

‘Personhood’ in the Old Testament? Who’s asking? *Deryck Sheriffs*

Deryck Sheriffs is MA Course Leader and Lecturer in Old Testament, London School of Theology

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Introduction: what are we looking for?

Someone walks into the bar off the street and shows the bartender a picture with the question, “Do you know this person?” The classic reply by the streetwise bartender is – “Who’s asking?” We know that there’s a range of replies the bartender might offer – depending on whether the inquiry is by someone trying to locate a friend, a police officer tracking a suspect, a mobster wanting to collect a debt, or a parent looking for a missing teenager. Why would we walk into the Old Testament to ask about ‘personhood’, and what would we be expecting to hear? How forthcoming on the topic will the Old Testament prove to be?

When we do walk into the Old Testament we are all carrying a photograph of what we are looking for. It might be black and white, or out of focus, or snapped from a distance, and we might not be flourishing it in our hand. But we have the photo alright, even if it is in our back pocket. This is because we live the experience of personhood ourselves, and therefore have an inside track on what we think it is to be a person, and, secondly, because we frame the question of personhood contextually. We have a reason to ask. Just as a suspect at the scene of a crime is framed circumstantially – they each have a reason for being there – so our inquiry should be framed by its specifics. So what are the circumstances and reasons for which we visit the Old Testament, given that the present context of writing is London in the first decade of the third millennium?

Are we turning to the Old Testament on ‘personhood’ in the context of an ethical debate about abortion, or about embryological research? In a discussion of dementia care, or of switching off a life support machine? In a study of the history of slavery and the use of the Old Testament in its justification? In a review of creationism versus mainstream palaeoanthropology and the human status or otherwise of our extinct fossil ancestors? In a debate about the culture-bound and patriarchal ethos of Israel in the light of contemporary gender issues? In the circumstances of racial riots or discrimination in a multicultural society, of which South Africa under Apartheid was but one recent example? In a discussion of consciousness and altered states of consciousness including trance, dream, vision and Ezekiel’s ‘out-of-the-body’ tour of the Jerusalem temple? Each of these discussions frames personhood differently and prints a picture in a par-

ticular style. This essay cannot turn into a gallery spacious enough for hanging all these prints.

Again, we need to ask: Is the photo of 'personhood' that we are carrying in our pocket developed from colour film produced in the laboratory of cognitive psychology, psychodynamic theory, transactional analysis, person-centred counselling, attachment theory, existential psychotherapy or a systemic model in psychiatry? All these considerations indicate that the 'Who's asking?' question is relevant, and also why we will tend to find what we are looking for if we walk into the Old Testament. Or why we might miss things if we did not bring a question or two with us.

If inquirers in the bar frequented that place they would not need to ask the bartender for information. Patrons would know whether the King's Head was a favourite haunt of the person they were after, or whether the Lamb and Flag would be a better place to look. We do not live in the Old Testament world, and there are two or three reasons why the Old Testament may not be the most obvious place to look for information on personhood. Besides the fact that 'personhood' is not recognisably anybody's word in particular in terms of academic disciplines, 'personhood' is also one of those abstract conceptualisations that readily lifts off into the ether of abstrusity like a hotair balloon – whereas the Old Testament, if it has anything going for it, is fundamentally down-to-earth and simply refuses to systematise and offer us a treatise on any topic, preferring to tell stories and compose poetry instead. Secondly, the New Testament is a more obvious place to look since Jesus himself is at the heart of our Christian faith and is God's most startling and personal statement of what being human might involve and imply. Jesus might update anything the Old Testament had to say on personhood in novel ways.

Thirdly, Yahwistic faith was engaged in a struggle with polytheism inside Israel perhaps even more fiercely than beyond it. Its dispute was with the alternative and competing ideologies of its times – for instance, royal ideologies that offered theological legitimation for a king's claims to unique personhood, even divine status, to his privileged role in cultic rituals and festivals that supposedly kept the cosmos running, to conquest of foreign territories, and to a large harem of women for political and sexual advantage. Do strands of Yahwistic theology categorise personhood by rank, hierarchy, gender and other forms of status because it is immersed in the ethos of a patriarchal world? Yahwistic theology is very evidently not in direct dispute with the alternative and competing conceptualisations of personhood in our times, but if we find that it does confront them, that will be because we transpose Yahwistic perspectives on personhood into our world, into our cultural milieu. This involves active discernment and appropriation of the Old Testament on our part, triggered by our reading of our own culture and its values. We need to be explicit about our hermeneutics if we are to travel to and fro between these worlds.

Briefed about the need to be streetwise when walking into the Old Testament with our questions about personhood, we shall select from its vast expanse of pages a few that seem to focus the discussion in a useful manner. Page one turns

out to be one place that we could start.

1. Beginning with an image?

Walking into the Old Testament at page one is like walking into a field; some would say a minefield. Everyone has their way of traversing it, and theologians of the church passing this way over the centuries have dug up verse 26 and walked away with it in their rucksacks, a bit like Naaman taking soil from Israel back to Syria. In the process, like backpackers, these visitors have attached a sticker to their rucksack to show that they have been there. The sticker reads *imago Dei*. Oddly enough the sticker is in Latin which is not what we might have naively expected since it is neither Hebrew nor English. What actual connection *imago Dei* has with Genesis 1:26 is another matter – after all the theologian's rucksack accompanies a journey and that journey might be in a variety of directions, none of which might be in the direction that the author of Genesis 1 was headed at the time. The soil dug up from Genesis 1 may simply serve a purpose. Perhaps it is for potting plants that the theologian is growing on his windowsill. We are looking for soil in which to pot 'personhood'.

We need to distinguish between exegesis that makes a serious attempt to understand a passage in its original context, and application which attempts to transpose it into our context. Author's intended meaning – or something that approximates as closely towards it as possible – is what the first attempt involves. The significance is the step beyond the back then into the now, the result applied to us, the time-shifted gist of the message transplanted into new and contemporary circumstances.

Genesis 1:26 turns out to say something pretty important, but the question is, 'About what?' and 'Is it "personhood"?' We can say with assurance that Genesis 1:26f. is important because the author has highlighted it for us. He broke his formulaic pattern, 'And God said, "Let there be..."' with a new lead in: 'And God said, "Let us make..."' He also placed the creation of human beings on the last day of creation, day 6, and after the creation of animals, so it stands out in the linear pattern of the telling as a finale to God's creative activities. God has a lot more to say about this act than He has to say in the rest of the narrative, and this is another way that the author signals to us the importance of this material in his intention. God talks to the human beings, and we can listen in. So far, so good; but what is being in 'the image and likeness of God' all about? Here is where we come up against Hebrew styles of writing. Genesis 1 is a telling, not a treatise. The author has not stopped to define his terms for us. We can not even be sure whether 'image and likeness' are saying the same thing twice for emphasis and effect, rather like the device of parallelism in Hebrew poetry, or whether each word carries its own subtle nuance.

