

Cat.2 # 3 The principle of hierarchy

By Pieter Bos

One of the common human questions, everywhere in the world around us, is the "more than" question: "I am more than a machine, more than a number, more than a case, am I?" "Why is man worth more than the sparrows" (Luke 12:24)?

The "more than" question.

A brief survey on the concept of hierarchy in the Bible.

Not only is it important to ask: "Am I more than a ...?", but it is also basic to find out the answer to the next question: "What am I more than...?"

This question also runs both through my books *The Nations Called* and *The City Called* (see Resources).

Both questions touch on the concept of hierarchy.

Also, when the world is confused about authority and indulges in anarchy, it is because the world is confused concerning the concept of hierarchy.

My personal conviction is that the two main organizing principles of reality are: God is making history and God is acting through hierarchy. An understanding of hierarchy can be considered of major importance for understanding the structure and functioning of reality. (Note by Helene Bos, 2018 That is why this principle is terribly attacked in the last 40-50 years. So that it is changing the values in the western world.)

A. First Biblical evidence

God calls himself the "Most High". We meet this name for the first time in the mouth of Melchizedek (Gen 14:19-20). This suggests the idea of high – higher – most high. The last name given to Jesus in the Bible is "King of kings and Lord of lords" (Rev 19:16). This suggests a three-level hierarchy: King – kings – subjects.

The way God reveals himself suggests the basis for this organizing principle of hierarchy. "Suggests", I say, because both scriptures are taken out of a narrative that is not dealing with theological argument. Many references to be mentioned are of this nature, presenting the idea of hierarchy in a casual and non-argumentative way, as if the concept of hierarchy is assumed and not questioned.

However, first I will deal with two more "theological" arguments on the issue.

An event turned into a sermon to emphasize the principle.

Jesus offers to go to a centurion and to heal his servant (Matt 8:5-13, Luke 7:1-10). The centurion identifies himself as a man "under authority" and at the same time as a person with authority ("with soldiers under me," Matt 8:9). The centurion knows what it is to serve "up" and what it is to rule "down". He understands that it is only through servanthood and obedience to his superiors that he has the authority to rule others. He also understands that ruling is more than the issuing of commands; it entails caring for his sick servant (Matt 8:5-6), valuing his servant highly (Luke 7:2), love for the nation where he is sent (Galilee) and building the local synagogue (Luke 7:4). In fact, on the one hand the centurion renders obedience to his superiors and on the other hand loving care to those under his authority.

The pagan centurion acts upon what I would call a BIBLICAL THREE-LEVEL HIERARCHY: being in the middle between superiors and subjects, respecting and trusting your superiors and at the same time treating those who are entrusted to you with God's authority and love.

On the basis of this understanding the centurion expects healing for his servant from Jesus. He seems to think along these lines: "That Jewish rabbi would never be able to share care and love for the sick so powerfully, if he was not himself obedient to the one who commissioned him; from him one word should be sufficient." And so the centurion's response is basically this: "I am in the middle of a three-level hierarchy, and it works; I believe you are also in the middle of a three-level hierarchy, so act upon it. No doubt it will work. Just speak the word". "When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him: I tell you the truth, I have not found in Israel anyone with such great faith" (Matt 8:10).

Jesus interrupts a healing ministry to expound on the topic of hierarchy, so important and central is the understanding of the issue. He rejoices in this man's faith, and even more in his understanding. Jesus takes the opportunity to turn theological about hierarchy (!), to make an instant sermon and to stress a practical example for

those who follow him (*including myself!*). He makes a very strong declaration by saying that "subjects of the kingdom will be thrown out," whereas many coming from outside will enter into the kingdom (Matt 8:11-12). In other words: many who know the king, the superior, but do not behave according to the biblical three-level hierarchy, who rule "down" without caring "down", will be expelled; those who are not legitimate subjects but who act according to the three-level hierarchy, including care for those under their authority, will come in and take their places! (Another example of this pattern is the other caring centurion, Cornelius, who is described as "God-fearing" and who "gave generously to those in need" (Acts 10:2))

This short but powerful sermon of Jesus establishes the "biblical three-level hierarchy": with respect and trust "up" and authority and loving care "down" the hierarchical ladder is functioning properly. In short: not lick up and kick down, but honour up and care down.

B. An everyday situation exposed to the principle

"Now I want you to realise that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God" (1Cor 11:3).

This is a reflective, or theological, moment in Paul's argument; he wants us to realise that there is a hierarchical order God / Christ / husband / wife.

This scripture is very important for our argument. "Head", both in Eph. 5:22-33 and in this scripture, is understood to NOT mean "centre of control" but "source of life". I am aware that the translation allows more options, but the reason to make this choice is based on research, 1) and based on the understanding of covenant.

In a covenant "the stronger party chooses another party and unconditionally commits himself to prosper and protect the chosen party", in short: I am your God and you will be my partner". 2)

This concept of covenant is basic for marriage; the "prospering and protecting" is really what the "source of life" should be doing.

And what do we discover here? In a hierarchical structure Life flows from the Head to the body, flows DOWN from the Source of Life! That's why God is on top; who else can grant life but God? And who else sets the example of caring down, but God and Jesus?

