

THE SECOND COMMANDMENT AND THE QUESTION OF HUMAN DIGNITY IN AFRICA: A CREATION-THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE*

Knut Holter

School of Mission and Theology, Stavanger
Old and New Testament, Stellenbosch University

Abstract

In a context focusing on the Decalogue in relation to the question of human dignity in Africa, two sets of texts interacting with the Second commandment from a creation-theological perspective are analyzed. One is the core of Deuteronomy 4, the other is four passages in Isaiah 40-55, and it is argued that both see the act of making 'a graven image' as a perversion of the concept of the human being as created in the image of God. This interpretation of the Second commandment, relating it to a broader creation-theological discourse, may provide an interpretative model for contemporary readers of the Decalogue, in casu in relation to the question of human dignity in Africa.

Key Words: Second Commandment, Image, Idol, Human Dignity, African Biblical Interpretation

The Second commandment – “You shall not make yourself a graven image” – has not received much attention from Old Testament scholars in Africa, at least not north of the Limpopo River. In spite of some exceptions, most notably Abel L Ndjerareou’s (Chad) PhD thesis on the theological basis for the prohibition of idolatry in the Old Testament (Ndjerareou 1995), the general picture is that the Second commandment is a neglected field of research within African guilds of Old Testament studies. As such it is symptomatic of the situation that even the same Ndjerareou tunes down the importance of this commandment in his articles on ‘Exodus’ and ‘Yahweh and other gods’ in the 2006 *Africa Bible Commentary* (Ndjerareou 2006a, 2006b), and, likewise, that FK Lumbala (DR Congo) ignores the commandment completely in his ‘African perspective’ on the Decalogue in the 1999 essay collection *Return to Babel: Global Perspectives on the Bible* (Lumbala 1999).

Taking into account the general focus on questions of relevance among African Old Testament scholars (Holter 2008), one must assume that this lack of focus on the Second commandment reflects an understanding of this particular commandment as having little relevance in traditional or contemporary Africa. Some of this might be due to the fact that African Traditional Religions traditionally were not experienced particularly threatening vis-à-vis this commandment, when compared, for example, with some of the major religious traditions originating in Asia. More important, though, is probably the theological marginalization of the Second commandment within some of the larger, interpretative communities of the Bible in Africa, such as the Roman-Catholic, Anglican and Lutheran churches.

* The article is a revised version of a paper read at the ‘Seminar on the Decalogue and Human Dignity in Africa’, Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, 2010-11-05. Let me use this opportunity to express my gratitude to the Department of Old and New Testament for inviting me to spend a semester in Stellenbosch in 2010, and for many years of close collaboration, as Extraordinary Professor in the department.

Now, the Second commandment is but the Decalogue version of a widely attested Old Testament prohibition of cultic images, documented throughout various historical epochs and literary genres of the Old Testament (Schmidt 1993:59-77). What is characteristic of most expressions of this prohibition, though, is that they tend to restrict themselves to just emphasize – in the form of a law paragraph, a narrative, a prophetic proclamation, or a wisdom saying – how wrong it is to make cultic images. Few texts seem willing to go deeper into the question and explain *why* it is wrong to make such images, by integrating the prohibition into larger, theological discourses. However, there are a couple of exceptions from this general rule. One is found in Deuteronomy 4, where the core of the chapter (vv. 9-31) first relates the prohibition of images to the verbal mode of the Horeb theophany and then to the concept of Yahweh as creator. The other is found in Isaiah 40-55, where, again, some scattered texts in the first half of the corpus (40:19-20, 41:6-7, 44:9-20, 46:6-7) relate the prohibition of images to the concept of Yahweh as creator.

The present article will analyze some aspects of these two sets of texts and their creation-theological approaches to the Second commandment, and in a seminar focusing on the question of human dignity in Africa in light of the Decalogue, I will argue that the major concern of these creation-theological approaches to the Second commandment is of relevance to the question of human dignity in Africa. I will first discuss some major lines in the texts on images in (1) Deuteronomy 4 and (2) Isaiah 40-55, respectively, then (3) draw these lines together, and (4) finally relate them to some basic perspectives with regard to the question of human dignity in contemporary Africa.

