

Corporate Personality in the Bible

Adam and Christ—a biblical use of the concept of personality

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Both sociologists and philosophers are becoming more and more aware that a man's personality is formed by the interplay between himself and his society. If he is transplanted into a different society or different culture at a sufficiently formative period of his life, then that culture will determine the directions which he takes in many fields of thought and activity; if, on the other hand, such a transplantation takes place when he is too rigidly (or firmly) fixed in the ways of a different society, he may be unable to communicate with or relate to the members of his new society, and remain a frustrated member of his old group, from which he is now separated. Examples of both these situations are easy to find among European immigrants to the United States. In more primitive societies where there are less universal conventions and systems of protection, the involvement of the individual within his group, and his dependence on it, are even more obvious. Today the Coca-Cola and Kleenex culture is world-wide; the traveller's cheque and the passport will provide a fair measure of financial and legal protection the world over. Group loyalties and so group particularism, strong as they may be, need to be less extreme than in primitive times. The psychologists will tell us that a sense of belonging is a crucial factor for psychological stability, but in Hebrew times real belonging to a group was a condition of survival. This was one element which generated the way of thinking which was first characterized by H. Wheeler Robinson as that of the 'corporate personality'. This notion, puzzling and difficult of access to us nowadays, is of critical importance in many spheres of theology, not least in the matters of sin and recreation in Christ.

It is difficult to be aware of the extent to which our thinking is conditioned by Greek thought-patterns and particularly by Aristotelian logic, and to realize that there have been other ways of thinking—defective or primitive, perhaps—where distinctions which seem to us obvious were just not made; perhaps they would have been considered unimportant, perhaps meaningless. One such distinction is that of body and soul, a distinction elaborated by the Greek philosophers and adopted, some would say with disastrous consequences to the development of a full Christianity, by the influential Platonist thinkers of Christianity. In semitic thinking this distinction simply does not occur: man is not a composite made up of a soul encased in a body, but is a living being, primarily that by which we

experience others through sight, touch and hearing, just like a corpse except that it has life and all that this involves in the way of motion, emotion, perception and capabilities. The semites do not seem to have asked themselves the questions which led to the evolution of the dichotomy body—soul. So in the matter of the corporate personality, the Hebrews do not seem to have asked themselves what precisely was the relationship between the individual and the group to which he belongs and on which he depends for his life and well-being; they seem to have been content to dwell in the group without questioning the relationship between it and their—as we would say—separate personalities.

For a nomad, membership of a clan is a condition of life: without the clan he cannot survive. His well-being or the reverse are inescapably bound up with that of the clan. To a great extent his personal history is that of the clan. (A good reconstruction of the mental consequences of this is provided by William Golding's *The Inheritors*, while the continuance of the state of interdependence of the members of society long after the nomadic state is vividly shown by John Wyndham's *Day of the Triffids*.) Hence it is assumed to be natural that the sin of one man, Achan, in illegally appropriating the spoil of Jericho should bring defeat on the whole people, and that his whole family should be executed with him to expiate the crime (Jos. 7, 1–26); both one and the other are considered to be involved in the crime. It is not till centuries later, when the corporate sense of the nation was beginning to be eroded by the collapse of stability and the whole material framework involved by the exile, that the prophets Ezekiel (18, 1–32) and Jeremiah (31, 29–30) both began simultaneously to teach the doctrine of limited and personal responsibility, rejecting the old proverb 'The fathers have eaten unripe grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'; this was an important step in the recognition of independent personal value of each man, but it still did not mean the abandonment of the way of thought behind a corporate personality.

