Scripture Words—II: World and Flesh

LEONARD JOHNSTON

Hebrew thought, and therefore the Hebrew way of speaking, is concrete and realist. Greek thought, which has influenced to some degree all our western civilization, is abstract, speculative, analytic. For example, by reflection and analysis Greek philosophy arrived at the notion of man composed of two elements—the one visible and material, the other invisible and spiritual; and for most of us it has become almost instinctive to speak of man as composed of 'body and soul', without realising that we are speaking in terms of Greek philosophy.

But the Hebrews took man as they found him—he is just a man, a single thing, a living being endowed with movement and intelligence and speech. Of course, they did distinguish different aspects of this single being, they could look at him from different points of view; but these different aspects were simply aspects of the same single whole—not separate parts which were really different things and only accidentally united. Thus, the Bible can speak of man's 'body and soul', just as Greek philosophy did; but by those terms they meant something rather different. The body—or the 'flesh' as it was called—was man looked at from the point of view of the innate weakness which they recognised as a characteristic of man. The 'soul' on the other hand referred to man in so far as he was endowed with vital qualities, and these vital qualities came to him from God: 'The Lord God breathed into his nostrils and he became a living being' (Gen. 2. 7).

Without this 'breath of God', man is a feeble, helpless thing: 'My spirit shall not be for ever in man—he is but flesh, and his life shall be but a hundred and twenty years' (Gen. 6. 3). To rely on purely human resources is described as 'using an arm of flesh' (2 Chron. 32. 8): 'The Egyptians are men and not God; they are flesh and not spirit' (Is. 31.3). And before God's almighty power this human strength is of no avail: 'All flesh is grass, and its glory is like a flower. The grass withers and the flower fades when the breath of God blows upon it' (Is. 40. 6-7). 'Flesh', then, denotes the specifically human quality in a man—what he would be like if he had not the 'breath of God', the spirit, within

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0269359300016293 Published online by Cambridge University Press

him. Job can even speak of an 'eye of flesh' when he reproaches God with acting in too human a fashion: 'Hast thou an eye of flesh, dost thou see as men see?' (Job 10. 4).

But, it must be repeated, this is a distinction of aspects, not of entities. When the Hebrew says 'man is flesh' it really does mean that—it does not mean that there is one part of him which is purely material and another part which is purely spiritual. It means that the whole man considered from one particular point of view is weak and helpless; while the whole man considered from another point of view is noble and powerful. The word 'soul', for example, instead of meaning the substantial form of the body means the whole person: indeed in some semitic languages this word 'soul' can be used as the reflexive pronoun: 'I killed myself' would be rendered: 'I killed my soul'. This may give a rather different meaning to those words of our Lord: 'What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his own soul'. It is not a question of a choice between two parts of man—his external, material part which must be sacrificed for the sake of the internal spiritual 'soul'; it is a question of the whole of man—his very life—which is more important than any possessions he may acquire.[1]

When it comes to the New Testament, then, it is in the same sense that we must read St Paul's use of the term 'flesh': it will not mean one particular part of man, the material part; it will mean the whole of man—but looked at from a particular point of view. When he speaks of 'the flesh being enslaved to sin', he does not mean that sin affects only the material element in man; he means that the whole of man is subject to sin, and considered as such, one will rightly use the term 'flesh' of this imperfect, ignoble aspect of him.

St Paul's appreciation of the Redemption will even enable him to give a deeper meaning to this weakness of man which the Old Testament labelled 'flesh'. The Old Testament used 'flesh' to denote man in his native feebleness, without the vital power that comes from the breath of God. But St Paul realises that man left to himself is not subject only to physical incapacity, but also and especially to moral weakness: 'I am a creature of flesh, sold into the power of sin' (Rom. 7. 14). And just as, in the Old Testament, it was the breath of God which gave power to this flesh, so St Paul realises that the breath of God, the 'spirit', is in fact the Holy Spirit who has become in us a 'spirit of life'. 'If you

[1]It will be noted that the New English Bible expresses this meaning in its translation: 'What does a man gain by winning the whole world at the cost of his true self?'

