

H. WHEELER ROBINSON REVISITED*

There were several reasons for choosing Wheeler Robinson as the subject of my presidential address. First, he was a noted Principal of Regent's Park College, at which I myself studied theology and where I taught for eighteen years; the first Principal to become President of the Society for Old Testament Study, in 1929 and again as Acting President 1941-5. He was the first Regent's Principal to be so honoured, but not the last, since Professor G. Henton Davies is still very much with us. I never met Wheeler Robinson. He died in May 1945, in my second term as an undergraduate at Oxford, but when I proceeded to Regent's to read theology his influence was still pervasive. Further, in the Angus Library of the college there are many shelves full of his papers, and I had boasted so often to my colleagues that, after my retirement, I should give myself the task of examining these, that I was ashamed not to (I am greatly indebted to the Angus Librarian, Mrs Sue Mills, for her cheerful, tireless and efficient help in providing me with all this material). Again, I had naturally read the searching criticisms of some aspects of his work which appeared from a number of scholars in the 1960s and 1970s and later, but I had never had the time to work through them in detail or to formulate any properly considered response to them. So over the past few months I have read and re-read all Wheeler Robinson's work which I could lay my hands on, together with those writers he refers to as the inspiration for his ideas, and as many of the criticisms of his work as I could identify and locate.

Henry Robinson was born in Northampton in 1872 into what would today be termed a 'one-parent family'. He only met his father once, later in life. Nowadays such a birth would incur little general opprobrium - and that mainly from governments anxious to lay claim to the high moral ground and to save money. But in a provincial town in 1872 things were very different and it was therefore a fine act when Helen Robinson, with her child, was taken in to their home by her uncle and his wife, Hail and Dinah Mawby, and it was in this enlarged family circle that Henry grew up. It was a strongly Baptist family and, on their moving to Northampton, Hail became a staunch deacon of the College Street Chapel. He worked at a tallow-chandler's firm which his wife's father had started while acting as part-time minister of a local Baptist community. That father-in-law's name was John Wheeler, and it was this family name which Dinah Mawby, having no children of her own, gave to Henry. Wheeler Robinson never forgot the great debt he owed that Northamptonshire family and it would be nice to think that it was partly his doing which resulted in his being known chiefly by the name 'Wheeler'.¹

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His family had little money and he had to leave school when he was fifteen to earn his living in the counting-house of a wholesale leather merchant. He set himself from the first to the task of self-education with that seriousness and singleness of purpose which was to characterize him throughout his whole life. It is a familiar nineteenth-century story of evening classes, Cambridge University extension lectures, and hours of study at home after a day's work. Nor must one overlook the influence of the Chapel, with a particularly enlightened minister little more than Wheeler's own age, the Revd Henry Pollard, and the familiar chapel round of Sunday School teaching, Young Men's Society, and so on, for its influence on Wheeler as on so many young people of working-class background at that time. All this led eventually to a sense of a call to the ministry. He spent a year in 1890 at Regent's Park College then, of course, at the London site which gave it its name, but then went on to Edinburgh University, where until 1895 he studied for an MA in Classics and Philosophy. It was to Mansfield College, by this time in Oxford, that he went thereafter to study Theology (1895-90), attracted by its Principal, Dr Andrew Fairbairn, an outstanding theologian who devoted himself tirelessly to his college, although who will not feel sympathy with Fairbairn's lament over 'the unwritten books of which Mansfield has robbed the world'? Wheeler, specializing in Semitic languages, was taught there by Buchanan Gray. His tribute to his mentor is interesting: 'Gray became to the men he taught an externalised conscience, an intellectual ideal in exegesis and philosophy, a continuous though unseen censor of the pretentious and vague'. That seems to be, according to those who knew Wheeler, an exact self-portrait, showing that in our admiration, as perhaps in our criticisms of others, we tend to project our own values and self-image.

In 1900 he married Alice Ashford, of whom over the years he had three children, Bernard, Monica and Ursula, and there followed ministry at two Baptist churches, in Pitlochry and Coventry. It was, however, Wheeler's outstanding scholarly gifts, becoming more and more widely recognized, which led to the invitation to join the staff at Rawdon Baptist College in Yorkshire. Principal Fairbairn of Mansfield College preached at his installation, a detail I mention because I cannot resist the temptation to pass on a description of the event at a time when even that great man's powers were apparently beginning to fail. His themes was 'Religious Experience', but we read: 'He never really got to his subject because of lengthy introductory passages on the teachers in Germany in his youth and on the words for 'experience' in various languages. The lecturer went on and on, the first shades of night began to fall, most of the company left the terrace to make their way home, and it is alleged that, when some had reached Leeds, Fairbairn's prolegomena were still incomplete.'²

