

Vorster J.M.

A CHRISTIAN ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE MORAL STATUS OF THE HUMAN EMBRYO

ABSTRACT

This investigation focuses on the moral status of the human embryo from a Christian ethical perspective. The central theoretical argument is that the embryo has a particular standing before God and should therefore have a special standing in the eyes of human beings. The article examines three biblical concepts from the perspective of a biblical-theological hermeneutical model in order to unfold this argument. These are: the creation of the human being as a living being with the breath of God (*nephesh*); the creation of the human being in the image of God; and the biblical view of the human being as a covenantal being. The conclusion reached is that the human embryo must be regarded as a neighbour. Therefore, the commandment of neighbourly love, which is a core characteristic of deontological Christian ethics, should also be extended to include the human embryo.

1. INTRODUCTION

In a published volume of scholarly articles on the ethics of stem-cell research, various researchers in this field define and describe the ethical problems related to embryonic stem-cell research (see Gruen, Grabel & Singer 2007). Questions about the moral status of the embryo are raised as well. Bio-ethicists such as Devolder and Harris (2007:16), MacMahan (2007:32) and Tännsjö (2007:188) are of the opinion that the embryo should not be perceived as a human being and should therefore not be regarded as an organism with any moral status. Marquis (2007:51), on the other hand, argues that the embryo is a human being, but that this point of view should not inhibit embryonic stem-cell research. Regarding this issue, the question arises: Does the embryo have any moral or fundamental human rights that can determine the question of whether the embryo may be destroyed in either stem-cell research or abortion? Sagan and Singer (2007:139) contend that the destruction of

Prof. J.M. Vorster, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa. E-mail: Koos.Vorster@nwu.ac.za.



Acta Theologica
2011 31(1): 189-204
doi: 10.4314/actat.v31i1.11
ISSN 1015-8758
© UV/UFS
<<http://www.uovs.ac.za/ActaTheologica>>

SUN M^oDIA
BLOEMFONTEIN

Vorster A Christian ethical perspective on the moral status of the human embryo

embryos should not be an issue in the human rights discourse, owing to the fact that the embryo has no moral status, since it has no rational faculty.

The above-mentioned publication of Gruen, Grabel and Singer also deals with other ethical issues such as the creation and selling of oocytes (Gruen 2007:145) and the creation of chimeras (DeGrazia 2007:169). However, the main ongoing debate in question in this publication relates to the moral status of the embryo. The essential question is: Can the embryo be regarded as a human being with human dignity and all the human rights that such a dignity entails, and as an organism that can claim the moral status of a human being? And: Is the embryo just an organism, or a potential human being, or a developing human being? This article enters this debate from a deontological Christian ethical perspective. The central theoretical argument will include an examination of the Christian concepts of the human being as a "living being" (*nephesh*), image of God (*imago dei* and *imago trinitatis*) and as a covenantal being, in the unfolding of this hypothesis. These topics are approached from a Reformed paradigm, which entails a biblical-theological hermeneutical model. In other words, biblical material will be investigated within the total scope of biblical theology and the on-going history of revelation throughout scripture (*tota scriptura*).

The investigation is preceded by a brief definition of the core terminology used in this examination.

2. TERMINOLOGY

A few concepts need further clarification, namely that of "moral status", as well as the biological terms "zygote", "embryo" and "foetus". The term "moral status" is a recent concept in the human rights discourse. It features mainly in the domains of animal welfare and third-generation rights, especially animal rights. However, the concept became prominent in bio-ethical debates relating to topics such as abortion, euthanasia and stem-cell research, as well as in feminist ethics. In these debates, the issue is whether animals or foetuses or terminally ill or comatose patients have the same standing as persons in general. In the feminist debate, the central issue is whether insidious social pressures and norms deny women a voice or a full membership of the moral community. Moral status thus refers to the standing of the object of ethical reflection. This standing can be defined by the ontological features of the object itself, or by the circumstances that may inhibit the standing of the object, whether rightly or wrongly. The Kantian approach of Sagan and Singer (2007:139) is a good example of how a moral status can be defined in terms of this way of reasoning. They regard the embryo as an organism without any rational component, and argue that, in view of the absence of rationality, the

embryo should not be regarded as an object with moral standing. Another viewpoint entails determining the standing of an object by way of ownership. The owner determines the standing and the value of the object (Waters 2003:69). For example, the parents may decide about the standing of their unborn child and the farmer may decide on the standing of his or her livestock. This viewpoint maintains that neither the unborn child nor the livestock on a farm have any intrinsic ontological standing. The only standing they have is the value conferred on them by their owners.

