A Good, Physical Creation

As has become clear last night, our focus at this weekend is on ecclesiology. In other words, we are thinking about what it means to be church. More specifically, we are looking at what is implied when the Bible speaks of the church as the body of Christ. This session, however, is not going to make a direct contribution to that discussion. Instead, we are going to take a step back, as it were, and consider the issue of the human body as such, and specifically some aspects of what the Old Testament has to say about the human body. After all, in order to understand what the biblical writers mean when they define the church as the body of Christ, we need to have a clearer idea of how they saw the human body.

That we are in need of reconsidering this issue is to no small degree due to the fact that Western Christianity is strongly influenced by Greek philosophical concepts about God and humanity, concepts that have obscured many of the distinctive ideas of the Old Testament. So let us look at some of those ideas, and where better to begin than at the beginning, i.e. with the creation of humankind in the image and likeness of God.

Humankind as the Bodily Image of God

Genesis 1:26-27 tells us:

Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image (-navigation [selem]), according to our likeness (mirror [dēmūt]); and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

There are two key terms here, that of the image (Navigation [selem] in Hebrew) and that of likeness (mirror [dēmūt]). The first, the notion that humankind has been created in the image of God is of particular importance to our writers, who repeat it three times in these two verses. But what does it mean for humankind to be created in the image of God? Our Genesis text does not explicitly explain the idea, but of course it occurs within a specific context that is provided, first, by the book of Genesis itself but then also by the wider ancient Near Eastern world.

Unfortunately, interpreters have often ignored these contexts and have turned to philosophical ideas instead, thus ending up reading their own preconceptions of what it means to be human back into Genesis 1 (see Middleton, 2005, p. 17). It has even been suggested that ‘by studying how systematic theologies have poured meaning into Gen. 1:26, one could write a piece of Europe’s cultural history’ (Berkhof, 1979, p. 179). And one commentator complained that theologians, ‘like Humpty-Dumpty, ... have made the word mean just what they choose it to mean’ (Snaith, 1974-75, p. 24). We must not spend
too much time with these misguided attempts at filling the term with meaning, but I want
to give you at least a general idea of the kinds of suggestions that have been made regard-
ing the *imago Dei*. One line of thought conceives of the image of God in terms of some kind
of metaphysical analogy or similarity between humans and God and understands the im-
age variously as humankind’s:

- reason,
- conscience,
- spirituality,
- immortality,
- freedom,
- personhood,
- memory,
- intellect,
- will.

Alternatively, the *imago Dei* might also be construed dynamically or in relational or ethi-
cal terms as:

- man’s original righteousness (Luther),
- the God-given capacity of human beings in their co-humanity (as male and female) to be addressed by and to respond to God’s word (Barth).

When you looked at Genesis 1 in the context of your Old Testament module, you will,
hopefully, have come across a third way of conceiving of the divine image, which under-
stands it neither in analogical nor in relational but rather in *functional* terms. This is based
on the ancient Near Eastern context, in which kings were regarded as being created in the
image of the gods, which gave them the right to rule on behalf of the gods. The image, as
I said, is here understood functionally: it legitimates the kings’ *function* as rulers. The
Genesis writers democratised that idea in saying that all human beings, male and female,
are created in the image of God. And that that implies their rule over God’s creation is
explicitly pointed out in the following verse, where humankind is told to ‘be fruitful and
multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion’ (Gen. 1:28). It is clear, there-
fore, that this functional understanding is shared by the biblical writers in contrast to the
other ideas that have been read into the text.

But there is more to the divine image, and this is something that is usually overlooked.
As Richard Middleton notes, interestingly, ‘the interpretation of the *imago Dei* among …
thecologians almost universally excludes the body from the image’. And that is quite a tell-
ing exclusion, for, as Middleton goes on to say, it ‘continues to perpetuate an implicit de-
valuation of the concrete life of the body’ (Middleton, 2005, p. 24), a devaluation that is
the result of the profound influence of Greek philosophical ideas on Christian interpreters of the Old Testament.

This is the 3,000-year-old statue of Hadad-Ishi, king of Sikani, an ancient city in upper Mesopotamia (ancient Iraq). It comes with an Aramaic inscription that describes the statue as ‘The image of Hadad-Ishi ... this likeness he made better than before. ... Before [the God] Hadad who dwells in Sikani, ... he [King Hadad-Ishi] set up his image’ (quoted, with some modifications, from Carr, 2003, p. 20; see also Schroer and Staubli, 2001, p. 3). As you can see, Hadad-Ishi uses the very terms, ‘image’ and ‘likeness’, that are used in Genesis 1 as well, and he uses them to talk about a statue that represents his bodily presence in the temple before his god.

