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The Old Testament View of Man

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One cannot speak of anthropology proper in the Bible. The Bible does not consider man in himself, as an individual as such, but always in his fundamental relation and attitude to God. This is very true whichever way he is considered, whether from the point of view of creation or from the viewpoint of eschatology. Paul characterised the divine dealings with the world and man in one word: mystery. This can be said also, and pre-eminently so, of man who remains, despite very many studies and analyses, a mystery and a riddle without sufficient solution.

Man is a creature, created by the all-loving God. This creatureliness, that is the fact that God created him, makes him not only dependent on God, but also in some way similar to him. Man is the final and the best product of creation according to the biblical accounts. Everything else seems to have been made because of him. As the origin, so also the maintenance of man is dependent on the free decision of God (Job 10:12; Ps. 119:73; Job 14:4f.; Ps. 104:20f.).

Foremost in the Bible in referring to man is the word *'adam*, which is a collective term which can better be rendered as humankind rather than as man. A more precise term is *ben 'adam*, or son of man. Another word used to denote man is *'ish*, which has more the sense of an individual, or husband. A third word that signifies man is *'anosh*. Man is a living organism (Gen. 2:7; 1 Sam. 18:1); the most commonly used words to denote the living man, however, is *nepesh* when it deals with the personality of the subject or *baśar* when the treatment is about the weak nature of man. In Greek there is a variety of terms used in reference to man: *anthropos*, *aner*, *brotos*, *thnetos*, *psyche*, *arsen*, *andreios*, *dunatos*, *gegenes*, etc. However, a distinction between body and soul as the constituent elements of man is unknown to the Old Testament. The different words, such as *leb* or *lebab*, meaning heart, or *baśar* meaning flesh, or *nepesh* meaning a living soul, etc., are used to describe the entire man in different aspects, and not his parts (Job 14:22; Pss. 16:9f.; 69:2). Each one of them describes the many-sided reality that man is. Dichotomy or trichotomy is foreign to Old Testament thinking. We can say, therefore, that the conception of man is wholly and not partly treated in the Old Testament. Dualistic tendencies originate with late Judaism and the Qumran sect.

Inheriting a Greek philosophy as its substratum for a thinking process, Christianity in the past often applied its categories in an effort to understanding the Old Testament teaching. This has done violence

to the oriental thought pattern and injustice to the Jewish mentality. The Old Testament considers man in his relation to God. If man is the centre of dispute and discussion in Greek philosophy, the arena of the Old Testament world is given over to God. It is God and not man who occupies the centre of the stage. Conveying and embodying in himself the collectivity of the human race, Adam and his relationships sum up in a microcosm the entire history of all humanity.

This man is great (Ps. 8:5f.) and at the same time nothing (Isa. 2:22; Pss. 49:13f.; 62:10; 89:48; 90:5f.; 102:12; 144:3; Isa. 40:6ff.; Job 25:6). All human plans depend on the absolute sovereignty of God, who, however, makes use of humans for his ends, as vehicles and carriers of his plans and as instruments and agents of his ordination (Ps. 66:12; Ezra 30:10f.; Isa. 44:24f.).

