

Creation of Human Beings in Sirach 17:1-24 and Quest for the Purpose of Human Life

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Abstract

There are, at the beginning of Genesis, two accounts of creation, with emphasis on human beings; echoes of these are found in the rest of the Bible. In a quest for a return to traditional themes, Sirach dedicates a long poem (16:24-18:14) to creation in general. He elucidates the creation of humans with fascinating details in 17:1-24, captivating every reader. Narratives on the creation of humans and the sage's reflection on them, particularly, with details derivable from his procedure, offer an insight into the purpose of human existence (Sir 18:8). From the revealed truth and with the aid of reasoning there is an insight into the purpose of human life. In these sources, the dignity of humans and their pride of place are evident. However, these are scarcely recognised and respected in the various degrading manner they are treated today. Therefore, the aim of this study is to understand Sirach 17:1-24 in the context of its anthropological vision and its message in our quest for the meaning of human life. A literary method, which analyses the syntactical dynamism of the text, is adopted in this study. Hopefully, it will enhance our understanding of human life and encourage positive attitude towards it.

Keywords: Sirach 17:1-24, human being, image of God, human rights and dignity

0. Introduction

In a hymn of praise to God the Creator, on the grandeur of creation and the pride of place accorded to humans, in spite of their frailty, the poet, in Ps 8:4, exclaims in a synonymous poetic line: "What are human

beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them”¹ (cf. Ps 144:3). Similar exclamation, articulated as an interrogation, occurs in some sapiential texts: Job 7:17; Sir 18:8. Both the psalmists and the sages recall and reverberate, in their own terms and in distinct epochs, the two accounts of creation, narrated in Gen 1-2, particularly the nature and place of humankind in creation. Although made from the dust of the earth (Gen 2:7; 3:19; Qoh 3:20; 12:7; Sir 17:1), a tradition depicted in Ps 8:4b in its use of the term *’ēnôš* that denotes human frailty,² the Creator made them in his image, and they share in his sovereignty over other creatures.

The text of Sir 17:1-24, chosen for this study, contains in its immediate context (16:24-18:14), a sapiential reflection on creation, with a special focus on humankind. In his usual manner of returning to the religious traditions of Israel and emphasising the Mosaic Law against Hellenism, Ben Sira elucidates a fundamental teaching of the Hebrew Bible. Humans are special to the Creator and there is a purpose for creating them. Although they have limited number of years on earth, they are endowed with senses, faculties, and knowledge to enable them to accomplish their mission on earth. Their relationship with God, expressed in a covenant, includes some stipulations, established to regulate their actions. The omniscient God knows their actions and he is merciful to them when they err and return to him. Ben Sira extensively underlines human dignity, which has its matrix in the creation of humans in the divine image.

The message of Ben Sira remains relevant today in a society that tends to neglect the sacredness of human life. Violation of human rights and dignity has become ubiquitous to the extent that the actions are seen as normal in life. Humans have become objects of degrading research and procreation is tampered with in the name of progress in technology. Micro society, family, is fast losing its value because of some unnatural ideologies. The mission of responsible stewardship over other creatures is constantly abused in unlawful attitudes towards other creatures.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, the Biblical citations in English are from the *New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*, Nashville, Tennessee: Catholic Bible Press, 1989.

² F. Maass, “*’ēnôš*”, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament I* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1997), 345-348 (346).

Humans are trapped in the effects of their actions that result in ecological crisis. The sage in Sir 17:1-24 calls attention to the origin, nature, and mission of humankind.

The literary approach adopted in this study, which is tripartite, consists of the analysis of the Greek text of Sir 17:1-24, a presentation of various perverting attitudes against humanity, and some recommendations on how these can be curbed. As much as it is still preserved in the Greek version of the text, the literary devices of Ben Sira are highlighted with the intention of discovering his message in the context of the pericopé. The aim of the study is to understand the text and its message to our contemporary society. It might excite a renewed understanding of human life and mission in the world.