Theologians have often sampled from or read into 'the image and likeness' of Genesis 1:26 and 27 what most appeals to them or most impresses them about being human. Here is an example below:

God created mankind male and female in his own likeness by endowing

them with distinctive human faculties – rational, moral, social, creative and spiritual. He also told them to have children, to fill the earth and subdue it (Gn.1:26–28). These divine commands are the origin of human culture. For basic to culture are our control of nature (that is, of our environment) and our development of forms of social organisation.¹

From one point of view, this is harmless; the five faculties listed in connection with ‘likeness’ to God are significant aspects of being human, and we could argue from elsewhere in the Bible, if we wished to, that they are godlike faculties too, and therefore implicated in ‘likeness’. On the other hand, the list – which, no doubt, is intended as a significant sample rather than an exhaustive categorisation – omits the human distinctive of language, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, fails to mention, or is blind to, emotion as an enormously significant feature of human life, and presumably of God’s life too, if ‘God is love’, as 1 Jn. 4:8 tells us.

One suspects that rationality is preferred over emotion because it is traditional and male, as theology tends to be, and because this was drafted in Europe with its history of the Enlightenment and its philosophy.² ‘Intelligence’ might have been a better choice than ‘rationality’, given the method operating. Hampered by the lack of explicitness in the text of Genesis 1, the Report has done its own homework on making explicit what it believes to be implicit in order to use Genesis 1:26 in a foundational manner for what it wants to say in the rest of the document. The Willowbank statement is also a child of its times, as we can now see with the benefit of hindsight, since it omitted the current buzz word ‘relationality’ – ‘social’ is the nearest idea to that – and it is unblushing in affirming ‘our control of nature’, which is now something that it is ecotheologically incorrect to say.³

This is somewhat sobering when but a generation of twenty-five years elaps-

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- 1 Taken from *The Willowbank Report*, Lausanne Occasional Papers 2, 1978 reproduced in J. Stott and R. Coote (eds), *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1981, 311. For an article that offers an in-depth survey of approaches to Gen 1:26, see D. J. A. Clines, ‘Humanity as the Image of God’, *On The Way to the Postmodern, Old Testament Essays, 1967–1998*, Volume 2, JSOTS 293, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998. The original article was published as ‘The Image of God in Man’, *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968), 53–103.
 - 2 For a redressing of the balance, and a contemporary restatement of the holistic functioning of brain-body-mind-emotion by a neurologist and by a neuropharmacologist, see Antonio Damasio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*, Basingstoke: Papermac, 1996 and Susan Greenfield, *The Private Life of the Brain*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000.
 - 3 Whether it is sensible to use phrases like ‘our control of nature’ is itself dubious, though we can affect the environment. At the time of *The Willowbank Report*, twenty-five years ago, Lyn White’s paper ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis’ (*Science* 155 [1967], 1203–1207) had not received the fanfare of citation that it has enjoyed subsequently. White blamed Gen 1, probably unfairly, for offering legitimation to a ‘dominance’ position for humans over nature, a dominance mentality that he believes has resulted in the exploitation and degradation of the environment today.

es, and we can detect, in retrospect, a hermeneutics in operation that may cause us misgivings. What we have in the Willowbank phrasing is not exegesis but well intentioned explication – ‘by endowing them with distinctive human faculties’. The actual method of procedure seems to have been extrapolation from ‘distinctive human faculties’. ‘Distinctive human faculties’ was brought to the reading of the Genesis chapter as the photo in the back pocket. And once we start from ‘distinctive human’ we could make up interesting lists of human distinctives that might include the following: opposable thumbs (God also needed these, one might argue, for his work on Adam in chapter 2) combined with brain capacity (including volume, number of neurons, organisation of circuitry); autobiographical memory, a self-aware form of consciousness, imagination, and the capacity for long-term goal setting, strategising and evaluation; enjoyment of sex unrelated to the oestrus cycle; blushing; painting and art therapy; oral, written or sung poetry, and so on. These items are undoubtedly endowments that arise from or facilitate our being human and hence contribute to the expression of our ‘personhood’. They just don’t happen to be the ones that Willowbank listed, and they may not rate highly in theological discussion.

The chances are that our page 1 author was expressing his own explication of the ‘image and likeness’ through the job description that he so closely associates with the creation of human beings. He has certainly highlighted functionality. Verse 26b flows from ‘image and likeness’ straight into the exercise of dominion on earth. This assignment of dominion is repeated in verse 28 straight after the reiteration of ‘image’ in verse 27. Repetition is a feature of Hebrew style, a way of underlining a point. So the repetition of ‘image’ and its associated dynamic function in verses 26 and 27 does two things. It highlights the concept of ‘image’, and it couples image and dominion together. We might say that the role expresses the image. The role is being God’s visible representative on earth.⁴

If our page 1 author did not stop to define ‘the image and likeness’ but pointed us to how it works out in behaviour in role, then we are left to infer what light Genesis 1 might throw on personhood today. Our Genesis 1 author believes that human beings can understand when God talks to them; that they can respond to the affirmation of the blessing and the responsibility of being given a job. He believes that man and woman relate to one another and to God (in ways he has not spelled out) – but in Genesis 1, he deliberately gives the man and woman no

4 Ancient Near Eastern kings set up their images, that is, statues or relief carvings of themselves in places far from their capital city as a visible reminder to all that they ruled in the outlying areas. Akkadian *šalmu* and Aramaic *šlm*, that are cognate with the Hebrew *šelem*, are used to refer to these carved images. Hadad-Yis’i, the 9th century governor of Guzan on the Khabur river, north Syria, erected a statue of himself in perpetual prayer before the gods in the temple of Adad. He referred to his statue using the Aramaic words for ‘image’ (*šlm*) and ‘likeness’ (*dmt*) synonymously. Human beings, on analogy with this statue, are the three-dimensional, physical and visible representatives on earth of God. God rules the world, but human beings are delegated to be living symbols of that rule at a remove from the Celestial Court.

speaking role. The speaking role in this chapter is appropriately reserved for God. Clearly our Genesis1 author is not writing a treatise on personhood or relationality, either within the Godhead, or in the Celestial Court (the likely background to the plural form 'Let us...'), or between man and woman. Hence, whatever the phrase *imago Dei* might mean at various points in the history of theological debate, *imago Dei* is likely to relate to Genesis1:26 only tangentially. The *imago Dei* of the theologians will be culturally conditioned, a product of its era, while tending to give the impression that Genesis authenticates whatever content it is that the theology is propounding. Hermeneutics requires self-awareness about agenda, frame of assumptions and starting point.

2. The origins of personhood: two stories

If we extend our search for the beginnings of personhood according to Genesis beyond page 1 and into the Eden story, then we will once again need to be alert to what the Hebrew narrative is portraying and what we might draw from it by way of inference. The question of genre is hugely important. There is no space to debate that here, so we will simply explain our frame of reference and assumptions. The Eden story is a profound piece of theological writing that uses the story-telling genre. The story was generated in the mind of a literary craftsman reflecting on the experience of Israel in the light of its covenant relationship with God and extrapolating backward from there to human beginnings for his story's setting.⁵ It is story, not chronicle. In the story there are the true-to-life dimensions and the symbolic dimensions. Dust becomes body, a rib becomes a woman, a fruit conveys knowledge, a snake talks, God walks, relationships go wrong, consequences follow. The world of the story is both recognisably our world and also distinctively different and its own world.