Man is called to be a partner with God and a partner with his wife. According to the ancient near eastern concept, all men did not enjoy equal worth. Men lorded it over women. A successful leader or a warrior was held in high esteem (Gen. 45:13). Even if all men are encompassed in the covenant of Noah, only at the end of times were people other than Israel to partake of the blessings of Israel (Isa. 2:2-4; 45:22-24; Zech. 9:9f.). All men are sinners (Gen. 6:5; 8:21; Ps. 51:4; Job 14:4; 15:14f.). Sin should have been but an alien term in salvation history; but unfortunately it is not. It is a very fundamental concept in Christian linguistics. It is a condition that will remain with us till the end of times. Sin is much more than sinful behaviour. It is a situation in which man finds himself. It is a fragmented existence that the sinner leads in a divided world. The fall of man is the expression of the fundamental awareness that there is a deep-rooted conflict in him often brought into the open in disobedience, revolt, unrest and self-centredness. Man is one who decides against God. The consequences of man's decision against God are not so much sickness and death, suffering and pain, as isolation and alienation, estrangement and the breaking up of relations. Instead of the intended dialogue, what now exists is a strained and strange silence, between the creator and the created. The amity that existed between man and rest of creation is now turned into enmity. The relationship of man to woman, which was supposed to be the guiding principle and ideal pattern for all other relationships, is torn asunder. This is reflected in the accusation of the man about the woman. He does not any more identify himself with her. She is seen as the other, the other that is hell. It is not only man and wife that become enemies and accusers of each other, brothers turn out to be murderers (the story of Cain and Abel). This is not restricted to the family, but goes out of it, extending, reaching out, and pitching one relation against the other. Even when in society men come together for a set purpose, they do not understand each other any more; there is a gap somewhere that prevents them from communing with each other (Tower of Babel). This battle that starts within the innermost recesses of man becomes open and violent in terms of wars between peoples. Because man shattered the pristine position of a privileged existence, the universe that was called to be under his dominion comes to share in this battered and thoroughly

shaken relationship. The world yields no fruit; it rebels against the rebel. Service and subjection have given way to rebellion and open hostility. Whereas up to now man looked forward to the company of God with pleasure and anticipation, he is henceforth afraid of his voice and presence; he tries to hide from the divine presence whence he has no escape. This futile attempt of hiding from God is contagious. This is the picture which the beginning of the Old Testament paints for us about man.

The mystery of man is not that he is composite, but that he is weak and strong at the same time. It is flesh that betrays his weakness. It is not the seat of sin as this would be later developed in Paul, yet it denotes man as unsteady, essentially weak, a weakness that is both moral and physical. Sex offered no mystery to the pagan religions, because it was the primary principle in the gods themselves. In Israel, however, sex plays no part with God, and therefore it becomes a matter of mystery and speculation. Man is created in two sexes, whereby the woman becomes man's helper, partner and companion; she is equal to man in dignity.

Nevertheless, the Old Testament views man not so much as an individual as a member of society. Man is solidary in the guilt and salvation of society. God saw that it was not good for man to be alone. Therefore he made for him a helper. The man is called from the very beginning by his name (Gen. 35:10; Exod. 31:2; Isa. 45:4). This divine call is necessary for the development of human personality itself. In him rests hence the untransferable responsibility of responding to that call whenever and wherever it is made. Called to be in eternal dialogue with the Almighty, man remains for ever the subject of divine grace or judgement according to his ever present option. This dialogue of God touches man both as an individual and as a member of society. The Hebrew thought pattern is shot through and through with this reality of the absolute duty and the responsibility of humans before God. Because the divine action is fully free and as far as man is concerned absolutely unforeseeable and incalculable, man is always faced with the necessity of a fresh decision. He cannot treat God as a taken-for-granted power, an ideal to be striven after, or a solidly immutable system. What is of paramount importance and significance is the fulfilling of the divine will. Time, therefore, provides the possibility for a personal decision. A spontaneous, free obedience to the will of God is the answer God awaits from every man (1 Sam. 15:22; Isa. 6:6). This obedience to the divine will which is a must in a relationship between man and God was called into question by sin. What should have provided man with joy has through sin turned out to be a burden and cause of conflicts.

This is the story the prehistory of man presents us with. The story of the patriarchs shows how man and his history remain still under the sway of a just but merciful God. Through the covenant and the law in which the dialogue of man and God could continue, every Israelite was called to be a partner with God. The commandments of dos and don'ts emphasised this responsibility of each person. Through the

law and the covenant, Israel found itself chosen as the special patrimony of God (Exod. 19:5), a specially sanctified people (Lev. 19:2; Deut. 7:6). This also showed that Israel was called to render a special service.