The Second Commandment and Deuteronomy 4

The so-called Deuteronomistic parts and layers of the Old Testament express a very negative attitude to cultic images, explaining, for example, the Babylonian exile as a result of “the idols and all the other detestable things seen in Judah and Jerusalem” (2 Kings 23:24). Deuteronomy 4 is traditionally considered to be some of the youngest material in the Deuteronomistic literature (Otto 1996), and also to be a core text as far as this literature conceptualizes the ban against cultic images and relates it to other theological discourses (Knapp 1987, Holter 2003).

First, the ban against images is linked to the theophany at Horeb, in the sense that vv. 9-16a make a wordplay on the expression *כל-תמונה* – one of the key expressions in the Second commandment: “You shall not make for yourself a graven image, any form (*כל-תמונה*) of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth” – and thereby is able to bridge the ‘form’ of the image in the commandment with the ‘form’ in which Yahweh revealed himself at Horeb:

‘you saw no form’	תמונה		v. 12
‘you did not see any form’	תמונה	כל-	v. 15
‘an image, the form of any ...’	כל-	תמונת	v. 16a

Deuteronomy 4 emphasizes the verbal – or ‘hearable’ – character of the Horeb theophany, as opposed to something visible: “You heard the sound of a voice, but you saw no form” (v. 12). Generally speaking, this serves to legitimize the ‘heard’ Torah, but here it additionally is used to explain a central element within the Torah, namely the commandment against cultic images. The people did not see any ‘form’ when Yahweh revealed himself, and they should therefore not make cultic images in any ‘form’.

After vv. 9-16a, where the Second commandment is linked to one central aspect of the Old Testament understanding of Yahweh, the continuing vv. 16b-18 link the commandment

to another central aspect of the same, that is, Yahweh as creator. Whereas v. 16a (cf. above) forbids production of ‘any form’ of cultic images, vv. 16b-18 offers a systematic survey of what kind of images are possible to imagine. The following table is an attempt at demonstrating the structure of vv. 16b-18:

v. 16b	likeness of		male or female			
v. 17a	likeness of	any	animal	that		is on the earth
v. 17b	likeness of	any	winged bird	that	flies	in the sky
v. 18a	likeness of	any			creeping	on the ground
v. 18b	likeness of	any	Fish	that		is in the waters below the earth

			זכר או נקבה		תבנית	v. 16b
בארץ		אשר	בהמה	כל-	תבנית	v. 17a
בשמים	תעוף	אשר	צפור כנף	כל-	תבנית	v. 17b
בארמה	רמש			כל-	תבנית	v. 18a
במים מתחת לארץ		אשר	דגה	כל-	תבנית	v. 18b

In this structure, we recognize a combination of two other textual structures (Holter 2003:47-69). One is the Second commandment, with its three times repeated ‘that’ (אשר) plus localization (ב + שמים, ארמה, and מים מתחת לארץ). This clear continuation of the allusions to the Second commandment in vv. 9-16a is then combined with another recognizable, textual structure, a list of creatures parallel to the ones in the Priestly creation tradition we know from Genesis 1 (Knapp 1987:88-91, Holter 2003:54-63), and not least the key passage about the creation of the human being, Genesis 1:26-28:

Then God said, “Let us make the human being in our image (צלם), in our likeness (דמויה), and let them rule over the fish (דגה) of the sea and the birds (עוף) of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along (רמש רמש) the ground.” So God created the human being in his own image (צלם), in the image (צלם) of God he created him; male (זכר) and female (נקבה) he created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish (דגה) of the sea and the birds (עוף) of the air and over every living creature that moves (רמש) on the ground.”

When Deuteronomy 4:16a/b-18 reads the Decalogue version of the Second commandment together with Genesis 1, the result is that the commandment is given a theological rationale based on the concept of Yahweh as creator. Yahweh is creator of everything, and he can as such not be portrayed in any form of what he has created. This includes all creatures on earth, in the sky, and in the waters below the earth. But above all it includes the human beings, who are not allowed to make images of themselves, or of any of the other creatures they were created to rule over.

The Second Commandment and Isaiah 40-55

It can obviously be questioned whether the polemic against cultic images in Isaiah 40-55 has a legitimate place in an analysis of the Second commandment. A central characteristic of the idol-fabrication passages in Isaiah 40-55 is that they do not legitimize their polemic with reference to the Decalogue commandment, but – at least at first sight – to human reason. Nevertheless, when these passages are included in the present discussion, it is

because we underneath the appeal to the human reason find a creation-theological way of thinking that is related to the one in Deuteronomy 4.