What will determine moral status in a deontological Christian ethics? Unlike Kant, prominent Christian theologians maintain that the standing of objects is determined by their standing in God's creation and the appeal to humankind to act as the stewards of creation (*see* in this regard the discussions of Barth (1961:33); Bonhoeffer (1995:181); Moltmann (1993:31) and Berkouwer (1957:34)). Objects have an ontological standing as part of creation; and human beings are called to respect this standing. For example, creation constitutes the moral standing, and thus the moral status of the ecology. Furthermore, the creation and ensoulment of human beings by God establishes their human dignity. This intrinsic human dignity constitutes the moral status of the human being. This line of thinking regarding the moral status of the embryo will be explained, and subsequently employed in this article.

The biological differentiation between "zygote", "embryo" and "foetus" is usually understood in the following sense: The zygote is the fertilized egg cell. During the first stage of development of a baby from the moment of fertilization, it is referred to as an embryo. It is called a foetus from the eighth week after conception. There are developmental differences between the two stages, as well as significant differences for the mother during these distinct developmental phases.

The embryo is the first thing of which the mother will become aware when she undergoes a pregnancy test. At this stage, the embryo is the size of a sesame seed, and the embryonic sac can be traced by means of ultrasound equipment. By the fifth week of development, the embryo will display a heartbeat during the early ultrasound scans. Early in this development, the tiny embryo will develop buds that later grow into arms and legs. This is also the time when the neural tube – which will later become the brain and the spinal cord – starts developing. During this period, the developing embryo obtains all its nourishment from the uterine tissue, or the amnion. The placenta also starts developing at this stage. The placenta is the lifeline through which the baby will obtain oxygen and nourishment from its mother's body (*see* Raven *et al.* 2005:1097 ff.). This investigation will use the terminology as defined in the foregoing paragraphs.

The first topic to be analysed in this examination is the biblical idea and ethical relevance of the creation of the human being as a living soul (*nephesh*).

3. THE HUMAN BEING AS A LIVING SOUL (*NEPHESH*)

The statement in Gen. 2:7 is of particular interest for the status of the human embryo. It reads: "... the Lord formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the *breath of life*, and the man became a *living being*" (NIV). The Hebrew word used for the "breath of life" is *ruach* and the word used for "living being" is *nephesh*. The *ruach* is more than breath in a biological sense. It indicates life that comes from God and contains the spirit of God (Preuss 1991:161). It is important to note that this word is used in other parts of the Old Testament to describe the spirit of God (see Job 34:14). This spirit equipped charismatic leaders and prophets (Judg. 3:10; 6:34; 1 Sam. 10:6; 19:20-24.) After the exile, the *ruach* was perceived as the force behind prophetic proclamation and a moral lifestyle (Isa. 59:21; Ezek. 36:27; Joel 2:28-29 and Hag. 2:5). *Nephesh* indicates life – the life of humans as well as animals (Gen. 1:20; Lev. 17:11 and Deut. 12:23).

Although this concept is also used to describe the life of animals, one cannot deduce, on the basis of this fact, that the life of humans is the same as that of animals. The theological context is important in order to understand the special quality of human life. Human life does not emerge from the human beings themselves, but comes from God. Brueggemann *et al.* (1999:51) state, in this regard, that:

God's very life is then breathed into the sinner; something of God's own self becomes an integral part of human identity, enabling life to move from God out into the larger world.

In this description of the origin and quality of life, the biblical story of creation differs from the ancient Babylonian myths of creation (Wolff 1973:142).

