Is Genesis 1:27 Poetry?

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The short answer to the question: yes and no. It is worth exploring why. Gen 1:27 in Hebrew, framed as it were by 1:26 and 1:28, reads like this:

Spacing is used to mark the medial syntactic break which occurs at midpoint in all three clauses of 1:27. The thrice-repeated break contributes to the prosodic rhythm of the whole.

I follow Ronald Hendel in terms of the text most likely to reflect the original in 1:26. In his view, in MT, an unlikely phrase in context, is an error resulting from a scribe skipping ahead from לארשי ובלכלי to לארשי ובלכלי. The correct text was added back in without the erroneous text being removed.¹

I prefer Robert Alter’s rendering of Genesis to all others,² but in my view he misses a couple of nuances in his translation of 1:26-28. I would translate as follows:

And God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness, to hold sway over the fish of the sea and the fowl of heaven and the cattle and all the crawling things that crawl upon the earth.”

And God formed the human in his image; 
In the image of God he formed him; 
He formed them male and female.

And God blessed them and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; hold sway over the fish of the sea and the fowl of heaven and every creature that crawls upon the earth.”

In 1:26, אדָם is used in the sense of a plurality realized grammatically as a collective singular, and is followed up by a grammatically plural verb: וְיִרְדּוּ ‘and let them hold sway.’ I translate אדָם in 1:26 with ‘humankind.’ In 1:27, אדָם is used in the sense of a singularity, and is followed up by a grammatically singular personal pronoun: הוּא ‘him.’ It is found with the article to indicate identity with אדָם as referred to in 1:26. I translate אדם in 1:27 with ‘the human.’

The abstract expressions ‘create’ and ‘have dominion’ are avoided in my translation. The corresponding Hebrew terms are concrete. בָרָא Qal means to ‘shape (by cutting),’ and by extension ‘form, fashion, make’; בָרָא Niphal, idem; בָּרֵא Piel means to ‘cut down, cut out.’ See BDB; HALOT assigns בָרָא Qal and בָּרֵא Piel to different roots. בָרָא in Phoenician occurs as a nomen professionis in reference to some sort of craftsman. בָרָא Qal in ancient Hebrew probably has the specific concrete sense of ‘shape, form, fashion’ in the passage before us and in Isa 43:1, 7; 54:16. A more generic concrete sense of ‘fashion, make’ is plausible in all others. בָּרֵא Qal but not בָּרֵא Niphal (Ezek 21:35; the subject here is a ‘sword’; the passage confirms the relevance of the meaning of בָרָא in Phoenician to its meaning in Hebrew) is found exclusively with God as subject. בָּרֵא Piel, on the other hand, is found exclusively with human beings as subject. If the corpus at our disposal were more extensive, it is likely that examples of בָּרָא Qal with a human subject and בָּרֵא Piel with a divine subject would turn up, though it is impossible to be sure. Theologoumena in support of the doctrine of creatio ex nihilo based on the exclusive occurrence of בָּרָא Qal with God as subject have often been pronounced by Old Testament scholars. They constitute a classic case of overreach, and lead to boners like the following: “An element (in the
accusative or introduced by a preposition) from which God ‘creates’ is never indicated.”³

The verb רדה Qal occurs with a double accusative in Isa 65:18.

The verb רדה means to ‘beat down, beat out (e.g., grapes in a winepress: Joel 4:13),’ more figuratively, ‘beat down, subdue.’ The use of force is implied, or at least serves to give punch to the idiom, as is true in the English expression ‘I beat him’ in the sense of ‘I vanquished him.’ Translating רדה with ‘have dominion’ drains it of its color.

In my view, Gen 1:27 is an example of poetic prose and is best formatted as if it were verse even if it is not verse in the strictest imaginable sense. It exploits several conventions of ancient Hebrew verse. In particular, it has an appositional style (connectives between clauses are not used; the clauses are merely juxtaposed), a tripartite structure in which each part repeats and at the same time builds on the preceding part, and a repetitive (2+2) + (2+2) + (2+2) prosodic structure.

On the other hand, the spreading out of a clause within each of its three parts to a length of four beats violates a norm observed elsewhere in ancient Hebrew verse, whereby such spreading occurs, sometimes often, sometimes rarely, but not to the exclusion of occurrences of greater terseness in which a clause is confined within a verset of no more than three beats. Furthermore, the thrice-repeated occurrence of the nota accusativi (אֶת אֹתֹ אֹתָם) within such a short compass, while not impossible in verse, is more typical of prose. The repetition is in fact characteristic of the prose environment in which 1:27 occurs and of which it is a part.

For further discussion of Genesis 1:27, I recommend the post by Wayne Leman, and ensuing exchange, over at englishbibles.blogspot.com. For a discussion of the usefulness of counting the number of so-called prose particles in a text as a way of determining whether it is poetry or prose, see the post by Tim Bulkeley and ensuing exchange over at bigbible.org/blog. In posts to come, I discuss other questions that pertain to Genesis 1:27 and its interpretation.

³ Werner H. Schmidt, THAT, sub ברא.