The biblical writers similarly present humankind as the bodily image of God. The formulation in Genesis presupposes that God has a body and that human beings have been created to resemble such a bodily God. That God could be understood as having a human-like bodily form with hands, feet, eyes and even loins is clear from many Old Testament texts. For instance, in Exodus 24:10, when God appears at the top of Mt Sinai, the text talks about his feet being on ‘a pavement of sapphire’; and the prophet Ezekiel sees God appearing as ‘something that seemed like a human form’ (Ezek. 1:26). Of course, we tend to think of these texts as anthropomorphisms, i.e. as God being described in human terms, ‘as an imperfect human way of imagining the unimaginable’ (thus Carr, 2003, p. 20-21). Genesis 1, by contrast, invites us to make the opposite move and think of ourselves as an example of theomorphism. In other words, ‘God had the human bodily form first. Humans did not project it onto God. God made humans – men and women – in the image and likeness that God already had’ (Carr, 2003, p. 21). It is an idea that is well captured in Michelangelo’s fresco ‘The Creation of Adam’.

We may be inclined to question such a concept, but I am not concerned about how we understand God at this point. I am interested, rather, in the ability of ancient Near Eastern and biblical perspectives on the ‘image’ to help us overcome our negativity towards the body, which has all too frequently been understood as a sign of human limitation. Whichever way you look at it, according to Genesis 1, we are created in the image of God, not the other way around, and the concept of the image includes as one of its key features bodily representation. The emphasis, in Genesis 1, upon the fact that we all, male and female, are created in the image of God underlines the bodily connotations even further. As David Carr has concluded, ‘we bear God’s form, not first in our brains, spirits, or souls, but in our entire male and female embodied selves’ (2003, pp. 23-24). And again: ‘human male and female bodies, including our sexualities [after all, the text goes on to speak of procreation in v. 28], are a reflection of divinity’ (p. 25). Or perhaps you prefer the for-
mulation by Silvia Schroer and Thomas Staubli, who have pointed out that the anthropo-
logy reflected in the biblical text ‘discovers in concrete bodies the symbolic, or better, the

It is well worth pondering this point a little, not least because the church fathers, in-
fluenced as they were by Greek philosophy, have been far more likely to think of our hu-
man bodies as polluting flesh or imperfect vessels of the spirit. The vision of the writers
of our Genesis text could not be more different. Indeed, their account of God’s creation on
the sixth day ends with the biblical God evaluating his creation and pronouncing it ‘very
good’ (Gen. 1:31).

From Throat to Soul: A Case Study in Old Testament Body Symbolism

This, then, takes me to another area that is equally relevant to our discussion, namely that
of Old Testament body symbolism or how the Old Testament writers thought about dif-
ferent parts of the human body. However, as this is quite a vast subject, we will only be
able to look at a case study.

In their book *Body Symbolism in the Bible*, Schroer and Staubli say that ‘it can really
give you goosebumps when Near Easterners at a festival, for example, when the company
gathered for a wedding greets the bride, break out in joyful noise. They emit shrill tones
while striking their hands against their throats, which results in a remarkable, penetrat-
ing warble’ (2001, p. 56). There is a Hebrew word that captures the sound, much like our
words ‘gurgle’ or ‘yodel’, and that word is *hallel*. When a Hebrew speaker seeks to encour-
geage people to make that sound, they would say *hallelu*; and when the sound is to be made
in recognition of Yahweh, then it becomes *hallelu-ya* (or *hallelu-yah*), *yah* being an abbrevi-
ation of Yahweh. The sound, and this is important, breaks forth out of the person by
way of the throat.

You are all familiar with the phrase ‘bless the *LORD*, O my soul’, which is found repeat-
edly, for instance, in Psalms 103 and 104. But is that what the Hebrew text says? Not quite,
for in Hebrew, we find the words ‘bless the *LORD*, O my *nep* (*nepes*)’, and the standard
meaning of the last term is ‘throat’, hence ‘bless the *LORD*, O my throat’. While that may
sound somewhat odd to us, it actually makes perfect sense, considering that it is the
throat that makes those warbling sounds. But why then is the term usually translated
‘soul’ in these verses? Or, to put it differently, what does the throat have to do with the
soul? To answer these questions, we need to have a look at some texts that use the term
*nep* (*nepes*), which in turn will allow us to come to a better appreciation of the Old Testa-
ment’s thinking about the human body.