The group thinking which manifests itself in group responsibility is not, however, peculiar to the semitic mind. The specific trait which differentiates this is that the past history or future destiny of the whole tribe and every member of it may be described as that of one member. Thus in the story of the rivalries between Jacob (whose other name is Israel) and Esau (whose other name is Edom) the real content of the story is not the struggle between the two ancestors but that between the two nations Israel and Edom during the reign of David. When the present relationship of the two peoples is assumed always to have existed, the logical link is not merely aetiological, as though the cause of present strife were to be found in past strife, but is rooted in the presupposition that the history of the present members of the people is the same as that of the founder. So also when the dying Jacob blesses his sons, the blessings are intended not merely

for the sons but, in them, for their descendants, for the historical situation envisaged is that of Canaan centuries later, when the tribes have already been settled for some time. But just as the descendants are contained in the ancestor, so also the ancestor is present in his descendants: Amos can address the people as the family that God brought out of Egypt (3, 1) and Hosea can teach that the punishment threatened to his own generation is punishment on Jacob for supplanting his brother (12, 3–4). The vividness of his conviction that all Israel fundamentally constitutes one person, and has always done so, is perhaps best expressed in the profession of faith which the individual Israelite makes when he offers the first-fruits of his produce: ‘Today I declare to Yahweh my God that *I* have come to the land Yahweh swore to our fathers he would give us. . . . My father was a wandering Aramaean. *He* went down to the land of Egypt, few in numbers, to find refuge there: but there he became a nation, great, mighty and strong’ (Deut. 26, 3, 5).

It is by appeal to this notion of corporate personality that one of the most vexed questions of Old Testament exegesis must be solved: the identity of the Suffering Servant of the Lord in the second part of the Book of Isaiah, the figure in terms of whom Jesus seems to have understood his person and mission. For decades exegetes disputed whether this figure was to be identified as an individual within Israel or as the nation as a whole. The number of cogent arguments advanced on either side and the inability of both sides to answer their opponents’ arguments is in itself an indication that questions were being asked of the text which cut across the logic of the author; there could be no satisfactory answer because the question was wrongly posed. The Servant of the Lord is sometimes clearly Israel the nation, for he fulfils the mission of Israel to the nations (Is. 42, 1). The frequency with which Israel is called the Servant of Yahweh in the prophecies surrounding the four passages which exegetes have (somewhat artificially?) isolated as the Songs of the Suffering Servant shows that at least the compiler felt no incompatibility in this interpretation (Is. 44, 1, 21; 49, 3). And yet at other times it is equally clear that the Servant is not wholly identified with Israel, but is a sort of Israel within Israel, having the mission to Israel which Israel has to other nations (Is. 49, 5–6).

And now Yahweh has spoken,
 he who formed me in the womb to be his servant,
 to bring Jacob back to him,
 to gather Israel to him:

‘It is not enough for you to be my servant
 to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back the survivors of Israel;
 I will make you the light of the nations,
 so that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth’.

Another important clue to the resolution of what may seem to us an illegitimate confusion is that the Hebrews were not so interested

in *who* a person was (in the sense of the personal information entered in his passport) as in *what* he was, the part he had to play. Thus Elisha is constantly represented as an Elijah, because his role as a prophet to Israel was the same: this is why he works the same miracles as did Elijah, miraculously providing oil in a time of scarcity and raising a widow's son to life (1 Kings 17, 7–24; 2 Kings 4, 1–7; 18–37). Without any such muddle as transmigration of souls the officials from Jerusalem can ask John the Baptist whether he is Elijah, and Jesus' significance can be shown by representing him as Moses (in the Matthaean infancy narratives, or when he provides bread in the wilderness) because this is his meaning as liberator and leader of the new Israel. He is Moses and Elijah as well as being Jesus son of Mary. Just so the Suffering Servant is Israel, that is, he who is instrumental in the fulfilment of God's plan; *neither* the individual *nor* the collectivity is meant, to the exclusion of the other, but both are bound up together.