Because there was already someone teaching Old Testament at Rawdon, Wheeler was required to prepare lectures on Church History, the Philosophy of Religion, Religion and Literature, Christian Doctrine and New Testament. In addition to the enormous work of preparation for all that, he was called on more and more widely

for service to the denomination. Yet this period saw the publication of the Century Bible volume on Deuteronomy and Joshua, his formative essay 'Hebrew Psychology in Relation to Pauline Anthropology' in *Mansfield College Essays*, dedicated to A.M. Fairbairn, *The Christian Doctrine of Man* - one of his major works, and *The Religious Ideas of the Old Testament*. Small wonder that in 1913 he suffered a severe physical breakdown which meant a cessation of all work for six months. Yet it was from that experience that there emerged much later his book, *The Christian Experience of the Holy Spirit*, and two of the major concerns of his whole work, namely the *experiential* nature of religious experience and a pre-occupation with the theological implications of human suffering. This last concern was intensified, not only by his own experience of helplessness and lack of support from conventional religious belief during his own suffering, but in the dreadful end of one of his early friends from Northampton in a mental hospital in utter and abject penury. He returned to work later in 1913 but it is of no coincidence that his next publication, in 1916, was *The Cross of Job*.

The remainder of his life story must be summarized with despatch or you will suspect me of failing powers similar to those which assailed the aged Fairbairn. In 1920 he was invited to become Principal of Regent's Park College. The story of his leading that college to Oxford and establishing it there is enough for more than a lecture in itself.³ It requires little imagination to sense something of the time and of the emotional and mental energy taken to prepare for such a move, not least to prepare the minds of those with less vision, to finance and then actually to effect it. If ever one wonders why such a creative scholar as Wheeler Robinson was one notable Baptist scholar *not* included in the canon of honourable mention in Eissfeldt's *Introduction to the Old Testament*, one has only to reflect on the degree to which the three who were mentioned were able to pursue academic matters so much more exclusively than he.⁴ The miracle is that he achieved so much. Apart from being President of the Society for Old Testament Study twice, he edited the Society's production, *Record and Revelation*, and he must have been one of the first non-post holders to be created Reader by Oxford University. He was invited to give the University Speaker's Lectures⁵ and was awarded the Burkitt Medal for Biblical Studies by the British Academy. While all that was going on, he saw through the completion of the first stage of the buildings of the college on what is an extraordinarily prime site to have been obtained by a college coming so late on the scene in Oxford. Throughout all this and much more, his own publications continued apace. In addition, he was called upon to serve the denomination in numerous ways, mainly by his scholarship. His *Life and Faith of the Baptists* has long been considered, by all shades of opinion within the denomination, a standard work, almost a text-book on the subject of Baptist belief and practice. It is strange, in view of all this, that he was never invited to become President of the Union, but readers of the *Quarterly* will be interested to know that he did serve as President of the Historical Society, a post he held from 1921 until his death, having served on

the Society's committee from its inception in 1908. Little wonder that in his last months he knew collapse again, a collapse from which this time he did not recover. Yet this is the man who said of his own writings that they were 'the fruit not of brilliant intuition or the highest reaches of scholarship, but came of patient, honest and systematic toil'.⁶

Unfortunately there is evidence, not only of this sense of unrelenting effort throughout the whole of his life, but also of the cost it exacted - a cost which Wheeler himself was not alone in paying. A friend from university days remembered his powers of application: 'I had never been surprised that he could pore for hours over his books without uttering a word, but I confess that it did surprise me that he did the same with his fiancée sitting quietly in his study! . . . it was a revelation to her of what to expect in marrying a man devoted to his studies.'⁷ That was presumably intended as a joke but it proved rather less than a joke for Alice Ashford. David Russell tells of coming down the stairs from Wheeler's study following a tutorial to be met by her saying, 'Come in and have some tea, Mr Russell.' He adds his own comment, 'She was obviously very lonely', an observation borne out by her further words, 'The Doctor's chief interests in life are his books and his cat.'⁸ I have heard a bitter outburst from a member of the family at what that person at least regarded as the isolation of Mrs Robinson. But it is clear that this man, for whatever reason, found all close human relationships difficult. I have heard many people speak of him with admiration and respect for his scholarship, his unremitting effort, his character, his spiritual sincerity and the depth of his devotional life, but it so happens I have never heard anyone speak of him with affection. R.H. Coats, a fellow student at Mansfield, wrote, 'He had sternly and austere disciplined himself in his younger days, and it was largely as a moral disciplinarian that he exerted consciously or unconsciously his influence over others.'⁹ Page after page of his writings reflect this severe self-discipline. For all his insistence on the evangelical doctrine of justification by grace and on the power of the Spirit to inspire and ennoble human personality, he is constantly lashing himself 'with the whip of the categorical imperative' (to quote David Glass in a clear reference to Wheeler's predilection for Kant. Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Ethics* was among Wheeler's six favourite books, one which he said showed 'There is nothing in the world which can be termed absolutely and altogether good, a *good will alone excepted*' - the italics are mine). In *Redemption and Revelation* he traces evil to the fact that 'we are not willing to pay the price of abstinence or effort' (p.65). David Russell recalls, 'They [his students] thought very highly of him, but his very scholarship and austerity made it difficult for him to come close to them . . . His relationships with his students were good, though they could hardly be called "warm". He was not that kind of man. He disciplined himself rigorously and expected his students to do the same.' Something of this might be echoed in his parting words to David Russell when he left college shortly before Wheeler's death: 'Mr Russell, don't let your church work

