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# The Human in the Old Testament*

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In a little known story at the end of the book of Judges, we are told about a man taking a journey with his concubine and his servant. Arriving at Gibeah, they met an old man.

> And the old man said, "Where are you going? and whence do you come?" And he said to him, "We are passing from Bethlehem in Judah to the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, from which I come. I went to Bethlehem in Judah; and I am going to my home; and nobody takes me into his house. We have straw and provender for our asses, with bread and wine for me and your maidservant and the young man with your servants; there is no lack of anything." And the old man said, "Peace be to you; I will care for all your wants; only, do not spend the night in the square." So he brought him into his house, and gave the asses provender; and they washed their feet, and ate and drank. (Judges 19:17b-21)

That is the human** in the Old Testament—someone we meet in a story like this one, with its everyday atmosphere. We can only understand this Old Testament picture of humanity if we are prepared to enter its simple everyday world, to affirm that world and participate in it.

What is fascinating about this brief segment of the Judges story, despite its distance from us, is the peculiar and finely nuanced dignity given simple events and conversations. The traveler seeking shelter does not go door to door, but waits for someone to speak to him and offer an invitation. The old man coming home from work addresses the stranger and inquires about him, taking him in with no thought of remuneration. We are quietly introduced to the order of an intact

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**Translator's note: Prof. Westermann's term throughout this essay is "*der Mensch*"—a word which refers to human beings as male and female, but which in German is grammatically masculine (as are its corresponding pronouns). To avoid the exclusive use of the English masculine pronoun, the translation must occasionally paraphrase the German original.



community, where each person has a clearly determined place and where the common life, down to the smallest detail, is carefully structured.

This story brings to mind other, better known stories from the Old and New Testaments: Mary and Joseph on the way to Bethlehem or fleeing to Egypt, the visit of the divine messengers

to Abraham, the wooing of Rebekah by Abraham's servant. Considering these together helps us see something about the Bible that we must learn anew, namely, that its stories take place in our own world, between ordinary people like ourselves, in the various forms and relationships of life which belong—also for us—to human existence.

## I. THE HUMAN AS CREATURE

The human is a creature among creatures. We probably no longer perceive that so directly as did the people of the Old Testament. In the course of the development of western culture the simple juxtaposition of creator and creature has gradually been replaced by that of humanity and nature. As the human began to be seen as the center of all things, God was removed to a distant transcendence; humanity's opposite number became nature—something to be comprehended and ruled. Then as the technical consequences of scientific development eroded a unified concept of nature and produced a humanity which in its everyday life had to do with technical production and with things that were technically produced, the biblical notion of creature and creator was pushed even farther into the background. The basic question today is not at all whether or not one believes in a creator—this question is much too abstractly formulated for the present situation; the basic question is much more whether or not we can find any clear and genuine way to relate our technicalized existence—as we now have to live it, with its machines, its nuclear physics, and its modern genetics—to what the Bible says about God the creator.

It is important, therefore, to listen anew to the biblical witness, asking what it has to say to today's changed world that we cannot hear elsewhere.

The human is a creature among creatures. In the Old Testament that is not something people must be taught or which must be revealed to them. It is taken for granted, completely natural; it encompasses all human thought and life. The world around us cannot be understood as anything but creation, a creation which participates fully in the worshipful joy humans direct to God. Sun and moon, fire and hail, snow and frost join in praising the creator (Psalm 148).