What was the relation of the individual to society and of society to the individual? In considering this relationship we should not succumb to oversimplification. The Hebrew thought pattern may be styled simple; but the reality expressed through it is anything but simple. Society and social groups were twofold in Israel. First there was the clan in which different individuals were often connected by family ties. Within the clan itself the relations were rather solid and tight. The second social group was the political society. In Israel the only truly political society was under the monarchy. The king was the symbol of unity and centre of unification. Both in the clan society and in the kingship society, Israel's thought pattern believed in a continuity. Centuries may separate one generation from the other, but all Israelites considered themselves children of the same patriarchs. The Exodus events, which were worked out in the lifetime of a distant generation, were thought of as contemporary. Israel was considered a continuum. That man does not amount to much as an individual is not a later developed concept. Soon after his creation, man is given a helper. The spontaneous and explosive relation of man to woman—'now, this at last bone from my bones, flesh from my flesh' (Gen. 2:23)—constitutes the dangerous pattern of love that exists in human society. This relationship is not only fundamental to society but also its highest ideal. This is the beginning of human relations. Man is intended to be a part of the society in which he moves.

Another aspect of Israelite thought was the idea of corporate personality. In this underlying concept of Jewish thinking, the individual and society had their particular meanings; but one did not, and could not, exist, and for that matter could not be understood, without the other. Thus we see in the history of Israel's individuals, the entire Jewish history reflected, portrayed and sometimes anticipated. What happens to them as a nation is already taking place in the life of the patriarchs. This kind of projection into the future in terms of fulfilment and ruminating back into history as the foreshadowing of the future is not limited to individuals within the history of Israel; it extends to Israel's neighbours and enemies—which were the same to most of the Israelites. Examples of such kinds of corporate personality can be observed in the Esau-Jacob story, as well as in the Jacob-Laban incident. (Esau stands for the Edomites and Laban for the Arameans.) If Israel was almost firmly established with monarchy, the land of promise had already been entrusted to the patriarchs.

In this idea of corporate personality the king occupied a significant place. He was the representative of the people. No wonder, amidst a people whose idea of the individual was more in terms of the collective, the king should be acknowledged not only as a visible symbol of unity, but also as the one in whom the fortunes of Israel were concretised.

Hence too the sins and shortcomings of the people of Israel could be seen and judged as those committed by a single individual. The whole history of Israel can be viewed as the life history of a single individual; where the relationship between the God of Israel and the children of Israel was concerned, it was one of constant faithlessness. Amos could call Israel the family Yahweh brought out of Egypt. Israel alone was chosen by God and cared for by him; and because Israel returned infidelity to the gracious gifts of God, she would be punished: 'Listen, Israelites, to these words that the LORD addresses to you, to the whole nation which he brought up from Egypt; for you alone have I cared among all the nations of the world; therefore will I punish you for all your iniquities' (Amos 3:1-2). Not only as a family, Hosea saw Israel as the only son of God: 'When Israel was a boy, I loved him; I called my son out of Egypt!' (Hos. 11:1). However, the nearer he was called, the further he went away from him; hence punishment would follow: 'Back they shall go to Egypt, the Assyrian shall be their king; for they have refused to return to me. The sword shall be swung over their blood-spattered altars, and put an end to their prattling priests, and devour my people in return for all their schemings, bent on rebellion as they are' (11:5-7). This is but justly merited punishment, because they acted without acknowledging the hands that caressed them, because they rejected the bonds of love that united them, because they bent their heads and offered burnt offerings to the carved images.

