

# The Biblical View of Man

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A detailed handling of the subject is beyond the scope of this paper and I do not think such a presentation is necessary for a learned gathering such as this. Quite a few scholarly works on this subject are available,<sup>1</sup> and, I am sure, you are familiar with most of these. I shall not, therefore, go into a detailed discussion of the biological, psychological and physiological aspects of biblical man; I shall just confine myself to underlining some of the basic elements that are dominant in the biblical view of man.

The Bible being a religious book, obviously theology is its primary interest and anthropology is the sequent of theology. Man is seen only in his relation to God. This does not, however, mean that anthropology is only of secondary interest in the Bible. Theology and anthropology are just two sides of the same coin; in revelation man is the subject and God the object; man raises questions and God answers; without the former the latter would not have been possible. In this respect 'The Bible is Human.'<sup>2</sup>

Man's questions arise out of his conflicting and complex situations, out of his triumphs and defeats, exhilarations and frustrations, and as such, biblical man, while finding a theology for himself, unconsciously exposes his nature and thus presents an anthropology. As R. Bultmann

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<sup>1</sup> H. W. Robinson, *The Christian Doctrine of Man*, London, 1926\*; J. Pedersen, *Israel, I-II*, London and Copenhagen, 1946\*; W. Eichrodt, *Das Menschen—verständnis des AT*, Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments 4, 1947; K. Galling, *Das Bild vom Menschen in Biblischer Sicht*, 1947; A.R. Johnson, *The Vitality of the Individual in the Thought of Ancient Israel*, Cardiff, 1949; W. Zimmerli, 'Das Menschenbild des AT,' *Theologische Existenz Heute* NF 14 (1949); G. Whitefield, *God and Man in the Old Testament*, London, 1949; W. Eichrodt, *Man in the Old Testament*, London, 1951; C. Ryder Smith, *The Biblical Doctrine of Man*, London, 1951; J. A. T. Robinson, *The Body*, London, 1952; L. Koehler, *Hebrew Man*, London, 1956. W. D. Stracey, *The Pauline View of Man*, London, 1956; R. P. Shedd, *Man in Community. A Study of St Paul's Teaching*, London, 1958; Stephen Neill, *What is Man?*, London, 1960; A. R. Johnson, *The One and the Many in the Israelite Conception of God*, Cardiff, 1961\*; C. F. D. Moule, *Man and Nature in the New Testament*, London, 1964,; Ernst Käsemann, *Perspectives on Paul*, Philadelphia, 1972\*; H. W. Wolff, *Anthropologie des Alten Testaments*, München, 1973, and the Books on O.T. and N.T. Theology.

<sup>2</sup> This is the title of a book published by Louis Wallis, a sociologist, in 1942.

sin are, thus, due to his creaturely ignorance. People perish for want of true knowledge (Hos. 4:6).

As a creature, man also stands in solidarity with nature. He is made out of the dust of the ground. As Ruben A. Alves notes, 'Nature is his body, and therefore his bread.'<sup>7</sup> Every action of man has its repercussion on the rest of the created order (Gen. 3:17f.; 6:7).

In the New Testament, too, the creatureliness of man is acknowledged. Man being a creature, he is dependent on God (Matt. 6:26-30; 10:28; Acts 17:25-28). Here, flesh represents the external, visible and temporal aspect of man in contrast to the internal, spiritual and eternal (Rom. 2:28f.).

## 2. Man as an Unitary Being

God created man as an unitary being; there is not in him a dichotomy of body and soul or a trichotomy of body, soul and spirit. He is not an incarnated soul, but an animated body or flesh. The anthropological terms used both in the Old and the New Testaments present the different aspects of man.

The word '*adam*' (from '*adamah*'—ground) refers to man as belonging to the human species; '*ish*' refers to man as one endowed with power, perhaps the power of the will and choice; '*anash*' (from '*enosh*'—weak) stresses the feeble nature of man (Pss. 8:5; 90:3), '*geber*' points to man as one with manly vigour as against a woman (Exod. 10:11; 12:37; Josh. 7:14).