If we make the genre decision to read the Eden narrative as story, then we should note that it throws no direct light on the historical origins of personhood. It throws no direct light on personhood in *Homo sapiens* in relation to *Homo neanderthalensis* in relation to *Homo heidelbergensis* in relation to *Homo antecessor* in relation to *Homo erectus* in relation to *Homo habilis*, and in relation to all the other upright-walking, tool-using hominids that preceded them back to four million years ago. Within the discourse of mainstream palaeoanthropology, 'personhood' does not come into the discussions, though cognitive development does. However, many of the attributes or capacities or endowments that Willowbank or we too might want to infer from Genesis on 'personhood', or infer

5 This approach to the composition and comprehension of the Eden story is in debt to L Alonso-Schökel 'Sapiential and Covenant Themes in Genesis 2-3', in J. L. Crenshaw (ed), *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*, New York: Ktav, 1976, pp. 468-480. Commentators such as Wenham have offered it a guarded recognition (G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, WBC 1, Waco: Texas, 1987, 54f.). This theological understanding of the text as story can be followed if one takes a more literalist approach.

from our experience of it ourselves, may, in fact, have antecedents that reach back hundreds of thousands of years prior to our own species, *Homo sapiens*.

Thus, to name three aspects epitomised in *Homo sapiens* that likely have more ancient antecedents, consider the following: (a) intelligence in advanced practical problem-solving; (b) culture in its technological expression, eg. stone tool manufacture passed on to youngsters; (c) living in bonded social groups with a likely division of labour by gender between hunting and edible plant gathering. These activities all imply forms of relationality, and forms of consciousness, and of cognitive processing – though not requiring language or our explicitly self-aware form of consciousness. Our present and evident intelligence, cultural diversity and social bonding that form the context for the expression of our 'personhood' have very deep roots.

Symbolic behaviours, that we might be disposed to regard as characteristically human, include burials and decoration with red ochre. These behaviours reach back thousands and thousands of years. The use of red ochre by early anatomically modern humans is documented at 77,000 years ago in Blombos Cave on the coast of the Western Cape, South Africa, where a piece of ochre is itself decorated with a cross-hatched abstract pattern.⁶ Some burials are acknowledged among Neanderthal and early modern groups in caves in Israel, between 90,000 and 40,000 years ago.⁷ Use of fire in hearths goes back much further, and is documented at a camp site at Bilzingsleben, Germany, dated at around 400,000 years ago associated with artefacts in bone, antler and wood, as well as stone. Wooden throwing spears of the same date were recovered at Schöningen.⁸

Clearly, then, there are at least two stories to tell about the origins of 'personhood': the one is theological and has its roots in the Old Testament; the other is palaeoanthropological and is based on the interpretation of fossil remains in their chronological sequence and ecological contexts. Moreover, the idea of personhood as an emergent quality with deep antecedent roots is supported by the following facts. Tool-making and tool use, cultural transmission of know-how, male hierarchy, social bonding and mutual grooming, forming alliances, the use of intelligence in problem-solving, acting with the intention to deceive, the manipulation of learned symbols for communication, and self-awareness in the form of mirror recognition have all been observed in chimpanzees – who are less like us than the extinct members of the genus *Homo* and some of the

6 Reported with photo in *The Times* of Jan 11, 2002 quoting Prof Chris Henshilwood of the South African Museum, Cape Town. See <http://galleries.news24.co.za/news/blombos/index.htm>; <http://galleries.news24.co.za/news/blombos/index.htm> for colour photographs of the site and the artefacts, including the decorated ochre.

7 See John J. Shea, 'The Middle Paleolithic: Early Modern Humans and Neanderthals in the Levant', *Near Eastern Archaeology* 64 (2001), 38–64.

8 See Rick Gore, 'The Dawn of Humans: The First Europeans', *National Geographic*, July 1997, 96–112.

extinct bi-pedal hominids as well.⁹ How much more, then, may these antecedents of our personhood, observable in today's chimpanzees and bonobos, have characterised the more immediate predecessors to *Homo sapiens* such as *Homo heidelbergensis* at 500,000 years ago and *Homo erectus* at 1.6 million years ago.¹⁰

This points to 'personhood' as an emergent phenomenon that culminates in responding and talking to God – which is where the Old Testament takes up the story. In the end, we don't want two separate and irreconcilable stories of human personhood as it emerged on planet Earth, but we do want to respect our sources and what each contributes to understanding our personhood.

Returning to Genesis and its light on personhood, what we can affirm with assurance for the Eden story is that being human in the biblical sense involves a relationship with God. That includes the capacity to receive and understand his commandments, and alongside that the liability of suffering the effects of disobeying God's commands with inter-human effects. If personhood, in present human experience, includes responsibility, accountability, and choice, the Eden story links those human qualities to a relationship with God in an essential manner. Hence, personhood and the capacity to sin are tightly correlated by Genesis. Of course, the Eden story does not address or resolve questions about when sin first entered God's creation, or at what date sin entered *Homo sapiens*' experience.¹¹ Chimpanzees form territorial gangs that patrol boundaries and kill

9 Chimpanzees share 98% of our DNA; but we will be genetically closer to the extinct hominids than that because the last common ancestor shared by chimpanzees and ourselves is believed to have lived as far back as around 8 million years ago. See K. S. Savage-Rumbaugh and R. Lewin, *Kanzi: The Ape at the Brink of the Human Mind*, Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1994, for an account of the impressive level of communication by use of symbols that can be evoked in a chimpanzee with longterm human contact and planned stimulus.

10 The find, KNM-WT 15000, from Nariokotome, Kenya, sometimes referred to as the Turkana Boy skeleton, and given the species label *Homo ergaster*, is discussed in an interesting manner for the general reader in A. C. Walker and P. Shipman, *The Wisdom of The Bones*, London: Phoenix, 1997. Brain capacity is 880cc for an eleven year old with an estimated 909cc at full growth of 1.8m and 68kg (6'1" and 150lbs). This is three times the brain volume of a chimpanzee, but a third below the range for our species, and it is significantly lacking in the prefrontal cortex where we do our higher cognitive processing. The diameter of the spinal cord suggests less enervation of the chest and diaphragm than is needed to control human speech. Despite less brain power and likely absence of speech in *Homo erectus*, recent evidence from Tanzania in the form of microanalysis of residues on Acheulean stone tools indicates that *erectus* was working hard wood 1.5 million years ago. Evidence for this species' use of fire is still debated.

11 For recent papers that have appeared in *Science and Christian Belief* that attempt a synthesis of biblical and mainstream scientific frameworks on what it is to be human, see for instance, Alan J. Day, 'Adam, Anthropology and the Genesis Record – Taking Genesis Seriously in the Light of Contemporary Science', *SCB* 10.2 (1998), 115–143; R. J. Berry, 'This Cursed Earth: Is 'the Fall' Credible?' *SCB* 11.1 (1999), 29–49; David Booth, 'Human Nature: Unitary or Fragmented? Biblical Language and Scientific Understanding', *SCB* 10 (1998), 146–162; Joel B. Green, 'Scripture and the Human

fellow-chimpanzees from adjacent territories if they can catch them isolated. Chimpanzees kill; humans murder. By biblical definition, murder is an expression of human personhood and not of animality. We apply ethics to humans and not to animals.