Isaiah 40-55 is generally interpreted as a collection of texts addressing the situation under the Babylonian exile in the sixth century B.C. The texts argue that even though the Babylonians and their gods apparently have conquered Jerusalem, Yahweh is still the Lord of history, and it therefore makes no sense when exiled Judeans give up their faith in Yahweh and start worshipping Babylonian gods. Isaiah 40-55 is characterized by a strong polemic against these gods, not least in the way they appear in the form of idols or cultic images. Four passages within the corpus of Isaiah 40-55 – *i.e.* 40:19-20, 41:6-7, 44:9-20, 46:6-7 – are linked thematically by a special focus on idol-fabrication, and they are also formally linked together, all being introduced by rhetorical ‘who’- (מִי) questions. Three of the four passages are quite short and descriptive, apparently without any explicit polemic against the idol-fabrication they portray, whereas the fourth, 44:9-20, is longer and does indeed include explicit polemic. The second passage, Isaiah 41:6-7, may serve as an example of the first group:

Each helps the other and says to his brother, ‘Be strong!’
The craftsman encourages the goldsmith,
and he who smooths with the hammer spurs on him who strikes the anvil.
He says of the welding, ‘It is good.’
He nails down the idol so that it will not topple.

We see here a passage without any open polemic; rather, it seems like a descriptive and almost sympathetic description of the work and challenges facing the idol-fabricators in their workshop. The opposite, an open and explicit polemic, we find when we move to the third passage, Isaiah 44:9-20. This narrative includes some verses about a man who walks into the forest and cuts down a tree; half of the tree he uses as wood for a fire to warm himself and make some food, the other half he forms into an idol. The satirical conclusion criticizes the idol-fabricator for not realizing the stupidity of what he is doing, v. 19:

No-one stops to think,
no-one has the knowledge or understanding to say,
“Half of it I used for fuel;
I even baked bread over its coals, I roasted meat and I ate.
Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left?
Shall I bow down to a block of wood?”

I have argued elsewhere that a close reading of the idol-fabrication passages in their immediate literary context reveals a rather subtle form of polemic (Holter 1995). The second passage, Isaiah 41:6-7 (quoted above), can here serve as an illustration. These two verses have a surprising accumulation of the Hebrew verb *חזק*, here with two or three different meanings: ‘be strong!’, ‘encourage’, and ‘nail down’. The same verb, however, is also used in the neighbouring Isaiah 41:8-13, one of the so-called ‘priestly salvation oracles’ of Isaiah 40-55 (Westermann 1987:37ff., Schoors 1973:167ff.). Here, the verb is used to describe how Yahweh ‘takes’ Israel from the ends of the earth (v. 9), and ‘takes hold of’ her right hand (v. 13). In other words, the accumulation of the verb *חזק* creates a contrast between the two neighbouring passages, the idol-fabrication passage in vv. 6-7 and the priestly salvation oracle in vv. 8-13. This terminological contrasting is confirmed by other terms in the two passages – such as by the verbs *עזר* (‘help’) and *אמר* (‘say’) – and it proves to be a dominant pattern in and around all four idol-fabrication passages that they let

the acting subjects of these passages, the idol-fabricator on the one hand and Yahweh on the other, be contrasted (Holter 1995:25-31 and *passim*).

The idol-fabrication passages, in other words, let the idol-fabricators be ironically portrayed according to a pattern that elsewhere is used to portray Yahweh, such as when they 'form' the idol (Isaiah 44:9), like Yahweh 'forms' Israel (44:21) or the history (46:11), or when they 'stretch out a measuring line' on the piece of wood (44:13), like Yahweh in the creation 'stretched out' the heavens (44:24). The result of this rhetoric is that not only the explicit polemic against idol-fabrication, based on human reason (cf. parts of 44:9-20), but also the apparently descriptive references to the work in the workshop (cf. 40:19-20, 41:6-7, 46:6-7, parts of 44:9-20), serve to point out fabrication of idols as wrong and to be rejected. The idol-fabricators are thereby portrayed as making themselves like Yahweh, that is the ultimate hubris of any human being.