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0269359300016293 Published online by Cambridge University Press

walk according to the spirit, you will not perform the deeds of the flesh'.

It must be noted that we are not concerned here to defend one thought-pattern, the Hebrew, against the other, the Greek. Our main concern is not to show which of them is correct, but merely to show that they are different, and that these differences must be respected in our reading of the texts. As a matter of fact, there is today a swing back to a view of man which is more consonant with the Hebrew approach: that the Greek distinction between body and soul has been vastly over-stressed, and that in spite of any such distinction man remains and must always be considered essentially a unity—a body-soul, rather than a compound of body and soul. But that is not the point. Even if the Hebrew way of looking at man is to be held less accurate than the Greek, it is nevertheless a fact—it is the view adopted by the writers of the Bible, and we have to read their words with this point of view in mind. The Hebrew idea of the world is quite different from that which modern physical science has opened out to us; but we would be wrong to attempt to read our knowledge into their descriptions of the world as they saw it. And in the same way, we should not try to read a later view of man into the Hebrew author's words.

To do so is not merely bad method from a literary point of view, but in the present case leads to fatal theological consequences. St Paul says harsh things about the flesh; and, as we have seen, he is there using 'flesh' in the sense that the Old Testament uses it—the whole man, in his aspect of weakness. But if we then understand his term 'flesh' in the sense of Greek philosophy—or indeed of ordinary language—we make St Paul a Manichee, one for whom the physical body, the material element in man, is totally evil. 'Nothing good dwells in my flesh' (Rom. 7. 18): 'With the flesh I serve the law of sin' (Rom. 7. 25): 'Those who are in the flesh cannot please God' (Rom. 8. 8): 'The desire of the flesh is death' (Rom. 8. 6).

Such statements, wrongly understood, open the way to a false spirituality in which the body has no other part than to be a source of temptation and a means of mortification. This is far from being St Paul's thought. He never gives any suggestion that this one part of man is evil; on the contrary, he is well aware that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6. 19), and that it is intended one day to exist in a glorified state, like Christ's own body, in virtue of the same Spirit which animates it (1 Cor. 15. 42 ff.). It is true that he does look forward to the time when this bodily existence shall be over: 'This tent, our

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0269359300016293 Published online by Cambridge University Press

earthly dwelling place, is destroyed; but we have an eternal dwelling place in heaven . . . and we groan in this state, ardently desiring . . .' (2 Cor. 5. 1 ff.). But even in such a text he cannot bring himself to desire the destruction of the body: ' . . . we groan; but we would not be stripped of this garment, but rather be clothed with another above it, that this mortality should be swallowed up in life' (2 Cor. 5. 6). Similarly, it is only a tendentious English translation of Philippians 1. 23 that gives the sense: 'I desire to be dissolved and to be with Christ'—a sense that could very easily be taken to imply that Paul, like a Greek philosopher, found the material body something disgusting and impeding, which he longs to cast off so as to attain the freedom of the spiritual element, the soul. But the metaphor that Paul is using is probably that of a ship, ready to 'cast off', to set sail; and once more, it is the 'I' which is the subject of this departure that Paul longs for—his whole self, body and soul. What death will bring him is not freedom from the material element, but freedom from the trials and temptations which are an inevitable accompaniment of this life in the flesh; death will set him free of those and make certain that perpetual union with Christ which is a Christian's hope; and it will give him too that glorified body, completely imbued with the Spirit, which is the body's own ideal and the end of redemption. But meanwhile, even in this body of flesh, Paul is content to live—knowing that even here, whether he lives or whether he dies, he is the Lord's.

A similar misunderstanding and confusion may also affect our understanding of the term 'world' with disastrous results. It is St John who uses this term frequently, and uses it in a sense that is almost equivalent to Paul's use of 'flesh'. He makes the same harsh judgment of it as St Paul makes of the flesh: 'He came into the world and the world knew him not': 'The world hates me': 'The prince of this world comes, and in me he has not anything': 'Be of good heart, I have overcome the world'. If, then, we understand the term in its normal, literal sense, we are going to make St John completely pessimistic about our human situation; the whole of creation is irremediably evil, the whole of humanity is implacably opposed to its creator; and the only solution for those who would be saved is to escape from this evil thing: 'I have manifested thy name to those whom you have drawn from the world . . . I do not pray for the world, but for those whom you have given to me . . . they are not of the world, as I am not of the world' (Jn 18. 6-11).