There is mounting evidence for cannibalism way back in the palaeoanthropological record from patterns of cut-marks on bones made by stone tools in defleshing processes that mimic the defleshing of animal carcasses. Whether this defleshing was preceded by killing is unclear. The ethical status of such acts would depend on the level of moral awareness at the time, for sin in the biblical sense comes after the reception of divine commandments and prohibitions – hence the prohibition of murder in Genesis 9:6 which enunciates its moral principle on the basis of humans being created in or as the image of God. True, the story of Cain and Abel, with the condemnation of Cain for bloodguilt, implies an intuition of the wrongness of fratricide – without a record of this being explicitly prohibited by God. However, the normal way that the Old Testament presents sin is against the background of God's direct address, as in Genesis 9:6.

More specifically still, Yahwistic faith speaks of sin against the background of covenant relationship freely entered. Thus Exodus 20:13, one of the ten key covenant stipulations, prohibits murder while the Exodus storyline records the threefold voluntary declaration by the Israelite community 'Everything that the LORD has commanded we will do' (Ex. 19:8) The first assent comes prior to the Sinai theophany; the second and third assents are within the covenant-making itself – compare 24:3 and 24:7, before and after the blood ritual of covenant and the reading aloud of the covenant document. So in the perspective of the Old Testament, personhood, like community, comes to its spiritual focus in the covenant relationship.

In the story world of Eden, the snake is known for its intelligence. It acts like a person, talks like a person, reasons like a person, and so has personhood. The snake character might, in the author's intention, point away from human beings as the origin of sin. Or it might not. There is other data in the New Testament that certainly does. The Eden story does not address or resolve the question of when a human child first sins. Nor will asking a child's parents resolve it either, though the parents may have a hunch about when their child begins to understand that their commands may embody a right or wrong, rather than entail a simple inter-generational conflict of wills. This is simply to point out that once we move away from responsible, accountable, choosing human beings in the Eden portrayal and want to talk about the history of our species on the planet, or about the development of a child, or about a person who is in the throes of dementia and has lost the ability to recognise others or self, then discussions of personhood from the biblical perspective of Genesis falter. We will end up haggling over potential

Person: Further Reflections', *SCB* 11.1 (1999), 51–63; Malcolm Jeeves, 'Changing Portraits of Human Nature', *SCB* 14.1 (2002), 3–32; Joel B. Green, 'Eschatology and the Nature of Humans: A Reconsideration of Pertinent Biblical Evidence', *SCB* 14.1 (2002), 33–50.

personhood or the empty shell of personhood. And those are not topics that the opening pages of Genesis address – nor, indeed, does the whole of the Old Testament. We need to recognise what we can derive from the Old Testament and what we can only infer and haggle over.

3. Personhood in narrative expression

Since the way of the Hebrew writer is to tell a story and to present readers with situated dynamics, we now move on to listening out for ‘personhood’ in two narratives from the many available in the Old Testament, one from the patriarchal cycle and one from the Judean state history. The stories contrast. The first captures the individual state of Jacob on his life journey; the second, is about a collective group of ‘captives’ of the state. One is male gendered; the other female. The first highlights the eponymous ancestor of Israel; the second, the anonymous subjects of the royal court. Our point is that personhood is always expressed contextually. Our individual personhood is always part of someone else’s story, and so narratives present personhood when characters interact in a dynamic manner, making choices, doing things and having things happen to them.

a) Jacob alone between families: personhood, character and encounter with God

There are many unlikely, unwitting and unwilling heroes, and a few heroines, in the spiritual story of Israel. Jacob is a most unlikely hero and an undeserving winner. He is a character by anyone’s reckoning, and his fortunes and misfortunes in the family setting form a plot that twists and turns its way towards his deathbed scene at the end of Genesis. Rightly or wrongly, as readers of the story we feel that we get to know Jacob through the stories from his youth to his dotage. We will pinpoint now the moment of flight and encounter that catches Jacob between two lives and two families (Gn. 27:41 to 28:22). It is a story of hatred, fear, skewed mother love, dissimulation, escape, and profound spiritual experience – indeed, it is a story that captures something of the gamut of personhood from its expression in individuality and aloneness to its embeddedness in family and extended family; generationally in terms of parent and sibling rivalries; culturally in terms of kingroup and marriage customs.

Responding to God is the Old Testament’s distinctive angle on personhood, and here God breaks into Jacob’s consciousness when he is least expecting it – he is asleep, and as far as he knows, he is completely on his own, near no shrine or holy spot where God might normally be encountered. He is also in a state of moral guilt and bent on enacting his survival strategy. The storyline discloses a pattern of deception: Jacob has not only tricked Esau and deceived Isaac once already over the birthright, but again is found in collusion with his resourceful and wily mother Rebekah, acting on the pretext of filial piety with the motive of avoiding a Canaanite marriage – but in fact slipping away from the angered Esau. Isaac is none the wiser and bestows another blessing, again on his unfa-

avourite son. We see Jacob's personhood expressed in terms of the hidden self and the presenting self. We notice that he inherits, or learns, the duplicity of his mother. Personhood is never simple and individualistic, but always complex, many layered, and subject to deep influences – the family dynamic being a major one that the Old Testament stories highlight.

As if this level of family dynamic were not enough, another level is added by God's appearance in Jacob's dream. Whereas Isaac is presented as the doddering, blind and deceived male head-of-clan, Yahweh presents himself as the all-seeing, unmanipulated, decisive and purposeful Head-of-clan with his own programme of blessing. Jacob exclaims in surprise: 'Surely, the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!' (Gn. 28:17). Personhood means that Jacob is addressed by God (28:13–15), and in turn addresses God (28:22b). Yet a salient point to note here is that Jacob turns the relating into a deal. Personhood may be about relating to God, but it does not exclude human character and behaviour patterns. These patterns are brought into the relationship with God. The wrestling match (Gn. 32:24ff.) and the formative impression that it leaves on Jacob's body and character lies many years and several stories down the line from the stairway to heaven at Bethel. But we must switch over to our second embedded context of personhood, a switch to politics and family dynamics.

b) Ten sadlywise non-virgins: personhood at court

A Hebrew narrator may leave his readers to join up the dots in several ways. Firstly, the narrator seldom allows us inside the characters' heads to tap into their stream of consciousness or feel their emotions from the inside. Secondly, the story is told but the reader is often left to make of it what he or she may. Contrary to popular preconception, Hebrew narratives are seldom straightforwardly moralistic; they demand more of their readers who should mull over outcomes and see several sides to the characters. Good characters have bad flaws. False prophets speak true oracles. Besides this, another feature of human personhood emerges in Hebrew narrative, and that is the divided self. Characters in key roles are shown to be riven with contradictions. They are bold, then fearful; devout but murderous; obedient and self-willed; loyal and immersed in politicking; generous and cruel; wise and foolish. David is one of these persons who lives with contradictions. He is passionate poet speaking to God, and loyal to his fellow soldiers, yet a murderer of Uriah and passionate for yet another woman.

