

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Canadian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_canadian-journal.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_canadian-journal.php)

# The Biblical Understanding of Community and Person

ROGER MEHL\*

THE dialectic of the part and the whole is inadequate to do justice to the situation of man in relation to the community. This way of thinking distorts at one and the same time both the personality of man and the collective "personality" of society. Any account of the relationship between the individual and society must preserve these two "personalities." The mass, by its very nature, destroys them both; it is essentially anonymous and featureless, stifling all inter-personal relationships by standardizing them. It exercises over the individual consciousness an extremely strong pressure without encouraging a fusion of consciousness in a "we" capable of self-determination towards recognized ends. It does not succeed in creating an awareness of the values which can serve as a means of personal communication between them. It can only bring them under the influence of emotional currents in which they are alienated from each other; it produces a kind of collective effervescence, followed by relapse. Individuals, for a moment forced together into a corporate whole, are left to themselves; the mass does not put an end to the solitude of the individual, who does not find in it any opportunity of transcending but only an occasion of forgetting himself. Is it possible to give a collectivity a personal significance, to make it a veritable "we," in which persons can recognize each other and find an opportunity to transcend the limits of their subjectivity without sinking into anonymity? Holy Scripture is unaware of the phenomenon of the mass, which is bound up with an industrial and urban civilization, a civilization goaded by the demands of technology and of efficiency, producing immense urban concentrations by destroying all the traditional frameworks of existence and by snatching man from small communities where he found a relative security and relative guarantees for the development of his personality. Can Holy Scripture, which is unaware of the sociological phenomena connected with industrial and urban concentration, give us positive and normative guidance in the search for a living and fruitful relationship between the community and the person? At first sight, one may well doubt it.

One is naturally tempted to turn one's attention first of all to the Old Testament. It gives us the history of a people who passed through different sociological stages in proceeding from nomadism to the semi-nomadic and then to the sedentary life, in which they adapted themselves to a civilization of cities and small towns. Let us be on our guard against thinking that a

\*This article was translated from the French by R. F. Aldwinckle.

sociological study of the people of Israel and its evolution—a study already made by Antonin Causse under the significant title: *Du groupe ethnique à la communauté religieuse* (Paris, Alcan 1937)—must necessarily have for us normative significance, or even an illuminating value for our present situation. It would not, in any case, be sociologically more enlightening than the history of many other peoples. It is possible that a sociological study of the people of Israel would lead us quite simply to the frank conclusion of Wellhausen: “The wheel of history passes over the individual; it only remains for him to submit himself hopelessly to it. He must find his reward in the well-being of his people.”<sup>1</sup> This statement would be valid for all forms of tribal organization. To be sure, in tracing the evolution of Israel, one might to a degree modify the verdict of Wellhausen. It is customary to distinguish two periods in the history of Israel: one prior to the prophets, a period of collectivism in which personality has little reality, and another inaugurated by the prophets in which the protest of the individual conscience makes itself heard against social conformity, the protest of justice against routine. Certainly, this scheme is only valid in the broad sense and many modifications must be introduced. But let us accept it as true. What does it teach us beyond what we have already learned from the sociology of Durkheim, namely, that the individual personality only escapes from social conformity when certain sociological conditions are combined, and that this personality, even in its autonomy and in its capacity for revolt against the social order, is a product of sociological evolution? It is certainly evident that we shall not find an answer to our question along the line of an historical and sociological analysis of the evolution of the people of Israel. It is only when we consider the history of the people of Israel in the light of the interpretation given by the biblical witnesses, through the divine plan which is expressed in it—it is only when we consider this history as it was lived and understood by a certain number of divinely chosen witnesses, that is to say, only when we consider it in the light of the notions of election and covenant, that it can assume for us a normative significance. This history, which has unfolded according to known sociological laws, has also a significance different from that described by those laws. It is the history of a relationship between God and the people he has elected and with whom he has concluded the covenants. It has been lived as such (or sometimes retrospectively interpreted as such) by a certain number of witnesses who might have been able to illumine this process of development for the common understanding. One has no right, even scientifically, to say that a mythological interpretation has thereby been superimposed upon the true history of Israel, for this interpretation is an organic part of that real history, and has modified its course. It has produced in a sociological context, otherwise analagous to that of other contemporary pagan peoples, certain insights which have guided the relationships of the nation and the individual towards a new polity. It is worth the trouble, not only to see in what respects the history of Israel resembles