The God-given life mentioned in Gen. 2:7 is more than mere biological life. The human being is invested with something of God himself, namely his spirit. With the gift of this life the human being is ensouled (Vriezen 1966:440; Gunkel 1977:6; Brueggemann 1977:450). This ensoulment does not imply a dualism in human existence. Humans are not bodies with souls; rather, a human being is a "dependent, vitality-given unit, for which the term *psychosomatic* entity might be appropriate" (Brueggemann 1977:453). The human being is a living soul. The word *nephesh* appears 755 times in the Old Testament; and in 600 cases, it is translated in the Septuagint with the Greek

word *psyche* (Wolff 1973:25). This psyche is the centre of love and grief, desire, hope and expectation. When God withdraws his breath (Ps. 104:29 & Job. 34:14), humans revert to dead corporeity (Von Rad 1972:77). For this reason, human life should be regarded as holy; and therefore it constitutes an important theme in biblical revelation (see Wüstenberg 1996:136).

The Fall tarnished all these divine gifts, but did not destroy them. The God-given life is part of God's goodness to all people. Calvin ([1559] 2008 II:III:4:180) explains that God bestows divine gifts on all human beings. People can be virtuous because of the common goodness of God, in spite of total depravity. The fact that people can make good laws, have artistic talents, are able to develop science and technology, can be caring and compassionate and maintain an orderly society, does not indicate that these abilities comprise part of an innate goodness and qualities founded in humanness, but reflects the creational gifts of God aimed at maintaining law and order. The greatest gift of all is the gift of *ruach*, the spirit-filled life from God.

Several prominent Old Testament scholars emphasised the crucial importance of the God-given *ruach*, which resulted in the *nephesh*, as a basic ingredient of a Christian anthropology. The German Old Testament scholar Von Rad (1972:77) typifies this passage (Gen 2:7) as the *locus classicus* of Old Testament anthropology. He argues that the divine breath of life, which unites with the material body, makes man a living soul, in terms of both the physical and the psychical aspects. Westermann (1975:81) argues that the creation of humankind in this way constitutes the essence of the human being. Without becoming divine, the human being nevertheless becomes the representative of God.

According to the Old Testament, life emerges at the time of conception (Job 3:3; Ps. 139:13-16). From the testimony of the Old Testament, it would be valid to argue that the formation of the zygote (which is the term used to describe the fertilised egg) already constitutes the domain of the God-given human life. The *ruach* of God is present in any form of human life; in this instance, in the zygote and the embryo, and – during the later development – in the foetus. The soul is indissolubly present in the *ruach* of God. Because of the special quality of the life of the zygote, embryo and foetus, they must each be regarded as a human being in development – and not as a development into a human being. Life, even in the zygote, is human life, given by God, which defines this organism as a human being (*nephesh*).

As a human being, created and ensouled by God, the embryo is ontologically an object with a moral status. In practical terms, deliberately destroying the human embryo is tantamount to the deliberate destruction of a human being.

4. THE HUMAN BEING AS *IMAGO DEI* AND *IMAGO TRINITATIS*

The moral standing of human beings is not only grounded in their creation as living beings by God, but also in the quality of their creation – that is to say, their creation in the image of God (*imago dei* and *imago trinitatis*). The biblical idea of the *imago dei* should be regarded as the basis for the doctrine of human dignity in deontological Christian ethics. Human dignity implies a standing before God and other human beings, and this standing constitutes a moral status. The consideration of the moral status of the human embryo requires an answer to the question of whether the embryo can be defined as a being with human dignity. As in the case of the creation of the embryo as a living human being, the answer seems to reside in the story of creation and the value bestowed on human beings by God. In the first description of the creation of humankind, Gen. 1:27 reads: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them”.

The creation of humankind in the image of God implies that God created people to live in a relationship of mutual love and care. The *imago dei* has various implications for a Christian anthropology and a deontological Christian ethics. Since the Reformation, several theologians have enunciated these implications. Although Reformed theology emphasises the total depravity of humankind as a result of the Fall, it is fair to conclude that this theology did not proceed from a totally pessimistic view of humankind because of this angle of approach in its anthropology. It also reflects on the implications of the *imago dei* for human relations, and propounds the view that the *imago dei* reflects the inherent human dignity of all people, which should be respected by fellow human beings and social institutions. Human depravity does not preclude the recognition of the inherent human dignity of persons by fellow-humans and social institutions.

