

All in All: The Hebrew Conception of the Human Person

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What can I learn about myself in the ancient Scriptures?

“S*hmah Israel Hashem Eloheynu Hashem Ehad,*” “Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4, NKJV). Such is the prayer uttered daily by the Jew his whole life until he dies. It reminds him of the existence of the unique and incomparable God, the only God Whom he is to adore. But in this encounter with the “One,” referred to as the “Him,” the “Other” by Martin Buber, the Jew paradoxically discovers himself to be “one.” This lesson is given in Genesis 2 at the height of creation as God, who has created them man and woman, exclaims: “And they shall become one” (Genesis 2:24). Thus man is defined in the Bible as “created” by God, and

consequently, *ehad*, that is “one” and “unique,” like God.

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Man: Created by God

The first page of the Bible affirms it: the human person was created in the image of God

(Genesis 1:26). For the ancient rabbis, it was a sign of God’s love to create us in His image: “The love of God for humans is manifested in the act that God created them in His image, and especially, that He revealed this to them” (*Avot* 3:15). That is to say, we will be fully ourselves only in relation to God. The biblical text associates the idea of the image of God to the verb “create.” Humans must first assume their condition as created beings before they can find and develop the image of God which they carry within themselves. One must be aware of this fundamental difference between humans and God. Humans were created; therefore, they will never be God. This is an important postulate

which must be the cornerstone of the foundation of biblical religion. A postulate which constantly escapes the human's awareness, leading to temptation and fall (Genesis 3:5, 22-24). From Babel to modern humanism, this "absent-mindedness" has generated the most senseless ambitions and the resulting confusions. Because humans were "created by God," humans come "after" God and are dependent on Him.

This is why biblical religion inscribes deep into the heart of humans, Jew or non-Jew, man or woman, the duty to be faithful and to obey. One can be totally fulfilled only at the price of abandoning one's own law and program. Pride is what will suffocate us, hindering us from becoming truly ourselves. Throughout the Psalms, the *hasid*, even if he is a Levite or King David himself, is depicted as a beggar of God. He needs God for his physical life (Psalm 69:2), he asks Him for his bread and water (Psalm 136:25). But he also needs God for his spiritual life (Psalm 63:1, 2), and invokes His mercy (Psalm 77:10), looking to Him as his last remaining Hope.

Man: One as God

Because he/she was created in God's image, the individual person was created like God as "one." This idea is already alluded to in the passage relating the formation of man: "The Lord formed [*yatsar*] man from the dust of the earth, blew in his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul" (Genesis 2:7). The language of Genesis is here suggestive of the image of the potter: just as the potter shapes (*yatsar*) the clay into a beautiful vase, the Creator

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shaped (*yatsar*) the dust of the earth (*adamah*) into the living human being (*Adam*).

The human person is not the combination of two distinct elements: breath and dust. He/she is rather the result of two actions of God who forms, then breathes. This dynamic definition opposes itself to the pagan Greek conception which sees the human person as the superposition of the soul to the body. However, for

the soul without the body is like the body without the soul; the soul and the body do not exist separately. It has been said that in Hebrew thought man does not "have" a soul but that he "is" a soul.¹ What is called soul, the *nefesh*, is none other than the human person and exists only as a result of these two operations of God. Without the "breathing" of God, dust remains dust, that is, in biblical symbolism, a void, a state of death (Psalm 30:9). Without the "fashioning" of God, the Potter (Jeremiah 18:6), the breath remains breath, that is, in the biblical sense, a vapor without existence (Psalm 39:6, 12; Job 7:7). The human person is a whole, or he/she is not.

The implication of this anthropology is that everything, for the Hebrew, maintains its importance: the body, the spirit, the



(Picture by Antonio Bueno)

"Just as the potter shapes the clay into a beautiful vase, the Creator shaped the dust of the earth into the living human being."—Jacques Doukhan

the Bible, it is neither the dust nor the breath which makes the human person, but the intervention of God. The human person surges forth from two verbs of which God is the subject, and not from two materials. In Hebrew,

moral insight, nothing is indifferent. Each leaves its mark in the molding of the human being. The moral behavior influences the physical (Proverbs 3:3-4). Likewise, the exercise of the intellectual faculties is a source of

physical health and beauty (Proverbs 3:21). On the other hand, sin, falsehood, and calumny ruin the body (Psalm 31:11). We then understand, in this context, the importance accorded to alimentary hygiene and to the health of

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the body (Leviticus 10:8-11; 11; 1 Corinthians 3:16). Health is a sacred duty. It is not surprising then that the rabbis established a parallel between the sacred temple at Sinai and the organs of the human body.² In line with this same tradition, the Apostle Paul compares the human body to the Temple of Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 5:1, 4).³ The religion of the biblical person encompasses all the aspects of the being. It is the "whole" being which is involved in his/her relation with God (Ecclesiastes 12:14).

Man: Unique like God

Because humans were created in the image of God, each human was created "unique," the other meaning of *ehad*. God is unique, and consequently, He created the human person facing Him, like Him, a unique individual. This is, according to the philosopher Bernard Henri Levy, one of the most original ideas of the Bible; it occurs nowhere else.⁴ This is already implied in the biblical formulation of creating man "in our image, in our resemblance" (Genesis 1:26). Each human being possesses in him/her something unique. This is why God can love man as an

individual. This is why He presents Himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

One of the lessons of this definition of man consists in his/her duty to respect others. His/her difference is the mark of God Himself. The Midrash says that man is "in the world the candle of God" (*Tan. B. Gen. 28*). The image of God in the human person is for the Bible the argument *par excellence* against murder: "Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed; for in the image of God He made man" (Genesis 9:6, NKJV).

When one kills a man, it is a whole world that disappears, a unique world that will not reproduce itself. This emphasis on the individuality of the human person is found in the giving of names. Each individual receives a name which he/she will call his/her own and which will express the specificity of his/her person and of his/her destiny. The name is, however, never definitive. If in his course, man changes his direction, from Jacob he can be-

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come Israel, from Abram to Abraham, from Saul to Paul. Man remains free from fixed and arbitrary conceptions. This definition of man not only invites us to be tolerant because the other holds a treasure which I do not have, but also to the responsibility of sharing. At the same time, it exalts the courage to remain oneself before others, not merely to "blend in." But here again, the

"uniqueness" of oneself can be discovered only through God. Paradoxically, it is because modern men and women have rejected God in their emancipative tide that they have come to create idols which brought them to the level of slavery and asphyxiated what was unique in them.

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Man loses more and more of his individuality because he has lost contact with the Absolute which transcends him. And from clothing to food, not forgetting the "flashing smile," our civilization of mass media creates robots which resemble each other more and more.

More than ever man needs to be reminded of who he/she is. The ancient Bible testifies of the origin of man and contains the formula of his/her being as well as the recipe to his/her happiness. This is a call to become "one" in the engagement of all man's forces, physical and mental. This is a call to be "unique" in the renewal of personality. But over all, this is a call to be "recreated" by God and to depend on Him. The ideal proposed implies a return to the great "Other," the divine "One," the Source and Point of reference of the human "one." This ideal is inscribed in the ancient prayer: "*Shmah Israel Hashem Eloheynu Hashem Ehad.*"

¹Claude Tresmontant, *A Study of Hebrew Thought*, trans. Michael F. Gibson (New York: Desclee Company, 1960).

²*Mid. tadshe, Beit ha Midrash*, vol. 3, pp. 175ff.

³Cf. 2 Peter 1:13, 14.

⁴Bernard Henri Levy, *Le Testament de Dieu* (Paris: B. Grasset, 1979), p. 78.