1. Insight into Sirach 17:1-24

The original Hebrew text of Sirach 17:1-24 is not part of the extant fragments from Qumran and Masada;³ therefore, the Greek text preserved in the LXX is adopted in this study. It is shorter compared with the version in the Vulgate which includes five verses understood as glosses to the Hebrew text, viz. 5, 16, 18 and 21, and an addition in verse 11. Their contents are stated in the footnotes of some modern translations, particularly *The New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. A close reading of these glosses shows that they are expansions of the preceding texts, which can be read without these additions. It has been noted that “the Hebrew text suffered additions and rewritings even before the Christian period”.⁴ Following the principle of Biblical textual criticism that prefers the shorter text to the longer, the Greek version of Sir 17:1-24 prevails in its study.

Literary Procedure of Sirach 17:1-24

In the structural analysis of the Book of Sirach, the section of 16:24–18:14 is often considered a distinct unit having the central theme of

³ See J. VanderKam – P. Flint, *The Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Their significance for the Understanding the Bible, Judaism, Jesus, and Christianity* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 2002), 425, for the list of the fragments.

⁴ R.J. Clifford, *The Wisdom Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 116.

creation⁵ or divine wisdom and mercy seen in the creation of humankind.⁶ Comparable theme on creation occurs in 39:12-35 and 42:15–43:33. Sirach 16:24–18:14 has an introductory part (16:24-30), which presents creation as a manifestation of divine wisdom and care. The longest section is 17:1-24; “it speaks of the creation of humans, the gifts they received from God, and God’s knowledge of their deeds and his recompense of their virtue and vice”.⁷ The next part (17:25-32) develops the theme on repentance introduced at the end of 17:1-24. Finally, 18:1-14 continues with the theme of repentance with a special focus on divine mercy towards human beings. Similar reflection on divine mercy is reckoned in 17:25-32, thus justifying the caption “divine wisdom and mercy seen in the creation of humankind”.

Logical arrangement of 17:1-24 and other parts of Sirach, which are not among the Hebrew fragments discovered at Qumran, especially their poetic devices might prove difficult to reconstruct. This is because these literary techniques are more evident in the original language of composition. However, the content of the Greek version can, to some reasonable extent, guide a meaningful discussion on the literary procedure of the pericopé. The first verse of 17:1-24 introduces the theme of the entire section, that is, the creation of human beings and their relationship with the earth. The key words of the pericopé are mentioned in this verse: the Creator (*Kurios*), the verb to create (*ktizein*), human being (*anthopos*) as the direct object of the action, earth (*gē*) as source and material destination of human beings.

After the introductory verse 1 comes the first major part (vv. 2-4), which is on the conferment of sovereignty on human beings over other creatures. Before expounding this, the sage carefully links the introduction to this first major part by adding in v.2a “the fixed number of days” which explains further in v.1b where he says that God makes humans return to earth. In other words, they return to earth because they have a fixed number of days. The adversative particle (*kai* ‘but’) in v.2

⁵ R.E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1990), 73.

⁶ Clifford, *The Wisdom Literature*, 119.

⁷ Alexander A. Di Lella, “Sirach”, *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1992), 496-509 (502).

indicates that human beings supersede the alluded transient nature of human existence because of their singular endowment. The sage articulates this special gift of the creator to humans with some suitable words and phrases in vv.2-4: *eksusia* (authority), *ischus* (strength), God's image (*eikōn*), fear (*phobos*) and to have dominion (*katakuriēuein*). All these words are related, and they convey the superiority of humans over other creatures. The emphatic position of *kai kat' eikona autou epoiēsen autous* (and he made them in his own image) in the middle of this section shows that all other ones are derived from it:

<i>eksusia</i>	<i>kai kat' eikona autou epoiēsen autous</i>	<i>ischus</i>
<i>phobos autou</i>		<i>katakuriēuein</i>

In verses 6-9 the sage reflects on another gift bestowed on humans by the Creator. It is the gift of mental power with its corresponding organs (tongue, eyes, ears and heart) in human body. This is presented in various words and phrases in this section of the text beginning with the first word in v.6: *diaboulion* which means discretion, counsel, deliberation. Other keywords are: *epistēmē* – knowledge, *sunesis* – understanding, *agathos kai kakos* – good and evil, and the fear of God translated in Greek as the eye – *ophthalmos*– of God. According to the sage, with the gift of mental power and all its faculties, humans are made capable of recognising God's mighty deeds – *to megaleion tōn ergon autou*.

