

Is Genesis 1:27 Poetry?

John Hobbins
jfhobbins@gmail.com

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:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים
נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ
וַיְרִדוּ בִדְגַת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם
וּבְבְהֵמָה < > וּבְכָל-הָרֶמֶשׂ הָרֹמֵשׂ עַל-הָאָרֶץ:

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים	אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ
בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים	בָּרָא אֹתוֹ
זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה	בָּרָא אֹתָם:

וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים
פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ וּכְבִשְׁתֶּהּ
וַיְרִדוּ בִדְגַת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם
וּבְכָל-חַיָּה הָרֹמֶשֶׂת עַל-הָאָרֶץ:

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, *וּבְכָל-הָאָרֶץ* in MT, an unlikely phrase in context, is an error resulting from a scribe skipping ahead from *וּבְכָל הַ* to *לְהָאָרֶץ*. 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:

¹ Ronald S. Hendel, *The Text of Genesis 1-11: Textual Studies and Critical Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 42-43; 122-23.

² Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2004) 18-19.

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

The abstract expressions ‘create’ and ‘have dominion’ are avoided in my translation. The corresponding Hebrew terms are concrete. ברא Qal means to ‘shape (by cutting),’ and by extension ‘form, fashion, make’; ברא Niphal, idem; ברא Piel means to ‘cut down, cut out.’ See BDB; HALOT assigns ברא Qal and ברא Piel to different roots. הברא in Phoenician occurs as a *nomen professionis* in reference to some sort of craftsman. ברא 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. ברא Qal but not ברא Niphal (Ezek 21:35; the subject here is a ‘sword’; the passage confirms the relevance of the meaning of ברא in Phoenician to its meaning in Hebrew) is found exclusively with God as subject. ברא 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 ברא Qal with a human subject and ברא 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 ברא 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 ברא 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* (אתם/אתו/את) 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.