In the Hebrew understanding, *nep* (*nepes*) does not merely refer to ‘the visible part
of the body but also to ‘the audible calling, croaking, or warbling throat’ as well as to ‘the
greedy, never satisfied, hungry and thirsty, devouring and air-breathing throat’. The *nep*
(nepes) thus ‘becomes the symbol of the needy, greedy human being’, the ‘creature that pants for and craves life’ (Schroer and Staubli, 2001, p. 57). A biblical text that illustrates this is Psalm 107:8-9:

Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.
For he satisfies the thirsty (nepes),
and the hungry (nepes) he fills with good things.

The Hebrew text includes the term (nepes) after ‘thirsty’ and again after ‘hungry’. English translations tend to leave it untranslated, because the translators realise that it refers to the entire person, and in English it is unnecessary to say ‘the thirsty person’ or ‘the hungry person’. However, it is significant that (nepes) is used here, because this illustrates the point made above: that (nepes) means the needy, greedy person.

Another interesting text is Proverbs 25:25, which says:

Like cold water to a thirsty soul (nepes),
so is good news from a far country.

Here it is spiritual neediness, rather than physical needs, that is referred to by the term (nepes). This, the translators thought, is best expressed by rendering the term as ‘soul’.

In other texts, the throat and the breath that enters and leaves the body through the throat can be referred to by the same term, as in 1 Kings 17:21-22:

Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried out to the Lord, ‘O Lord my God, let this child’s life (nepes) come into him again.’ The Lord listened to the voice of Elijah; the life (nepes) of the child came into him again, and he revived.

Here, (nepes) is translated ‘life’. ‘Breath’ would have worked just as well, but the term does indeed sometimes mean the life of an individual, as, for instance, in Exodus 21:23-25:

If any harm follows, then you shall give life (nepes) for life (nepes), eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

‘You shall give throat for throat’ is what this text says literally, but here the throat clearly stands for the life of the person.

Another aspect expressed by the term (nepes) is human desire, not only hunger and thirst, which we have already mentioned, but also, for instance, the sex drive, as is illustrated by Genesis 34:2-3:

When Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, prince of the region, saw [Dinah], he seized her and lay with her by force. And his soul (nepes) was drawn to Dinah daughter of Jacob; he loved the girl, and spoke tenderly to her.

It is evident that this is a case of rape. Where the NRSV translates, ‘he seized her and lay with her by force’, the Hebrew text literally says, ‘he took her, laid her [rather than the somewhat euphemistic ‘lay with her’] and shamed her’. The words chosen by the writers express strong disapproval. But v. 3 strikes a different note: ‘he loved the girl, and spoke
tenderly to her', for which the Hebrew text literally has 'he spoke over the heart' to her. This is perhaps best translated as 'he spoke reassuringly' to her (see Wenham, 1994, p. 311). This move from strong condemnatory terms to more tender language renders the central phrase that talks about Shechem's soul being drawn to Dinah, literally his שׁנֶפֶ (nepēš) 'clung to Dinah', somewhat ambiguous. It is clear that שׁנֶפֶ (nepēš) here expresses sexual desire, but is it merely lust, as the opening sentence would suggest, or should the following words lead us to construe it more positively? As Schroer and Staubli have pointed out, 'the nephesh is the force of driving lust or tender longing' (2001, p. 61).

As you will no doubt have realised, my reason for looking at all these texts with you is to point out how 'bodily', for want of a better word, Hebrew idiom is. In fact, I want to give you two further examples to illustrate this, but before I do so, I would like to emphasise that שׁנֶפֶ (nepēš), the word for the 'throat', is only one example amongst many of this Hebrew tendency to express itself in highly bodily terms. Genesis 34:2-3, as you will have noticed, features another example of this when it says that Shechem 'spoke over the heart' to Dinah. But let us move on to our final two examples.

The first one comes from a very well-known verse, the so-called Shema in Deuteronomy 6:5:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul (שׁנֶפֶ [nepēš]), and with all your might.

It is this human desire, the neediness, the craving for life and for others, that is said to be a crucial component in our relationship to God. שׁנֶפֶ (nepēš) is 'used here in the sense of an all-encompassing inner desire' (Schroer and Staubli, 2001, p. 61), in this case applied to our desire for God. Our final passage makes the same point, though not in connection with God but in relation to our fellow human beings. It comes from Exodus 23:9:

You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart (שׁנֶפֶ [nepēš]) of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.

In this case, the translators have chosen 'heart' as the English equivalent for שׁנֶפֶ (nepēš). As you can see, they tend to fluctuate between 'soul', 'heart' and 'life', but bear in mind that the root meaning of the term is 'throat'. Here, the point is that the Israelites are not to oppress strangers, because they themselves had been strangers and thus know the lust or hunger for life of those who find themselves in such a situation.