1. J. Wellhausen, *Israelitische und Judische Geschichte* (Second edition), 1914, p. 69.

from a sociological point of view that of neighbouring peoples, even if this resemblance constitutes a dominant factor, but also to seize the specific difference, the decisive difference, even if it cannot be precisely defined, which makes it possible for the people of Israel to give us quite new norms for the relationship between a group collectivity and a person. This specific and precious difference belongs precisely to the revelation made to certain witnesses who have been able in a certain measure to communicate it to the whole people. In short, it is not, as the biblical fundamentalist tends to believe, the history of the people of Israel, in its total unfolding and in all its sociological structures which is interesting and normative for us. It is this history as it is interpreted and lived as the history of a relationship with God, a relationship which is essentially expressed in the three categories of creation, election and covenant, and in the category of eschatology. By virtue of this lived interpretation of history, the Old Testament perceives first of all that the individual man has a singular dignity and consequently cannot be regarded simply as a social product, even if in fact the nomadic Israelite was nothing else. Such a man has a spiritual essence: he is not a mere product of nature. Doubtless he has the same origin as the animal. Like it, he is formed of the dust of the earth and his fate is no different. But what constitutes his specific character is his ability to stand before the Eternal, to hear the Eternal speak to him, to enter into relationship with God. Such a relationship is not one of physical parentage (which would lead us again into a substantialist and naturalistic anthropology) but a relationship freely established by God, a relationship on the one hand of dependence on man's part as a creature, and on the other of partnership inasmuch as man is the object of the Word of God and understands this Word. Fall and salvation are events which take place within the very heart of this relationship. This essence of man, which is a being-in-relationship, is expressed by the Old Testament in its juridical theology. One of the meanings of Old Testament legalism is to underline the truth that man actually exists only in a relation of obedience or of disobedience to a divine order. It is by virtue of this relationship alone that man is not conceived as a pure fragment of the social collectivity and is not crushed by it. Certainly the group has a primacy, as is attested by the general fact of collective responsibility. But in the very functioning of this collective responsibility the particular dignity of man is manifest. The whole family of Achan is destroyed because of the fault of one (Josh. 7:24). The iniquity of the fathers is visited upon the sons. (Exod. 20:5). There is even solidarity in reward: the righteous Noah saves his whole family (Gen. 7:1). The house of Obed Edom is blessed because he has given shelter to the ark (2 Sam. 6:11). The benefits of Yahweh are always granted to the whole people without account being taken of the character of the individual members. Yet, precisely because an individual has the power of being a blessing or a curse to the whole people, the individual is not without value in the eyes of God. According to Edmond Jacob whose account we are following in this treatment: "If an individual can

involve the whole group in his reprobation or his blessing, there is present something very different from the totalitarian conception whereby the individual is sacrificed to collective ends."<sup>2</sup>

The social anthropology of the Old Testament, so far as it is determined by the idea of a relationship between God and His people, between God and each member of His people, is as free from the characteristics of tribal collectivism as it is from those of modern individualism. That is why Old Testament scholars, and in particular H. Wheeler Robinson, have created the new concept of corporate personality, defined by the latter in the following way: "The whole group, composed of past and future members, can act as a single individual in and through the activity of any member whatsoever, conceived as a representative of the group."<sup>3</sup> Examples abound of this notion of corporate personality. Adam and Israel are presented to us as at the same time both individual persons and as types representing a whole race of people. Amos speaks to his contemporaries as if they had been actually present at the departure from Egypt. There is a true reciprocity between the group and the person: If Moab is mentioned, this and that Moabite are indicated. In the same way, the "I" of the Psalms represents both the author of the Psalm and the whole nation, and the servant of the Eternal is an ambivalent being, representing both a person and the people of Israel. Election and covenant concern the whole nation, but the order of God, or the law which constitutes both the content and the sign of this covenant, are addressed to each man and cannot be carried out except by each responsible individual. The people is called to prayer, but that means that each man prays.

The individual is therefore never conceived as a separate being, enclosed in his own solitude, a kind of atom. He is always thought of in solidarity with his people, and with his ancestral line. Apart from this solidarity he would have no authentic existence, not being a beneficiary of the promise and of the covenant. But this solidarity is in no way mechanical. It finds expression in a consciousness of personal responsibility. The people sin and turn away from God, but each man is called to repentance. In these conditions, the people is no longer an anonymous mass, or a simple juxtaposition of individuals; it is composed of persons, conscious of their solidarity and of their responsibilities. Nothing illustrates better this mutual relationship between the nation and the individual than the prayer of intercession. Consider Abraham's prayer in behalf of Sodom (Gen. 18:22-33). In this extraordinary account, various themes are intermingled. On the one hand is seen a sociological structure such as characterizes all primitive societies. Sin is collective. Punishment is collective. The just and the unjust will be punished. It is the theme of collective responsibility which suggests that the individual does not count. But at the same time, there is Abraham's protest