The next section, vv. 11-14, continues with the theme of mental power as a special gift bestowed on human beings. However, it takes a new perspective. *Epistēmē* – knowledge – in v. 11 recurs for the second time in this text and it is parallel to *nomos zōēs*– law of life – in v. 11b. Verse 12 clarifies this further; the law of life is a stipulation of the covenant; it is an integral part of this divine human relationship. This is affirmed in v. 12b where one reads *ta krimata autou* – his decrees. Analogous concept of the law is found in v. 14; first with an explicit command “beware of all evil” (v. 14a); second, in the use of another synonym of law, albeit in a verbal form: “he gave commandment”; this is specified as “concerning

the neighbour". In other words, the commandment given concerns relationship with one's neighbour.

A natural and expected continuation of the above is the content of vv. 15-20, which represents another unit. Observing the commandment mentioned in vv. 11-14 constitutes the "ways" of human being – *hai hodoi autōn* – that initiates this section in v. 15. The "ways", activities or actions or behaviour of human beings, according to the sage, cannot be concealed from God. Furthermore, he has a representative, a ruler, appointed by him to oversee human activities on earth. The concept of *hai hodoi autōn* ("their ways") is explained further in this text in the use of *ta erga autōn* ("their works", v. 19a), which stands in a synonymous parallelism with v. 19b, where the phrase "their ways" occurs again. In v. 20a these human activities assume a negative connotation as *hai adikia autōn* ("their iniquities"), and *hai hamartiai autōn* (their sins, v. 20b). God's omniscience of human actions is emphasised by the literary technique of repetition, alternating positive and negative sentences in vv. 15, 19 and 20. In v. 19 the sage employs the metaphor of the sun: the ways of human beings are as clear as the sun.

God, before whom all human actions, especially their sins, are bare, repays humans according to their sins. However, divine punishment can be averted through almsgiving (*eleēmosunē*) and kindness (*charis*), which God are pleasing to God. These two are in a synonymous parallelism in v. 22 which begins the last part (vv. 22-24) of this text. Absence of these virtues attracts God's chastisement (v. 23). Repentance, however, brings human beings back to God who sustains them through his encouragement. This section of the text is linked to the preceding.

The Meaning of Sirach 17:1-24

A reflection on the creation and nature of human beings in Sir 17:1-24 begins with an allusion to the second account of creation in Genesis 2 that narrates the creation of Adam from the dust of earth, and about the breath of life from God that generates life in human beings. Humans, called *nepes̄*, living being, are animated by this breath of life. They are alive because God's gift is in them. It is also an allusion to the frailty of humans and their dependence on God, which are intrinsic in this account of creation. The concept of humans presented in Genesis 2 becomes a

sapiential reflection in other texts of the Bible that echo this creation narrative. Humans are made from dust but the plan to return to dust came as a result of human fall (Gen 3:19; Job 10:9; 34:15; Ps 146:4).⁸ They return to the material source of their origin when God withdraws his life-giving breath. Psalm 104:29 is explicit on this: “When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath they die and return to the dust”. Commenting on this, Terrien explains that:

The end of life in death is not comparable to an impersonal fading, like flowers, or the wearing out of animals, but a specific act of the Creator, who gives, and also withhold, his breath. The intimate and ultimate designer confers on the impersonality of death the splendid meaning of divine decision.⁹

Similar reflection on the fleeting nature of humans and of all living beings is reckoned in Ecclesiastes 3:20 and 12:7. “Everything lives because of the divine breathing”.¹⁰ In 1 Cor 15:45-49, Paul illuminates this from a Christological point of view.¹¹ The first Adam is from dust; the second Adam is life-giving spirit. Human life, though transient, has its origin in God and it belongs to the Creator, because what makes humans alive comes from God.