Israel in exile, trapped in weary mourning, is reminded of the "creator of the ends of the earth," who "does not faint or grow weary" (Isa 40:28). When people in such situations realize that they themselves are creatures of God, the questions that plague us—like whether or not it is possible to harmonize creation and evolution—become irrelevant. They have nothing to do with this joy in being creature, this respectful astonishment over the miracle of being human—made "little less than God" and crowned with "glory and honor" (Ps 8:5). The people of the Old Testament were amazingly aware of what it meant to be creatures of God:

> O Lord, thou has searched me and known me!
> Thou knowest when I sit down and when I rise up;
> thou discernest my thoughts from afar. (Psalm 139:1-2)



Words like these speak to us directly across the intervening millenia; but what we do not hear, what we must learn again from the Bible, is that this knowledge—that as creatures we always stand before God—is accompanied by a full and complete affirmation of this creatureliness. When the singer of Psalm 139 says, You are "acquainted with all my ways" (v. 3), he means the daily ways on this earth—his everyday concerns in all their variety. The Old Testament makes no

attempt to present us with a doctrine or abstract portrayal of "the human." It speaks about a general humanity only rarely and peripherally. Normally, its human is a man or a woman or a child, someone with a name who appears on a rather small stage at a particular time and place. It is important for the Old Testament to tell us who the father and mother were of the person under consideration; hunger and thirst play a significant role as do the variety of physical movements and gestures—like a greeting or a shining face.

Great attention is paid to the basic phenomena of human need: hunger and thirst, exhaustion and illness. The Bible knows that a healthy person is not the same as a sick one. It knows that a person dying of lack of water can no longer think beyond the reality of thirst; that one who is totally exhausted needs compassion rather than moral admonition. Only one who has personally known a similar situation can comprehend why Israel held on to the memory of its years of famine and thirst up to the end and why it never forgot that the one who is thirsty experiences God's miraculous power in a drink of fresh water.

Consider two passages which seem to stand in marked contrast to one another. First, there is the drastic description of the murmuring of the people in the wilderness with its detailed list of the things for which they hunger: fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic (Num 11:5). The particularity is an indication that the memory is real—as anyone who has ever been in a similar situation can confirm. On the other hand, in apparent contrast to this, a sermon reflecting on the same period announces:

> And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know; that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord. (Deut 8:2-3)

Actually, the two things belong together: the realism of hard experience and the proclamation as a present reality of the help once experienced.

## II. THE HUMAN BETWEEN BIRTH AND DEATH

In the creation faith of the Old Testament, the individual human is always seen in the context of an existence that spans birth and death. Every age group has its particular and necessary function, and only a community which includes both children and elderly can be called intact.

One must realize, of course, that in the Old Testament period the family had a different structure than today. Because of early marriage, successive generations were much closer to each other. Further, the still purely agrarian economy made possible a closely shared life in an extended family. Even more important, the relationship between old and young was not primarily a matter of authority (as is usually surmised from our present distance); authority arose as a consequence of the blessing; it was the blessing which finally held young and old together in the



family. We can only comprehend this with great difficulty. The old, even the very old, had something to pass on to the young which the young could get nowhere else than in the blessing received from their elders. The actual content of that blessing cannot be described or explained. It

is that which has matured—that which God has made mature—in a person's life. And the elderly could pass this on, at least in part, to the young. That was the basis for the respect shown to elders (which is nicely described in Job's reflection on his previous good fortune [Job 29:7-11». This is also why wisdom has its place in the Bible. For it is in the realm of wisdom that the blessing is effective; wisdom is something which can only grow and mature.

At the same time, the young have their own distinct voice in the Old Testament. Being human includes exuberance and enthusiasm. Judges is a decidedly youthful book, marked by the exuberance of youthful enthusiasm. The history of the monarchy is also largely the story of the deeds and decisions of quite young persons.

It is important to all the narratives that the human be taken seriously in the whole course of life. As a touching feature of the laws of war, we learn that a young man who is newly married is relieved of military duty so that he can participate in the blessing meant for him.

In the Old Testament, death is also understood in its relationship to the whole course of life. The extermination of a young person who is in the midst of life, whose powers are just developing, is not the same as the death of one who, as the texts often say, is "old and full of years." Death is not merely the cessation of life; it is a power breaking into the midst of life.

