

HUMAN DIGNITY AND WORK

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What Is

Civil society has been unraveling. Political life is dysfunctional. Sides are taking up arms. The Head of State is accused of power abuse and beheaded.¹ And after nine years of civil war more have died from the ensuing diseases than had died from armaments.

But in the midst of all this, a group of believers in British Isles in the 17th century remained convinced that the humanity's main purpose is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. Is it really possible to glorify God and enjoy him when everything seems to be falling apart around me?

What Could Be

The answer to this question hit me between the eyes when I had the privilege of serving at the Lausanne II Congress on World Evangelization in Manila where we were introduced to Chen Min Lin and got to hear his story.

Chen Min Lin was born in Shanghai to the family of a well-off manufacturer. He was born again to faith in Jesus as his Lord and Savior at the age of 19. He experienced God's call on his life to make disciples in a land where Chairman Mao was the "savior" and the "bible" was Mao's "Red Book."

While Chen was pastoring three rural churches in 1968 he was arrested for the third time for the crime of preaching the Good News of Jesus. And the outcome was 18 years in prison. During this time Chen's wife dies and their son was killed, though officials never let him know.

Pastor Chen told of numbers of imprisoned pastors being tortured to death. He told how he almost starved to death in the Shanghai City Jail. After several years he was transferred to a prison camp where he was assigned the morbid task of working down in the cesspool that collected the human waste of 60K prisoners. He thought he'd die there in the cesspool before the first day was over.

And yet, as he waded down into stench of that disease-laden soup, a smile took shape. For the first time in prison he was alone and he would sing hymns like *"I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses, And He walks with me and he talks with me, And He tells me I am His own, And the joy we share as we tarry there none other has ever known...."*

¹ Charles I

Pastor Chen told how, as he sang, "I would feel the Lord holding me tight in his everlasting arms. At that moment, the cesspool became my own private garden." The stench kept the guards away and, he said, "I could now commune with God, praise his name at the top of my voice and recite Scriptures...It is easy for us to praise the Lord in freedom, but are we able to praise our Lord in these kinds of circumstances?"

"Because He was with me," Pastor Chen told us, "I was able to praise him in such earthly misery because He never leaves or forsakes us. For 18 years, not only did I survive physically, but also I was able to forgive those that put me there."

So in the most dire life and work circumstances, Chen Min Lin learned to glorify God and to enjoy him. When Pastor Chen was released he went back to visit the three little churches where he'd served maybe 100 altogether and was greeted by more than 5K Christians.

What Is/Was

So let's unpack this a bit by taking a look at the stark contrast between ways of understanding how the world works – let's rewind the tape some 5 millennia. The Middle East experienced its share of chaos during the Bronze age. City-states, tribal confederations and multi-national empires, each with their patron deity, tangled with each other as they came and went.

I'd like to introduce you to Enheduanna. Princess Enheduanna was born c. 2250 to Sargon, King of Akkad. The Princess was also a high priest of the moon god, Nanna. And she's one of the earliest authors we know by name because of the discovery of temple hymns she wrote along with devotionals to Inanna, "Queen of Heaven," the Sumerian goddess of love and fertility. In Enheduanna's world, folk understood that life as they knew it was controlled by 60 times 60 capricious gods.²

Many of these deities came about as a result of the gods copulating with each other. At times the gods would prank other gods. And at times they'd terrorize each other. And sometimes the gods would get "creative" and kill each other for the raw material—like when Tiamat, goddess of the ocean, was beaten to a pulp and bisected so that her corpse could be used to create heaven and earth.

As you might imagine, 3,600 deities are sufficient to animate and control just about every sort of thing and activity in the universe...but, when they fought against each other that might cause things to go a bit helter skelter.

² Karen Rhea Nemet-Nejat, (1998). "Daily Life in Ancient Mesopotamia", 182

There are a number of ancient texts to help us understand the perspective the ancients had on how the world worked such as the Eridu Genesis the Atrahasis Epic, the Enuma Elish, and the Gilgamesh Epic. The ancients understood that humans were created from the corpse and blood of a slain god and created for the purpose of relieving the gods from their labor. The gods called on Mami, midwife of the gods, "create a human being that he may bear the yoke, let him bear the yoke, the task of Enlil, let man assume the drudgery of god."³

What Could Be

But the Bible begins line one by pushing back against the notion of a sun-god and moon-god and earth-god and rain-god. Genesis starts out, "In the beginning God..."—God always was and is. And God created all that is rather than being created by and out of what is. And this single claim provides the basis for morality and economic order

And Genesis begins by arguing that, far from being an afterthought, humanity is created—not under duress, as seen by the people of the ancient Near East, to do the work that the gods detested—humanity is specially created from the earth by God in his own image as the crowning act of creation and is given dominion on behalf of the Creator and commissioned to steward God's good creation for God's great glory.

Genesis 1 provides a corrective to the prevalent worldview. It teaches a view of the God of creation, of his relationship to creation, of humanity's relationship to God and to each other. God is God. And he created humanity "a little less than God" according to Psalm 8.