Prominent theologians in the Reformed tradition developed the doctrine of human dignity based on the biblical idea of the *imago dei*. Calvin (1:XI:2:147), the father of the Reformed tradition, did not use the term “human dignity”. However, he stressed the worthiness of the human being. In his view, the creation of humankind on the “sixth day” is important to note because God first created a dwelling place for people, then the angels to act as protectors of humankind. These actions were the prelude to the creation of human beings. Humankind was bestowed with a certain status. Humans are the most precious part of creation, and the most worthy to behold; and this fact is proof of God’s righteousness (Calvin 1:XV:1:172). The most distinctive quality of humankind is its likeness to God, which is seated in the intellect and in the abilities of the “soul” (Calvin 1:XV:4:179). In spite of humankind’s alienation from God, owing

to the Fall, the *imago dei* has not been destroyed (Calvin, 1:XV:4:179). People retain the dignity of their creation, and all the responsibilities flowing from this inherent dignity remain intact.

Reformed theologians, in the tradition established by Calvin, furthered his argument of the dignity of humankind – especially in the twentieth century with the emergence of the notion of human rights against the background of the human rights abuses in World War II. The German theologian Barth (1961:116) emphasised the relational aspect of the *imago dei*. He maintained that the *imago dei* is an expression of God's willingness to enter into a relationship with humankind. Man became a relational being; and in their expression of relations of love and care, people express their basic dignity. In other words, people's ability to express humaneness is a sign of the *imago dei* (see Westermann 1975:344). This is the reason why God forbids manslaughter and why preservation of life is so important in the Old Testament laws (Barth 1961:344). The purpose of human conduct is to preserve and protect life and everything it entails, such as humaneness, compassion, caring and social concern. On this basis, Barth designed a Christian anthropology that resists the individualism and rationalism of the Aufklärung (Price 2002:97).

At the same time, the prominent Dutch theologian Berkouwer (1957:34) reflected on the relevance of the *imago dei* for modern ethics and social concern. He also maintains that the doctrine of *imago dei* is essential for the development of a relevant Christian anthropology. Through the *imago dei* and the atonement in Christ, a human being becomes a "man of God," and as such, receives the ability to strive after the justice of the kingdom of God. However, the main ethical implication of the *imago dei* is that it establishes the possibility for humans to be free from any form of slavery or lack of freedom that arises from the blemishes of sin and feelings of guilt. Therefore, any person who uses the *imago dei* as an angle of approach should support a nation's call for freedom, and the Christian Church should also support such a desire for freedom (Berkouwer 1957:369). The consequence of Berkouwer's view within the framework of the topic under discussion is that the *imago dei* sets the stage for people to seek liberation by way of repentance and forgiveness. This doctrine indicates that in a world of suffering and hardship, people can achieve peace by respecting human dignity, seeking the kingdom of God and embodying forgiveness.

Moltmann (1993:1), a prominent Reformed theologian of the late twentieth century, developed the ethical implications of the *imago dei* even further. He also maintains that this notion is a theological concept with clear ethical implications. The concept should be explained in terms of its close relationship with the *imago Christi* and the notion that *Gloria Dei est homo* (Moltmann 1993:216). The concept conveys an idea about God who created an image and then entered into a close relationship with that image. Therefore the *imago*

Vorster A Christian ethical perspective on the moral status of the human embryo

dei is all about relationships – the relation between God and humankind and interrelations between human beings. Humans are thus created as relational beings. They relate to God, to each other and to the rest of creation. They are representatives of God in this world, to care for his work as stewards. The *imago dei* should be manifested not only in a few human characteristics, as early Reformed theology argued, but in the totality of human existence. Moltmann (1993:221) states:

The whole person, not merely his soul; the true human community, not only the individual; humanity as it is bound up with nature – it is these which are the image of God and his glory.

The *imago dei* is what human beings are and not what they have (*see also* Wright 2004:119; Vorster 2007:75).

Van Huysteen (2006) presents a valuable and seminal contribution regarding the “uniqueness” of the human being in a recent publication. The value of his contribution lies in the fact that he approaches the issue of the possible “uniqueness” of the human being from an interdisciplinary perspective. He rejects the idea that

the domain of religious faith and the domain of scientific thought are exemplified by rival and opposing notions of rationality (Van Huysteen 2006:xv).