> Man that is born of a woman
> is of few days, and full of trouble.
> He comes forth like a flower, and withers;
> he flees like a shadow, and continues not. (Job 14:1-2)

But over against this knowledge of death and its power stands a radiant joy of life, as shown, for example, by the psalm of Hezekiah:

> For Sheol cannot thank thee, death cannot praise thee...
> The living, the living, he thanks thee, as I do this day. (Isa 38:18-19)

That this joy in life breaks out in praise of God—indeed, that it is virtually identified with the praise of God—is particularly characteristic of the Old Testament's understanding of existence. It corresponds exactly to Psalm 139's amazed consciousness that being creature is what it means to exist before God.

## III. HUMAN WORK

Work is included without question as part of human existence—the work of the peasant, the shepherd, the handworker, in a poor land and on stony ground. With a contrast that is difficult for us to explain, two passages describing the work of the peasant stand at the beginning of the Old Testament. In the story of the exodus, Canaan is called the "Thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you...In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread" (Gen 3:18-19). Both passages can only be understood in their contexts. To the Israelites wandering in the desert, the



cultivated land which was their goal seemed a land of milk and honey. Even when they had long since discovered how poor and meager it was, they never forgot how they had once longed for it; it

remained for them the gift of God they had once seen from the desert. That is precisely why it was so hard for them to deal with the experience of thorns and thistles. Their struggle with difficult experience is reflected in the story of the cursing of the ground. It would be a crude misunderstanding to say that in this curse work itself is cursed. Rather, this text is based on the deep realization that all human work has to come to terms with thorns and thistles, that there is no such thing as ideal work, and that no one can become happy through work alone. But this realization does not alter the fact that, before their disobedience to God, human beings were given the commission to till and to keep the garden. This commission includes all work worthy of humanity—even up to the present day. Every human work, insofar as it understands itself to be involved with tilling and keeping the ground (of whatever kind), takes place as a divine commission.

But the Old Testament does not include only this general word upon which all human work is based; it also considers the differences in work that arise in the course of social development. Traces of such thought occur already in the story of Jacob and Esau. One can clearly recognize an older form of the narrative, behind the present one, in which the vocations of peasant farmer and nomadic shepherd are played against one another. In a later text, the differentiation of human work, with all its problematic, comes right to the surface. Along with Israel's monarchy, there arose a group of people who were opposed to it. Their polemic against the innovation of the monarchy included the Jotham fable (Judges 9:8-15), which views the rule of the king with contempt compared to the work of those who produce something useful. It is a protest of the free farmer against this new form of permanent sovereignty.

What has been scarcely noticed is that the Old Testament already displays early traces of a more decisive development in human work, whose full effects have been seen only in the last two centuries, namely, technological inventions. I will not dwell on the fact that the transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age can be seen in several Old Testament passages (part of the reason for the rule of the Philistines over the Israelites is their privileged access to the production of iron; at that time a revolutionary new weapon arose: the war chariot). More important for us is the passage which reflects one of the greatest technological discoveries of human history: the fathoming of the earth itself in mining. Excavations in Palestine have found beginnings of mining and of metallurgy already in the time of Solomon. Such mining is described in the book of Job in such a way that one can sense the joy of astonishment over this human invention (Job 28:1-11). This is one of the very few passages in the Bible that talks about what we would call human technical progress. It is important that such work is here affirmed; the text's joyful sympathy with this new human possibility cannot be overlooked.

The Old Testament knows the work of the mind as well and regards it highly. Early on, the wisdom teacher already belonged in a leadership role, alongside the prince, the priest, and the prophet. Wisdom had so much significance that collections of proverbs and wisdom songs found their way into Holy Scripture, even though they deal essentially with matters that are fully profane. We can observe here how the first traces of scientific thought grow out of the process of observation,



comparison, and abstraction seen in the simple popular maxims (found among all peoples of the earth). An example would be the observations of nature found in Proverbs 30:24-28.