2. Edmond Jacob, *Theologie de l'Ancien Testament* (Neuchatel et Paris, 1957), p. 125.

3. H. Wheeler Robinson, "Wesen und Werden des Altentestamentes," *B.Z.A.W.*, 66, 1936, p. 49.

against such a misunderstanding of personal responsibility. Such a proceeding would be contrary to the justice of God. "To slay the righteous with the wicked, and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from thee: Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" Classical sociology will detect here a glimmer of individualism which it will hasten to explain as the result of the lateness of this writing, which retraces for us a long process of historical development. It is heard in quite another sociological context than the prophetic epoch in which it is supposed to have been written. The explanation no doubt is true, but it leaves on one side a third element, and doubtless the most important, for the redactor of the text. Abraham is in the presence of the Eternal, and thus in this personal encounter, he affirms his solidarity with the people of Sodom. He intercedes on its behalf, and God accepts this intercession. God can scarcely confuse Abraham with the people of Sodom. Moreover, God accepts this intercession by Abraham for Sodom, this solidarity of Abraham with Sodom, this kind of substitution of Abraham for Sodom, which is all the more remarkable seeing that doubtless the Sodomites do not belong to the same tribe as Abraham. As soon as a man is in relationship with God, as soon as he holds himself erect before the Eternal, the possibility of communication is opened up between him and others. Between a man and a whole people a kind of mutual relationship is established. In the measure that the people of Israel or its predecessors considered their life as a personal relationship with God and their existence as a kind of worship offered to Him, the opposition between the person and the group was effaced. The person and the collectivity had homogeneous and interchangeable personalities rooted in what we have called the idea of corporate personality.

The theological significance of this corporate personality is that God sees humanity as a single man. He has created humanity in Adam. He has not created a collection of individuals who are strangers to one another, but beings in the solidarity of a community, united by the bond of obedience and adoration, collectively receiving the promise and the blessing intended for each of them. The fact that men are divided, that man is compelled to defend himself against a persecuting group, or that he is forced like the prophet into opposition to it in order to make it hear the divine threat—all this is the consequence of sin, of the rupture of the bond with God. Ceasing to be a being-in-relation with God, man ceases also to be in relation with the community and with each member of that community. The community then ceases to be a community, and simply becomes an organization of power and therefore of oppression. It is precisely because God sees humanity as a single man and hopes for the re-establishing of its unity that he acts in favour of a man or a group of men whom he chooses, but for the benefit of the whole of humanity. He chooses Abraham and his posterity that they may be a blessing to all nations. He chooses Israel that she may be the teacher of all the nations. He chooses a remnant in Israel for the benefit of the whole of Israel. He chooses a servant for the advantage of all.

It is in this way that the perspectives of the New Testament are determined by those of the Old. As Oscar Cullman has shown, the Christ is situated on this line of history.<sup>4</sup> He is the servant of the Eternal, incarnate in a unique person. He is, in the history of the relationships of God and humanity, the final remnant of the remnant of Israel. But precisely in him, humanity is recapitulated, that is, he takes upon himself the whole of humanity and its sin. And in him also God acts for the benefit of the whole of humanity. That which happens to him happens for the salvation of all. The doctrine of substitution must be viewed from the Old Testament standpoint of the doctrine of corporate personality. Christ is the elect of God, the anointed of the Lord, but his election does not signify the abandonment by God of the rest of humanity, nor of Israel, as Paul demonstrated long ago (Rom. 9-11). On the contrary, in him all the nations are called. He is "the first born of the new creation." The work accomplished by God in Christ, the foundation of the church made possible by this work, bear witness to the fact that God calls all men and all nations to live with him in a new relation, in a covenant of grace, in a relation of confidence, of peace, of love, of service and of adoration. This new relationship with God makes possible and results in a new relationship of men to each other, a fraternity transcending all sociological differentiations, a victory over those differentiations which is symbolized and realized in the church, whose vocation it is to extend its sway to the uttermost limits of the world, thereby integrating the whole of humanity.