In the New Testament it is only by this collectivity thinking that sense can be made out of Paul's assertions about the Christian belonging to Christ. Diverse origins have been suggested for the figure of the body of Christ. Paul's use in 1 Corinthians 12 of the classic figure of the need of all the parts of the body to co-operate together for the effective well-being of the whole—a commonplace of hellenistic literature—has even induced the idea that this figure was at the origin of Paul's thinking on this subject. But for one thing 'body' to Paul or any semite does not signify a collection of limbs and organs, but a whole living person, so that 'my body' can be used for 'me', and 'offer your bodies to the Lord' is interchangeable with 'offer yourselves to the Lord'. So the Greek way of thinking which is so common will simply not do: we commonly think that what is meant is that Christ is the soul of the mystical body, somehow the centre, a little man in a machine, while we are the limbs at the periphery, joined to Christ by a more or less tenuous link. When Paul says 'your bodies are limbs of Christ' (1 Cor. 6, 15) he does not mean that our bodies are somehow extensions of Christ, like a pair of sugar-tongs, but that we physically are Christ to the fullest extent of physical reality. And this to Paul is the horror of a Christian fornicating: Christ too is copulated with the whore (1 Cor. 6, 6–18).

Our logic revolts at this: how can I, an individual, be Christ, another individual? Or is the Christ which I am an abstraction, not the individual who walked this earth? (This is, of course, a convenient way of looking at it, since it tones down the awful responsibility imposed by the full truth of Paul's teaching.) It seems to me that the only way of overcoming this impasse is the way of the corporate personality: just as the whole and each member of Israel was contained in the patriarch Jacob/Israel, and he lived on in each member of the clan and in the whole, so each member of the Church and the whole is Christ, and Christ is each member and the whole.

The individual is engulfed in the corporate personality, or rather, since he retains his individuality and finds his own personality therein, the individual achieves his true existence in the corporate personality.

That Paul is thinking along these lines is clear from his more explicit statements on our existence in Christ. We have taken on his history as our own, and his experience as ours—two crucial factors which go to the formation of a personality. He coins a series of barbarous words to express this, for which there were no means of expression in the Greek language. It was not enough to say that we had died with Christ and risen with him, for this could suggest two individuals side by side and hand in hand. When we were baptized *into* Christ (Rom. 6, 3) we were, so to speak, fused with him so that we share his form (Rom. 8, 29). And, sharing his form, *we* died in his death, in his burial *we* were being buried, in his resurrection it was *we* who were raised and given life. This is what Paul is labouring to express by the series of words which he coins with the Greek prefix *syn-*. Perhaps the best quasi-translation would be: concrucified, conburied, conraised and conglorified with Christ. J. A. T. Robinson has written (*The Body*, p. 63) that in this doctrine 'the new tissues take on the rhythms and metabolism of the body into which they have been grafted'. But the reason for their doing this is surely that Christ's history and experiences are made their own. This holds for the future too: our destiny and striving is Christ's too: just as we are waiting to be transformed as we 'wait to be set free' (Rom. 8, 23), so Christ has yet to hand over the kingdom to the Father (1 Cor. 15, 24). But on the other hand in one sense our victory with Christ is already won, for he already sits at God's right hand (Eph. 1, 20–23) and the life we live is already hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3, 3). In the new covenant, then, what is true of Christ is true of us, just as in the old covenant what was true of Israel the patriach was true of each member of the corporate personality of Israel. When we are incorporated into Christ we take on the rhythm, history and so personality of Christ, just as those who were incorporated into the chosen people took on those of Israel.