The book of Ecclesiastes, at the very periphery of the Old Testament, looks at the theme

of human investigation, an investigation that wants to explore everything—but it is seen there with deep skepticism:

> All this I have tested by wisdom; I said, "I will be wise"; but it was far from me. That which is, is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out? (Eccl 7:23-24; cf. also 8:16-17)

## IV. HUMAN COMMUNITY

Today we are in the midst of a transformation of human community whose radicality is comparable only to that of the period which saw the beginnings of human agriculture and permanent settlement. The proclamation and counsel of the Christian church in this revolution dare not exhaust itself with a call to hold on to the old forms. On the other hand, neither is it helpful for some to try frantically to be as modern as possible and to be involved in everything. What we need is thorough and fundamental deliberation over the relationship of the church to the other elements of society that are undergoing change. Up to now, the Old Testament has not been sufficiently employed in such deliberation; in my opinion, it has more to say about the basic relationships of human community than has previously been recognized. Such an area of inquiry is, of course, so broad that here I can make only a few suggestions.

### *A. Community and Individual*

It is fundamental to the Old Testament understanding of human beings that the human is not seen first as an individual—who then goes on to build communities—but as one who is from the beginning part of a larger pre-existing entity. The human is not the tree, but the branch; not an organism, but an organ; the human is a member of a body. The traditional order of the biblical narrative makes it appear that the human was first created as an individual, with family and nation following thereafter. But as it actually arose, the Old Testament begins with the journey of a group, as reported in the book of Exodus. The foundational experience of Israel's history is the experience of a group, not that of an individual. The individual participates in this history only as he or she participates in the whole.

The cycle of stories that begins with the exodus and runs to the conquest of the promised land contains not one single episode that revolves around the destiny of an individual. (The only exception is Moses, the group leader; but even then we are told only that which belongs unavoidably to his office.) Only in one other epoch of Israel's history do stories about individuals fully disappear behind the story of the group: the time of the exile. The prophet of the exile, Second Isaiah, is the only one of the prophets whose words always address only the whole community, never a single individual.

These two epochs—exodus and exile—are the two periods of most intensive waiting and hoping, waiting and hoping for a home or for a return home. In other words, there are in God's history with his people times when the destiny of the individual must give way completely to the destiny of the whole group. But it is not God's will that such periods should endure. The Bible can never be used to



affirm a theory of human society which sees as the desired goal the dissolution of the

individual—of personal relationships and personal destiny—into the communal or the collective.

On the other hand, the history of the people of God does inevitably include those moments when the individual and individual destiny recede in the face of an elemental threat to the whole. During the forty years in the wilderness Israel had to face the ongoing threat of death with no other security than trust in the one who alone could help. This endurance—persevering when the fulfillment of the promise always slipped away into a more distant future—was made possible only by following the way God showed to Israel. During this period, to obey meant to follow. Even when the Israelites murmured, protesting the never relenting trials, the continuation of the journey was what mattered. Notwithstanding the recurrent murmuring, this period is seen favorably in the later tradition, because despite everything the people continued on the way in which God was leading.

*B. The Family*

The family is the basic form of human community in the Old Testament. As we said before, it is impossible to equate the family of that time with the family of today; nevertheless, I think the texts say something here which speaks to us directly. The ancestral history in Genesis, from Abraham to Joseph, depicts the primary relationships of human community—as seen first in the family—from the perspective of a tradition which encompasses several centuries. Additional centuries of experience and reflection stand behind the present portrayal. In no other human religion or holy writings is the family given such great and far-reaching importance in defining communal life and the human relationship to God. A different basic familial relationship is used as the characteristic motif in each of the three cycles of the ancestral history: in the Abraham stories, the relationship of parents to children; in the Jacob-Esau stories, the relationship of sibling to sibling; in the Joseph story, the relationship among the parent, the child, and the other siblings.

An abundance of simple human relationships is presented in these three cycles of the ancestral history—all anchored in the work of God. Placing the ancestral history in front of the history of the nation shows that a person's nature and character come from the family, with all its diverse connections. What is said about people in the ancestral history continues implicitly to hold true for all the people who appear later in the history of the nation. All of them are first son and brother, husband and father, sister or mother. Whatever happens in the larger movements of history—in economics and politics, in social and cultural affairs—has its origins and its roots in the small circle of the family—the source of the first human impressions.