Several other words are used to refer to the constituent parts of the human faculty—soul (*nepesh*), flesh (*bašar*), spirit (*ruah*), heart (*leb/lebab*). As seen above, *bašar* represents man in his creaturely nature and more frequently it refers to the entire body (1 Kgs. 21:27; 2 Kgs. 6:30; etc.) or to mankind in general. *Nepesh* has been variously translated as soul, living being, life, self, person, desire, appetite, emotion and passion. It distinguishes man's inner being from his external body or flesh. It is the seat of emotion and personal desires. *Nepesh* is not a soul which is imprisoned in a body, as later Greek thought took it, but it is the final result of the creative activity of God which is physical and spiritual at the same time. It is not that man has a soul, but man himself is a soul. It represents the whole man as a living being; in several places it means life (Exod. 4:19; 21:23; 1 Kgs. 19:2).

The word *ruah* (wind), when used of man, has a wide range of meanings, from 'breath' to 'the spirit of prophecy'. It is the gift of God (Zech. 12:1,10). It is that element in man which is most closely connected with the nature of God. When *bašar* is animated by *ruah* it becomes *nepesh*, a living being (Gen. 2:7). The spirit creates life when it acts; the life reveals itself in various degrees of intensity according to the level the spirit is active in that man. Special gifts of the spirit are given to persons to fulfil extraordinary purposes (Jud. 13:20; 14:6; etc.). Man's spirit is to be controlled by God.

Heart (*leb*) is the seat of will or the decision making faculty in man (2 Sam. 7:3; 1 Chron. 22:7; Ps. 20:5 [E.4]; Isa. 63:15). Associated

<sup>7</sup> Ruben A. Alves, *A Theology of Human Hope*, Indiana, 1974<sup>2</sup>, p. 147.

with the heart are the kidneys (*kilyoth*) which have the thinking capacity (Pss. 7:10; 26:2; Jer. 11:20; 20:12). Some other internal organs of the body are also thought to be the seats of different feelings and emotions of man—bowels (*me'im*)—seat of sorrow and yearning (Isa. 16:11; 3:15; Jer. 31:20); liver (*kabed*)—seat of grief (Lam. 2:11); womb (*rehem, rahamim*)—seat of compassion or mercy (Jer. 31:20; Pss. 40:12 [E. 11]; 103:4).

Though different functions are ascribed to the different parts of the body, man is considered to be an unitary being. Though dualistic elements under Greek influence are found in some of the late writings of the Old Testament (Eccles. 3:21; 12:7), the main crux of Old Testament anthropology speaks of man as an unitary being. The idea that flesh is opposed to the spirit and is the cause of sin is foreign to the Old Testament. The body and the breath of life, both coming, as they do, from God, are not two elements that they may be isolated and treated separately. The divine life penetrates the total being to such a degree that each organ of the body can express the life of the whole.<sup>8</sup> 'Man is a psycho-physical being and psychical functions are bound so closely to his physical nature that they are all localised in bodily organs which themselves draw their life from the vital force that animates them.'<sup>9</sup> Man is, thus, body (flesh), spirit, soul, feeling, mind and heart. He is all these, yet none of these in particular if one tries to identify him with any single category. They are not contrasting elements, but different aspects of one vital personality. Whatever activity a man is engaged in, the predominant aspect, be it soul, heart, face or hand, represents the whole person and induces the other aspects.<sup>10</sup>

This unitary nature of man is preserved in the New Testament as well. According to the Gospel writers, Jesus Christ is the true man whose unitary being is not destroyed even in death.

St Paul, too, sees man as an unitary being. Though he uses some of the anthropological terms—soul (*psyche*), flesh (*sarx*), body (*soma*), spirit (*pneuma*), mind (*nous*)—common among the Greeks, he uses them more as a Jew with his Old Testament background. Flesh and body are not used in Paul in relation to matter and form as in Aristotelian philosophy. Nor is flesh or body seen as the prison for the soul or the spirit from whose bondage the latter has to be freed.

Soul is less frequent in the New Testament (13 times), compared with its frequency in the Old Testament (756 times). On the other hand, the word spirit is used here more often (146 times). There is no evidence in the New Testament for the pre-existence of soul. The New Testament uses soul in the Old Testament sense to designate man as a living being (Matt. 10:28; 16:26; Luke 9:56; 12:19f.; John 12:27). The existence of the soul without flesh or body is impossible.

