no static order in our world, but a continuous process of changes and evolutions. It seems that we are able to destroy the conditions of life that are favorable for us but are not able to secure those conditions effectively.

Perhaps it would be sufficient for us to recognize our responsibility not to destroy the present conditions of life on our planet, without imagining ourselves as masters of the universe or even as “rulers within the limits of creation.” And perhaps a more ideology-critical approach to the texts of the Old Testament and the ancient Near East could help us to see more clearly where biblical concepts can help us to understand ourselves as human beings and our place and role in the world and where they transport views and values that are out of date and block our view.