The story from David's civil war with his son Absalom is fraught with irony. From it we lift one unnoticed paragraph that speaks volumes on personhood but in which the persons concerned have no voice whatsoever.

David came to his house in Jerusalem. The king took the ten concubines whom he had left to look after the house, and put them in a house under guard, and provided for them, but did not go in to them. So they were shut up until the day of their death, living as if in widowhood. (2 Sa. 20:3)

Here are ten women without names. Were they originally excited by the prospect of palace life, or were they conscripted? We are not told. Whatever their

start, they become pawns of the palace. We might imagine that they were palace servants of the rank of cleaner or kitchen maid – were it not clear that David used to sleep with them. At least he did before Absalom raped them in public on the rooftop of the palace as a public relations exercise (2 Sa. 16:22). We first heard of these ten women some five chapters before David returns to his house in 2 Sam 20:3. The narrator offered us a brief notice back there: ‘So the king left, followed by all his household, except ten concubines whom he left behind to look after the house.’ (2 Sa. 15:16). They seem insignificant. The narrator knows differently.

David’s return to his house closes the sequence begun when he departed. David resumes normal life; the ten concubines do not. David chooses what to do with them; they have no choice. David has escaped danger and is restored to the throne; the concubines are exposed to degradation and are locked away out of sight forever. The narrator is very restrained, very factual. Is it only we who are sensitised by feminism that hear ‘shut up until the day of their death, living as if in widowhood’ as a tragedy and an offence to personhood? Surely not; it is the Hebrew narrator’s perspective, indicated by his choice of phrase. He tells us that they were ‘under guard’, ‘shut up’ and ‘living as if in widowhood’. The phrases seem chosen to prompt our reflection on David and his anonymous bedfellows.¹² Surely the personhood of these ten women is denigrated by David and their expression of being human is diminished. The ten women are unfree – they were left unguarded during Absalom’s takeover; now they are restricted under surveillance. Theirs is a loss, a living bereavement. No ‘spiritual’ note of redemption is introduced to mitigate their personal disaster. No theology of ‘the image of God’ can be waved aloft to plant a flag of spiritual triumph on the prison roof of this royal episode. If personhood in Old Testament thinking comes to expression in covenant and community and responding to God, then this episode underlines the horizontal dynamic of covenant and community, and love of your neighbour as yourself (Lv. 19:18). Absalom and David did not. They denigrated the personhood of these women. No amount of ‘sound theology’, the narrator’s or the women’s, if they espoused it, reverses the effects of the human behaviour of father and son. This sobering point about damage to personhood confronts contemporary pastoral models of theology and counselling – to what degree can the damage of abuse be ameliorated, even within the context of the soundest theology?

12 When male commentators pass over these verses in silence to focus instead on the male characters and the political dimensions of David’s return to Jerusalem, they confirm the generally androcentric character of traditional interpretation, but fail to hear this editorial voice for the voiceless. On the problem of the dominantly male perspective of Old Testament narration and the reactions of feminist interpreters to androcentrism and patriarchy, see, for instance, R. Bauckham’s interaction with feminist readings of Ruth ‘The Book of Ruth and the Possibility of a Feminist Canonical Hermeneutic’, *Biblical Interpretation* 5.1 (1997), 29–45. For a wider review, interacting with Bauckham, see Robin Parry ‘Feminist Hermeneutics and Evangelical Concerns: The Rape of Dinah as a Case Study’, *Tyndale Bulletin* 53.1 (2002), 1–28.

If Israel had material like Genesis 1–3 in circulation at this point in David's reign, then its theology has apparently left its court life untouched. When we are looking in the Old Testament for material about personhood then we must be clear that the Old Testament mostly describes life as it is, rather than as it should be, and sometimes it is life without mention of God, as here in this episode. Cultural norms and royal prerogatives shape the scope of personhood here, both the personhood of David and that of his concubines. This is the realism of the Old Testament. We are a long way from male and female together as the image of God in Genesis 1. No amount of theologising converts an ought to an is. The ideal of personhood lies far from the actuality; a sad truth.

4. Constituent parts of personhood?

From story and political narrative, we move to a different Old Testament angle on personhood that is more technical, and yet comes to a very familiar expression in the poetry of emotion expressed towards God. We reach this material from asking the question: 'Did the Israelites develop a terminology of the inner being with which they described 'personhood'? And if so, how do these constituent parts of the inner being contribute to the whole, and also to an expression of spirituality?' We will start off again from Genesis, with its terminology for animals and humans, and then move on to verses about personhood in Proverbs and Psalms.

The early chapters of Genesis speak about both animals and humans as 'living creatures' or 'living beings'.¹³ Genesis 2:7 is striking in the manner in which it describes God blowing the breath of life into the man's nostrils – with the result that he was animated, that he became a 'living being'. The 'living beings', the animals, are included in the rainbow covenant after the Flood, as well as being included in the ark. In this way, by using the shared term *nepeš ḥayyāh*, Genesis recognises affinity and interaction between humans and animals. It also accentuates the difference – in the quality of companionship between man and woman compared with the relationship between a human being and animals. Contrast the man naming the animals in Eden, but exclaiming aloud in spontaneous love poetry at the sight of the woman (Gn. 2:20 versus 2:23).

At no point in the Genesis story does an author stop to assert that humans normally live on beyond biological death. Indeed, the statement of principle rather runs in the opposite direction: 'Dust you are and to dust you shall return' (Gn. 3:19). Personhood lasts while life lasts; after that there is a return to the ground from whence humans originated. Of course, these statements are enunciated in the Eden story and belong in the world of this story. And yet they have exercised an enormous influence on at least one serious Old Testament thinker – the author of Ecclesiastes, who applies them outside the world of the Eden story. It is no coincidence that Qohelet, who speaks of God as Creator, and

13 Gn. 1:20, 21, 24 and 30 as well as 2:19 use *nepeš ḥayyāh* referring to animals; Gn. 2:7 uses the same phrase referring to 'the man'.

muses on animal death and human death (Ec. 3:19–21) describes death as irrevocable and final in terms very similar to Genesis 3: ‘the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it’ (Ec. 12:7). This is expiry, not the soul winging its way heavenwards. God takes back the life that originated from him.¹⁴ When the Old Testament does begin to affirm life after death, this is in a context of an eschatological new age and a public vindication for those who were loyal to God but died as martyrs and so lost the covenant blessing of a long biological life. Daniel 12:2 is alluding back to the formation of the man from dust when it speaks of those who are interred in the dust waking up. They do not come back from heaven to earth, but get up from where they were buried. There is a physicality to this eschatologically restarted life.

