

The Damascus Pentateuch (14th century)

THE KIRBY LAING CENTRE

Apologizing FOR Public Theology

PART 2 · CHAPTER 6

How Does the Pentateuch Inform Public Theology?

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Some will wonder how the Pentateuch could contribute to public theology. After all, these first five books of the Bible – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus Numbers and Deuteronomy – contain some of the strangest and most ancient parts of Scripture. Are we to believe that texts containing things such as talking donkeys, genealogies and rituals are the basis for speaking into contemporary issues such as medical ethics, artificial intelligence and identity politics? Perhaps surprisingly, the answer is a resounding “yes!” The Pentateuch is, in fact, fundamental to the rest of the Bible and, therefore, fundamental to the Christian worldview as well. It does nothing less than set out the origins and destiny of humanity.

Key to understanding the Pentateuch’s contribution to public theology is what might be called the two “Rs”: humanity’s *relationship* with God and its *role* in creation. Genesis 1–2 paints a beautiful picture of how these interact. To begin with, all of creation is depicted as God’s sanctuary. The Garden of Eden is the inner sanctum, the holy of holies, of creation, and Adam and Eve, God’s image, are placed there with the charge to “guard” and “keep” it (Gen 2:15). This language is distinctly priestly; it is used elsewhere in the Bible to

describe the priests’ role in caring for the tabernacle space (e.g., Num 3:7–8).

The language is also royal. Outside of the Bible, typically, only kings were considered the image of gods. They were given special status and charged with extending a god’s presence through the kingdom. This meant spreading divine dominion throughout the land by embodying the characteristics of the particular god. Generally speaking, the Bible shares this view. Humans, as God’s image bearers, are responsible for spreading his life-giving presence. We find this clearly in the call for humanity to “fill and subdue” the earth and “rule over” its creatures (Gen 1:28). This is unmistakably royal language.

Yet the Bible also differs in fundamental ways. For one thing, the biblical view represents a “democratization” of the image of God.¹ Instead of one man, the king, serving as God’s representative on earth, all people serve in this capacity: men and women, old and young, rich and poor, able-bodied and disabled. All people have a part to play in imaging God in creation.

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1 J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005), 121.



Unknown Artist, *Adam Naming Animals* (Meteorá)

Furthermore, it is not just a local kingdom in view but all of creation. All people image God throughout all creation. And finally, this ruling and subduing is done as artisans or craftsmen rather than warriors. Since human rule is done in imitation of divine rule, it is vital to observe how cultures depict their gods establishing order. Here the Bible stands alone in the ancient world. In place of creation accounts in which the gods are depicted as warriors conquering chaos through violence, we find the biblical account, where God is pictured as a “craftsman or artisan”² who brings order through craftsmanship.

In imitating God, then, humans are called to rule over creation as artisans. This has been called the “cultural mandate,”³ for it envisions humans incarnating the character of God by creating culture: “Embedded in this human activity is (at least in germ form) the development of agriculture, the arts, economics, family dynamics, and everything that contributes to human flourishing, to the glory of God.”⁴ Or as Herman Bavinck said, “And this dominion of the earth includes not only the most ancient callings of men, such as hunting and fishing, agriculture and stock-raising but also the trade and commerce, finance and credit, the exploitation of mines and mountains, science and art.”⁵ As image-bearers, the human vocation is one of “culture

making,”⁶ of cultivating “secondary environments” in creation, which reflect the goodness of the creator.⁷ We find this impulse already in Genesis 4–11, where people participate in activities such as city building (4:17; 11:1–9), livestock herding (4:20), music making (4:21), metallurgy (4:22) and technological innovation (11:3).

This calling, however, is corrupted in the fall of Genesis 3, the first moment when humans choose to disobey their creator. When this happens, the twin strands of image bearing – the priestly and the kingly – become bent and twisted. St. Augustine captured the idea well when he said that, from Genesis 3 onwards, human love is directed inwards rather than upwards to God and outwards towards creation, and the desire to rule becomes the desire to dominate rather than to guard and keep. In Church history, these ideas were expressed elegantly in the Latin phrases *homo incurvatus* (the inward-curved human) and *libido domanandi* (the lust for domination).