With his theocentric faith, Paul sees man in his relation to God, and realises that the highest and best is derived from God. This is why spirit becomes central in his thinking. The word *pneuma* is used with

<sup>8</sup> E. Jacob, *The Theology of the Old Testament*, London, 1958, p. 248.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>10</sup> W. D. Stracey, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

different shades of meaning—Holy Spirit or the Spirit of Christ, the divine influence in the life of the believers, the seducing evil spirits, the spirit of bondage, the spirit in a Christian which holds communion with God (1 Cor. 2:11-12), a personal spirit, the natural possession in every man, which, of itself, is neither good nor bad (cf. 1 Cor. 2:11a) and which can be defiled (2 Cor. 7:1). The Spirit of God gives rise to a new spirit in man—the spirit of faith, of adoption, of prophecy etc. (Rom. 8:15; 1 Cor. 2:4; 2 Cor. 4:13; Eph. 1:17; 1 Cor. 4:21). The Spirit of God recreates the spirit of the natural man, so that the Christian possesses only one spirit, different in quality from that of an unbeliever or natural man. Paul's pneumatic man never loses his own identity; he is never absorbed in the Spirit; he only shares in the fellowship of the Spirit. He is still human, and he shares human weakness, being liable to temptation (1 Cor. 3:1-4; Gal. 6:1). He remains still within the bonds of humanity. As E. Käsemann notes, 'The terms used in Pauline anthropology all undoubtedly refer to the whole man in the varying bearings and capacities of his existence.'<sup>11</sup>

### 3. Man as a Creative Being

Under this head, I wish to discuss what is normally dealt with under the *image of God*. Man is created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27; 5:13; 9:6—P). In the first place, this shows that the biblical view of man is theocentric. Because man is created in God's image, to know the true nature of man one has to know God. As Stracey observes, 'A new view of man would, therefore, only arise with a new view of God.'<sup>12</sup> As a corollary, a true understanding of man should lead to a true understanding of God.

Creativeness is the nature of God, and man shares in this divine prerogative, and this is the gift of God to man. It is the priestly writer who speaks about the image of God, and from the position of the texts, it has been argued that neither the fall nor the flood destroyed the image of God, and this from the outset puts the concept into the domain of anthropology.<sup>13</sup> While there has been considerable discussion on the meaning of the 'image of God', there has been a certain amount of agreement among scholars that it meant primarily man's dominion over the rest of the creation. Scholars have been led to this conclusion from what has been said immediately following the reference to the image.

Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every thing that moves upon the earth (Gen. 1:28).

The Psalmist who reflects on the nature of man also relates this God-like nature of man to his dominion over the rest of the creation. Having said that man was created 'little less than God' (RSV) he goes on to add:

<sup>11</sup> E. Käsemann, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>12</sup> W. D. Stracey, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

<sup>13</sup> E. Jacob, *op. cit.*, p. 166; G. von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, I, Berlin, 1969<sup>2</sup>, p. 161.

'Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the sea (Ps. 8:6-8).

That this has been the sense in which the Jews understood this passage is attested by the apocryphal writing in Ecclus. 17:3-4:

He (God) clothed them with strength like his own, forming them in his *own image*.

He puts the fear of man into all creatures and gave him lordship over beasts and birds.

Man has been asked to be creative: 'Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion.' Sea, air and earth are under man's dominion. The world which God created should be made habitable, and this task God entrusted to man. In this sense the creative work is still unfinished.<sup>14</sup> As Teilhard de Chardin observes, 'It (creation) continues more graciously than ever. . . In action I adhere to the creative power of God; I coincide with it.'<sup>15</sup>

While man is part of the created order, there is no inherent bond between him and nature. He is to have dominion over nature. By this image of God, he grows out of his creatureliness and becomes creative; he conquers the animal world. Animals are often symbolic of the evil forces in this universe,<sup>16</sup> and this means that man is to overcome the evil forces in this world.

There is also the possibility of man tarnishing the image of God in him, of misusing his creative powers. 'To remain an image man must maintain his relationship with God, he must remember that he is only an ambassador and his dominion over creation will be effective only in proportion as that relationship becomes more real.'<sup>17</sup> When man estranges himself from God by trying to become a God himself, he falls back to his animal status (cf. Ps. 73:22; Dan. 4:31ff.). Man becomes fully human only in his relation to God. So, the Psalmist says,

Thou art my Lord;  
I have no good apart from thee (Ps. 16:2).