interfere with your studies'! That he could be formidable is attested also by Professor G. Henton Davies who once as a young man said to him, 'I hear there is a vacancy on the staff at Regent's, Sir. I wonder if I might be considered?' 'You *have* been considered, Mr Davies', was the somewhat crushing reply. I hope that was in no way allied to something else David Russell observed, that an irrational element could enter into his judgement of people. 'He appeared to have a certain antipathy to the Welsh and a bias in favour of the Scots'.

This man, insulated in his books, finding it hard to make warm human relationships, wrestling with the problems of suffering, and writing, as he did later, on the 'Scourge of Loneliness', appears to us as an essentially lonely figure. He himself attributed his devotion to his books to the scarcity of them in the home in which he grew up. Hail Mawby, in his religious zeal, even discouraged him from reading Shakespeare. I wonder if we hear a slightly different echo of the forces which drove him from a passage in *Redemption and Revelation*? 'The necessity to earn a living at a time when other youths are still at school or University is sometimes bitterly resented by an ambitious boy; yet he may eventually see that the experience so won has been a better equipment for his life's work than anything more academic could have been' (p.xli). Anyone who wants to sense this whole aspect of Wheeler's personality has only to walk into the Helwys Hall in Regent's Park College and stand before James Gunn's stern portrait of him which dominates that Hall. Indeed, there is no need even to stand before it, for the searching, accusing eye of the subject seems to transfix you wherever you are. There is no hiding place from that forbidding figure who seems to know whenever you have not checked a reference with quite the accuracy you should have done. If, over the years, I have sometimes marvelled at the general level of sobriety which generations of undergraduates have shown in that Hall, I have decided that it is this portrait, rather than the 'dry' years of that college, which has been largely responsible. It seems to me to fulfil something of the same function there as the writing on the wall did at Belshazzar's feast long ago. But perhaps all that I have been describing is only an illustration of what Wheeler himself saw at so deep a level. To achieve anything lasting, the servant always has to be something of a 'suffering servant'.

To turn to much happier matters, anyone who finds it in his line of duty to read Wheeler's writings is in for a most enjoyable experience. I mentioned the shelves full of papers in the Angus library. Truth to tell, in sum they are disappointing. Wheeler kept the full longhand text of every sermon, every lecture and notes on every book read. In fact, all that is there has, for the most part, found expression in his published works. There is, however, one exception: a course of lectures he gave at Rawdon entitled 'Religion and Literature'. It is a fascinating insight into this remarkable polymath of a man. It is quite clear that the quotations from English, Classical and other foreign literature which stud his writings did not come from consulting any *Dictionary of Quotations*. I also enjoyed a statement of his there on 'The backs of books', which he described as 'the reproach of the unread and a

corrective of ignorant self-complacency'. He was extraordinarily widely read and this shows in his superb literary style, even if occasionally a little rhetorical for today's norms. Some of the reasons given in those lectures for his preferences among books are a little amusing in the light of what we know about him: about *Robinson Crusoe*, 'Here is the patient and indomitable handling of the petty circumstances which form so much of life . . .'; of Browning's 'A Grammarian's Funeral', 'The dignity of work in all its petty details, here finds its worthy apologia'. But to read Robinson is like hearing the strains of a Bach fugue on a cathedral organ. Here he is speaking of the debt each of us owes to the past:

We are born in debt and we never become solvent. Every life has more invested in it than it can possibly repay . . . The stars hang over every cradle, and wise men from the East and West and South and North gather round it, in the spiritual inheritance they have bequeathed to it.¹⁰

Again, 'Out of the lion of prophecy (Am.3.8) came forth the honey of the law (Ps.19.10)'.¹¹ The last example comes from his earliest published work, the commentary on Deuteronomy and Joshua. He is speaking of the impossibility of the enforcement of some of the merciful *motives* called for in Deuteronomy:

For mercy is not only above the sceptred sway of the throned monarch: from the heart where it is enthroned it sends forth the pulsing life, without which the sceptre will drop from the nerveless grasp, and the most elaborate code of law be as dead as that of the Hammurabbi.¹²