From Genesis 3 onwards, humans continue to carry out the priestly-kingly calling, but now in ways that extend crookedly into creation. Instead of worshipping and mediating the one true God, humans now mediate the versions of false gods they hold in their hearts; and instead of ruling over creation like the artisanal God, they rule like tyrants.

Yet God does not abandon his creation or his representatives. Instead, he doubles down on his intentions. With humanity having gone astray as a

2 Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 266.

3 For a brief, helpful introduction, see N. Gray Sutanto, “Cultural Mandate and the Image of God: Human Vocation under Creation, Fall, and Redemption,” *Themelios* 48.3. Accessible here: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/cultural-mandate-and-the-image-of-god/>.

4 William Edgar, *Created and Creating: A Biblical Theology of Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 168.

5 Herman Bavinck, *Wonderful Works of God*, trans. Henry Zylstra (Glenside, PA: Westminster Seminary Press, 2019), 189.

6 See Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008).

7 Henry R. van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: P&R Publishing, 1972), 7.

species, God now sets apart a select group of people to serve as model image-bearers. To these, he will bind himself in covenant and reveal his ways so that they might bear witness to him and bless his broken creation. This begins in earnest in Genesis 12 with the promise to Abraham, and it continues throughout not only the Pentateuch but the whole of Scripture.

What we find in the Pentateuch, then, is the foundation for public theology, for it outlines three essential elements: the original intentions for humanity (to serve as priest-kings who mediate and rule), the way in which the fall corrupted these intentions (the mediation of false gods and ruling by domination), and how now God intends for his people, as ideal image-bearers, to live before him in this world. The Pentateuch, therefore, sets two realities in contrast: God's intended mediation and ruling of creation and the warped versions of these created by fallible humans. And, as such, it also invites commentary on the gap between these, which is where public theology can make a significant contribution.

Public theology is, therefore, a valuable tool in at least two ways: 1) in discerning the extent to which current cultural practices reflect the divine intentions and 2) in developing practices and perspectives that are closer to

the mark. This is true in both the so-called secular *and* sacred domains. Christian organizations and institutions, like secular ones, are governed by humans who also bear the scars of the fall, which is to say, who also tend towards embodying false images of God and misusing power. Everything touched by humanity bears the marks of the fall, and everything ought, therefore, to come under the light of the biblical witness.

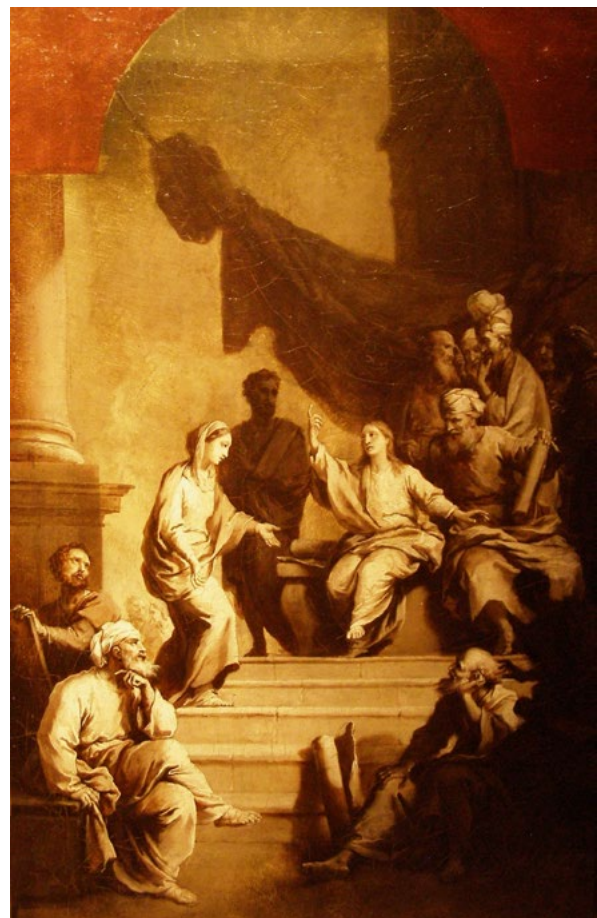
The realm of education provides a helpful case study. Across the West, education is now seen as a public good, a resource owed to all people. Because of this, immense funds are devoted to schools and universities, and people spend much time and energy debating the kinds of education that are best. What has been largely lost, however, is the fact that the very idea of public education comes from the Judeo-Christian tradition, indeed from the Pentateuch itself.

