

WHAT IS MAN?

SHUBERT SPERO

*1 Lord, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory
in the heavens.*

*2 Through the praise of children and infants
you have established a stronghold against your enemies,
to silence the foe and the avenger.*

*3 When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
which you have set in place,*

*4 What is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?*

*5 You have made them a little lower than the angels
and crowned them with glory and honor.*

*6 You made them rulers over the works of your hands;
you put everything under their feet:*

*7 All flocks and herds,
and the animals of the wild,*

*8 The birds in the sky,
and the fish in the sea,*

all that swim the paths of the seas.

9 Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! (Psalm 8:5)

Psalm 8 praises the Lord for having created such a glorious creature as man. However, I think that the text may be seen essentially as making a statement by posing a question for which it does not give an answer:

*What is mankind [Mah e'nosh] that You are mindful of them,
and human beings [ben-adam] that You think of him?*

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*You have made him but little lower than the angels [elohim],
and crowned him with glory and honor.*

And what a powerful question it is! The psalmist considers a question that the Bible itself does not ponder: indeed, why *did* the Lord choose such a strange creature to be the crowning achievement of His work of creation? For although the man is the last to appear in the six-day process of Creation, he was undoubtedly the goal of the entire cosmic process – as the poet says: *sof ma'aseh be-mahshavah te'hila*, “Last in action but first in thought.”¹ Yet in the psalmist’s depiction of man, we have a portrait of a creature torn by inner contradictions, as is often described in world literature and philosophy. The so-called “problem of man” has received much attention, only to reach the conclusion, in one set of terms or another, that man is “In doubt to deem himself a god, or beast . . . the glory, jest and riddle of the world,”² “Man’s ultimate concern is his finite reason which drives him beyond himself,”³ and “Man is a *becoming* not a being, Man is something that shall be overcome, a rope stretched between the animal and the overman – a rope over an abyss.”⁴

Yet, in neither of the two creation accounts in the Book of Genesis, nor, in fact, in any of the other books of the Bible is there any hint that man possesses such a disturbing singularity as to require further reflection of the kind we have here in the powerful words of Psalms 8:5. This is even more surprising given the wide-ranging critical perspective of such books as Ecclesiastes (Kohélet) and Proverbs (Mishlei).⁵ Thus, although man is said to exercise dominion over all of the other creatures (Gen. 1:26, 28), he fits in an orderly manner into the otherwise very systematic description of the cosmos. Even in the second chapter of Genesis where the basic duality of man is directly described, *And the Lord formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living soul* (Gen. 2:7); that is, a creature composed of both matter and the divine spirit, there is no textual hint of paradox.⁶

One might demur that the Bible is not a philosophy text and does not address philosophical dilemmas head on. In fact, this view has been strongly challenged by many scholars.⁷ Of course, it is clear that the nature and format of the biblical text do not resemble anything similar to what we today would consider analytic philosophy; it does not raise hypotheses and then negotiate their resolution. Nevertheless, while the Bible is essentially a book of laws, and

several historical narratives with moral implications, it is, as I have argued elsewhere, directly intended to relate to the world around us and to connect that world with some sense of God's ideals or even intentions.⁸ There is sufficient matter in the Bible to evoke and nurture deeper philosophical reflection, especially when we experience discrepancy between the ideal and the real.

I suggest that the psalmist's plaint is intended to reflect us back to a statement in the original account of man's creation which was never clearly elucidated. When God says, *Let us make man in our image and likeness* [*be-zalmeinu ke'demuteynu*] (Gen. 1:26), the text itself does not inform us in precisely what ways man is to be like God, and, hence, we are left with the problem or paradox of man referred to above.⁹ We have no biblical explanation of what would be the consequences of creating an animal-like creature who at some point, unlike the plants and animals, will become conscious of being God-like.

This peculiarity is usually explained by pointing to the fact that biblical Hebrew has no verbatim equivalent for the term we recognize in the complex concept of *person*. Instead, in an astonishing variety of contexts, the biblical text employs the terms *adam*, *ish* and *nefesh*, seemingly interchangeably.¹⁰

I wish to suggest that this quandary is no accident of language; rather, it takes us to the heart of the unique nature of what our tradition refers to as "Torah," with the emphasis being "instruction" (inf. *le-ho'rot*, *mo'reh*). Calling the Bible by this name has to some degree hidden its true syntactical nature. The fact is that the Five Books of Moses are not really a finished "law," nor is it a complete set of instructions for a specific local project. Instead, I would refer to these books as a *preparatory document*, given well in advance of the document's becoming obligatory to be carried out in real life. In fact, the entire concept of a constitution being given to a People in the wilderness before they have even reached their intended homeland, seen its features and understood its peculiar challenges, would only mask the true nature and character of such a narrative. Thus, returning to the philosophical question about the "problem of man," I believe that this issue was not seriously dealt with in the Bible because the entire possibility of man reflecting about himself, *homo meditans*,¹¹ could only take place in a much later phase in human development, long after man first began to observe himself in action, *homo agendo* (or *vir active*).¹² If Israel earned the title "the people of the book" it was because this is

the feature that formed the possibility of their developing the values contained therein, even when cut off from the rest of the world.