But, of course, such a wholesale condemnation of creation cannot be right. John knows, as we know, that God made the world, and all that

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0269359300016293 Published online by Cambridge University Press

he made is good; God loves this world, loves it enough to give his only Son to death for it. John cannot therefore mean that the world as such is evil. He must be using it in a very specific sense, almost as a technical term.

The Greek word for 'world' is *kosmos*, a word which has implications of grace, beauty, order. And this is the aspect of creation which appealed most to a Greek—its quality of order and harmony: that all this vast collection of things should be so gracefully arranged in a harmonious whole. But to a Hebrew, this was not the most striking thing about the world. The most striking quality was simply that it was created; the Hebrew idea of the world is the counterpart of his idea of God—God is 'the other', something different from all that exists within human experience; this supreme being is living, and a real person, but no matter how much one may try to visualise and express him in human terms, that which remains most truly characteristic of God is the purely negative idea that he is not to be identified or confused with creation. He made all that is, and he himself remains outside and above his creation. And creation, similarly, is most characteristically that which is 'not-God': it is made by him and depends on him for its existence. Where the Greek thought in terms of harmony, the Hebrew thought in terms of dependence.

But the tragedy that has affected creation, which we call original sin, has meant a disorientation. The direction of man's thoughts, instead of being outwards and upwards to the God on whom he depends, has become inwards towards himself. He refuses to recognise God as 'the other', the supreme being on whom all life depends; and makes himself his supreme good. He asserts his independence of his creator. And the term 'world' can then be used absolutely to express this state—it becomes simply 'the world', and nothing more. The term 'world' as it should be used, as the Bible normally uses it, has always a tacit addition: creation dependent on its creator: when St John uses it in a pejorative sense he is tacitly underlining the omission of that implication. The world is just—the world.

But in reality, you cannot simply have creation. The world cannot be neutral. If it does not imply, as it should, the recognition of its dependence, then it implies not merely separation from God but aversion from God. The term 'world' will therefore come to mean not merely the world without God, but the world turned away from God. Necessarily therefore John will say that 'the world hates Christ'—simply because this is what the term 'world' means. This is 'the sin

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0269359300016293 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the world': not any particular act of disobedience or any specific vice; but simply the state of rejection of God and aversion from him. This is the sin which our Lord has come to take away—and he takes it away in the only way possible in the circumstances. 'The world' means the closed circle of self-centred regard, completely shut off from God, so God breaks through that hard shell and himself comes into the world, bringing his light into that darkness.

We may find interesting confirmation and clarification of this peculiarity of Johannine terminology by comparing his way of speaking about 'the Jews'. As in the case of 'the world', we would be wrong to see in John's use of this word a total and wholesale condemnation of the whole Jewish race. But a Jew is a member of that people which God had formed by covenant and promise to produce and to receive the Messiah. To be a Jew, then, meant following a certain way of life—certain precepts and moral practices—which was to culminate in the fulfilment of a promise. But when the promise was fulfilled, the Jews found themselves in something of a dilemma; for it did not come in the form that they expected; and not only that, but it even seemed to involve something which was incompatible with the religion they followed.

As a matter of fact, this was inevitable—the state of fulfilment puts an end to the state of waiting; the flower puts an end to the bud; so the coming of the Messiah was obviously going to be something which went beyond the religion which had prepared the way for him. Many thousands of Israelites understood and accepted this—they found in Christianity the fulfilment of all their lives had stood for. But there were also some who found this too hard; who could not go beyond the religion which they so firmly held to. Instead of making that last decisive step forward from promise to fulfilment, over the threshold into the house, they remained where they were—Jews.