The Old Testament offers a holistic view of human life that fully appreciates its biological foundation. We are only just ready to appreciate this perspective once again after a long European love affair with soul/body dualism in which the soul resides within the body and is released at death. It seems much more helpful now to understand personhood, like consciousness and mind, as an emergent quality that arises from a biological system. Damage the biological systems of the brain with chemicals or with physical lesions and consciousness and mind are damaged in specific and correlated ways; personhood is damaged. Of course, Israelites did not understand brain functioning, complexity theory, or emergence. Indeed, it is doubtful to what degree they understood many of the interactive physical systems of the body, such as the respiratory system, the digestive system, and the nervous system. Bones and marrow would have been familiar to Israelites, but scarcely the function of the marrow in producing red blood cells for oxygen uptake and white blood cells that contribute to the immune system. Israelite knowledge would have come by observation – would have been phenomenological. If you stop breathing, you die; if you bleed profusely, you die. Therefore, ‘the life is in the blood’ (Lv. 17:10–14) and ‘God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life’ (Gn. 2:7).

The point is that we can postulate a similar level of Israelite psychological insight. In other words, Israelites would have encountered child development, depression, ecstasy, anxiety, confidence, romantic attraction, anger, duplicity, the presenting self and the hidden self, and could have described them as phenomena – but apparently without attempting to develop a theory of self, of motivation, emotion, learning, memory and psychosis. There is no trace of an impetus to a theoretical model with testable and predictive usefulness. What Israelites did appreciate was that human beings are bodymind interactive. Today we might want to state that in a more sophisticated manner in terms of dynamic interactive systems with reference to neurotransmitter chemistry, the immune system and endocrine system, and the functioning of the autonomic nervous system. Yet essentially we would be saying the same thing: what we think and feel affects our bodies, and our bodies affect what we think and feel.

¹⁴ Compare a parallel statement about animals expiring – ‘when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust’, Ps. 104:29.

We will now illustrate this dimension to the Old Testament expression of being human, of expressing personhood, with some proverbs and some verses from psalms of the individual. But first it will be helpful to make our hermeneutical assumptions explicit. Below are eight axioms that contribute to a reading strategy for the metaphors in the poetry of psalms and proverbs:

1. We are holistic, interactive systems with a richly textured experience and consciousness.
2. Whatever the components or sub-systems may be, they do not exist in isolation ever.
3. We use various labels and categories for what we perceive to be our system components.
4. In pre-scientific cultures, people observe life, and evolve their own forms of terminology.
5. Local terminologies and categories may or may not map onto scientific explanations easily .
- 6 The Hebrew labels are not sacrosanct, nor are they a product of special revelation.
- 7 Israelite culture is pre-scientific, but very articulate in a phenomenological manner.
- 8 We too find picture language and poetic imagery helpful for expressing our experience.

First, let me illustrate what the dynamic of psychobiological unity means with a simple example – the phenomenon of blushing or flushing that is easily observed in a light-skinned person. We might experience blushing subjectively, or we might see it and interpret it in a social interaction. Blushing is a beautiful example of psychobiological interactivity. It involves conscious awareness and unconscious, automatic processes. If we are onlookers observing the blush, then we intuit its cause in terms of the social dynamic involved. Unless we have had medical training we are probably unable to explain how the rush of blood to the face and throat happens physiologically, and no one has explained consciousness yet – how the grey and white jelly-like neurons and glia cells in our skulls make it possible for us to subjectively experience what it's like to be me, self-aware of blushing. We operate with the subjective experience of blushing and the phenomenology of being human, being psychosocialbiological interactive wholes.

If we blush, we are aware of physical sensations (such as hot skin), emotions (such as embarrassment and anxiety), social reasons for this (a foolish statement or blunder made in front of someone we wanted to impress), and the fact that the blushing is not in our control; it just happens without our consent. The biological, the emotional and the social dynamics all interplay. If we blush, we are conscious of our state of mind, indeed acutely self-conscious. What's more, we imagine what might be passing through the mind of the person who has triggered the blush. To be self-aware and able to imagine what is going through the mind of someone else is characteristically human, and to exercise what the philosophy of consciousness terms rather oddly 'a theory of mind'. We respond to

the world with much more than a set of conditioned reflexes. We are a higher lifeform than a snail. Blushing turns out to be an expression of our personhood though it has no obvious link with what is traditionally labelled ‘the soul’.

a) The psychobiological dynamic of personhood captured in proverbs

In the OT, there are enunciations of human experience that put things in terms of a dynamic interplay between body and mind. We might speak of psychosomatic effects.

A man's *spirit* will endure sickness,
but a *broken spirit* who can endure. (Pr. 18:14)

A cheerful *heart* is a good medicine,
but a *downcast spirit* dries up the bones. (Pr. 17:22)

The first proverb is saying that a physical illness is sometimes easier to bear than something that badly affects our inner person. The word ‘spirit’ *rūaḥ* is one of those Hebrew words that are tricky to translate, but in this statement it is clearly being used as the opposite polarity, as the binary with, the body. We experience an infection, a pain, a fever through our body. Our body runs a temperature, and we measure it with a physical entity, a thermometer. A thermometer, a blood test, an X-ray, or an MRI scan cannot measure a ‘broken spirit’ – depression rating scales and anxiety rating scales are routinely used for this purpose by clinical psychologists but they require answers in words from the person concerned using introspection, a tapping into the ‘inner being’.

The positive effect of the inner being on the body is noted in the next proverb:

A tranquil mind gives life to the flesh,
but passion makes the bones rot. (Pr. 14:30)

In this proverb, ‘bones’ and ‘flesh’ represent our physicality which is in polarity with... , well, with what? Our emotions? Our state of mind? The phrases ‘tranquil mind’ and ‘passion’ are contrasted. The Hebrew suggests a healthy state of inner being contrasted with a highly charged and harmful state. So ‘tranquil mind’ is not a bad translation for *lēb marpē* (literalistically, ‘healed heart’). The word for ‘passion’ (*qin’āh*) suggests something strong, such as anger or jealousy. Obviously strong emotions like jealousy and anger do not do anything to bones literally, let alone make them rot. The proverb is a colourful way of saying that our state of mind – meaning our emotional state in this instance – can have a serious and negative effect on our physical health. Modern medicine supports that truth and can certainly document it in a host of ways. For instance, studies have shown that a correlation exists between chronic anger, elevated levels of glucocorticoids in the bloodstream and heart attacks.¹⁵

¹⁵ For accessible discussions, see, for example, Paul Martin, *The Sickening Mind: Brain, Behaviour, Immunity and Disease*, London: Flamingo, 1998; Robert M. Sapolsky, *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers: a Guide to Stress, Stress-related Diseases and Coping*, New York:

The next proverb speaks about the power of words for promoting or disturbing our psychobiological well-being.

A healing tongue is a tree of life,
but perverseness in it breaks the spirit. (Pr. 15:4)

To be on the receiving end of friendly, encouraging, affirming words is to reap a tremendous reward. With affirmation and encouragement we flourish. To be on the receiving end of lies, deception, or bitter, twisted and manipulative words is to suffer damage. The role of friend, mentor or therapist is in sharp contrast with someone who is antagonistic, untrustworthy, destructive and intending to inflict pain. The proverb is a psychobiological statement of the power of words that effectively contradicts the playground ditty 'sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me!'