A Creation-Theological Discourse on the Second Commandment

After these two glimpses into how Deuteronomy 4 and Isaiah 40-55, respectively, interpret the key text of the Old Testament tradition of prohibiting cultic images, I will try to draw some of my observations together and argue that the two reflect a creation-theological discourse on the tradition pinpointed by the Second commandment.

Both versions of the Decalogue – Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 – have a somewhat uneven, literary structure, a phenomenon that in the past led to various literary critical and redaction critical attempts at reconstructing a supposed *Ur-Dekalog*. Whereas some of the commandments do not bother to go into any details at all – in their dignified majesty they just proclaim the 'you shall not' – others do indeed do so, with discussions about the motivation of the commandment, such as the Fourth/Sabbath commandment ('creation' in the Exodus version, 'exodus' in the Deuteronomy version), or the consequences of keeping or not keeping the commandments, such as the Second/image ('show love' or 'punish'), the Third/Yahweh's name ('punish'), and the Fifth/parents ('live long in the land') commandments. In consequence, whereas some commandments are very short, consisting of two words only in the Masoretic text, others are considerably longer, such as the Second/image commandment, which consists of 43 words, and the Fourth/Sabbath commandment, which consists of 55 words in its Exodus version and 65 in its Deuteronomy version.

This uneven, literary structure of the Decalogue demonstrates that the individual commandments are not isolated proclamations; each of them are part of wider, theological discourses that to varying degrees have been integrated into the Decalogue text. Moreover, the many differences between the two Decalogue versions – not least that they differ so clearly with regard to the motivation of the Sabbath commandment – demonstrate that even the so-called 'final' text of the Old Testament reflects a level of the textual development when the commandments are not 'finally' cemented but are still part of an ongoing, interpretative process. So is also the case with the Second commandment, which in its Decalogue versions relates to exilic concepts of punishment versus hope (three or four generations versus thousands of generations), but which then outside the Decalogue are interpreted from even other perspectives, such as the creation-theological perspectives in Deuteronomy 4 and Isaiah 40-55.

When Deuteronomy 4 lets the Second commandment interact with theological concerns similar to those we know from Genesis 1 and its conceptualization of the creation of the human being, the result is a theological discourse where the commandment is interpreted against the mediatory relationship of the human being vis-à-vis God on the one hand and

the rest of the creation on the other. The key concept used by Genesis 1 to express this mediatory role of the human being is that it is created in the 'image' of God, with a special function vis-à-vis the rest of the creation. First, in v. 26, where the concept of being God's image-bearer on earth – terminologically expressed by the parallel nouns 'image' (צלם) and 'likeness' (דמות) – immediately is identified as its decision to 'rule' (רדה) over the other creatures. Then, in v. 27, where the same concept is linked to the distinction between 'male' (זכר) and 'female' (נקבה), through a structural parallelism between v. 27aβ and b: "in the image of God he created him" || "male and female he created them". And finally, in v. 28, where the lines from vv. 26 and 27 are brought together, as the portrayal of the human beings in the plural 'them' (אֹהֶם), that is the 'male' and 'female' from v. 27, is a logical precondition for being 'fruitful' (פֶּרֶה), so that they can 'multiply' (רבה) and 'fill' (מלא) – but also 'subdue' (כבש) – the earth, and 'rule' (רדה) over the other creatures, cf. v. 26.

Genesis 1:26-28 is indeed a rich text, and I am here only able to scratch its surface. Let me restrict myself to point out just a couple of things with regard to its portrayal of the human being. First, its mediatory role vis-à-vis God on the one hand and the rest of the creation on the other – being God's image-bearer on earth – is what makes the human being unique in the organizing of the universe, according to the map in Genesis 1. As it is often noticed, the way the human being is described as God's image-bearer on earth seems to emphasize an aspect of human equality. Compared with other Ancient Near Eastern traditions, where it is often the king who is conceptualized as the 'image' of the deity, appointed as his representative on earth, Genesis 1 reflects a democratization of the concept of God's 'image'. The portrayal of the human being – here in Genesis 1, but also in Psalm 8, which is often seen as related to Genesis 1 – does indeed make use of royal terminology, but it is, so to speak, a democratized royalty. It is the human being as such, irrespective of what we today would call gender and class questions, that is the 'image' of God, and thereby God's representative on earth. Second, however, in spite of the royal connotations, the human being is not autonomous in his/her representation of God on earth; he/she is accountable to God, both in the sense that his/her office is to be performed on God's command (v. 26), but also as it is based on God's blessing (v. 28). In other words, the human being is accountable to its Creator.