The reference to this *locus classicus*, fundamental text, on the OT anthropology affirms the duality of humans; they are initially from dust and this dust became a living being through God’s gift of life. The Creator bestows on humans something divine, “breath of life”, which calls to mind the fundamental statement in the first account of creation in Gen 1:27, “in the image of God he created them”. Humans are closely linked to the Creator,¹² who sustains them in life and determines the length of their earthly life.

⁸ G.J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (WBC 1; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 83.

⁹ S. Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2003), 717.

¹⁰ R. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (Words Biblical Commentary 23A; Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1992), 37.

¹¹ G.D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids Michigan: Eerdmans, 1987), 788-795.

Sirach 17:2-4 takes up the concept of transitory nature of humans in a sentence that tends to explain 17:1b: “He gave them a fixed number of days” (17:2a). This rendition seems more appropriate in this context than “He gave them so many days and so much time”, seen in the *New Jerusalem Bible*, which is probably translated from the Vulgate: *numerus dierum et tempus dedit illi*. The phrase “fixed number of days” is a logical sequence to v.1b and a preparation for the theme of vv. 2-4: “Humans made in God’s image (Gen 1:26-27), share in the divine dominion over all other creature”.¹³ Despite their transitory feature, the Creator made them share in his sovereignty and it is inherent in their creation (Gen 1:28; cf. Gen 9:2). The paradox of frailty of human nature, endowed with this special gift, must have prompted the exclamation in Ps 8:4: “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them” (cf. Job 7:17-18). Human nature is indeed paradoxical,¹⁴ because, although they are made from dust, they have dominion over other creatures. According to Ben Sira, God prepared humans for this special task by giving them strength like his own and making them in his image (17:3). Actually, 17:3 has two parallel stiches that appear synonymous: humans are endowed with divine strength because they are made in God’s image.¹⁵ Their singular responsibility over other creatures is innate in their creation.

In vv. 6-10, the sage focuses on the gift of knowledge and understanding, given to humans. They are first endowed with senses: tongue, eyes, ears and mind for thinking. All these are connected to the gift of knowledge, and they are to enhance their understanding.¹⁶ In this reflection, Ben Sira moves beyond the account of creation in his details of God’s gift to humans at creation. These details are not mentioned in the two accounts of creation in Genesis 1–2. Like other OT sages, Ben Sira observed and reflected on human nature before articulating in words God’s special

¹² Pontificia Commissione Biblica «*Che cosa è l’uomo?*» (*Sal 8,5*) *Un itinerario di antropologia biblica* (Citta Vaticano: Libreria Edizione Vaticana, 2019) 15.

¹³ Di Lella, “Sirach”, 502.

¹⁴ Pontificia Commissione Biblica, «*Che cosa è l’uomo?*» 22.

¹⁵ J.L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 198.

¹⁶ [A.J. Schmidt](#), “The Well-Ordered Cosmos”, *Wisdom, Cosmos, and Cultus in the Book of Sirach* (Berlin/Munich/Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2019), 64 (37-80).

gifts. Included in these gifts is the fear of the Lord, instilled in human heart. In the OT Wisdom Books, wisdom and the fear of the Lord are often connected. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Prov 1:7; 9:10; 15:33; Sir 1:14; Ps 111:10 Job 28:28). In this context, it is the same as religion or devotion to God; it is crown of wisdom (Sir 1:18; 19:20; 25:10-11; 40:26-27). This explains the rationale for making this follow immediately the gift of knowledge in Sir 17:6-10. The wisdom, proposed by OT sages, is a religious type of wisdom, encouraging a personal relationship with God of the covenant, in which fear and love, submission and confidence, coincide (Pss 25:12-14; 112:1; 128:1; Qoh 12:13; Sir 1:27-28; 2:7-9, 15-18).¹⁷ The direct recipient of the gift of this fear of the Lord is human heart, which, in the OT, is the seat of human actions. With this, humans are naturally religious beings. “God has gifted human beings with splendid intellectual and moral endowments, including the fear of the Lord, so that they may marvel at his works and praise his holy name, two essential activities of Israelite life and religion”.¹⁸ This is the finality for the gift of wisdom and the fear of the Lord: to marvel at God’s works and in doing so praise his name; that is, his presence in all he has created. The author of Ps 8 combines these two in his hymn of praise, for “the proper human response to God’s creation is to praise the creator”.¹⁹