Indeed, the exercise of words destructively or constructively is captured by the next proverb:

Rash words are like sword thrusts,
but the tongue of the wise brings healing. (Pr. 12:18)

Here we have the metaphor of bodily wounds, either inflicted or treated. The wise are skilled at restoring peace to situations which have flared up in angry words. It could apply to a range of life situations such as quarrels and conflicts in domestic or social settings. We might want to stretch an application to a contemporary setting in which a therapist or counsellor is facilitating the emotional recovery of someone who has been verbally abused over a number of years, such as an emotionally abused child, or perhaps an adult in a setting where the 'rash words' take the form of gender or racial abuse. Indeed, our personhood is expressed through and affected by our gift for language.

b) Personhood in the psalms of the individual: the inner being and spirituality

Individual psalmists often express their emotions because the fear of enemies creates turmoil within, or as they feel the distress of God's absence keenly. Lament psalms play off the inner dynamic against the relational factor of God or enemy. Whereas the phrase 'the inner dynamic of the psalmist' fits the context, the 'personhood' of the psalmist sounds an odd word to use in lament or praise contexts. We would more readily speak of the 'inner being' of the psalmist since 'inner being' is a general, non-technical and unspecific term that can embrace the interplay of faith, emotion and cognition. Translations of the psalms have tended to move away from the King James 'soul' to 'person' or the like, but the whole range of Hebrew terminology poses problems of consistency of translation unless a thoroughly semantic approach is adopted and dynamic equivalence overrules a one-to-one reflection of the Hebrew idiom.

WH Freeman, 2nd revised ed., 1998 – Sapolsky's field research is on stress-response in baboons in the Serengeti. Both books reference the primary research literature.

A classic example of the need for using dynamic equivalence in translation is presented by the Hebrew word *nepes̄* that we encountered previously in Genesis in the idiomatic phrase ‘living creature’, ‘living being’ (*nepes̄ hayyāh*). A Hebrew dictionary gives the following range of meanings for *nepes̄* – ‘throat’, ‘neck’, ‘breath’, ‘person’, ‘personality’, ‘individuality’, ‘life’, ‘mood’, ‘state of mind’ ‘feeling’, ‘taste’, ‘will’, ‘someone dead’.¹⁶ The King James 1611 version often translated *nepes̄* as ‘soul’, but ‘soul’ is unhelpfully loaded with Greek soul-body dualism, and we need something closer to ‘me’, ‘myself’ or ‘my self’ that conveys me as ‘person’, or me in terms of the inward and reflective side of myself, my ‘inner being’.

The contrast between ‘soul’ and a more appropriate translation is illustrated in Ezk. 18:4. ‘The person who sins will die’ [and not somebody else] – this is what Ezekiel was saying. The KJV says ‘the soul that sinneth it shall die’. Thus Ezk. 18:4 is no proof-text for the existence of a soul. Instead, it correlates personhood with sin, with being personally accountable, in the same way as we noted that the Eden story does.

Another Hebrew word that needs a dynamic equivalence translation is *lēb*, conventionally known as the word for ‘heart’. Dictionaries offer a wide semantic range for the Hebrew usage of *lēb* that includes ‘mind’, ‘character’, ‘disposition’, ‘inclination’, ‘loyalty’, ‘concern’, ‘determination’, ‘courage’, ‘morale’, ‘intention’, ‘purpose’, ‘attention’, ‘consideration’, ‘understanding’, ‘conscience’, ‘life’, ‘person’.¹⁷

In some instances, our English idiom with ‘heart’ overlaps with Hebrew idiom, or runs adjacent to it, or sounds misleadingly the same. Hence, we use ‘heart’ metaphorically in English over a semantic range, and usually with an emotional nuance. Take the English phrases ‘have a heart!’, ‘don’t be so heartless’, ‘a heart-to-heart talk’, ‘a heartfelt sigh’, ‘having no heart for the task’, something being ‘on my heart’, a word spoken ‘straight from the heart’, to ‘pour out one’s heart to’, or ‘to break someone’s heart’. We would not say ‘he broke her mind’, but the nuance of Hebrew *lēb* ‘heart’ often comes close to English ‘mind’. Other times, it is simply doing duty for ‘inner being’, that is, our inner, personal self. The translator must choose what correlates best.

In Hebrew poetry ‘bones’, ‘liver’, ‘bowels’ and ‘kidneys’ appear as items that constitute aspects of the inner being. A translation would be torn between reflecting the graphic physicality of the idiom or expressing the inner dynamic without reference to bodily anatomy. Below is a list of Hebrew terms. We follow them by verses from the psalms that illustrate their use in context and their relevance to the expression of personhood in communication with God.

bowels, entrails, intestines, innards *m^e’ēy* dual constr. of *mē’eh*
kidneys *kilyāh* (sing), *k^elāyōt* (plural)

16 W. L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Leiden: Brill, 1971, 242f., *nepes̄*.

17 Holladay, *CHALOT*, 171f., *lēb*.

heart *lēb*

bones ^a*šāmōt* ('*ešem*)

flesh, body, humanity *bāšār*

inner being, the self, *nepes̄*

In the translations below, the italics represents a more idiomatic English translation, while the square brackets reflect the Hebrew idiom:

I delight to do your will, O my God;
your law is within *my heart* [my innards]. (Ps. 40:8)

Prove me, O LORD, and try me;
test *my heart* [my kidneys]
and *mind* [my heart]. (Ps. 26:2)

My spirit [my person] longs, indeed it faints
for the courts of the LORD;
my spirit [my heart]
and *my whole being* [my flesh]
sing for joy to the living God. (Ps. 84:2)

When the cares *of my heart* [in my insides] are many,
Your consolations cheer *my spirit* [my self] (Ps. 94:19)

O you who answer prayer!
To you *all human beings* [all flesh] shall come. (Ps. 65: 2)

Then *my spirit* [my person] shall rejoice in the LORD,
exulting in his deliverance.

All *my inner resources* [bones] shall say,
'O LORD, who is like you?
You deliver the weak
from those too strong for them,
the weak and needy from those who despoil them.' (Ps. 35:9–10)¹⁸

In these utterances from the psalms, it is clear that we are encountering biblical spirituality. The psalmist is in dialogue with God himself, and is responding to God. Indeed, 'responding to God' is a handy definition of Old Testament spirituality. It allows for its flexibility of context: responding in worship, or in obedience to commandments; in behaviour or in inner orientation; responding in ethical action or in ritual participation; responding as an individual or as a community; responding in praise, or in accusation and lament; resting on the Sabbath or dancing in festival; making a vow or bearing testimony in a thanksgiving meal; offering first fruits from the crop or fighting enemies; fasting in re-

18 For further psychobiological references, see Pss. 22:14, 71:6 (*mē'eh* 'innards'; *beten* 'womb'); Pss. 139:13, 73:21, 16:7, 7:9; 10:11, 12:2, 19:8 and 14, 20:4, 73:7, 147:3 (*k'lēyōt* 'kidneys'; *lēb* 'heart'); Pss. 31:9f, 23:3, 35:9, 51:8, 102:3ff (^a*šāmōt* 'bones'); Pss. 63:1, 65:2, 119:120 (*bāšār* 'flesh'); Pss. 86:4, 23:2, 103:1, 119:167, 123:4 (*nepes̄* 'inner being', 'self').

penitance or feasting in jubilation; sitting in silence or shouting aloud; going up to the temple or reflecting in bed; lying down to sleep or waking up to greet the day; recalling the past or anticipating the future. All these are Old Testament expressions of spirituality that are referred to in the psalms or demonstrated by them. It is a spirituality within covenant and this is made clear, together with the intimacy of covenant in the lines: ‘The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him, and he makes his covenant known to them’ (Ps. 25:14).¹⁹ We recall the intimacy of God walking with the man and the woman in Eden – but they failed to reverence God.