This is then the text and concept with which Deuteronomy 4 lets the Second commandment interact. Admittedly, the two key terms from Genesis 1:26-28, צלם and דמות, are not used in Deuteronomy 4. Nevertheless, the terminological correspondence between the lists in Genesis 1:26-28 and Deuteronomy 4:16-18 is, as pointed out above, so close that the latter hardly can be read independently of the former. A discourse is thereby created, relating the making of cultic images to the creation of the human being. And it is an utterly negative discourse, leading the reader to conclude that the making of images for cultic purposes actually perverts the unique character of the human being. First, it perverts the mediatory role of the whole species of human beings – that is the equality aspect – vis-à-vis God on the one hand and the rest of the creation on the other. In making cultic images, the human being leaves his/her role as God's image-bearer on earth, and starts worshipping all sorts of images of him- and herself, and of all the creatures they were to rule over on God's behalf. Second, it perverts the accountability of the human being to God. By making cultic images of him- and herself, and of the creatures they were to rule over, no room is left for the real Creator, in whose image they were created, and it makes the human being its own referee, accountable not to its Creator, just to itself.

Whereas Deuteronomy 4 does not use the key terms צֶלֶם or דְמוּת of Genesis 1:26-28, the latter term actually occurs at a crucial point in the idol polemic of Isaiah 40-55. One of the characteristics of the four idol-fabrication passages of Isaiah 40-55 is that they are all introduced by rhetorical מַי-questions, emphasizing the incomparability of Yahweh (Holter 1995:29). The first of these passages, Isaiah 40:19-20, is introduced by a מַי-question in the preceding v. 18 (cf. also v. 25), rhetorically asking whether Yahweh can be compared by someone or something, using one of the key terms from Genesis 1:26-28, דְמוּת and its verbal counterpart דָּמָה: “To whom will you liken (דָּמָה) God? Or what likeness (דְמוּת) will you compare with him?”

The inter-textual relationship between Genesis 1 and Isaiah 40-55 has been acknowledged for more than a century (Duhm 1892), and it has been suggested that the rhetorical question in Isaiah 40:18 is one of several examples where Isaiah 40-55 deliberately criticizes Genesis 1 (Weinfeld 1967/1968). The מַי-question in Isaiah 40:18 is part of a series of rhetorical questions from v. 12 on, all emphasizing the incomparability of Yahweh and all demanding a negative response: “no-one is like Yahweh”. When v. 18 then asks “What likeness (דְמוּת) will you compare with him?”, it is supposed to demand a corresponding negative response: “no likeness (דְמוּת) can be compared with Yahweh”. This is then argued to contradict Genesis 1:26-28, which says that God actually has a ‘likeness’ (דְמוּת), namely the human being. However, such an interpretation misses the rhetorical point of Isaiah 40:18, the ironical suggestion by the following vv. 19-20 – and by the whole corpus of idol-fabrication passages in Isaiah 40-55, in relation to their preceding, rhetorical מַי-questions (40:18, 41:2.4, 44:7, 46:5) – that human beings such as idol-fabricators can be compared to Yahweh (Holter 1995, *passim*). When human beings engage in the act of making idols, even in the likeness of themselves (cf. Isaiah 44:13), they place themselves in a role solemnly belonging to Yahweh (Holter 1995:79-89).

In a sum, therefore, when Deuteronomy 4 and Isaiah 40-55 interpret the Second commandment and its prohibition of cultic images from a creation-theological perspective, the result is a discourse – one would perhaps be allowed to say a rather imaginative discourse – where the act of making such images is conceptualized as a perversion of the key anthropological concept of the Old Testament, the creation of the human being in the image of God. When human beings engage in the making of cultic images, when they even make such images in their own likeness or in the likeness of the creatures they were to rule over, they actually reverse God’s creation. The result is an anthropology expressing the ultimate hubris, an anthropology where the human beings have lost their accountability to God, an anthropology where the human beings have become their own referees as a kind of perverted יֵהוּ אֲשֶׁר יֵהוּ: “they are who they are” (cf. Exodus 3:14).