The gift of knowledge, the law of life, aids humans to recognise and keep the stipulations of the covenant with God. These stipulations are called, in Sir 17:11-14, decrees and commandment; they show humans the way of life.²⁰ These are necessary in life for they guide humans in their vertical and horizontal dimensions of religious expressions: love of God and love of neighbour. In this OT Law to which the sage refers, God reveals his will to human beings. In keeping this Law, wisdom is guaranteed.²¹

¹⁷ See the explanatory notes on Prov 1:7 in the *New Jerusalem Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 967.

¹⁸ Di Lella, “Sirach”, 502.

¹⁹ D.J. Harrington, “Sirach”, *The International Bible Commentary, An Ecumenical Commentary for the Twenty-First Century*, W.R. Farmer (ed.), (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2015), 998 (987-1014).

²⁰ Pontificia Commissione Biblica «*Che cosa è l’uomo?*» 33-34.

²¹ P.M. Igbo, *Introduction to the Old Testament Books and Pseudepigrapha* (Enugu: Clarentian Publications, 2020), 455.

Although given to Israel as a specific task, it is for all humans, because Mosaic Law, according to Ben Sira, is universal.

All human actions are known to God (vv. 15-20). He knows when they are faithful to the Law and when they violate it. Their good deeds and their sins are known to him. God rewards good deeds and accepts those who repent of their sins; he is a merciful God and humans who are merciful through their almsgiving and kindness are pleasing to him.²²

Conspicuous in the two accounts of creation in Genesis 1-2 is the creation of humans, which is narrated differently from the creation of other creatures. The Creator accorded humans with dignity, which is not given to any other. They are made in God's image, being the only creature with this divine privilege. Created in God's image, they are able to enter into dialogue and relationship with the Creator, a privilege that is imbued with responsibility. The ability to enter into dialogue with God, which is intrinsic in the creation of humans in the divine image, made them receptive of divine revelation. They can perceive God's marvellous works in the world, and this does not leave them indifferent. The expected response from them is to praise the Creator. Dialogue with God is exemplified in the formal relationship initiated by God in the life of the Chosen People of Israel. This dialogue is typified in the concept of the covenant and its stipulations, which Israel had to observe in order to sustain the relationship.

Echoes of the accounts of creation of humans in the Bible reflect further from lived experiences on privileges of humans. Sirach 17:1-24, a sapiential meditation on humans and their privileges, elicits those gifts bestowed on them by the Creator in spite of their frailty with dust as a material source: divine image, wisdom, responsible dominion over other creatures, law to guide them and to reveal the Creator, and God's ever ready mercy when they swerve and repent. Despite all these gifts, humans move steadily towards death (Sir 17:1),²³ which they have in common with other creatures. However, they have a mission in the world, which is God's plan for them in making them different from all others. Humans are religious beings endowed with divine image. With

²² S. Pinto, *I segreti della Sapienza: Introduzione ai Libri sapienziali e poetici* (Torino: Edizioni San Paolo, 2013), 158-159.

²³ Pontificia Commissione Biblica «*Che cosa è l'uomo?*» 26.

their knowledge and understanding, they can recognise God's work and praise his holy name. Neglect of human dignity, inherent in their creation, generates various forms of deviation from God's plan for his choicest creature.

2. The Crux

The divine image in the frail human beings created from the dust of the earth is the matrix of their dignity²⁴ bestowed on them by the Creator. Creation of humans "in the image of God" is "a datum which gives rise to the inviolable dignity of the human person and the transcendent value of natural norms".²⁵ This dignity, with all that it entails, is in God's plan for them and should be recognised as such by all. Actions infringing on this are not only an offence against human nature but also against the Creator. Unfortunately, these actions against humans, and God's works in general, abound today in their varieties.