A glance through the verses above shows that there is no systematic referencing of the sub-components of personhood or selfbody. We ourselves might speak of our totality as ‘body, mind and spirit’, and that serves us well enough in loose sort of way without too much intention of carving up what only exists as an organic whole. The Hebrew psalmists likewise might write parallel lines of poetry to capture a wholehearted response to God, using one term in the A-line and another in the B-line to compliment the first for a combined effect. Whether they capture that wholeness with a word like ‘innards’, or a combination of ‘bones’ and ‘heart’, or ‘kidneys’ and ‘heart’, or ‘inner self’ and ‘flesh’ is immaterial. Sometimes bones are bones, but sometimes they are a metaphor for strength which is as much to do with inner resources, resilience, or vitality as it is related to the hard bits that prop us up. Likewise ‘heart’ is not expressing what pumps the blood round, but something less physically tangible, such as ‘mind’ or ‘spirit’ in our parlance. The Hebrew terminology does not map directly onto our contemporary psychological jargon or gross anatomy or neuroscience. It serves its purpose well because the Hebrew expressions are colourful and expressive and non-technical.

We have no trouble in grasping the wholeheartedness of relating to God in covenant when it is expressed in Deuteronomy ‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might’ (NRSV, Dt. 6:5). As it happens, this verse uses *lēb*, *nepeš* and *m^e’ōd*. In the light of the psalms, it could have conveyed the same wholeheartedness of the person, issuing from the inner being, using ‘bones’, ‘kidneys’ and ‘bowels’. Personhood is not an abstract noun in the Old Testament; if ‘personhood’ is anything there, it is a summation of all that makes us characteristically human without a severing of the pieces.

Finally, we can illustrate from Psalm 103 the two points about covenant and spirituality. Spirituality is expressed in terms of the wholeheartedness, the inner being directed towards God in the context of covenant. Beginning with verse 1, the opening lines set *nepeš* in parallel with a prepositional phrase ‘all inside me’. ‘All inside me’ could hardly be clearer as a parallel to *napšiy* – ‘my “soul”’, that is, ‘my person, my self, my inner being’.

¹⁹ For a full discussion, see D. C. T. Sheriffs, *The Friendship of the Lord: an Old Testament Spirituality*, Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996, and in particular pp. 1–26, ‘The Friendship of the Lord – Psalm 25’.

Bless the LORD, O my *soul* (*nepes*),
and all that is *within me*, (*qereb* + personal pronoun)
bless his holy name. (Ps. 103:1)

As a father has compassion for his children,
so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.
For he knows how we were made;
he remembers that we are dust.

As for mortals, their days are like grass;
they flourish like a flower of the field;
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more.

But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting
on those who fear him,
and his righteousness to children's children,
to those who keep his covenant
and remember to do his commandments. (Ps. 103:14–18)

The 'fear of the LORD' is a key concept in Old Testament spirituality. It runs through the Pentateuch in narrative contexts, it appears in Wisdom literature as a first principle, and it is reflected in the Psalms in relation to approaching God in temple worship. Here, as in Psalm 25, a paradox of spirituality links the 'fear' with being embraced by the love of God. The context of Psalm 103 is the community that unfolds generation by generation as children are born and grow up into the national story of the forefathers and the exodus ('he made know his ways to Moses', v.7), where covenant with God began. Psalm 103 sets the covenant, in turn, within the wider context of creation, the vegetation that flourishes and disappears, and individual human beings who live and return to the dust from which they are constituted.

5. In conclusion

We walked into the Old Testament waving 'personhood', whether it matched the concerns and conceptual categories of the Old Testament's primary material or not. 'Personhood' was our unhidden agenda. Normally, we would also have a specific contemporary motivation for putting questions about 'personhood' to the Old Testament, but this essay was elicited as an overview of Old Testament thinking without a specific life context to motivate it.

We began with Genesis, and this Genesis material is relevant to at least two worlds of discourse that touch on 'personhood' – gender issues, and science-faith explorations of the emergence of modern humans. We continued with narrative material. The narrative material in the Jacob example highlighted personhood shaped by family dynamic and individual character traits. The experience of David's ten concubines illustrated social and cultural norms as well as power relations affecting personhood. The 'personhood' angle in the concubine and the Jacob stories related to nurturing or manipulative contexts. In our times, we can see how 'personhood' may be nurtured or pressured by ideologies, by poli-

tics and policies, by justice and by oppression, by education, and by social and cultural change.

Then we focused on the dynamics of the inner being that are relevant to the way that we work as biological, emotional and psychological beings. We saw that the spirituality of the Old Testament orientates the individual to God in the context of God's covenant with the community. Individuality is not a Western invention – the Old Testament itself tells of many individuals in personal encounter with God, of which Jacob and the individual psalmists are examples. Yet covenant, even covenant with Jacob, is primarily about a faith community, just as Jacob's story is part of the larger story of the ancestors and the Israelites, and likewise the personal prayers are incorporated into the collection of psalms that are made available for communal use.

The focus of the Old Testament is not on 'personhood', an abstract term of debateable meaning. Why should it be? The Old Testament is more concerned with being human as it comes to expression through creation, in Israel, in a relationship with God that is earthed in life in the land, in biology, in family, in community, and in worship.

Today we have a host of conceptual tools for thinking about 'personhood' that are not developed in the Old Testament – psychology, psychiatry, sociology, anthropology, education, and law, to mention half a dozen. There is no reason to neglect these fields of expertise that illuminate 'personhood', and every reason to use their perspectives in interaction with the writings of the Old Testament, while recognising that the primary agenda of the Old Testament is relating to God.

We ended our Old Testament exploration with the words of Psalm 103 that capture the paradox of personhood, of being human in Old Testament terms. Though biological dust, we are invited into covenant, into the steadfast love of the Person who is the Father of all humanity.

Do we recognise ourselves in that picture of personhood? God is asking.

Abstract

This article examines the hermeneutical starting points, frames of reference and assumptions that are involved in investigating 'personhood' in the Old Testament. It samples texts from creation, the Jacob narrative, royal history, proverbial wisdom, and psalms with the emergence of our species, family dynamics, power politics and biblical spirituality in mind. The Old Testament offers us a colourful and holistic perspective on being human and relating to God without it being a handbook on biology, neuroscience or cognitive development.