Towards the Question of Human Dignity in Africa – and the Second Commandment

In the introduction to this article, I noticed that the Second commandment has not received much attention within the guilds of Old Testament studies in Africa, at least not north of the Limpopo River, and I suggested that reasons for this may be found in the fact that African Traditional Religions have not been experienced particularly threatening *vis-à-vis* this commandment, but also in the marginalization of this commandment in some of the Bible’s larger, interpretative communities in contemporary Africa. In the main bulk of the article, where I have discussed how Deuteronomy 4 and Isaiah 40-55 interpret the Second commandment from a creation-theological perspective, I have tried to demonstrate that the commandment may have a broader theological potential than simply that of rejecting a

concrete fabrication of cultic images. Now, towards the end, I will suggest that this observation might be a suitable starting-point for a discussion of the relevance of the Second commandment in contemporary Africa, *in casu* in relation to the question of 'human dignity'. Time and space prevents me from developing this discussion in any depths; still, a few basic perspectives should be pointed out.

First, before we even come to the Decalogue and to Africa, we should acknowledge that this seminar's focus on 'human dignity' touches a rather complex concept. The concept 'human dignity' is a culturally and contextually dependent construct, of course, which in spite of this – and like its close relative, the 'human rights' – struggles to find universal expressions. A much used example to illustrate this is the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, where the ink of the signatures hardly was dry before critical voices started to point out its 'Western-ness', its 'secular Christian-ness', and other examples of supposedly lacking universality (Wilson 1997). Another example, a more recent one, is the official Chinese response to the decision of the Norwegian Nobel Committee in October 2010 to award the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize to the Chinese human-rights activist Liu Xiaobo. Amongst their various examples of economic threats and political sanctions (which in the following months were put into action), the Chinese authorities also argue – not without any justification, I would tend to think – that the award can be seen as part of a more general lack of understanding in certain Western contexts of traditional Chinese values. In spite of their many differences, the United Nations and Chinese examples demonstrate that there is hardly any such thing as a generally accepted understanding of 'human rights' or 'human dignity'; we are talking about constructs that are under constant, culturally and contextually dependent negotiation.

Second, however, precisely because the concept 'human dignity' *is* a culturally and contextually dependent construct, it can be taken as an invitation to interact with classical texts and discourses such as the Second commandment and the creation-theological discourse on this commandment in Deuteronomy 4 and Isaiah 40-55. These texts and discourses express central human experiences as far as Old Testament anthropology is concerned, experiences that, I think, have the capacity of challenging anthropological paradigms even today. If we are to localize contemporary concepts of 'human dignity' somewhere in the biblical texts, the anthropological optimism of Genesis 1 would obviously be a good candidate. However, it is a text that ought to be balanced by texts expressing a more pessimistic anthropology, in order to encompass a broader spectrum of human experiences. Deuteronomy 4 and Isaiah 40-55 would probably say that the Second commandment could serve this purpose. It is a text, they might argue, that demonstrates the destructive potential of the human beings, when they turn their role as God's image-bearers around and – in their ultimate hubris – reject their God-given equality vis-à-vis each other, as well as their accountability to God. According to the interpretation of Deuteronomy 4 and Isaiah 40-55, the Second commandment is a text focusing on the potential of the human beings to destroy a key aspect of being a human being, and as such it is a text that is able to challenge concepts of 'human dignity' in all cultures and contexts.

Third, this ability of the Second commandment – at least in its Deuteronomy 4 and Isaiah 40-55 receptions – to challenge concepts of 'human dignity' in all cultures and contexts, may be seen as an invitation to reflect upon these concerns also in contemporary Africa. When we accept this invitation, we will soon realize that the various guilds of African Old Testament studies – not least north of the Limpopo River – have already taken up this challenge. More than most other guilds of Old Testament studies, the ones in Africa demonstrate a continuous interest for ethical questions, often related to what we here and now refer to as questions about 'human dignity'. An illustrative example is the Nigerian

Association for Biblical Studies – the leading organization for biblical studies on a national level in Africa, at least north of the Limpopo River – which again and again puts individual-ethical and socio-ethical questions on the agenda of its annual conferences, and always ‘from an African perspective’. Amongst its more recent conference topics, one finds for example ‘Biblical view of sex and sexuality from African perspective’ (Abogunrin 2006), “Biblical studies and corruption in Africa” (Abogunrin 2007), “Biblical studies and leadership in Africa” (Abogunrin 2009), and “Biblical studies and environmental issues in Africa” (Manus *s.a.*).