Of that first publication, the Century Bible volume on Deuteronomy and Joshua (1907), Payne observed, 'At the time it did not excite a great deal of attention'.¹³ A good deal of his later thought is, however, already there *in nuce*. Under Buchanan Gray at Mansfield he had studied particularly the Hebrew terms relating to the Israelite understanding of human personality. Only a little later, in 1909, he had an article in *Mansfield College Essays*, entitled 'Hebrew Psychology in relation to Pauline Anthropology'.¹⁴ One might feel that there are problems enough in the psychological study of our *contemporaries*, let alone the ancients, but it obviously compelled him for soon afterwards the substance of this appears in much more systematic form in his first major book, *The Christian Doctrine of Man*. It was, indeed, a theme to which he returned several times, notably in an article, 'Hebrew Psychology', in *The People and the Book*,¹⁵ and, in more popular form, in *Religious Ideas of the Old Testament*.¹⁶ It is well enough known, I think, to require only the baldest summary here. He made much of the fact that there is no Hebrew word equivalent to our term 'brain', nor, indeed, any word denoting our idea of what might be called 'self-consciousness'. Early Israelites saw no distinction between the psychical and the physical, so that actual 'breath' might be thought of as a person's 'soul', and the blood embodied what might be called 'the life-soul'. That life drains away when a man's blood is shed. Lacking this central organ of self-consciousness, early Hebrews, in common with other primitive peoples, saw

psychical consciousness as residing in the various bodily organs, such as the 'heart', the 'hand', the 'eye', the 'mouth', and so on. Thus, when the Old Testament speaks of the power of man's hand, or the effectiveness of the word of his mouth, or assigns some attribute to the eye, this is to be understood in a literal and certainly not only in a metaphorical sense. Each part had a 'quasi-consciousness' of its own to use his phrase, and 'Man's organism is in fact a "United States" rather than a monarchic or imperialistic realm'.¹⁷ Thus there was no body-soul duality in Hebrew thought. Human personality for them was comprised of 'an animated body'. *Nephesh*, meaning 'life' or 'self', consisted of that part of human consciousness which related to the appetite, will, mind or emotion, that which Wheeler referred to as the 'psychical'. Like the blood, *nephesh* was the animating principle of human life and, like the blood, went out from the body at death, or even in sleep or any other unconscious state, although it might linger in some shadowy form elsewhere. *Ruah* originally denoted a principle of life in both humans and animals, but later, after the exile, through its association with the 'spirit of God', it came to denote what Wheeler somewhat vaguely defines as 'the substratum or entity of man's own consciousness'¹⁸ and, for him, was thus that element in human personality which was most open to the influence of the divine spirit.

Putting it very crudely, we might say that this shows an understanding of human personality which is open at the edges, or has ill-defined frontiers. It was thus easy for the Hebrews to blur any sharp distinction between a person as an individual and as a member of a larger, collective unit such as the family or the clan, the source of the much discussed concept of what he came to call 'corporate personality'. But it also meant that this 'United States' of a consciousness was seen as wide open to influences from without and could become 'possessed' by powers and influences beyond itself. Fortunately, perhaps, he never coined a term to describe this aspect of his study of Hebrew psychology.

If all this seems very strange to us now it has to be remembered that he was bringing to his study of Hebrew nomenclature a great deal of contemporary anthropology. He cites such sources as E.B. Tylor with his study of *Primitive Culture*, published in 1891, which involved a detailed study of 'Animism'.¹⁹ Tylor writes of man consisting of a 'breath-soul' since 'breath' is the sign of life. 'Departing from the body at the time of death, the soul or spirit is considered set free to linger near the tomb, to wander on earth or flit in the air, or to travel to the proper region of the spirits - the world beyond the grave' (Volume I, p.457). Equally influential was Spencer and Gillen's study, *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*, whose first edition appeared in 1899, with a second in 1938.²⁰ We have to remember that Wheeler Robinson inherited from nineteenth-century critical study of the Old Testament, in part at least, a developmental or evolutionary view of Hebrew religion whose progress, it was thought, could be traced through the Old Testament. It began with animism, moved on to polytheism, through henotheism to monotheism, flowering in the ethical monotheism of the prophets. Further, there

was a widespread view, observable in such works as Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, that all primitive societies, wherever and whenever they might have lived, shared common characteristics and that modern societies had, for the most part, passed through similar stages in their early pre-history. The same tendency can be seen in the work of another who influenced Wheeler and many other Old Testament scholars, Lévy-Bruhl, with his study of *The 'Soul' of the Primitive*.²¹

It is a commonplace, but needs occasional restatement, that we have to pay those who have preceded us the courtesy of not lashing them with critical whips which later knowledge and subsequent movements of thought have put into our hands. Rather, we should acknowledge scholars such as Wheeler Robinson and others as among the pioneers who saw the importance of other disciplines in making ancient texts accessible to the modern mind. It is rather like the study of what used to be called 'biblical archaeology'. It was a sound instinct of its early exponents to think that a knowledge of the world in which ancient Israel had its life was important to our interpretation of the biblical texts. The fact that we now see that much of their early work was wrong in no way invalidates their belief in its importance. Indeed, I am not sure that, even now, 'advanced' as they have become, we should let the dogs of comparative sociology or archaeology off our critical leads too early in our scholarly walk through the park of the biblical texts.