People who maintain a faithful relationship with God are endowed with the Spirit of God. It is this Spirit which gives man the knowledge to know the will of God (Job 28:28; Prov. 9:10) and the strength to do it.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Ruben A. Alves, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

<sup>15</sup> C. F. Mooney, *Teilhard de Chardin and the Mystery of Christ*, New York, 1966, pp. 151f.

<sup>16</sup> E. Jacob, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

## 5. Man as an Ethical Being

Biblical man is an ethical being. The very fact that Israel's ethical leaders—the prophets, the wisemen and the lawgivers—urge upon the people the doing of good shows their belief that man, as intended by God, is to do good. The Yahwistic account of creation notes that man was created with freedom, the freedom of choice between life and death, good and evil, the freedom to obey or to disobey, which implies that man is capable of making an ethical decision. By applying his freedom man shared the characteristic of God in distinguishing between good and evil (Gen. 3:22). But his freedom is not absolute; it is conditioned by two things—by his collective personality, i.e., by his commitment to his society, and by his theistic focus. Ethical awareness, social consciousness and religious commitment are allied. A solitary good man is inconceivable.

As man is theocentric, the source of his goodness lies in the nature of God (Ps. 16:2). 'Man is required to act ethically and to establish justice in society by a command from without, not by an impulse from within.'<sup>22</sup> The 'fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom' (Job 28:28; Prov. 9:10). As Käsemann points out, 'Man is always faced with a call—a call to which he must respond in his thinking, his speaking, his acting and his suffering. . . he stands beneath the sign of exodus and his horizon is hope'<sup>23</sup> (cf. 1 Cor. 7:17-24). A wrong response to God's call, an act of disobedience, is in itself a demonstration of the freedom given to man. This is what the fall account in Genesis illustrates. With man's disobedience the whole creation is affected. The repercussions of human morals are to be recognised even in non-human nature (cf. Gen. 3:17-19; Isa. 11:5-9; Job 5:17-23; Rom. 8).

According to the New Testament man has abused his freedom in making the wrong choice (John 1:10f.; Rom. 1:19-21) and this has affected his ethical behaviour. The new man in Christ is where Christ is and he does always what Christ wants him to do (Matt. 12:30; Mark 9:40; John 12:24); the Spirit of God is active in him and, therefore, he brings forth the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-24).

## 6. Man as a Becoming Being

Man has a dynamic personality which possesses greater possibilities for development and change, change both for good and bad. Man as the dust of the ground is part of nature and he has a living relationship with this nature—having dominion over it, conquering it and subduing it. As such, as nature changes, man is also likely to undergo changes. Secondly, man as the image of God is destined to live in fellowship with God. As N.W. Porteous rightly observes, 'Man's nature is determined entirely by his relation to God, a relation which preserves the distinction between God and man, between the creator and the creature.'<sup>24</sup> The closer man comes to God, the more human he becomes.

<sup>22</sup> O. J. Baab, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

<sup>23</sup> E. Käsemann, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>24</sup> N. W. Porteous, *IDB* 3, p. 242.

The biblical revelation adds one more factor to the nature of man, namely sin. Sin affects the image of man in the negative. It disfigures the image given by God; it brings him into conflict with both nature and God. It deprives him of God's Spirit: 'My spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh' (Gen. 6:3). When man responds to God's call wrongly (John 1:10f.; Rom. 1:19-21) sin dominates and dehumanises man. Sinful man is no longer man as God intended him to be (Rom. 1:18-32; 7:14-24). The Spirit of God departs from him and his personality deteriorates (Jud. 16:20; 1 Sam. 16:14).

The biblical story implied that death was not originally meant for man. For animals to die is natural, for man to die is unnatural. Death came through man and the cause of death is sin (Gen. 2:17; Rom. 1:32). However, sin does not have the last say in the life of man. God out of His grace engages himself in redemptive activity and tries to restore man back to his lost fellowship with Himself. This is what the biblical concepts of election and covenant imply (cf. Gen. 12:1-3; Isa. 42:6; 49:6,8). The pre-fall condition of life has to be restored where man lives with the rest of the created order in harmony, when 'the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea' (Isa. 11:1-9). It is towards this restoration of the pre-fall order that the Hebrew religion with all its functionaries and cultic paraphernalia strived for.