A general characteristic of the papers presented at these conferences, is that they approach the conference topic from the perspective of a contextual interpretation of certain biblical texts or motifs. Still, I am sometimes tempted to think that the contextual interpretation would have benefited from being related to a more general, ethical or theological discourse. Having looked at how Deuteronomy 4 and Isaiah 40-55 interpret the Second commandment, I would tend to think that the two may provide a model also for contemporary interpreters of, for example, the Decalogue and the question of human dignity in Africa. From a general perspective, I am sure that we can learn from our two interpretative predecessors when they relate the text that is to be interpreted to other, core texts and core concerns of the Old Testament, thereby being able to demonstrate a relevance that goes far beyond what a mere paraphrasing of the text would do. And from a more specific perspective – the Second commandment and the question of human dignity in Africa – I am sure that a creation-theological approach, emphasizing the ultimate hubris of rejecting our God-given equality vis-à-vis each other, as well as our accountability to God, would correspond with but also challenge the interpretative concerns expressed by our Nigerian colleagues.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abogunrin, SO (ed.) 2006. *Biblical View of Sex and Sexuality from African Perspective*. Ibadan: Nigerian Association of Biblical Studies (Biblical Studies Series, 5).
- Abogunrin, SO (ed.) 2007. *Biblical Studies and Corruption in Africa*. Ibadan: Nigerian Association of Biblical Studies (Biblical Studies Series, 6).
- Abogunrin, SO (ed.) 2009. *Biblical Studies and Leadership in Africa*. Ibadan: Nigerian Association of Biblical Studies (Biblical Studies Series, 7).
- Duhm, B 1892. *Das Buch Jesaia*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Holter, K 1995. *Second Isaiah's Idol-fabrication Passages*. Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang (Beiträge zur biblischen Exegese und Theologie, 28).
- Holter, K 2003. *Deuteronomy 4 and the Second Commandment*. New York: Peter Lang (Studies in Biblical Literature, 60).
- Holter, K 2008. *Contextualized Old Testament Scholarship in Africa*. Nairobi: Acton Publisher.
- Knapp, D 1987. *Deuteronomium 4: Literarische Analyse und theologische Interpretation*. Göttingen (Göttinger Theologische Arbeiten, 35).
- Lumbala, FK 1999. ‘Exodus 20:1-17: An African perspective’, JR Levison & P Pope-Levison (eds.), *Return to Babel: Global Perspectives on the Bible*. Louisville: John Knox Press, pp. 43-54.

- Manus, CU (ed.) s.a.: *Biblical Studies and Environmental Issues in Africa*. Ibadan: Nigerian Association of Biblical Studies (NABIS West Biblical Studies, 1).
- Ndjerareou, AL 1995. 'The theological basis for the prohibition of idolatry: An exegetical and theological study of the Second commandment'. Unpublished PhD thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, Texas, USA.
- Ndjerareou, AL 2006a. 'Exodus', T Adeyemo (ed.), *Africa Bible Commentary*. Nairobi: WordAlive Publishers, pp. 85-128.
- Ndjerareou, AL 2006b. 'Yahweh and other gods', T Adeyemo (ed.), *Africa Bible Commentary*. Nairobi: Word Alive Publishers, p. 861.
- Otto, E 1996. 'Deuteronomium 4: Die Pentateuchredaktion im Deuteronomiumsrahmen', T. Veijola (ed.), *Das Deuteronomium und seine Querbeziehungen*. Göttingen, pp. 196-222 (Schriften der Finnischen Exegetischen Gesellschaft, 62).
- Schmidt, WH 1993. *Die Zehn Gebote im Rahmen alttestamentlicher Ethik*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft (Erträge der Forschung, 281).
- Weinfeld, M 1967/1968. 'האל הבורא בבראשית א ובנבואת ישעיהו השני', *Tarbiz* 37, pp. 105-132.
- Wilson, RA 1997. 'Human rights, culture and context: An introduction', RA Wilson (ed.), *Human Rights, Culture and Context: Anthropological Perspectives*. London: Pluto Press, pp. 1-27.