Before I turn briefly to consider the vexed issue of 'corporate personality', I should like to mention that other fruit of Wheeler's studies for which, perhaps fortunately, he coined no particular term or phrase. I do so because, in my view, it has more important consequences for his whole thought than the idea of 'corporate personality' and because it illustrates, I believe, what may be left to us of value in his thought when his sources of inspiration and the authority he claimed for them have been discredited.

It is that other consequence of the individual's 'open' personality, its openness to invasion from outside and beyond itself that I find most influential for Wheeler's thought. In his own words, 'The most important aspect of this personality is its constant accessibility to "spiritual" influences from without'.²² It was this Hebrew conception of the personality as 'subject to invasive influences from without' which 'more easily enabled the Hebrew mind to regard itself as the vehicle of divine revelation'.²³ 'When the prophet spoke, he would be intensely conscious that his mouth was speaking by such a power directly given and that his own volition was, so to speak, "short-circuited" . . . It would not be possible for a modern man, to whom the mouth is simply a physiological organ, to hold this belief in the same way' (p.374). One more quotation must suffice: Hebrew psychology 'which has directly developed from Semitic animism provides the cardinal conception of God's means of contact with man - the idea of the Spirit of God, together with the idea of human personality as a unity of soul and body, entirely dependent upon God'.²⁴ He applied his developmental ideas to this aspect of human psychology as well. At first the Hebrews are very close to animism with such concepts as the spirit of God

coming upon men as an elemental force with striking physical results. He could see it as very close to the kind of thing Spencer and Gillen describe: 'Each *Churinga* is so closely bound up with the Spirit-individual that it is regarded as its representative . . . and those of the dead men are supposed to be endowed with the attributes of their owner and to actually impart these to the person who, for the time being, may, as when a fight takes place, be fortunate enough to carry it about with him'.²⁵ As time went on the idea of a possession by God's spirit of a more ethical kind develops, as in the belief that prophets are able to speak by virtue of divine endowment and when Ezekiel sees the whole nation being morally and ethically transformed by the inbreathing of God's Spirit.

All the objections which have been raised to Wheeler's concept of Corporate Personality with its supposed basis in 'Hebrew psychology' can be raised here. There is no evidence that the Hebrews shared the outlook of primitive animism (although one cannot deny that there are plenty of examples of 'animistic' happenings, such as the power of sacred trees and stones, the clothing of a dead person possessing vital powers, brackish waters being 'magically' purified and so on. We have, however, no means of knowing how far such incidents in the Hebrew Scriptures might be 'conscious archaisms'). Few today would accept the kind of developmental view of Hebrew religion which underlies so much of his work (while at the same time we cannot deny that development of religious consciousness did take place). On the other hand, not all Wheeler's ideas about Hebrew psychology and anthropology have been discarded. I believe many still welcome his insistence that the Hebrews did not have an essentially dualistic, soul/body view of human personality. The fact is, however, that by whatever means, Wheeler came to a basic emphasis which is to be found in many places in the Old Testament, and in many more in the New, that the human spirit is what we might term 'susceptible' to the spirit of God. In fact, he himself seems to realize that he gains his understanding of the inspiration of the prophets not *via* his understanding of Hebrew psychology with its animistic roots. 'These survivals of primitive belief and practice do not . . . materially affect the cardinal ideas of the Old Testament. Interesting as they are to the anthropologist, they are still but petrified growths in comparison with the living faith of the prophets.'²⁶ In other words, he has gained his ideas really from the biblical texts themselves. The 'anthropology' has served to illuminate them and give them some kind of supposed basis in the history of human ideas. Further, as I have already said, Wheeler's concept of 'divine inspiration' had a strongly experiential basis in his own consciousness arising from his own personal crises.

Again, his doctrine of the power of the divine spirit to touch the human mind and heart is an attractively broad one. He has no narrow, exclusively ecclesiastical understanding of the working of God's Spirit. In his significantly named book, *The Christian Experience of the Holy Spirit*,²⁷ he speaks of the 'revelation' of the Spirit in the beauty and nobility of creation, in human artistic achievement and in human personality and moral awareness. In all these he spoke of a real encounter between

the divine and human spirits, even if he referred to these manifestations as 'the *Kenosis* of the Spirit'. Furthermore, all his life he was convinced that the source of authority in religion was not in anything extrinsic, such as the Bible, nor in the dogmatic pronouncements of the Church, important as these both were, but that the only real spiritual authority was intrinsic, an intuitive response to the inward working of the Spirit. No wonder he had no time for Karl Barth! 'However transcendent God is, the point at which He reveals Himself to us must be a point at which He becomes intelligible to us, that is, a point at which there is kinship between His nature and ours. This is a principle which some theologians have ignored or denied, notably the present day Barthianism'.²⁸ That is why I have not hesitated to say that this aspect of Wheeler's Old Testament work is of far greater importance for his thought as a whole than was his concept of 'Corporate Personality'. When Stanley Porter in an article in 1990²⁹ linked Wheeler with the subsequent Biblical Theology movement there could hardly have been a greater distortion of his thinking.