It grows from the place where two revolutionary ideas converge:⁸ firstly, that all of humanity is made in the image of God and tasked with representing him in creation, and, secondly, that all of humanity, therefore,

⁸ See Jeremiah Unterman, *Justice for All: How the Jewish Bible Revolutionized Ethics* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2017), 15-40.



Maurycy Gottlieb, *Jews Praying in the Synagogue on Yom Kippur*



Christian Dietrich, *Jesus Teaching in the Temple*

ought to be educated (for lack of a better term) to know and imitate God. This is why the Pentateuch is also known as Torah, which literally means “instruction,” for it is God’s curriculum to form fallen creatures into fitting image bearers. In other words, the Pentateuch is meant to form the image of God for the mission of God.

Fundamental to this is the fact that pedagogy grows out of anthropology. That is, every model of education (pedagogy) grows out of a particular vision of humanity (anthropology) – what humans are *for*. In the biblical view, humans are meant to mediate God truly (as priests) and rule over creation by cultivating environments of flourishing (as kings). Since all people are made in God’s image, all people ought to be educated in his ways. Indeed, it was this very idea that led John Amos Comenius, Bishop of the Unity of the Brethren in Moravia (modern-day Czech Republic), to advocate for educational reform in the 1600s. Heavily influenced by the Pentateuch, he argued that all children, not just the elite, should have access to education since all children share in the vocation of being a “royal priesthood” in creation (Exod 19:6).⁹ Comenius’s ideas would go on to revolutionize education for good, imprinting upon society the idea that education is for all people. For this reason, Comenius is now considered the father of modern education.

Over time, Comenius’s vision of education (pedagogy) would remain while his motivation (anthropology) faded away. And this created what we now find in education today, which is to say models of education – both secular and sacred – severed from their roots. In the secular realm, we need to look no further than the university. While the Church is the mother of the university, today’s university barely tolerates its mother, relegating her to the corners of its campus in the form of clubs and societies. Beyond the ouster of theology and religion from the university’s core curriculum, Western society has gone to great lengths to sideline the humanities in general. This much was made clear in Australia in 2020, for instance, when the government introduced a fee structure prioritizing “job-relevant” degrees. The effect was that the cost of a humanities degree more than doubled, while that of programmes such as agriculture and nursing were slashed. While people might differ on the benefits of such moves, one thing is undeniable: those who specialize in understanding humanity now have little, if any, voice in shaping education. Of course, this is not to say that education is no longer driven by a particular view of humanity, but rather that this view is set by pragmatics. In the case of Australia, the message is clear: what humans are *for* is economic production,

and what education does, therefore, is prepare them for such production.

In the sacred realm, the situation is not dissimilar. Consider K–12 education in private Christian schools. At first glance, things appear to be different, with the language of academic excellence surrounded by that of Christian character, spirituality, and worldview. However, upon further investigation, it becomes clear that the curriculum is driven by the same forces that drive the university. We know this because the primary promise of such schools is that their education will provide students access to the best universities and best jobs. If this is their chief promise to parents, then ultimately the prayers, devotionals, chapel services, and Bible classes all orbit around this, not vice versa. For all the good that such Christian elements accomplish, they are, educationally speaking, still serving a view of the human person that is more economic than biblical.

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⁹ Comenius, *The Great Didactic* (Latin: *Didactica magna*; 1633–1638), esp. Chapter 9, pp. 66–69, and Chapter 25, 231–248.