He argues that

the porousness of the boundaries between theology and the sciences allows for a creative rethinking of the notion of *imago dei* in Christian theology (Van Huysteen 2006:xvi).

Although he criticizes specific trends in the historical explanations of the *imago dei* in post-Reformational thinking, he contends that the concept has always functioned in a broad sense to express the relationship between Creator and creatures, God and humans (Van Huysteen 2006:160). The *imago dei* is the theological explanation of human uniqueness; and this view of the human being can be complemented by paleoanthropology. His reasoning, although critical of historical theological voices, strengthens the idea that the *imago dei*, supplemented by paleoanthropological insights, comprises an important angle of approach in the estimation of the dignity and worthiness of the human being.

The biblical idea of *imago dei*, as it is expounded and applied in the Reformed tradition, has concrete implications for Christian anthropology and social ethics. Not only does this concept explain the core value of human dignity, but it is essential to any approach to humaneness and human

relationships. In the Roman Catholic view, after the publication of the *Rerum Novarum*, the *imago dei* was not only interpreted as the rational faculty of being human; it was also understood in the relational and representative senses (Ruston 2004:277).

These gifts enable humans to fulfil their calling to be stewards of creation. Preuss (1991:238) summarises the purpose of these gifts as follows:

From the beginning, God has given the world to humanity. The world, and that does not simply mean fellow human beings, is the object of human moral behaviour and discourse (cf. Ps. 8) and humanity may and should order the world responsibly before this God and in relationship with him.

Humans can also inherit the new world. In the community of faith God saves humankind and restores his creation. All these topics developed throughout revelation history demonstrate how God invested humankind with human dignity – not a dignity of equivalence with God, but a dignity *before* God. The richness of this dignity lies in the relationships of humankind – the relationship with God, with each other and with creation.

In contrast to the Kantian view that human dignity resides in human reason, the idea of the *imago dei* teaches that human dignity is seated in the relationship of God with the human being into whom God has breathed the breath of life. Where life is, there the human being is, and where the human being is, there is human dignity. It is thus fair to conclude that the moral status of the human embryo and foetus rests in its human dignity which flows from the relationship with God. *Imago dei* also means *imago Christi* and *imago spiritatis*. The embryo (foetus) as a human being in development can also inherit the fruits of the Spirit and can be “predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom. 8:29). The embryo’s standing before God and before human beings is thus all the more strongly constituted by these possibilities. This standing defines the moral status of the embryo.¹ The embryo has a moral status equal to that of all human beings, and has the same right to

1 In this respect the deontological Christian perspective is not out of step with secular ethical thinking. Lee (1996:24) argues from another point of view and contends that the embryo has an intrinsic value similar to the value of a human being because: The foetus is identical with – that is, it is one and the same entity as – the being that is later rational and self-conscious.
The being that is later rational and self-conscious is, at that later time, intrinsically valuable.
If a thing is intrinsically valuable, then it is intrinsically valuable from the moment it exists.
So, the being that is later rational and self-conscious is intrinsically valuable from the moment that it exists (on the basis of the second and third arguments).

life and respect. The embryo as a developing human being is as unique and dignified as a human being who is fully developed. In addition to the idea of the embryo as an *imago dei*, there is more to be said about its relational characteristic, as brought to light in the biblical teaching of the covenant. This teaching describes the human being as a covenantal being.

5. THE HUMAN BEING AS A COVENANTAL BEING

The idea of a covenant between God and humans is a prominent topic in biblical revelation. Vriezen (1966:181) describes the idea of the covenant, in addition to that of the *imago dei*, as one of the structural forms of the religion of Israel in the Old Testament. The word *bĕrīt* (covenant) occurs 287 times – in the singular form – in the Old Testament (Perlitt 1999:710). However, the theological *locus classicus* of the concept is found in Gen 9:8 and 17:7, which describe the promise of the covenant with Noah and later with Abraham. Gen. 17:7 reads: “I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.” Von Rad (1972:200) argues that the extension of the covenant to the descendants is a reference to the timeless validity of this relationship. According to the story of Noah, God extended his covenant to all living creatures (see Clark 2000: 284). Thus, he created the wholeness and relatedness of everything, as well as the relatedness of present and future. By establishing the covenant with Israel, God created an alternative social community (Fedler 2006:92). He entered into a special relation with Israel – the new alternative social community.