The behaviour of Israel, according to Hosea, is but a copy of the true character of their ancestor, Jacob, whose characteristic trait was treachery, deceit, cunning and deviousness (Hos. 12:2-4). The people did not learn from the divine chastisement that occasionally came in the form of loss of freedom, catastrophic weather and dwindling crops, invasion of locusts, drought, famine, and pestilence. The unfailing devotion Israel showed God in her youth for a time gave way to wanton living and faithless behaviour, though they did not find any fault with God (Jer. 2:2-5). The priests did not enquire: where is the Lord? The legislators and interpreters of the law did not bother about God; prophets prophesied in the name of Baal while the shepherds rebelled against Yahweh (Jer. 2:6-9). Ezekiel had but a very sorry picture to depict. Israel had been corrupt and vitiated right from the start. All their forefathers were faithless (ch. 20). Therefore Israel as a nation and as a group is answerable before God.

True, there was always the temptation to shy away from personal responsibility, because the idea of the corporate personality lent itself to frustration and resignation; so much so, there arose a false idea that the visitation of Yahweh was due to the sins of their forefathers. Israel's self-proclaimed innocence and the hard reality of divine chastisement were in themselves irreconcilable to any thinking or believing mind. If Israel chose for herself the illusory escape of fleeing under divine demolition, giving expression to a seemingly futile and apparently unjust and oppressive justice of the Almighty, she found consolation in the thought that it was their fathers who had sinned and not they. This was, however, making mockery of divine retribution and ridicul-

ing the justice of God. Therefore, Yahweh said: 'It shall not be so: in those days it shall no longer be said, "The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge." For a man shall die for his own wrongdoing; the man who eats sour grapes shall have his own teeth set on edge' (Jer. 31:29-30). More strongly is this principle of individual and personal responsibility emphasised in Ezekiel: 'What do you all mean by repeating this proveb in the land of Israel, "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge?" As I live, says the Lord God, this proverb shall never again be used in Israel. Every living soul belongs to me; father and son alike are mine. The soul that sins shall die' (Ezek. 18:1-3). Making a case out of a triple possibility, Yahweh excluded any kind of injustice from his actions and shattered the falsely conceived concept of an irresponsible corporate personality. The group is responsible only as an individual is responsible. An individual can reverse his spiritual future only by reversing his past. The same holds good for Israel as a group. Her expectation for the promises of God to be fulfilled can only come to pass in the future of Israel as a group.

This type of thinking pervaded not only the private and social life of groups, but its religious thinking and practice as well. It is as a group that the people came to worship Yahweh. There was no individual worship. A God without a people did not exist. Every individual relationship was conceived in terms of the group. Hence when the political system of Israel fell prey to invasion and exile, the religious edifice crumbled.

We saw earlier how Jeremiah and Ezekiel hammered at the necessity of personal relationship and bombarded a misplaced, misconceived and misunderstood corporate personality. These two prophets came to the rescue of Israel's religion when its political system vanished. When people were convinced that the God of Israel was vanquished and as good as dead, Jeremiah and Ezekiel gave expression to the unprecedented idea that God was very much alive even amidst a political defeat and religious chaos. This idea was indeed revolutionary and unheard of. However, it stuck. Maybe the political nothingness of Israel helped her to go along the lines of the prophets. This had a tremendous consequence. If Yahweh was still among his people, if his punishment was but medicinal, then Israel could rise again with the favour of Yahweh. She could still be his. This was also the time when personal responsibility came to be considered more openly. When there was no organised society and monarchy, each one was held responsible for himself.

The future haunts the present. This is nowhere truer than in human life. The uncertainty of a tomorrow and the inevitable unknown plague the human imagination and shatter any human certainty. What is the future of man? What is going to happen to me tomorrow, when I am dead? This tantalizing question plagued Israel's thinkers too. Belief in the afterlife is of a very late origin in Israel; in this they seem to have followed Canaanite and Mesopotamian beliefs rather than those of Egypt. Unlike the Egyptians, who believed in a continued but unchanged state of life after death, the Mesopotamians conceded that

everything ended with death. Life is a preserve of the gods. Death is the common lot of man, which is to be met with stoic pessimism. Death is the end of life. There is a kind of food and drink that would grant man immortality; but these are jealously guarded by the gods. Death, like birth, is a natural necessity, devoid of any deeper or ulterior significance.