A few examples best illustrate how people are understood in this material. In Abraham, we meet a father who has been placed by God in the middle of a most extreme and overwhelming trial. The conversation between the father and the son, in its moving restraint, lets us sense something of the hardship:

> And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here am I, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together.(Gen 22:7-8)

> The execution of the sons of Saul, demanded by the Gibeonites as an expiation

for Saul's transgression against their city, is a terrifying episode in the David story. The punishment is intensified because with the death penalty comes the refusal to permit the burial of the bodies. But the mother, one of Saul's concubines, acts in opposition to the royal command and performs her maternal duty, protecting the bodies (2 Sam 21:9-10). In this way the mother forces the king finally to permit the burial of the bones of the dead sons.

The elder brother plays a special role in the Joseph story. In the absence of the father, he is responsible for the other brothers. Toward the end of the story, the elder brother motif reaches its climax in Judah's speech before Joseph. He asks to take upon himself the punishment intended for the youngest brother who had been arrested for theft (Gen 44:30-34).

One more thing: in the Old Testament the passing on of tradition has its primary and most important place in the family; it occurs in the parents' answers to the children's questions. One sees this especially in the many Deuteronomy texts which begin, "When your son asks you..." This is the most important way for the faith to be transmitted from one generation to the next; it happens chiefly in simple stories. Israel's unique historical consciousness is also grounded in this transmission of the great acts of God from the parents to the children.

*C. Social Structures*

This brings us to the question of the affiliation of the individual Israelite to the larger society. One needs to realize that for centuries in Israel to belong to the nation meant to belong to the people of God. Church and community were identical.

We just referred to the amazing historical consciousness found everywhere in the Old Testament. For example, the portrayals of the beginnings of the monarchy under Saul and David are of rare historical value. Other such portrayals—also of outstanding significance—have undoubtedly been lost. But all such stories were made possible only because the entire people had such a remarkable historical consciousness, which itself is based in Israel's faith in God. For Israel experienced God's wonders in its history; history is the proper field of divine action.

The great drama of this history arises with the office of king. There a political, social, and religious activity begins which endangers the basic convictions about God's action in history. This is the reason for the cool, clear objectivity in the portrayal of David's monarchy—for the description of David, with all his success and all his splendor, asa simple, fallible human being. It is deeply moving that flaws and blemishes are never removed from the picture of this greatest of Israel's kings, who remained honored even after centuries; here we see quite emphatically the Old Testament's understanding of the human.

This is also the place for the beginning of prophecy. The threat of the monarchy required that through its entire history the prophet was needed to raise objection when the king overstepped the boundaries. In contrast to the kind of nationalism that looks to the people's own achievements, the individual Israelite is told to remember that he or she has been brought into a land filled with good things, cisterns, vineyards, and olive trees, which came not from Israel's hand, but from God's (Deut 6:10-12).

To complete this picture we would have to discuss the social expressions of the people and those who held office within them—the kings, the court and the officials, the legal system and laws, the masters and slaves, the priests and the

prophets. Only then would we be able to see the Old Testament person as part of his or her people in the full panoply and variety of possible relationships. The importance of many of these social structures is poignantly seen in their loss at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem (cf. Lam 5:1-16).

V. THE HUMAN BEFORE GOD

In conclusion, think once more about Psalm 139. In the Old Testament people know they are creatures of God; that means, in all situations and relationships of life they see themselves before God. It goes without saying that this relationship, in all its aspects, would find expression in words. The Psalter, Israel's prayer book, is nothing other than the verbal record of this regular and self-evident relationship. Like the rhythm of breathing, the ups and downs of human existence—the joys and the pains—find words in lament and praise. That people pour out their troubled hearts before God, that they rejoice before God when their hearts are filled with joy—that is as natural for these people as inhaling and exhaling. When we hear or repeat the Psalms today, we can still perceive how directly and how spontaneously they speak to God.