In order to illuminate the problem which concerns us, it is worthwhile to study the structure of the church, that new society of men reconciled to God and to each other. Our attention will first of all be claimed by the fact that in the community of the church the interpersonal relationships dominate the structure and the organization. It is not only a matter of empirical fact that the primitive church had a very fluid organization, which only developed in the light of concrete necessities (e.g. the institution of deacons), and that the charismatic element always dominated the institutional element. This fact expressed the essential nature of the church: a community gathered around the risen Lord. All those belong to the church who are bound by a relation of faith, at once confident and obedient, to Christ. One enters the church as a believer in Jesus Christ, receiving baptism in his name and the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). For baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit only confirm and make more definite this personal bond of faith with the Saviour. By baptism, we participate in his death and his resurrection (Rom. 6:3-11). One will note in particular that the significance of baptism is that it allows us to live with the Lord (v. 8) and to live for God in Jesus Christ (v. 11), and further that the role of the Holy Spirit is to allow the faithful man to live in communion with Christ, in spite of our present physical separation from him, during which the Holy Spirit is the precious comforter and witness in us of our new sonship to God (Rom. 8:16). The church is indeed a

4. Oscar Cullmann, *Christ et le Temps* (Neuchatel et Paris, 1947), p. 82.

body, but it is so not in virtue of the structure which leads its members into unity but of its relationship to Christ. It is in him that we form a body. This incorporation *en Christo* is effected by the establishment of a personal relation with him—a relation which affects our deepest dispositions and even the very nature of our feelings. This is why the Apostle Paul can say and say again: “Rejoice in the Lord.” This vertical relation with Christ necessarily involves a horizontal projection, an analogous relationship to the brethren: “We who are members one of another” (Rom. 12:4b). The whole of the New Testament ethic derives from this new realization of solidarity and love in which the faithful find themselves by virtue of their entry into the body of Christ, a relation so intense that it can break down the walls of separation between individuals: “Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those that weep” (Rom. 12:15). One sees that in this particular society, the Church, the opposition between the group and the individual is wholly transcended. The human person in his essential liberty, which is the liberty of believing, is here of the first importance. However, the community is not reduced to a mere aggregate of persons, since they are united, beyond everything that separates them, in a single body which creates such a unity as to make it truly possible to speak of the church as of a single man, who grows towards perfection so far as the bond between each believer and the Lord is not broken. It is because of Christ and all the bonds of his help that the whole body “fitly joined together and compacted . . . according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love” (Ephes. 4:16).

There is here a perfect mutuality between the person and the community, even though all the members are not equivalent since there are the strong and the feeble, the noble and the ignoble members (1 Cor. 12:22ff.), a diversity of ministries but not of passive members. The whole of 1 Corinthians 12 presupposes that there are no members in the church who do not exercise a ministry, however humble it may be. This unity of the church, this unity in the church, are placed under the sign of the hope of the Kingdom. As soon as the Kingdom comes, they will be perfect, for God will be all in all. It is the omnipresence of the personal God in every individual which will form the unity of this community which is the Kingdom. It is this profound unity of the coming Kingdom that determines even in the present all the ethical activities of the church and of its faithful. As Bultmann has written concerning the Old Testament itself, the characteristic of the eschatological expectation and of the obedience required by the Kingdom is that the responsibility of the individual and that of the community are simply one, whereas in the diverse apocalyptic perspectives the individual alone bears the responsibility for his own salvation and bears only that responsibility.<sup>5</sup> This reciprocity of community and individual at the very heart of the church seems to us to be seriously distorted in Roman Catholic ecclesiology inasmuch as the essence of the church is defined, not

5. R. Bultmann, *Geschichte und Eschatologie* (Tübingen, 1957), p. 35.

by this reciprocity in Christ of the body and its members, but by the hierarchical structure. The Church ceases to exist when this structure is not realized. This is the source of all clericalism, of all oppression of conscience. Roman Catholicism has established a sociological order in the church and this explains the often reactionary and oppressive influence which it has exerted in the state. This evolution is fatal as soon as it interposes between the Lord and the faithful, sociological authorities, a network of canonical prescriptions, all the structures and symbols of a human society. Let us have no illusions: Protestantism is also exposed to this danger, which appears very clearly as soon as churches, particularly the Reformed, cease to be content to define the nature of the Church as the congregation of all those who hear the Word of God and receive the sacraments in conformity to the gospel—the Word and the sacraments being the modes of personal relation between Christ and the faithful—but wish to add a third mark of the church such as discipline. Certainly the whole church, being a sociological body, is in need of discipline, but it is of the first importance that discipline be confined to its proper function and not be regarded as a constitutive mark of the church.

The reciprocity of person and community in the church is best seen in the identity of final purpose which is set before the faithful and the church. Ethical and spiritual progress in secular society is characterized on the contrary by the dissociation of personal and collective goals. Between my destiny and that of the state there is a gulf. However devoted I may be to the civilizing work of the state, I cannot regard the ruin of that civilization as depriving me of my personal destiny any more than the survival of the state across the centuries can suppress the problem of my death and of my ultimate survival. The misfortunes of the state have their repercussions in my existence and involve it in grief, but the prosperity of the state does not console me for my personal sufferings.