Dearth of the sense of the sacred in a society like ours that purports to excel in various forms of religiosity runs contrary to what we should be as persons bearing the divine image (Gen 1:27; Sir 17:3) and with the fear of the Lord instilled in our hearts (Sir 17:8). The gift of knowledge and understanding explained in Sir 17:6-10 is meant to help humans recognise God's works and revere him in all their actions. They perceive the grandeur of his works but act in opposition to their perception. They denigrate his works, and their actions manifest an age that seems to overlook the existence of God. Denial of the existence of God in any form whatsoever is incongruent with the primordial plan of the Creator for humans, "for what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made" (Rom 1:19-20).

Transgressions against human nature and dignity spring from neglect of the fundamental aspect of humans, the family, which suffers tremendously from unnatural ideologies propagated without reckoning

²⁴ M.J. Obiorah, "The Old Testament Creation Narratives as the Matrix for the Concept of Human Dignity", *Nsukka Journal of Religious Studies* vol. 3 no. 1 (2010) 61 (43-65).

²⁵ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate* (Charity in truth): On the Integral Human Development (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2009), 45.

their repercussions. These range from same-sex union, which is strange and foreign to many human cultures, to single parenthood, temporal cohabitation, and frequent divorce. The theme on marriage for the Laity Week in Nigeria in 2020 is very timely.²⁶ It explains same-sex union as desecration that “infringes upon sacred marital rights”.²⁷ Family, which ought to be the hearth of the society, is fast losing its value as the most ancient human institution willed by God when he created humans. “It is in the family that one learns the love and the faithfulness of the Lord, and the need to respond to these”.²⁸ It is the foundation on which every other institution is built. “The family is the ‘sanctuary of life’ and a vital cell of the society and of the Church”.²⁹ In our time, family, a micro-society, does no longer have value for many people; the society suffers this loss at the detriment of human dignity. Generations of humans, who have no inkling of the features of an ideal and true family, continue to emerge in great numbers. Offences against human dignity and against the purpose of human life are inevitable offshoots of a devalued family life.

Natural human conception has turned unnatural because, with the aid of technology, new ways of bringing humans to life have been discovered. In fact, no one negates that “technology enables us to exercise dominion over matter, to reduce risks, to save labour, to improve our conditions of life”.³⁰ However, it becomes an abuse when it is against human dignity and divine will. Technology that tampers with procreation reduces humans to mere objects of research in laboratories. “*In vitro* fertilisation, embryo research, the possibility of manufacturing clones and human hybrids: all this is now emerging and being promoted in today’s highly disillusioned culture, which believes it has mastered every mystery, because the origin of life is now within our grasp”.³¹ Scientists engaged

²⁶ Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, *Crisis in Married Life* (Catechetical Week 2020 Programme; Abuja: Catholic Secretariat, 2020).

²⁷ Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, *Crisis in Married Life*, 16.

²⁸ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005), 210.

²⁹ Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus*: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2011), 42.

³⁰ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, 69.

³¹ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, 75.

in these would find it difficult to believe in the divine origin of human life and its dignity as beings made in God's image.

The Church has never swerved in her conviction on the dignity and inviolability of human life which begins from the moment of conception until it is God's will to end it. Consequently, "the human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception; and therefore, from that same moment his rights as a person must be recognised, among which in the first place is the inviolable right of every innocent human being to life".³² Abortion clinics, where mothers kill their unwanted babies, increase daily in our society, fuelled by globalisation. Technology invents daily enhanced means of performing this murder. Life belongs to God who created it out of love and has endowed it with dignity. The use of abortion as a means of regulating birth is not only a sign of irresponsible parenthood but also an unlawful means.³³ "This should not cause surprise: to kill a human being in whom the image of God is present, is a particularly serious sin".³⁴

Various forms of abuse of minors as vulnerable members of the society are not uncommon. Deformed family life tends to deform and distort integral growth of many children. There are some who are abandoned by parents at a very tender age when they need parental care. Some are left in the hands of unprepared nannies that have no interest in the life of children in their care. Others are introduced to pornography and used as objects of such ill in the society. There are some who are subjected, out of poverty, to cheap labour and are denied of their childhood. "The sexual exploitation of children is yet another scandalous and perverse reality in present-day society".³⁵ Children treated in this way grow up with it and think that it is normal in life. Their rights as human beings are

³² Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Respect for Human Life in its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1987), I.1.