The meaning of the word *bĕrīt* is “relationship”. This was a relationship with the people as a group; but it was also a relationship with every individual and his descendants. The whole religion was built around the communion of God and humans. The covenantal relationship is created by God as an act of grace, and He sets the conditions of this relationship. According to Vriezen (1966:185), the covenant entailed the following:

- People’s absolute recognition of the communal relation between God and humans;
- the absolute recognition of God, the Holy One who is sovereign;
- the absolute recognition of the commandments given by God.

Therefore, the foetus is intrinsically valuable from the moment that it exists (on the basis of the first and fourth arguments).

Time and again the people rebelled against the covenant; but they were repeatedly reprimanded by the prophets, and exhorted to rectify their relationship with God.

The concept of the covenant is also prominent in the New Testament, although there are different opinions regarding the various possible translations of the word *diatheke* (Hübner 1999:712). The Old Testament concept of the covenant reaches its zenith in the New Testament. Moses, the mediator of the old covenant at Sinai, makes way for Jesus, the Mediator of the new and better covenant. In this regard, Heb. 8:6 reads: But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises (*see also* Heb. 9:15 and 12:24). However, the better covenant is not *another* covenant (Douma, 1996:5). Furthermore, Douma (1996:5) insists, along with Calvin and the Reformed tradition, that the covenant with Israel does not differ in “essence and substance” from the New Testament covenant, but that the two covenants differ only in administration. The new covenant is no longer established with one nation (Israel), but extends to believers and their descendants from all nations of the world (Acts 2:39; Rom. 9:24-26; Eph. 2:11-22). Moreover, he contends that worship practices associated with priests, animal sacrifices, and feast days ended when these things, which were mere “shadows”, were replaced with the reality that appeared in Christ (Col. 2:16-17; Heb. 5-10).

What is important for the purpose of this study is the question: “What are the implications, for the unborn child, of the covenant with the future people (descendants)?” Can the unborn child be regarded as part of those descendants who received the promise of this special relationship with God?

To my mind, the timeless validity of the covenant of which Von Rad (1972:200) speaks has a definite bearing on the unborn child. Unborn children are viewed in Scripture as human beings (Ps 51:5; 139:13-16; Job 3:3). Considered within the context of the *tota scriptura* (the on-going history of revelation), the covenant with the parents includes the children and the unborn children. Nowhere is this fact more clear than in the biblical teachings and the ecclesiastical doctrine of infant baptism as the concept is explained in the Reformed creeds. The Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s day 27, explains the Reformed view of infant baptism, which is derived from the biblical theology. All the other recognised Reformed confessions concur with this explanation (*see the synopsis of the Reformed Confessions as compiled by Beeke and Ferguson 1999:220*). According to the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), children are included in the covenant of God, just like adults. Therefore, they are also included in the church. In this respect this creed refers to Gen. 17:7, which indicates that God established his covenant with humans and their descendants. Furthermore, children are promised the cleansing by the blood of Christ no less than adults. In this regard, the creed refers to Jesus’ invitation

Vorster A Christian ethical perspective on the moral status of the human embryo

to children to come to him because the kingdom of heaven is for people like them (Mt. 19:14). Children are also promised the Holy Spirit and the faith that he will work in them. In this respect the creed refers to the theology of biblical passages such as Luke 1:15; Ps. 22:11; Is. 44:1-3; Acts 2:39).

The baptism is also a sign of children's inclusion in the "covenant of the Christian Church", and in this way they are distinguished from the children of unbelievers. Infant baptism is compared to the circumcision of the Old Testament; and the creed goes on to conclude that baptism replaced circumcision, which was the sign of the old covenant – the covenant of the Old Testament (McGrath 1997:507). The Belgic Confession (1561) says:

Moreover, what circumcision was to the Jews, that baptism is to our children. And for this reason Paul calls baptism the circumcision of Christ (Col 2:11) (see the synopsis of the Reformed Confessions as compiled by Beeke 1999:220).