The great spiritual achievement of Christianity since the breaking of the bond between religion and the state consists in the realization of an intimacy or subjectivity which does not in any way remove the destiny of the state from the area of personal concern, but enables the individual to exercise a kind of detachment in relation to it. Subjectivity has its own requirements and it cannot wait for the permission of the state before devoting itself to them. The error of Marxism is to distrust this achievement and to think that personal problems can await their solution until the realization of the classless society and the disappearance of the state in an era of abundance. On the contrary, by virtue of the common bond of goodness which unites us to Christ and to each of our brethren within the body of Christ which is the church, the end of man can no longer be conceived as independent of the historic goal of humanity recapitulated in the church under the authority of Christ. Salvation cannot be conceived as purely individual. It is also the salvation of the whole people of God. It is important that salvation should not be presented to us in the manner of the mystic, as a blessing, a contem-

plative enjoyment, but that this salvation should bear a communal character, namely that of the Kingdom of God. The whole apostolic activity of the church derives its proper significance from the fact that salvation is indissolubly a matter of both the nation and the person. The act of faith is the most personal act possible, but faith finds its seal in eucharistic integration in the community.

The community of the church is thus the community where the reciprocity of person and group clearly appears. It cannot become a mass without destroying its proper nature. It is saved from this fate by the personal character of the relationships which are established within it and which constitute its existence. It must not be distinct from the congregation which it forms around the Lord. Does it follow that it can be for our modern society a kind of archetype to be imitated? Such was no doubt the sociological thought of the Middle Ages which conceived civil society as a sort of prolongation of the church, which desired to impose upon the civil society church structures which no longer expressed the true nature of the church in the New Testament sense. This attempt is, properly speaking, the clericalism from which Protestant thought instinctively turns away. It accepts a normal secularization of the world. Where Christ is not explicitly acknowledged and where there is no faith in the Lord, it is vain to hope to set up forms of church order. Civil society is not a community gathered around a person: it is a collectivity organized around a certain type of civilization, that is to say, a system of abstract values expressed by juridical institutions which translate these values. Civil society is involved in other relationships than those required by the church. Civil society—particularly a nation—has a fundamentally institutional character that the church must not have. It will tend to order in a legal manner the relationships of individuals to the group (which will itself be symbolized by an abstract institution, the state), and the relationships of individuals among themselves, as well as those of the many social groups which constitute the close knit and complex network of relationships within a nation. It is precisely because of this institutional aspect of structured relations in certain types of civilization that the subjective life must preserve for itself a proper sphere and that the life of modern man often consists in the preservation of personal intimacy against the intervention of society. Here there is no reciprocity between the person and the community, but rather a search for an equilibrium between personal and social goals. If they often intermingle, they must not be confused with each other.

Does it follow that ecclesiology should have no connection with sociology? No, but one must be on guard against confusing them. The world is not the church. The positive role of ecclesiology appears to be as follows:

(a) First of all the church in a society like our own, necessarily and strongly collectivized, constitutes one of the refuges, if not the refuge, of the personal life. It is in the church that man becomes a person or is re-made as a person in a personal relationship with the Lord and the brethren, in order

to return stronger to the world where the emergence of the mass, bound up with technological structures, is always threatening.

(b) At the same time and for the same reason, the individual, so far as he thinks of himself egotistically as absolute and as an individual in revolt against the group, finds himself questioned, attacked and conquered by the new kind of community life exemplified in the church.

(c) The church by its life, by its preaching and in particular by the political function which it performs by means of this preaching, is a permanent protest against those massive and inhuman structures which make man lose his sense of social responsibility, against the destruction of smaller and more human communities, against the disorder which delivers the man without spiritual support to impulsive forces of collective life, as well as against the hyper-organization which, in killing adventure, also kills the personality. The church has no need to furnish models of social organization, nor even norms. Organization and norms are necessarily variable in the course of history. There are types of society as there are types of civilization. It can also—a fact which further presupposes that the church observes and studies sociology—avert the dangers which arise, dangers of the all powerful mass without definite goal, the concomitant danger of the individual delivered up to enervating solitude, the danger of making diverse social stratifications absolute, the danger of a juridical organization so abstract that a man no longer has the possibility of meeting his neighbour.

The church will play this triple role only if it remains the church, only if it itself preserves through the centuries and through whatever sociological structures it adopts, the living congregation of those who are gathered together around the Lord in the expectation of the kingdom.