The royal history reports how King Hezekiah once received a letter from the Assyrian commander during the siege of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was in a hopeless situation and was commanded to surrender. "And Hezekiah went up to the house of the Lord, and spread (the letter) before the Lord. And Hezekiah prayed to the Lord..." (Isa 37:14-15). This almost childlike, simple gesture—spreading the threatening letter before God in the temple, and praying to him—is characteristic of human speech in the Old Testament. The people perceived themselves to be quite genuinely in relationship to God, and they spoke to him. Recall once more the prayer of this same King Hezekiah at the time of his illness, when it became clear that God had healed him. The prayer of thanksgiving is simply the joyful sigh of relief of the one who has been rescued. The Psalter is full of both kinds of prayers—lament and praise.

Yet the Old Testament also recognizes a deep break in the relationship between God and human beings. Alongside the creation narrative, the primeval history contains several stories which deal with the break between the world as created and the reality of the present. The Yahwist writes a quite dramatic account of the ever growing deterioration of the humanity God created. The Priestly document confirms the world's corruption without offering an explanation. None of this is uniquely biblical. Other peoples and other religions have similar stories. What is uniquely biblical is the way the Yahwist places the history of blessing, beginning with Abraham, over against the dark background of this serious deterioration of the human race.

The story of the fall into sin is so full of significant insights into human life that no generation can exhaust its meaning. Let me lift up just one thing. This story asserts that no human being can stand before God without trespass and disobedience. But then the trespass and disobedience take on their own weight and push and pull the person where he or she does not want to go. The trespass has its own power which the human cannot master. Therefore, God's reaction to this trespass has two parts. On the one hand, God exposes the trespass and punishes the person. But, in order to expose the sin, God pursues the human; and to ensure that those

whose trespass has been exposed can continue to live, God clothes them. This clothing is a quiet sign of forgiveness—but a forgiveness that works in and with the punishment. The punishment leads to death, but forgiveness gives the human time—time to enjoy life before death occurs.

All of this applies to human existence in general, not only to the people of God. It is pre-theological, something like a biblical philosophy of existence. Therefore it is not appropriate to base fundamental theological doctrines on these stories. The Old Testament never uses Genesis 1-11 to draw out general teachings about the original state, the fall, and death as its punishment. What we have here rather is the furthest extension of a line which begins in the middle, with the story of Israel's rescue. The more naturally we hear these stories, the more they will have to say to us. Their purpose is to provide us a way—by hearing about the primeval history—to understand the essential features of contemporary history better and more profoundly. These stories arose out of a burning interest in the broad directions and the moving forces of human history and were then affixed to the history of God with his people.

In this connection there is a relationship between the book of Job and the primeval history. Job is a non-Israelite; he does not belong to the people of God. Nevertheless, a powerful drama runs its course involving the God of Israel and Job, the non-Israelite. Job's speeches always go beyond his own situation to include the incomprehensible fate of all suffering people in the world. As in the primeval history, the perspective of the writer of the book of Job goes beyond the people of God to include all humanity and its fate—the puzzles and the precipices of suffering and guilt that are common to all humanity. And just as the primeval history asserts that God's work has to do with all humanity and implies that the history of redemption that commences with Abraham means to lead to the blessing in Abraham of all the families of the earth, so also the writer of Job lays out the great human questions, with the hopeful prospect of a transformation that will include not only Israel, but everyone.

On one occasion Job declares how he sees this transformation:

> Oh that thou wouldest hide me in Sheol,
> that thou wouldest conceal me until thy wrath be past...
> Thou wouldest call, and I would answer thee;
> thou wouldest long for the work of thy hands. (Job 14:13,15)

That would be the end of the story that began when God called to Adam, "Where are you?" A powerful dialogue! One that encompasses the whole of human history. Only in the span of this dialogue is it possible to understand what the Bible says about God and about humanity.