As such, it was the divine intent to create a people and a culture that could transcend the vagaries of the intellectual marketplace and eventually face fully the responsibilities of choosing whether to remain a beast or to aspire to godliness. This is the task to which the psalmist seeks to direct our attention. His question regarding the value of man is essentially a rhetorical question designed to challenge man to reflect philosophically about his seemingly paradoxical nature and to accept his duality, integrating it at the highest level.

NOTES

1. Shlomo Halevi Alkabetz (1505–1584) of Zefat in the Shabbat night prayer *Lekha dodi*, but echoing the expressions found in the Zohar (*ri'shon le-mahshavah a'ha'ron le-ma'aseh*), and Yehudah Halevi (1075–1141) in the Kuzari (3:73) (*te'hilat ha-mahshavah sof ha-ma'aseh*).
2. Alexander Pope (1732-1734), *An Essay on Man, Epistle II*.
3. Paul Tillich (1956). *The Dynamics of Faith*. The existentialists were not the first to concern themselves with man's complex character. The Midrash (*Genesis Rabba* 8:5) famously attempts to come to terms with the duality in man by framing the problematic potentialities of man into a pre-creation scenario (based on the plural "Let us fashion..."). In this story, God consults with four anthropomorphized celestial attributes: *hesed*, lovingkindness argued in favor of creating man "because they care for each other." *Emet*, absolute truth, argued that humans lie. *Tzedek*, justice, argued in favor, and, finally, *shalom*, peace, argued against. At that point, God threw *emet*, the angel of peace, to the Earth, and assured the other angels that truth would rise up from the Earth, and created man.
4. Friedrich Nietzsche (1883). *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.
5. True, we find poor Job stating in almost identical terms, *What is a mortal [enosh], that you make so much of him [te'gadlenu, that You should exalt him], and that you set your heart on him?!*" (7:17, and echoed in 15:14, 25:4). If one adopts the view that Job was a later composition (i.e. not composed by Moses), then this passage might have been borrowed from Psalms. But perhaps the psalmist has undertaken man's contradictory qualities as a general problem whereas Job is expressing his sense of personal injury and grief, and insisting upon his innocence.
6. That is to say, an internal self-contradiction (*O. E. D.*, s.v. paradox).
7. Kenneth Seeskin upholds the view that the Torah is not a work of philosophy ([2016]. *Thinking about the Torah: A Philosopher Reads the Bible*. Jewish Publication Society). The opposing view is defended by Jaco Gericke (2014). "Is there philosophy in the Hebrew Bible? Some recent affirmative approaches." *Journal of Semitics*, 23, pp. 583-598; M. Glouberman (2013). "The Holy One: What is the Bible's philosophy is and what it isn't." *Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly*, 62, pp. 43-66, and Shalom Carmy & David Shatz. (1997). "The Bible as a source for philosophical reflection." In D. H. Frank & O. Leaman (eds.). *The History of Jewish Philosophy* (pp. 13-37). Routledge.
8. Shubert Spero (1976). "Encounters between Judaism and modern philosophy." *Tradition*, vol. 15, pp. 113-125.

9. Rashi, culling from many midrashim, interprets the key terms in the first account thus: *be-zalmeynu* as “our imprint, image” [*be-d’efus shelanu*] and *ke-demutaynu* as “to understand and to reason” [*le-havin u-le’haskef*]. We learn in the second account (Gen. 2:7) that God breathed into the man *nishmat hayim*, “the breath of life,” and man thus became a *nefesh hayah*, “a living soul,” but are once again without explanation. The Zohar and others since have accepted the logical idea that *maan de-napach mi-diley [mey-azmo] napach*, “The One who blew from Himself blew,” but this also does not solve the problem. Onkelos (*loc cit*) famously translates *ru’ah me’mallela*, “the spirit of speech,” which then creates the quaternity of the nature of God’s “speech” or capacity to think. So we are left to wonder: in what way *precisely* is man in God’s image, and man has been left to ponder this dilemma ever since.

10. The problem of the proper biblical Hebrew term for person, personhood is a deep one. Contemporary Hebrew has accepted *ish* and *ishiyut* as the nouns of choice. Adam is certainly not a candidate, though the expression *ben adam* is often translated as “Man” in the sense of a creature having a personality. *Nefesh*, though a hefty term, is often used for this purpose, and yet is best translated as “one” or “person” in the purely indicative sense. One other candidate is *enosh*, which does not appear in the Bible itself and has a Nabatean-Aramaic root. It may also have been formed from the plural *a’nash’em*, there being no other plural for *ish* or *adam*. Dictionary-Concordances such as Strong’s (no. 582) and Brown-Driver-Briggs point out that *enosh* is generally used to indicate man or mankind in his utterly mortal sense (modern Hebrew describes mortal injury as *a’nush*).

11. Usually referred to in philosophical literature as either *vir sui conscius*, a man conscious of himself and self-aware, or *Homo se inspiciens*, man looking into himself.

12. Indeed, the lack of self-awareness in primordial Adam can be seen in the fact that in the biblical text, he names all of the creatures but does not name himself, and does not ask for a consort but rather is understood by God as needing one. The Midrash (*Genesis Rabba* 17), however, tries to depict man as having successfully named all of the animals and then, when prodded by God, “What shall *you* be called?” responds “It is appropriate that I be called Adam for I have been formed from the earth.”