Israel shared this Mesopotamian concept of death. There was, however, this difference: in Mesopotamia man was mortal because the food and drink of immortality were kept away from him due to divine jealousy. Israel was convinced that man lost immortality through his own fault. Death is the limit of his horizon; there is no beyond. Nothing survives the grave. True, there is mention of a Sheol (Isa. 14; Job 10:21; 17:13-16; 3:17-19); but it is a vast tomb where the dead are stored up as inert matter. Death is the natural term of life. All that the Israelite ever desired was a long life and a painless death. Only an early or a sudden or a painful death was looked upon as divine punishment. Otherwise death was viewed as a natural thing that put a full stop to everything. In a society where corporate personality was uppermost, where everyone believed that the father continued in his son, a specifically individual afterlife existence was not a necessity. Israel lived; the dying man was its member. As long, therefore, as Israel lived, the individual too lived. This thought is not altogether primitive or foreign. Even today parents want their children to be better off than they are financially, educationally and in any other way possible. It is the fundamental belief of their ego being continued in their children that is uppermost in this behaviour. Collective immortality, therefore, is not simply superstitious or primitive. The Psalms offer a special problem. Some of them seem to believe in an afterlife of some kind. Sometimes the enemy that is spoken of, and whom the psalmist opposes, is death (Pss. 7:6; 13: 3; 18:4). Psalms 49 and 73 offer a vague and still unclear picture of some kind of life after death. The clear expression of a hope of resurrection occurs in Daniel 12:2 in the Maccabean period. How this idea developed in Israel we have no inkling.

We mentioned earlier that there is mention of Sheol in the Old Testament. However, it should not be concluded that Sheol is the place of afterlife. Sheol knows no retribution. A man's recompense or punishment for his good or evil ways are to be seen in this life, either in his own personal life, or in that of his posterity. The wicked are punished so that their names are blotted out altogether (Sir. 23: 24-27; 41:5-11). A good reputation and worthy children follow the good deeds of a man (Sir. 30:4-6; 37:24-26; 41:11-13; 44:10-15). Sheol has a kind of suspended existence. Even when Sheol is referred to as a place of rest (Sir. 22:11; 38:23; 30:17 uncertain text), it is not conceived in any positive sense. Man in the Old Testament view is a creature. He has no autonomous character. Considered in himself he has no worth. Man's only worth is that he is God's gift. He is given 'glory' and 'honour'; he is endowed with royal blessings (Ps. 8) and his status itself is a little less than divine. Man shares in the dignity of work which is a divine attribute (cf. Gen. 1:28; 2:15;

Ps. 104: 23). However, man is like the grass that withers away (Isa. 40:6-8). He is dust (Ps. 103:13-16) and ashes (Gen. 18:27). Nevertheless, the most tragic characteristic of man is that he is sinful. Wishing to assert his own autonomy at the expense of God, he sins. This is the lesson the author teaches by introducing the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Lamech, the Tower of Babel and the Flood. Man is corrupt from birth (Ps. 51:5; 143:2) and his thoughts are evil from his youth.

The prophets pictured sin as a total estrangement from God. When the Hebrew teachers tried to look into a future, what they visualised was the earth under the rule of God with a people obedient to his will. The Old Testament teaches in summary a belief and a possibility of trusting in a God who was ever ready to confront man not in conflicts but in forgiveness, love and solicitude. It is this attitude that paved the way for an understanding of man in the New Testament, based on the promises of God.