What does this doctrine imply for the unborn child? Drawing from the arguments above, the following deductions can be made:

- The unborn child (embryo, foetus) is a living human being (*nephesh*). It is not just an organism or an object. As stated earlier on, the argument that the formation of the zygote already constitutes the domain of the God-given human life, is a valid one. The *ruach* of God is present in any form of human life – in this instance, in the zygote and the embryo, and in the foetus that develops later on. The soul is indissolubly present in the *ruach* of God. The special quality of the life of the zygote, embryo and foetus should position it as a human being in development, and not merely a development into a human being. Life, even in the zygote, is human life, given by God, which defines this organism as a human being (*nephesh*).
- The child also bears the image of God because it is a *nephesh*. The creation of the human being in the image of God constitutes human dignity. Human dignity is not grounded in the rational capacity of mankind, but in its creation in the image of God.
- Owing to the fact that the unborn child at any stage of its development as a human being is indeed a human being in the image of God, the covenant with mankind and its descendants is also established with the unborn child. The unborn child is a covenantal being.

This qualification of the unborn child comprises an additional argument in the quest for the moral status of the embryo.

6. CONCLUSION

The biblical notion of the human embryo as a *nephesh*, as created in the image of God, along with the idea that the embryo, as a derivative of these qualities, can be viewed as a covenantal being, constitutes an indication of its standing before God and fellow human beings. By virtue of this standing, the human embryo has a moral status that should be respected in bio-ethical research and medical processes. Therefore, it would be immoral to create an embryo with the intention of destroying it for the purpose of stem-cell research. Other means of stem-cell research should be pursued.

The task of a deontological Christian ethics would be to stress the responsibility of researchers to protect the life of the embryo and to respect its moral status. In this regard, the words of Vogel *et al.*, authors of the German CDU policy document, are worth quoting:

[I]n the Christian view not only the children, but even embryos and fetuses, as well as the disabled, the sick and the dying and those who are unfit for, or have failed in life, are of course human beings and must therefore be included without reservation in the Christian image of man (Vogel *et al.* 2007:15).

In these times of unbridled racism, ethnocide, sexism, xenophobia, infanticide and the violations of the human dignity and human rights of so many destitute people, these words could hardly be more apt.

Waters (2003:71) brings home the essence of the responsibility of a deontological Christian ethics by contending that we should see “the embryo as my neighbour”. Jesus taught that the law of God instructs us to love God and our neighbour. That love and what it entails should then also be extended to the human embryo.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BARTH, K.

1961. *Church Dogmatics. Volume III. The doctrine of creation. Part 4.* Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark. (Translated by Mackay, A.T. *et al.*)

BEEKE, J.R. & FERGUSON, S.B. (EDS)

1999. *Reformed confessions harmonized.* Grand Rapids: Baker Books.

BERKOUWER, G.C.

1957. *Dogmatiese Studiën. De mens het beeld Gods.* Kampen: Kok.

BONHOEFFER, D.

1995. *Ethics.* London: Simon & Schuster.

Vorster A Christian ethical perspective on the moral status of the human embryo

BRUEGGEMANN, W.

1977. *Theology of the Old Testament*. Minneapolis: Fortress.

BRUEGGEMANN, W. ET AL.

1999. *A theological introduction to the Old Testament*. Nashville: Abington.

CALVIN, J.

2008. [1559] *Institutes of the Christian religion*. Peabody: Hendricksen.

CLARK, S.R.L.

2000. *Biology and Christian ethics*. Cambridge: University Press.

DEGRAZIA, D.

2007. Human-animal chimeras: Human dignity, moral status and species prejudice. In: L. Gruen, L. Grabel & P. Singer (eds.) *Stem cell research. The ethical issues*. (Oxford: Blackwell), pp. 168-187.

DEVOLDER, K. & HARRIS, J.

2007. The ambiguity of the embryo: Ethical consistency in the human embryonic stem cell debate. In: L. Gruen, L. Grabel & P. Singer (eds.) *Stem cell research. The ethical issues*. (Oxford: Blackwell), pp. 16-31.

DOUMA, J.

1996. *The ten commandments. Manual for the Christian life*. Philipsburg: P & P Publishing. (Translated from the Dutch by N.D Kloosterman.)

FEDLER, K.D.

2006. *Exploring Christian ethics. Biblical foundations for morality*. Louisville: WJK.

