

## BIBLICAL UNDERCURRENTS IN CHAVARA'S WRITINGS - I

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Anyone who engages with the writings of Kuriakose Elias Chavara readily discerns his profound reliance on the Bible as the wellspring of his thoughts. Whether in poetry or prose, his works are richly imbued with citations, allusions, metaphorical comparisons, intertextual echoes, etc., from the Bible. Yet, in the absence of explicit verse references, tracing the Biblical locus becomes a demanding task. Recognizing this as a vital step towards appreciating the depth of Chavara's theological insight, I undertake the task of uncovering the Biblical undercurrents in Chavara's writings. The methodology I follow is to read through his works to identify the use of the Bible in various ways. We start with his poetic work *Compunction of the Soul*.

### 1. Birth - "God Shaped me in the Image of His Glory"

The first poem in *Compunction* begins with a narration of Chavara's birth and vocation. In this narration, the saint draws on the Biblical

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accounts dealing with the creation of human beings. He begins his birth poem with a universalistic anthropological horizon – a vision of humanity that transcends individual biography. His assertion, "The almighty God fashioned me as Adam's son" clearly implies this (Sir 40:1). He regards this as a profound act of divine mercy (*daya*). He draws this conclusion based on the poetic imagination that it was in God's power to make him an animal or a reptile instead of a human being, and nobody in heaven and earth would have the right to question the Divine freedom (Poem I, lines 5-8). Here, one can find a subtle acknowledgment that God is the Creator of both humans and other creatures, reflecting the creation account in Genesis (1:24-26). However, in the poetic imagery describing his creation, he says,

In the magnanimity of Your will  
 Though a great sinner, I am, your servant,  
 You moulded me in the *image<sup>1</sup> of Your Glory*  
 By your mercy alone, O Lord (Poem I, lines 9-12)

Here, we find a beautiful blend of Genesis 1:27 and Psalm 8:5. Referring to his birth, Chavara writes, "God shaped me in the image of His Glory." Genesis 1:27 says, "God created humankind in His image." However, it does not mention "Glory of God" in connection with the image. Then, from where does Chavara get this additional element? In Ps 8:5, the Psalmist attributes the dignity of human beings to the sole fact of God adorning them with glory and splendor. Chavara's coinage of "the image of God's Glory" to refer to his creation as a member of humanity seems to be a beautiful intertextual link between Gen 1:27 and Ps 8:5. Psalm 8 is a lyrical meditation on the dignity and mission of human beings in God's vast creation. Though seemingly insignificant amid the grandeur of God's creation, God places a special focus on them – crowned with glory and honour and entrusted with sacred responsibility. Notably, the word pair "glory and honour" (*kabod wehadar*) is reserved for God's royal character. If so, God's decision to crown humans with them is a gracious gift, conferring them with a royal vocation: to care for creation in accordance with God's intentions and purpose. Chavara, using this coinage – "the image of God's glory" – to refer to his origins, makes a beautiful synthesis of the divinely bestowed dignity that makes them special. This implies the interdependent nature of human existence: humanity's significance

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<sup>1</sup> The word used by Chavara is the Malayalam word *chaya*, which I think refers to "image" (Hebrew *zelem*) rather than likeness (Hebrew *demut*).

within creation is not self-centered but relational, grounded in an obedient dependence on God. As Gross and Reinelt comment, "Human beings, therefore, do not exist in themselves, they can only be understood and described in relation to God; all glory and dignity of human beings are derived from God; they are the reflection and image of divine majesty."<sup>2</sup> The statement that human beings are created in the image of God also highlights their relational nature. By bringing together Genesis 1:27 and Ps 8:6, Chavara succeeds in articulating the role expected of human beings: to be the representatives of God as His image on earth in faithful submission to God's creative intent.

The contrast between his low estate and the divine attention on him is continued when he depicts the role of his mother in I, 17-20:

...like a worm creeping on the earth  
 I am created from the dust of the soil  
 To live on earth without stain  
 You gave me a spotless guard

Here, Chavara depends on Gen 2:7, "...then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground..." to develop his thoughts. Chavara's emphasis on his origins from dust reflects an attitude of humility befitting the handiwork of God. His comparison with a worm creeping on the earth suggests solidarity with other soil-born beings because both are fashioned out of soil (*adamah*) (Gen 2:19), underscoring "the affinity with the earth" that Genesis 2 prioritizes.

Synchronizing the creation accounts in Gen 1:27, Ps 8:6 and Gen 2:7, Chavara provides a very suggestive theological anthropology: human beings are crowned with divine and royal attributes as "images of Divine Glory," yet formed from clay, meaning, however exalted their vocation, they remain fragile and earthbound. This awareness of rootedness to the earth (*adamah*) and the gift of the image of divine glory (*kabod*) guide Chavara in his thought-process and life.

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<sup>2</sup> H. Gross and H. Reinelt, *Das Buch des Psalmen, I* (Dusseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1978), 60.