Paul, in the every-day and always sensitive situation of marriage, turns theological, in Eph. 5:22-33 a bit quick but in 1Cor 11:3 more explicit, and gives advice by referring to the hierarchical structure as secured in the covenant-extending and therefore life-giving God.

C. Examples of Biblical - three and more - level hierarchies

The following examples all clearly refer to a hierarchical structure. They become meaningful only when the respect "up" and the responsibility to care "down", that are typical of the biblical three-level hierarchy, are taken into account.

Pre-fall examples of God / man / animal / plant / thing in hierarchical relationship are given in Gen 1:28; 2:19-25.

Example including the inanimate: Isa 28:23-29.

Examples of hierarchical ladders up and down: Prov. 12:10; Prov. 14:31; Luke 20:14-16.

An elaborate example is given in Luke 17:24-27: Kings / subjects / tax money; but Jesus again makes an instant sermon, by including himself as God's son in the "case" and by providing for the money in a miraculous way, through which the hierarchy is extended: God / God's Son / kings / subjects / fish / coin / number.

Rom 13:1-4; Eph. 6:9 and Col 4:1 refer to governmental hierarchies.

Deut. 5:16; 1 Cor 11:1; 1 Cor 11:3; Eph. 5:22; Eph. 6:1-3 refer to family hierarchies.

D. Applying the idea of hierarchy, especially to the problem of worrying

The biblical three-level hierarchy includes worship and trust "up" and loving care "down." So, faith in the biblical hierarchy is a sound basis for not worrying! When you worship and subject yourself "up", you can expect and trust your superior to take care of you, "down". The best-known examples are in Matt 6:25, 26; 30; 31-32; 33 and Luke 12:23-28. In Mark 10:42-45 and Rom 13:1-4 again governmental hierarchies are presented, here specifically with the emphasis on not worrying: the secular government is described as "God's servant (up), to do you good (down)." Serving "down" is assessed as "greatness".

E. Human responsibility based on the logic of hierarchy

In the following scriptures, the psalmists refer implicitly to the hierarchical structure of reality as immediate basis for their behaviour: Ps 4:7-8; 119:36; 123:2. God speaks similarly through the prophets: Isa 1:2-3 and Jer. 8:7. Jesus does the same in John 13:16: "No servant is greater than his master, that's why..."

Violation of hierarchy

The Lord assumes an understanding of hierarchy and is full of wrath toward those who knowingly resist it, withholding from the Most High the honour he deserves.

Isa 29:16: "You turn things upside down (!), as if the potter were thought to be the clay..." Rom. 1:21-23: "although they knew God... they foolishly exchanged the immortal and the mortal"(!), Ibid. 2 Th 2:3-4.

Conclusion so far

The indignant question: "I am more than an animal, am I not?" is appropriately indignant, because the human being is more than an animal. To know the answer to that question and to rest in it, is a matter of understanding and receiving the principle of hierarchy in everyday reality of life. This principle is the biblical answer to the "more than" questions in everyday life.

In our time the world on the one hand is confused about authority and on the other hand indulged in anarchy. That is because the world is misled concerning the concept of hierarchy and the beauty of its rule, that those in authority should lovingly care for those under their authority.

How many peoples have suffered under tyrant kings, how many wives under selfish husbands, how many subjects under authoritarian leadership, how many landscapes under destructive "developers"? Each of these "heads" nothing but blurred the image of God these authorities were to show to them. The consequence has been, besides the tremendous suffering, a scepticism toward genuine care from authorities, the preaching of at random equality, and the danger of drifting toward anarchy.

Does God not like king-ship?

There are two occasions that seem to say that the concept of hierarchy, or at least the concept of king-ship, is not of God. 1 Sam 8 says that God did not want to give Israel a king; in John 6:15 Jesus did not want the people to make him king.

For both passages is the answer: not yet!

Kingship is a good thing, of God, in the Bible. Melchizedek was king, and what a testimony is given about him. And in the days of the Judges the narrative reflectively repeats: "There was no king in those days, and everyone did what was good in their own eyes!"

About the John 6:15 passage: Jesus emphatically spoke all the time about HIS coming kingdom, but the timing of it is beyond us and Him (also Acts 1:7)

About the 1 Sam 8 passage: This one is more complicated. My understanding is this: God set up a covenant with his people of Israel, for eternity. Covenants are God's idea for relationship, and as he is eternal, covenants are eternal. On this earth, as long as there is time, there will be celebration of kingship. Melchizedek gave a pre-view; a first actualisation we see through David and Solomon; the final thing we see through the son of David, for 1000 years, and then time and kingship stop and eternity takes over. In eternity, on "the new earth", there will be the eternal celebration of Bridegroom-ship, of the eternal Covenant-initiator-Bridegroom, with Israel-the-Church.

In other words, concerning 1Sam 8: Israel expressed her lack of appreciation of her position of future eternal Bride by preferring the temporary-ness of kingship, and God was indignant.

Why are Hierarchy and History-making THE two organizing principles of reality?