But Paul never compares Christ explicitly to Israel; it is Adam who is his counterpart. Adam was the corporate personality *par excellence*, for his name of course means 'Man' and in origin he is merely a personification of mankind; the story of Adam and Eve was never intended originally as a historical story of two individuals, but is rather a reflective analysis in pictorial form of man's state with relation to God and as regards the state of harmony for which he was intended, his own failure to co-operate with God's intentions in this and the hope which God lavishes in spite of man. By the time of Paul, Adam had come to be regarded as an historical figure, the first man, but essentially also as a representative figure, containing in himself the whole of creation. This was expressed in various ways: his body

stretched from earth to heaven, or was formed from earth taken from every land; the letters of his name stood for East (Anatole), West (Dusis), North (Arctos) and South (Mesembria). It was because of this real yet representative character of Adam that the delicate balance could be maintained between the responsibility of each man and the part of Adam in the theory about the origin of sin which Paul adopted and passed on to us. There were in fact three theories about the origin of sin then current in Judaism. Some held that the archetypal sin was that of the sons of God in Genesis 6, who 'looking at the daughters of men, saw they were pleasing, so they married as many as they chose', at which 'Yahweh saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that the thoughts in his heart fashioned nothing but wickedness all day long'. Others maintained that there was an evil tendency or instinct in man, implanted in man from his earliest youth but dormant until the age of puberty (it is conceived largely in sexual terms, and in some ways is like the *libido* of Jung). The third is that chosen by Paul in the famous passage of Romans 5, chosen perhaps very largely because it leaves such scope for the contrast with Christ's saving work, which is the primary object of Paul's attention in this passage. The oversimplifications, drawn originally from Ambrosiaster's interpretation of an ambiguous text of the Vulgate, which for so long hovered on the periphery of Catholic teaching (to say no worse), have no warrant in Jewish thought. Responsibility for sin rested on Adam, to be sure, but this in no way lessened each man's own responsibility; he was not held guilty of sins he had never committed. The inextricable complexity of the situation which results if Adam is taken as a historical as well as a representative figure is perhaps best expressed by the Second Book of Baruch, a first-century work: 'Though Adam sinned and brought untimely death on all, yet those who were born after him, each of them has prepared for his own soul torment to come. Adam is, therefore, the cause only of his own soul, but each of us has been the Adam of his own soul' (54, 15–19). The first sentence of this quotation tries to have its cake and eat it, for Adam is in some sense to blame, yet not in such a way as to exclude the responsibility of each of us for his own sin. In the second sentence the first phrase denies that Adam is to blame for us all, and the second phrase returns to the treatment of Adam as a representative personality, a personification of Man as a whole. This fluctuating approach to Adam makes any sense only to people who are familiar with the notion of a corporate personality, for according to this notion a real historical figure can be *also* representative, and embrace in himself a whole group: Adam is a real individual, yet represents his people (in this case all men), and his history is somehow theirs too. It is because we lack this concept that we can find no type of causality which will adequately cover the relationship between Adam and each man: he is not cause merely by providing an

example, nor on the other hand by contracting a moral disease with which he has infected all future men. Is the Hebrew doctrine saying any more than that in so far as we are contained in Adam or children of Adam (i.e. men) we are prone to sin, and by sinning we show that we are human, i.e. contained in Adam or children of Adam? This, surely, is the attitude expressed by that vexed sentence in Romans 5, 12: 'Sin entered the world through one Man, and through Sin Death, and thus Death passed to all men because all men sinned'. Thanks to the idea of a corporate personality Paul can say that in Adam's disobedience all were constituted by nature sinners (the word used in Romans 5, 19 is used also for constituting, setting up or establishing a judge or other official), but individuality still remains, in that this state or potentiality still has to be exercised or brought into play.

So too with Christ: by his act of obedience he is made the leader of the saved. In so far as men follow him in obedience, the obedience of faith, they are incorporated in his corporate personality, or in his Body, just as by their very existence as men they became incorporated into Adam. The only difference is that incorporation into Adam was a *datum* of our nature over which we had no control, whereas incorporation into Christ is a matter of free choice.

The concept of corporate personality is, then, deep-rooted in Hebrew thought and of crucial importance in Christian teaching. It is one which is in a way attractive, in a way at variance with the categories of modern thinking. In these pages an attempt has been made to illustrate the idea from some of its more important occurrences in Old and New Testaments, and to throw light on these passages by use of the idea.