Divine dealings with man start with promises. From the very beginning of human history, even when the book pictures the direct and the most glaringly glamourless event in the divine-human drama, the writer does not forget to include a promise on which later relationships and dealings could be based. The man who recorded unabashedly the shameful picture of the fall of man could not skip the silver lining in the darkest cloud. The toil and troubles of man, the shattered relationship between husband and wife which degenerated into a perversion of friendship from the paragon of intimacy it was to be, the unsavoury experience of pain and death, all prompted the writer to focus his attention on the promise held out by God to man as the only ray of hope in an otherwise pitch dark world. If the first humans decided to alienate themselves from their creator, he, in his turn, was not yet ready to push the matter to a seemingly just, but definitely meaningless conclusion. The author of the first chapters of Genesis has made a special effort to show that this story, including the fall and the promise, is not a story that happened to an undeveloped primate who traversed this earth at the beginning of human history. It is the conclusion and conviction of the writer that this man of the story is every man.

If in the fate of the first man and woman each man could see his own life and circumstances and the sum total of his living reflected in the promise made to him, then later generations could rest assured of their success. The Yahwist, with never-to-be-suppressed optimism, was convinced that the saving actions of God would in time bring victory. Even in the darkest moment of human enterprises, there stands a loving God with the promise of salvation. This is the God who gives meaning to human life. God intervenes salvifically in history in man's favour, through his words and deeds. In all this the intention of God of making a people and setting them apart for his service becomes abundantly apparent. It is not due to any merit on the part of man that this selection and election happen, but it depends strictly and solely on the goodness of God. The promises made by God to

his people draw them with the unmistakable power of a gentle breeze to himself where the divine interaction and intervention make it clear that God loves them.

We often speak of human commitment, especially in a religious and spiritual context. We understand by it our unrevoked and ever faithful willingness to be united with God, emphasising our resolve not to go back from the promise we have made to him. Yet our own commitments are but shadowy reflections of the divine commitment that starts out with his promise to be ever faithful to his word. The relationship between God and man is launched into the mainstream of history on the strong belief that God is behind everything that happens and that God wants to save man much more than he wants it himself. God is ever committed to save man, not by any internal necessity, nor even by any consideration of the importance of man, but because of his promises. The process of salvation history, beginning with the promise, going through the different stages of election and covenant, shows not only the necessity of correct options on the part of the humans but also the freedom with which the Almighty moves amidst them. The election Yahweh extended to the people was the archetype of relations that should exist among themselves, as sons of the same father. If man had to respond to the revealing and saving God in faith and love, mutual service and love were imposed on him as so many necessities to keep the divine promises alive, true and meaningful.

If creation brings a being into somethingness out of nothingness, it is promise that makes it capable of admitting to itself and experiencing within and without itself that the efficacious mainstay of its existence is the promise of God. The personal relationship God offers to man is only a part of God's self-gift which is his promise. Human response to the divine promises can and should be one of hope and absolute trust. The life of Israel shows that her entire history is a story of dependence on God with absolute trust on the fidelity of God and his promise. The people themselves were conceived because of a promise. Her own existence was conditioned by the continued and repeated promises of Yahweh.

The Old Testament concept of man is further and fully developed in the New Testament. If it is generally true to say that almost all the themes of the Old Testament are developed in the New, concerning man it is particularly true. Christianity is convinced that the first man was not Adam but Christ. Man apart from a consideration of Christ is but a scarecrow and a caricature. This is the summary result of the Old Testament considerations about man. The emerging picture is not very promising. This picture becomes increasingly irritating and frighteningly and frightfully frustrating, when we compare it with the glory that is Christ. This we leave for another paper to consider. If man is hungry and thirsty for the absolute, this is very true of Old Testament anthropology. The whole of Old Testament history shows the ever present invitation of God to men to be his own children, and the dismal human failure to respond to that call. Objectively viewed, there is not a single figure in the Old Testament that fully filled the divine expectations. Hence the idea of man, as it passes

from the Old to the New Testament, undergoes not only a development but a radical rethinking because Jesus the man was a radical rethinking of God. If the Old Testament is a promise of God to man, then Christ is the promise of humankind to its God. If the Old Testament is the history of a human 'no' to the divine 'yes', then the New Testament is the human 'yes' to the divine 'yes'; this is possible only through the man Jesus of Nazareth, the New Man.