I have felt it right to give prominence to that aspect of Wheeler's work since there has been so much discussion of the concept of 'Corporate Personality' that there can be little left to say that is fresh. I am merely going to ask here (without answering) whether it may be true for this, as it was for his understanding of 'invasion' of the human personality by the Spirit of God, that there is an underlying truth which he found in the Old (and New) Testament anyway and which may be said to survive the just criticisms which have been made of his anthropological approach. Looking back at the whole debate, it seems to me the issue has been largely bedevilled by the choice of the very term 'corporate personality'. This is a term drawn from English corporation law. He found this discussed in Sir Henry Maine's *Ancient Law*.³⁰ But also, and this is often overlooked, in his time the occupant of the attractively named Vinerian Chair of English Law at Oxford was W.M. Geldart, an expert in Corporation Law whose inaugural lecture was, in fact, entitled 'Legal Personality'.³¹ But, for all Wheeler's application of the principle to Hebrew law, and to judgements such as those involving Achan and his household, the Gibeonites, the practice of Levirate marriage, the law of blood vengeance and so on, the rights and duties of corporations under English law can hardly be said to be of direct relevance to the Old Testament. It is an *analogous* title and all arguments by analogy are, as we know, littered with logical pitfalls. I am reminded of something John Rogerson wrote about another 'title', in this case that of the 'tribe':

The whole exercise [of defining what is meant by a 'tribe'] was an example of forcing a label on to complex phenomena that may have had *something* in common . . . but which had so many differences, that much more was lost by the way in which the label obscured these differences, than was gained by the convenience of lumping the phenomena together under one common term.³²

Rogerson, in a cogent criticism of the concept of 'corporate personality', first in 1970³³ and then in the book just cited, complained of a loose ambiguity in the way Wheeler used the term, now to denote both someone acting in a representative capacity for a group and now a sense of psychical unity binding members of a group together. This is true although, if the second phenomenon of psychical unity in fact existed, there would be no obviously clear logical difficulty in thinking that someone could act as the representative of a group, so understood. It is unfortunate that an early work of Wheeler's can cite such an echo of people like Lévy-Bruhl as is to be found in Mozley (*Lectures on the Old Testament*) with the statement 'The defective sense of justice, then (in the punishment of all Achan's household) arose from *the defective sense of individuality*'.³⁴ A later definition of the concept reads differently: 'Corporate personality means for us in this place the treatment of the family, the clan, or the nation, as the unit in place of the individual. It does not mean that no individual life is recognized, but simply that in a number of realms in which we have come to think individualistically, and to treat the single man as the unit, e.g. for punishment or reward, ancient thought envisaged the whole group of which he was part'.³⁵ While he sees a development from a more corporate emphasis towards a greater individuality emerging at the time of the exile, particularly with the prophet Ezekiel, in a manner which we should not now find acceptable, he is in no doubt, '. . . it is in the individual that the ultimate meaning of the whole development must be found, even though we have to conceive the individual as incorporated in a new society beyond our present range of experience'.³⁶

Now, again, I should want to ask whether Wheeler does not draw this fine view of the individual as only perfected in relation to a community, a community which is, however, greater than the sum of all its individual members, also from the well of his biblical studies, and whether it is only incidentally dependent upon his suspect anthropological and psychological sources. This is a point that Cyril Rodd has made well in his introduction to a re-print of 'Corporate Personality' in 1981: '. . . it is by no means certain that "corporate personality" will be dropped as easily as Rogerson hopes. One feature of a living language is the way that terms once coined live on with meanings modified to fit later thought . . .'.³⁷ And I suspect people will go on using it because, confused and confusing as it may be, it answers to something fundamental to the debt both Judaism and Christianity owe to the Old Testament, namely that it is the divine purpose not merely to establish a private hotline to a number of individuals, but to build a new Jerusalem. And the examples of the concept which Wheeler gave, the idea of Israel as 'the Servant', the 'individual' speaker in many of the psalms, and so on, continue to speak powerfully for this very reason. Even J.R. Porter's criticisms of the application of the concept to legal issues in the Old Testament³⁸ only succeed in underlining this communal understanding of society in ancient Israel in ways which simply have little correspondence to the thinking of modern society.