The New Testament stands in fulfilment of this Old Testament goal. It shows the real man in the person of Jesus Christ. The Synoptists try to show the exceptional quality of this man, who made such an impression on those around Him (Mark 1:17f., 22, 27). With his coming a new age, the Kingdom of God, has been initiated (Matt. 10:32; 11:27; 12:28). St. John's Gospel makes it clear that Jesus Christ is, in contrast with other men, the true Son of God (John 8: 41-47) and that through him a new existence is now possible for man (John 3:14-16; 6:40; 12:31; 16:23).

The incarnation is for the reversal of the fallen order. With the fall, death, the climax of evil and suffering, came as an intruder from outside and it is an enemy to be vanquished (Rom. 6:9,16; 1 Cor. 15: 26; Eph. 2:2). With death sin has become an alien power residing within the individual, denying him command of his own actions (cf. Rom. 5:12, 21; 7:17, 20; 1 Cor. 15:26). The law, by becoming an instrument of sin, has also become an oppressive power on man (Rom. 7:5, 8, 11). Thus man through the fall came under a threefold slavery—slavery to the power of evil (death), sin and law. The incarnation is meant to set man free from this slavery. The Son of God identifies himself with man fully to the limit of the flesh in its fallen state, yet without sin, by his becoming a slave, obeying God even to the extent of death (Phil. 2:7f.; Gal. 4:3) and by his becoming a curse under the law (Gal. 3:10ff.; 4:4). What Christ has done in his flesh and body on the cross has been through baptism, and must be in conduct, reproduced in the life of the Christian,<sup>25</sup> thus producing the New Adam, the New Man in Christ (Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18).

<sup>25</sup> J. A. T. Robinson, *op. cit.*, pp. 34ff.

Thus man is still with open possibilities of becoming a new being in Christ, 'becoming children of God' (John 1:12; cf. Luke 20:36; Rom. 8:14). Christ is the criterion of this new being. As Käsemann observes, 'Man's position is still open. . . Man cannot be defined from within his own limits, but he is eschatologically defined in the light of the name of Christ, just as Adam once received his name from God, thereby acquiring a definition as creature. It is true of both that they are unable to give themselves being and existence, but remain dependent on grace which is new every morning and never finds an end.'<sup>26</sup>

According to the Old Testament, man who lives in accordance with the will of God enters into a communion with God which even death cannot end (Job 19:25-27; Pss. 16:10-11; 73:26-28; Isa. 26:19; Dan. 12:2). This is the theological basis for man's belief in life after death (1 Cor. 15:20-23; Col. 1:18). The new man in Christ stands in the hope of ever growing fellowship with God, becoming new every morning, a fellowship which continues even beyond death:

And we all. . . are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18).

The new man, manifested and made possible by Jesus Christ, is the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit creates new life in man (Luke 20:36; John 1:12; Rom. 8:14). The whole man, his spirit, soul and body, is kept sound and blameless for the final consummation of the fellowship with the second coming of Christ (1 Thess. 5:23); the body, too, shares in the life after death, but, obviously, it is a transformed body (1 Cor. 15:35-49; Phil. 3:21).

## Conclusion

Is the biblical model of man any longer relevant for our understanding of the modern man? Is it basically different from the other emerging models of our time? How far has it contributed to the other models—Marxist, Gandhian, Humanist, etc.? These are some of the questions still to be discussed.

The biblical view of man comes from a people living far removed from us both in space and time, and man, being true to his nature as a 'becoming being', has in the meantime changed considerably, as a result of his living encounter with God and nature. His understanding of his own self has grown accordingly. Therefore, some elements of the biblical view of man—e.g., the subordinate or inferior status of women in society—have proved themselves to be irrelevant and not true to the true nature of man. However, the basic elements we have pointed out above still remain useful and challenging for a proper understanding of man.

Man as a created being is not to arrogate to himself the power of a God over others; he has to realise his equality with his fellow beings; as a unitary being there is nothing in him that is essentially evil or bad;

<sup>26</sup> E. Käsemann, *op. cit.*, p. 31.



he has to apply himself wholly in his obedience to God, in his service to humanity; as a creative being he has to use his God-given potentialities and explore and conquer this universe in his attempt to make this universe more congenial and habitable; as a social being he has to care for his fellow human beings; as an ethical being he is called to use his freedom responsibly and to make mature choices; as a becoming being he is to live in expectation and hope, the hope of still improving himself and his society, until he comes closer to Christ and to his Kingdom.