³³ Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*: The Right Ordering of the Procreation of Children (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1968), 14.

³⁴ John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*: On the Value and Inviolability of Human Life (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995) 55.

³⁵ Pope Francis, *Amoris Lætitia*: On Love in the Family (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016) 28.

infringed upon and they are misdirected in life to continue the vicious cycle.

Closely related to the above is another group that comprise vulnerable elderly persons who are not given proper attention by some in our society. “Among some peoples old age is esteemed and valued, while among others this is much less the case, due to a mentality which gives priority to immediate human usefulness and productivity”.³⁶ Some of them are abandoned or entrusted to the care of persons who have little or no knowledge of geriatrics. Generally, African cultures cherish their senior citizens whom they perceive as a gift and source of wisdom. It is unnatural to these cultures to neglect the elders and deprive them of love and care because they are seen as liability to the society. “Such an attitude frequently leads to contempt for later years of life, while older people themselves are led to wonder whether their lives are still worthwhile”.³⁷ This indirectly quickens their death, and this is against human dignity and a violation of their rights.

Extermination of human life in any form, is against human life and rights and an offence against the Creator, whose image they bear. Unfortunately, this pervades and perverts our society where human life is snuffed out at will for reasons best known to perpetrators. “Serious threats loom over human life in Africa”.³⁸ Some hearts are so hardened in such a way that killing a human person is no longer seen as an evil but a duty that must be accomplished. Some kidnappers, after extorting money from their victims, still maim or kill them in order to conceal their identities. Politicians eliminate their opponents in order to establish their authority. Hired assassins perform their paid job without mercy. Recklessness in driving and in other public sectors has little regard for human life. Some persons in healthcare delivery abandon their duties and allow their patients to languish in pain and perish. Producers of fake drugs and edibles jeopardise human life and glory in their affluence. All these are signs of disregard for the sacredness of human life. “Human life is thus no longer recognized as a value in itself”.³⁹

³⁶ John Paul II, *Letter to the Elderly* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1999) 9.

³⁷ John Paul II, *Letter to the Elderly*, 9.

³⁸ Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus*, 72.

Human trafficking, sex-trading, abuse of vulnerable widows and migrants are other facets of violation of human rights and disregard for human dignity. Perpetrators of these take humans as commodities that ought to yield money. It is slavery in a new dimension because these “human objects” are used without their consent. Some are coerced to it; while others, out of poverty, have no other option than to succumb to ill treatments.

According to Ben Sira, leaders are appointed by God (17:17); they are not there on their own. There is a purpose for their office.⁴⁰ Inordinate craving for authority and its abuse in various ways are manifestations of ignorance of leadership, its divine origin, and the *raison d'être* of their responsibility. Many leaders of our time see their office as means of amassing wealth instead of caring for the citizenry.

“A sense of deep communion with the rest of nature cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings”.⁴¹ Lack of care for the environment that results in ecological crisis experienced globally is not far from how humans relate to one another. Brutality towards human persons is inevitably extended to other creatures. When the environment suffers, it has repercussions on human life. It is against human nature and a serious offense against the God. The Creator made humans to share in his sovereignty over everything on earth (Gen 1:28; Sir 17:2-4). Such participation is an invitation to care for other creatures as God does.⁴² To have dominion over other creatures entails, among others, caring for them and sustaining them in existence.

3. Towards a better image of human beings in light of Sirach 17:1-24

³⁹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Samaritanus bonus*: On the care of persons in the critical and terminal phases of life (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020), IV.

⁴⁰ Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus*, 81.

⁴¹ Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*: Encyclical Letter on Care of Our Common Home (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), 91.