Just like the term 'world', the title 'Jew' has a tacit implication: it is the people who wait for the Messiah. In using the term absolutely, then, John is implicitly noting the refusal and rejection of that necessary addition; instead of becoming the people who have received their Messiah, the Jews become the people who refuse to go beyond their present state—they become Jews, and nothing more. But once more, as in the case of the world, this omission is not neutral; a Jew must be either something more or something less than a member of a national body. Their reason for existing is to produce the Messiah; if then they refuse to accept him when he comes, if they refuse to make the final

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0269359300016293 Published online by Cambridge University Press

step forward, they forfeit their own reason for existence, just as surely as a tree which comes to bud and then fails to flower. 'The Jews', then, are the Jewish people in so far as they cling to their stage of preparation, and refuse and oppose their Messiah.

It is a basic principle of all literature that we should read it in the sense in which it was written. If we read St Paul's remarks about the flesh or St John's about the world in a way different from that which the authors intended, we end up at the worst with heresy, and at the best with that undue contempt for God's good creation which so often hovers round the fringes of genuine Christianity. But as we have seen, this difficulty is largely due to a difference of mentality—the difference between the Greek and the Hebrew mind. And if this is so, it may well be asked why the difference was not expressed in suitable terms when the written word of God came to be handed down in different languages? It is a question of translation; if 'flesh' for St Paul does not mean what we mean by flesh, why do translators not use some other word which would express accurately the precise shade of meaning intended?

The objection is quite valid up to a certain point; and it will be found that many modern translations do in fact attempt some translation which will indicate the real meaning of the terms. But it must also be remembered that words are in any case uncertain instruments; a correct understanding of a text does not depend simply on a good lexicon, but on the willing humility to follow the author's meaning beyond his words.

Moreover, granted that no simple manipulation of terms can guarantee to convey accurately the full flavour of a thought, there are reasons why tradition has continued to use the terms that St Paul and St John themselves used. The flesh—the material element in man—is not something intrinsically evil. But nevertheless, the main result of original sin in man has been the clouding of the intellectual faculties and the disturbance of the harmonious collaboration of all man's faculties. God has created man with certain physical desires and needs, and these, like all God's creation, are good; but they cease to be good if they seek satisfaction at the expense of man's total good and his final end. And it is the rebellion of these physical appetites—the flesh, man's material needs—which constitutes the weakness of human nature in its fallen state; and it is just this weakness that St Paul labels 'flesh'. In other words, the two meanings of the term, Greek and Hebrew, do overlap: it is the flesh in its normal, purely physical connotation which is largely responsible for the flesh in the Biblical sense.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0269359300016293 Published online by Cambridge University Press

And in the same way the world which God made is good. But again, original sin has led to this weakness in man, to tend to prefer the creature above the creator; to be attracted by what strikes the senses more immediately—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life—and to seize on these created objects without due consideration for their relationship with their creator. And it is precisely this tendency which becomes 'the world' in the specifically Johannine sense of the word. The world is good; but only because it comes from God and leads to God; and because there is something in man which tends to ignore and distort this direction, the world is always in danger of becoming 'world-without-God' and 'world-opposed-to-God'—which is the world as St John speaks of it.

It is important, then, that we understand these terms correctly, but once correctly understood we can continue to use them: they will serve as a signpost guiding us between the perils of Manicheism on the one hand, and on the other, a foolish blindness to the realities of our fallen state.

The Meaning of Genesis: A New Commentary

ROBERT SHARP, O.P.

It is a pleasure to welcome the appearance in English of a work of deep theological relevance.[1] Dr von Rad's commentary was published in the German Protestant series, *Das Alte Testament Deutsch*, nearly a decade ago. Now that it is available in English, it is to be hoped that it will be widely read. If so, the result can only be a growth in our understanding of the developing relationship between man and his creator, who has revealed himself in scripture as the Lord of history. Let us be clear that this commentary on Genesis is not primarily aimed at the expert philologist or literary critic. Von Rad accepts the classical documentary

[1]*Genesis*, by Gerhard von Rad, translated by John H. Marks; SCM Press (Old Testament Library), 50s.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0269359300016293 Published online by Cambridge University Press