God is the (Head or) Source of life, and Life is flowing from Him down to Jesus, and then to men and women, even the divine life as they are baptised in the Spirit, or at least the human life that makes man a "living being". And His life is even in beasts: "the life is in the blood". And inside atoms the mini-particles in their orbits are miraculous, even to non-believing scientists. Life is flowing down from the source of life, keeping erect this wondrous hierarchy of the created, and God says to man: "You are to manage this, you are in charge on my behalf; Life must flow down from Me through you down to the animals and the garden".

I am singing here a hymn to the Creator. He keeps His reality erect by letting his Life flow and flow and flow down: reality is organized by His design that His Life should flow from the Creator to the human creature to the rest of

creation; the human role is to worship up and to care down. (note 3). Call it heavenly order or hierarchy or what but let us behave according to that design. Isn't this enough for total worship?

But for God this is not enough. He wants this awesome creation to go somewhere, to a goal, for a purpose, to a future! Each trickle down of Life is designed to achieve something down AND towards a future, to make history! What future?

From eternity to eternity there was and is and will be God, Triune, Holy and Self-sufficient. In a 'window of time,' humanly speaking a 'short interruption of eternity,' spanning from the creation of the first earth and humanity to the creation of the new and imperishable earth, we see God enjoying His creation. God elected one nation, Israel, and covenanted her. The fall of humanity 'added' to this scheme that the Son of God, who is also the Son of Man, should carry all iniquity, giving His divine love and divine life to rescue humanity for a new covenant in His own blood. He did this to safeguard both His time-purpose: an earthly (thousand-year?) rule as King of kings; and His eternal purpose: a heavenly eternal covenant celebration as Bridegroom. When all things have (been consumed by fire or have) turned imperishable, from the new creation 'onward', 'after' the window of time, in 'the second half of eternity' (speaking all the time from a human viewpoint, of course), we see the Triune God again, but now covenanted to His Bride.

This "time-and-eternity line" is mega-historic, subordinating human world history to divine motives in history making. It is also cosmological, as it intertwines earthly and heavenly dynamics. The awesome and holy and infinite Triune God creates time, interrupting His eternal, self-sufficient Life, even offering His Life, only to live again in eternity, no longer God "alone", but God with his Bride. Is this to say that God made a decision to end His eternal self-sufficiency and surrendered Himself, in order that He could live again eternally, no longer self-sufficient? God is and will be self-sufficient forever. Yet it is as if God said, 'It is not good for God to be alone. Let us make humanity, even corporate humanity, and covenant ourselves to her eternally!' Can it be that the aspect of Adam of which God said: 'It is not good for the man to be alone' (Genesis 2:18), was also 'in God's image?' Adam was not alone, for he could, un-equally, relate to God. God was and is not alone for He is Triune. Yet still He created Adam, and He purposed a Bride, in order to have an eternal covenant with her. 4)

I present these two concepts in fear and trembling, in utter amazement and awe. With Paul, when speaking about hierarchy (Eph. 5:32) I exclaim: This is a profound mystery, but this is, as far I understand.

Hierarchy together with making history are in fact THE two organizing principles of reality: hierarchy establishes the honour relationships and the care relationships of all of reality, for God's eternal purpose to be reached!

We see a practical and very "scientific" application of both principles at work in philosophic materialism, which claims: all there is, is matter and chance, matter held together by energy and chance without purpose. Matter and energy, we can research and measure, and chance we can calculate. Top-down hierarchy? What can be Top? Meaningful purpose? What could have been the purpose of humans after there were monkeys? Especially as now "we have too many humans" (as the UN contends)? Intelligent Design? It is "foolishness to the Greeks". But the wisdom of those wise will be destroyed. In other words: denial of hierarchy and purpose locks us out of Life and Hope.

We see a practical and utterly corrupted example of both principles at work in all empires since Nimrod: with cruel persecution and proud city building they each pursue their one-world government. All will fail. In other words: corruption of hierarchy in order to safeguard your future will fail.

We see a practical and beautiful example of both principles at work in the commandment: "Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you" (Ex 20:12). In other words: observance of hierarchy grants your future!

Endnotes:

1. Mickelsen, Berkeley & Alvera. 'What does Kaphale mean in the New Testament?' in Alvera Mickelsen (ed.), Women, Authority & the Bible, some of today's leading evangelicals seek to break through a critical impasse, Downers Grove, Inter-Varsity Press, 1986.

2. This is the basic form of covenant, the glorious divine tool to bridge the gap between the Creator and the creature. It is presented by God to Abram in Gen 15, to David and to Israel in Jer. 31. The derived form of covenant is not unconditional but conditional, as to Abraham in Gen 17, to Israel in Exodus, to all nations in Zech. 11, and very common in ancient and medieval times between a souzerain and the vazal. The third form of covenant is a covenant between equals, as between Jonathan and David.

3. note from Helene: When Christian environmentalists speak about caring for the earth and creation but give no attention to the worship up, to the Creator Himself, they do not really understand the Biblical term "steward-ship".

4.This section on future is summarized from § 2.4 from my book "The Nations Called". See under Resources) The "more than question". (Note from Helene Bos: For more of this topic, see the mentioned book, under Resources) .