Finally, I want merely to indicate briefly some ways in which I have been surprised to find as I read and reread his work Wheeler Robinson anticipated with remarkable prescience subsequent developments in scholarly investigation of the Old Testament. Hear him on the danger of interpreting words from the text on etymological considerations alone: 'Words in themselves mean nothing until they are referred to life, and few inferences are likely to be more misleading than those based on etymology unchecked by actual usage',³⁹ and that was written nineteen years before James Barr's *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, which launched such a devastating attack on those, mainly exponents of the so-called 'Biblical Theology' movement, whom he saw as basing their arguments too much on etymological considerations. How could the writer of those words from *Redemption and Revelation* ever have been linked with the Biblical Theology movement? Only once have I traced any suggestion in his writings that the Hebrew language might be so structured as to favour certain ideas, and there he is quoting someone else and warns us that the view must be received with the greatest caution.⁴⁰ We can go further in tracing his distance from the proponents of the 'Biblical Theology' movement. They stressed that God had revealed himself in action, in great, redemptive historical acts. Indeed, they urged, the very Hebrew language, being a language of verbs of action and not of abstract nouns, lent itself to such a theology rather than one primarily of conceptual ideas. Against that, Barr, Childs and others argued that these acts are presented in the Old Testament only within a conceptual framework of theological interpretation.⁴¹ Let us hear Wheeler Robinson in 1942: 'The events themselves are, of course, capable of other explanations, but this was theirs, and their interpretation became itself a new event of far-reaching consequence for the subsequent history'.⁴² How prophetic a sentence such as the following becomes in the light of more recent literary studies which have argued that the reader puts her or his own stamp upon a text which thus acquires a new, and legitimate, meaning it may not have owned in its 'neutral', pre-reader stage: '. . . it is best to assume . . . that the meaning we ourselves are inclined to give to words of Scripture will in no case be quite that of the original writer; we may repeat the same words, but we cannot easily recall the same attitude in saying them, and it is attitude that says the last word as to meaning'.⁴³

Wheeler Robinson, then, for all his own humble disavowal of his scholarship, must be recognized as one of those scholars whose work proved creative, which formed a landmark, so that at least some things were different afterwards from that which had been before. Certainly his work influenced a significant number of outstanding scholars who came under his influence. He was also a child of his time and, to that extent, his work will perish with his time. But I, who in reading for this paper have come to realize I stand much more than I had recognized in the tradition of this man I never met, find in him in many ways a voice for our own time. He cannot be termed a theological 'liberal' - he was far too steeped in the evangelical Christian tradition for that and he placed far too much emphasis on

experience, on the 'existential' aspect of religion, rather than the purely intellectual, and in theology both 'liberalism' and 'fundamentalism' are ultimately rationalistic. But in these 'post-modern' days of fear and uncertainty, when ugly forces are seeking retreat into an illiberal and strident dogmatism, or else are withdrawing into a shallow, anti-intellectual world of spiritual make-believe, his voice sounds in a timely way to my ears. Here I find at least something I can recognize and which does not make religion utterly unspeakable. Further, in a period which has seen so extensive a re-introduction of nineteenth-century competition between individuals in the name of greater efficiency and profit, a competition which has been introduced under the battle-cry 'There is no such thing as Society' into hitherto unthinkable areas such as education and medicine, his emphasis on the corporate, the communal, has a prophetic ring about it.

He made his mistakes, he who interestingly - and comfortingly - once wrote on 'The Ministry of Error',⁴⁴ and he had his flaws in the manner of a tragic hero, as Bradley once described that Shakespearean figure. Yet I think he was a great man. Having lived with him for some months, I am drawn to that favourite poem of his, 'A Grammarian's Funeral', in order to describe him. The bearers are carrying the litter to the grave sited, appropriately enough, on a hilltop.

Leave we the unlettered plain its herd and its crop;
 Seek we sepulture on a tall mountain, citted to the top,
 Crowded with culture!
 All the peaks soar, but one the rest excels . . .
 Thither our path lies; wind we up the heights;
 Wait ye the warning?
 Our low life was the level's and the night's;
 He's for the morning.

NOTES

- 1 For many of the details about Wheeler Robinson's life, I am indebted to E.A. Payne, *Henry Wheeler Robinson: Scholar - Teacher - Principal: A Memoir*, 1946, hereafter Payne, *Memoir*. Other information comes from papers in the Angus Library and from personal reminiscences of friends, family and others who knew him, whether published or passed on in conversation and by letter.
- 2 Payne, *Memoir*, p.52.
- 3 The details are given in Robert Cooper, *From Stepney to St Giles: The Story of Regent's Park College 1810-1960*, 1960.
- 4 The dedication reads, 'Dedicated to the Representatives of three generations of British Old Testament Scholarship, Theodore H. Robinson, Harold H. Rowley, Aubrey R. Johnson'. See O.

Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction*, English translation by P.R. Ackroyd, Oxford, 1965. R.A. Coughenor made an extraordinary mistake in confusing Wheeler Robinson with T. H. Robinson and so claiming a place for him in this dedication in 'A Tribute to H. Wheeler Robinson on the occasion of the opening of Wheeler Robinson House at Regent's Park College, on 3rd August 1987', Angus Library, pp.15f. In what is a moving and, in many ways, fitting tribute to Wheeler Robinson, Coughenor connected him with the so-called 'Biblical Theology' movement (p.16). I show later why I think this is just as much a mistake as his misreading of the dedication in the Eissfeldt volume.