⁴² A.I. Umoren, “‘I am the vine, you are the branches’ (John 15:5): Implications of Johannine Eco-Christology for Christians today”; L.E. Ijezie *et al.*, *Theology and Ecological Issues* (Port Harcourt: CATHAN Publications, 2017), 127-136 (136).

Unlike earlier sages in the Proto-canonical Books of the OT, who “scrupulously avoided the slightest allusion to Israel’s sacred history as it unfolds within the rest of the Hebrew Bible”,⁴³ Ben Sira utilised fully the traditions in Israel’s sacred Scripture and was able to elicit fundamental elements contained therein. The image of humans and their purpose of existence presented in Sir 17:1-24 are basic tenets of these traditions, and they remain ever relevant. Ben Sira strove to rescue these traditions from the pervading effects of Hellenism, and he demonstrated the superiority of divine revelation embedded in the Scripture. Outstanding in the Scripture is the dignity of humans, who were not created just to conform themselves to nature and to reason as reflections of the Logos, according to Stoicism,⁴⁴ but created in God’s image with specific intention. Following the ardour of Ben Sira for his religious traditions, renewed zeal today in catechesis, based on the twofold deposit of the Christian faith (Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture), will help revive the divine teaching on the dignity of human beings and the reason for their existence. Christian deposit of faith teaches in various and clear terms the foundation of human dignity, creation in the image of God. The Church continues this teaching in her Magisterium. Catechesis for candidates preparing for the sacraments of initiation and on-going formation for those who are already in the faith can be useful reminder of this divine teaching. Many documents have been issued by the Church on the dignity of humans and on the obligation to care and preserve human life. These documents should be explained to the faithful according to their levels of understanding. Pastors and other pastoral agents should engage more in catechesis based on Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture.

Personal and group research on issues related to human life and its environment can help revive knowledge of these. Such research creates awareness; in-depth understanding is generated; insight into pertinent topics emerges; setbacks can be extensively discussed; contextual approaches are proffered; possible ways of resolving misconceptions could come out from these group and personal assiduous studies. Existing theological associations and many others that have engaged in similar discussions concerning human life and purpose of human

⁴³ Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 140.

⁴⁴ Clifford, *The Wisdom Literature*, 117.

existence should be encouraged to deepen their research and disseminate their discoveries so that the less informed can benefit from them.

Christian/Catholic religious education, based on Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture, should be compulsory in all Catholic Schools, irrespective of choice of subject areas of the students, especially those in secondary schools. Dedicated, well-trained and equipped instructors should be entrusted with this important task of teaching Catholic doctrine and morals in schools. Some dioceses already have an organised system with adequate materials on Catholic doctrine for schools. It is recommended that there be a national curriculum for all classes covering Nursery, Basic and Secondary Schools. Good knowledge of the contents of these materials should be used for promotion to the next class. It is better to begin early in life this education on Christian doctrine with special emphasis on anthropology from Christian/Catholic perspective.

4. Conclusion

In this study of Sir 17:1-24 on human beings and their mission in the world, the emphasis is on the implications of the creation of humankind in God's image and consequent divine gifts. From a close analysis of the Greek version of the pericopé, which is an extant ancient text of the passage, the literary techniques of the author are still discernible and helpful in our quest for the message of this wisdom text. Sirach 17:1-24 is an echo of the narratives on the accounts of creation seen in Genesis 1–2. Ben Sira's reflection on these narratives adds more useful details, which are not found in the Book of Genesis. Human beings made in God's image, though frail and from the dust of the earth, have been endowed with faculties and knowledge that dispose them to fulfil the reason for their existence.

Dignity and rights of every human come from the fact of their being made in God's image. Therefore, their dignity ought to be recognised and human life should be treated as sacred because it belongs to God. On the contrary, human life suffers varied degrading ill-treatment today in our society and it has its repercussions in the way that humans relate to their environment. Some of these abuses are discussed in this study and recommendations proffered for an enhanced behaviour towards human life. As religious beings, bearing the divine image and sharing in God's

sovereignty over other creatures, humans have great responsibility in the world beginning from profound respect for their own lives and extending this respect to other creatures entrusted to their care.