So, the Hebrew Bible sets out a view of God and of humanity that's radically different than anything we know of from the ancient Near Eastern context. And this sets the grounds for the sanctity of human life—made from the same stuff as the animals, but distinguished—set apart—as bearers of the image of God, and, as we see in Genesis 2, infused with a soulish vitality—"God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and 'adam, humankind—male and female—became a nephesh chayah—a living soul.

And the Creator commissioned humanity to creatively manage God's domain for God's glory. This creates a very different model of oikonomia—an economic model which has profound implications for us and our understanding of our work—whether paid for that work or not.

What Is/Was

Genesis 2 confronts another facet of the way the ancients understood the cosmos worked. Ancient Near Eastern texts like this one shed light on what's being addressed not only in Genesis 2 and Deuteronomy 4, but over and over again by the psalmist (Psalm 115; 135) and biblical

³ COS 1.130 II.193-197

prophets (Isaiah 2, 10, 30, 31, 42, 44; Jeremiah 8, 10, 16, 51; Hosea 8, 13, 14) who challenge the viability of the “gods” of the surrounding cultures as merely “carved images,” the “work of human hands.”

Jeremiah puts it this way (10:14)—“Every goldsmith is put to shame by his idols, for his images are false, and there is no breath in them.” To borrow a phrase from the Apollo XIII crew, Jerry says “Houston, we have a problem!” These “gods” are “dead as doornails.”

And people realized this problem. These texts from Mesopotamia admit, “This statue cannot smell incense, drink water or eat food without the Opening of the Mouth!”⁴ And you say, “Well, duh! I can’t either!” But hold on.

You see, in the ancient Near Eastern setting of the Torah, we find texts describing that the gods were carved and painted or overlaid with precious metals. Then the statue was brought to a sacred garden where they performed a ritual of transition that included prescribed incantations involving the *mīs pî*—“washing the mouth” and *pīt pî*—“opening the mouth.” These phrases allude to what a midwife does to clear the airway of a newborn.

In other words, the ritual speaks about the cult statue as if it were the outcome of a process of gestation and birthing.⁵ So there was concern over how an inanimate object of human design and manufacture could be transformed and birthed into a living god that could now properly be installed in the temple. And textual evidence shows how they addressed this concern.

The hands of the craftsman who made the idol were amputated—perhaps only symbolically (p.40)—and a sheep was sacrificed. The implements they used to craft the idol were collected and wrapped inside its carcass which was thrown into the river and floated away to be received by the craft god (p.114). And abracadabra! All evidence of human device has been “disappeared” and the craftsman would testify, “I swear that I did not make you; Ninagal, Ea of the smith, made you.”⁶

See, it’s a miracle! Well, these people demonstrate that they understood that it’s just inappropriate for humans to create gods.

What Could Be

And this is the setting in which Abe and Sarah grew up and now, generations later, the setting into which this fledgling nation is born and receive a rather contrary revelation from Yahweh himself. You see, Genesis 2 confronts the common worldview once again.

⁴ STT 200:42 (BIHMOE p.40)

⁵ Born in Heaven Made on Earth, p.68

⁶ Ibid., p.40

Yahweh God crafts an image with his hands. This one-of-a-kind divine Craftsman creates an image of himself. And then, the text tells us, Yahweh animates this image by breathing into 'adam's nostrils the breath of life. Then Yahweh plants his garden toward the east in Eden and installed adam—the human whom he had crafted—God installs 'adam in this "temple"—the place where God dwells with humankind.

Then a partner is crafted for this image of God. She is said to "correspond" to 'adam, she's his "other half"—Adam exclaims, "Aha! Now He's done it!—She's "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.""

So listen—understood in context, Genesis 2 is a clever, complex confrontation of the common worldview as it relates to the nature of humanity. Humans are not mindless objects, grudgingly created to relieve the gods of distasteful work. It's not up to humanity to create its own gods, however cleverly designed or how surreptitiously they might pull it off.

No, the God of the universe and LORD of history has created humanity to be a reflection of himself in the world. And humanity is explicitly commissioned to manage God's household—his oikonomia.

So, what do we have here?

I put it to you that maybe a bit like a 3D photo or cinema is produced by taking two similar but slightly different views of the same subject—so Genesis 1 and 2 give us, not two different origin fables from two different sources, but two different perspectives on the same historic event in order that the first audience (and we along with them) might be given a corrective to a tainted and skewed worldview in order that we might understand God's amazing grace and the splendor of his grand restoration and reconciliation project—and understand our role in it as managers of God's domain, as co-creators through our home and family and through our work and as purveyors of the glory of God's grace.

I hope these insights from Scripture might cause us to take another look at ways we glorify God as persons bearing his image and see that we don't get our dignity from our jobs, we bring dignity to our work.

Even when our work, like Pastor Chen, is shoveling sewage, we can do even that as an act of worship and find dignity in our work for God's glory and for the sake of the world for whom Christ died.