- 5 Subsequently published posthumously as

- Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament*, ed. L.H. Brockington and E.A. Payne, Oxford 1953. This was intended as the first part of a *Theology of the Old Testament* which he did not live to complete.
- 6 Payne, *Memoir*, p.105.
 - 7 *ibid.*, p.27.
 - 8 D.S. Russell's comments are to be found in 'Henry Wheeler Robinson: a personal recollection', 1987, Angus Library, and some have also been conveyed to me in correspondence.
 - 9 Payne, *Memoir*, p.36.
 - 10 *Baptist Times*, 16 April 1920.
 - 11 *The Christian Doctrine of Man*, Edinburgh 1911, p.52.
 - 12 *Deuteronomy, Joshua. The Century Bible*, Edinburgh 1907, p.33.
 - 13 Payne, *Memoir*, p.54.
 - 14 ed. W.R. Selbie, 1911, pp.267-286.
 - 15 ed. A.S. Peake, Oxford 1925, pp.353-82.
 - 16 *Studies in Theology*, 34, 1913. 2nd edition, rev. and ed. by L.H. Brockington, 1956.
 - 17 'Hebrew Psychology', p.354.
 - 18 *ibid.*, p.360.
 - 19 E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 1891.
 - 20 B. Spencer and F.J.Gillen, *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*, 1st edn., 1899; 2nd edn 1938.
 - 21 L. Lévy-Bruhl, *The 'Soul' of the Primitive*, English translation by L.A. Clare, 1928.
 - 22 'Hebrew Psychology', p.366.
 - 23 *ibid.*, pp.371f.
 - 24 *Religious Ideas of the Old Testament*, p.48.
 - 25 Spencer and Gillen, *op.cit.*, p.125.
 - 26 *Religious Ideas of the Old Testament*, p.47.
 - 27 London, 1928.
 - 28 *Redemption and Revelation*, 1942, p.165.
 - 29 'Two Myths: Corporate Personality and Language/Mentality Determinism', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 43, 1990, pp.289-307. In addition to the most unfortunate use of the term 'myth' by a scholar, of all people, to mean 'something which is untrue', Porter merely repeats the criticisms others have made about the concept of 'corporate personality' and entirely misunderstands Wheeler Robinson's ideas about 'language/mentality determinism, as I show later in this paper.
 - 30 Sir Henry Maine, *Ancient Law: Its Connection with the Early History of Society and its Relation to Modern Ideas*, 1901, see esp. Ch.V.
 - 31 See W.M. Geldart, *Elements of English Law*, 1st edn, Home University Library, London and New York, 1911. This is a work which has run through many editions, the ninth appearing as late as 1984.
 - 32 J.W. Rogerson, *Anthropology and the Old Testament*, Growing Points in Theology, Oxford 1978, p.87. One thinks of another label, much used in Old Testament studies, 'Apocalyptic', to which Rogerson's words could be applied with at least equal force!
 - 33 'The Hebrew Conception of Corporate Personality: A Re-Examination', *Journal of Theological Studies*, (ns) 21, 1970, pp.1-16.
 - 34 *Joshua, Deuteronomy*, p.300.
 - 35 'Hebrew Psychology', p.376.
 - 36 *The Christian Doctrine of Man*, p.277.
 - 37 A revised edition edited with introductions by J. Reumann and C. Rodd, Edinburgh 1981. The quotation comes from p.8.
 - 38 'The Legal Aspects of the Concept of "Corporate Personality" in the Old Testament', *Vetus Testamentum*, xv, 1965, pp.361-80.
 - 39 *Redemption and Revelation*, p.43.
 - 40 'Hebrew Psychology', p.380.
 - 41 See especially J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, Oxford 1961, and B.S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, Philadelphia 1970. These two books may be said between them to have fired the salvos which brought down the citadel of 'Biblical Theology'. I am not suggesting that they were either of them indebted directly to Wheeler Robinson, but merely pointing out that he was alert to the dangers to which they were to draw attention so forcefully.
 - 42 *Redemption and Revelation*, p.182. This aspect of Wheeler's thought is much more fully investigated and this emphasis of his is drawn out by Max Polley, 'H. Wheeler Robinson and the Problem of Organizing an Old Testament Theology', *The Use of the Old Testament in the New and Other Essays. Studies in Honour of W.F. Stinespring*, ed. J.M. Efrid, Durham, NC, 1972, pp.149-69. I am indebted to Dr Ed Ball of Nottingham University for drawing my attention to this article.
 - 43 *The Christian Doctrine of Man*, p.5.
 - 44 'The Ministry of Error', *Religion in Life*, Spring 1936.

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