GRUEN, L.

2007. Oocytes for sale? In: L. Gruen, L. Grabel & P. Singer (eds.) *Stem cell research. The ethical issues*. (Oxford: Blackwell), pp. 145-167.

GRUEN, L., GRABEL, L. & SINGER, P.

2007. *Stem cell research. The ethical issues*. Oxford: Blackwell.

GUNKEL, H.

1977. *Genesis*. 9. Auflage 1977. Neudruck der 3. Auflage 1910 mit ausführlichen Registern. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

HÜBNER, H.

1999. Covenant. NT. In E. Fahlbush, et al. (eds.) *The encyclopedia of Christianity*. (Leiden: Brill), pp. 710-711. (Translated into English by G.W. Bromiley.)

LEE, P.

1996. *Abortion and human life*. Washington: Catholic University of America Press.

MACMAHAN, J.

2007. The killing of embryos for stem cell research. In: L. Gruen, L. Grabel & P. Singer (eds.) *Stem cell research. The ethical issues*. (Oxford: Blackwell), pp. 32-50.

- MARQUIS, D.
2007. The moral-principle objection to human embryonic stem cell research. In: L. Greun, L. Grabel & P. Singer (eds.) *Stem cell research. The ethical issues.* (Oxford: Blackwell), p. 51-66.
- MCGRATH, A.
1997. *Christian Theology. An introduction.* Oxford: Blackwell.
- MOLTMANN, J.
1993. *God in creation.* Minneapolis: Fortress.
- PERLITT, L.
1999. Covenant. OT. In E. Fahlbush, et al. (eds.) *The encyclopedia of Christianity.* (Leiden: Brill), pp. 173-189.
- POPE, S.J.
2007. *Human evolution and Christian ethics.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- PREUSS, H.D.
1991. *Old Testament Theology.* Volume 1. Louisville: Westminster.
- PRICE, D.J.
2002. *Karl Barth's anthropology in light of modern thought.* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans.
- RAVEN, P.H. ET AL.
2005. *Biology.* Boston: McGraw Hill.
- RUSTON, R.
2004. *Human rights and the image of God.* London: SCM Press.
- SAGAN, A. & SINGER, P.
2007. The moral status of stem cells. In: L. Greun, L. Grabel & P. Singer (eds.) *Stem cell research. The ethical issues.* (Oxford: Blackwell), pp. 124-144.
- TÄNNSJÖ, T.
2007. Why no compromise is possible. In: L. Greun, L. Grabel & P. Singer (eds.) *Stem cell research. The ethical issues.* (Oxford: Blackwell), pp. 188-201.
- VAN HUUSTEEN, J.W.
2006. *Alone in the world? Human uniqueness in science and theology.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- VOGEL, B. ET AL.
2007. *At the centre: Human dignity. Christian responsibility as a basis for the practice of politics. Christian ethics as a guide.* Berlin: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.
- VON RAD, G.
1972. *Genesis. Old Testament Library.* London: SCM Press.

Vorster A Christian ethical perspective on the moral status of the human embryo

VORSTER, N.

2007. *Restoring human dignity in South Africa. Essays in Christian anthropology for a new dispensation.* Potchefstroom: Potchefstroomse Teologiese Publikasies.

VRIEZEN, T.C.

1966. *Hoofdlijnen der Theologie van het Oude Testament.* Wageningen: Veenman & Zonen.

WATERS, B.

2003. Does the human embryo have a moral status? In: B. Waters & R. Cole-Turner (eds.) *God and the embryo. Religious voices on stem cells and cloning.* (Georgetown: Georgetown University Press) pp. 67-76.

WESTERMANN, C.

1975. *Grundrisse zum Alten Testaments.* Göttingen: VanderHoeck & Ruprecht.

WOLFF, H.W.

1973. *Anthropologie des Alten Testaments.* München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag.

WRIGHT, C.J.H.

2004. *Old Testament ethics for the people of God.* Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press.

WÜSTENBERG, R.F.

1996. *A theology of life.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. (Translated by D. Stott.)

Keywords

Trefwoorde

Human embryo

Menslike embrio

Christian ethics

Christelike etiek

Moral status

Morele status