I want to come back, at this point, to the definition with which I began, because you will now be in a position to appreciate it much better. According to Schroer and Staubli, שׁנֶפֶ (nepēš) does not merely refer to 'the visible part of the body but also to 'the audible calling, croaking, or warbling throat' as well as to 'the greedy, never satisfied, hungry and thirsty, devouring and air-breathing throat'. The שׁנֶפֶ (nepēš) is 'the symbol of the needy, greedy human being', the 'creature that pants for and craves life' (2001, p. 57). As you can see, the term has quite a number of connotations that are all grounded in the very bodily
idea of the throat and go well beyond, or in another direction from, what we tend to associate with the idea of the soul.

When the Old Testament was translated into Greek, the Greek translators, in about 600 out of the 755 occurrences of שֶׁנֶפֶשׁ (nepes), used the term ‘psyche’, which led to a variety to Greek philosophical concepts being read back into the Old Testament that are foreign to the Hebrew conception of שֶׁנֶפֶשׁ (nepes). This is not the place to go into any details about Greek philosophy and its influence upon Western Christianity, but it is worth pointing out that two widely-found ideas, i.e. the division of soul and body and the contempt for the body, which has often been understood as a prison for the immortal and thus much more valuable soul, are entirely foreign to the thought of the Old Testament.

Let me finish this part with another quote from Schroer and Staubli (2001, p. 67), whose book Body Symbolism in the Bible I can recommend if you are interested in finding out more about Old Testament thinking about the human body. They underline that:

Old Testament faith was directed to concrete, earthly life, life before death. A living nephesh, a nephesh always hungry for life: that is the human being as long as he or she lives … If we take this image of the human as our basis, the Church’s pastoral service must concern itself more radically than heretofore with bodiliness, with the concrete neediness, longings, and desire for life of people today.

**Earthly Creatures Celebrate Bodily Connection**

This, then, takes us to the final part of our exploration of the Old Testament in search of a good, physical creation. As you know, the image of the church as the body of Christ implies that that body consists of a variety of members, all of which are required in order for the body to operate in the desired way. That image, of course, highlights the relational aspect of the creation. To explore this further, I would like us to return to the book of Genesis, but this time our focus is going to be on Genesis 2. Here we find a vision of God’s creation that emphasises human interconnectedness.

As you all know, the picture we are given is, quite literally, a very earthy one. The first human being, אדם (hāʾādām) in Hebrew, was formed from the dust of the earth ([הָאָדָם](#)) One way of preserving the Hebrew wordplay is to translate ‘earth creature’ or ‘earthling’; or one might correlate the terms ‘human’ and ‘humus’ in order to make the same point. Use of the term אדם ([ādāmāh]) implies that human beings are made of fertile earth, for אדם ([ādāmāh]) means fertile, farmable ground, ground that gives forth life (see Carr, 2003, p. 30). It is the divine breath that goes into the earth creature’s throat that animates it, turning it into a living, desiring, feeling שֶׁנֶפֶשׁ (nepes):

then the LORD God formed man ([הָאָדָם](#)) from the dust of the ground ([הָאָדָם](#)), and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being ([שֶׁנֶפֶשׁ](#)) (Gen. 2:7)

Thus, according to the writers of Genesis, our ‘material body is an earthy form energized by [a] divine power … that encompasses all of [our] desires, feelings, and thoughts’ (Carr,
A Good, Physical Creation (Karl Möller)

2003, p. 30). Another conclusion to be drawn from the text is to say that our human bodies are an essential aspect of our relationship with the earth and with God.

But those two relationships are not the only ones that Genesis 2 is concerned with. As I have already said, what we find is a vision for human interconnectedness or, if you like, an example of earthy longing and of embodied relationships. This connectedness and the embodiedness of human relationships is underlined when, in the first instance of poetry found in the Old Testament, the first human being celebrates the arrival of the desired partner:

This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman (אִשָּׁה [ʾiššāh]), for out of Man (שָׁאֵן [ʾēn]) this one was taken. (Gen. 2:23)

Note the very bodily description ‘bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh’ and also another instance of wordplay in the terms ‘man’ (שָׁאֵן [ʾēn]) and ‘woman’ (אִשָּׁה [ʾiššāh]). All of this is intended to stress the connectedness and relatedness of the two human partners.

Interestingly, while reproduction is very much in view in the first creation account (‘be fruitful and multiply’; Gen. 1:28), that is not the focus at this point, although it resurfaces at the end of Genesis 3, when the woman is told about the pain of childbirth. Here, however, the emphasis is on intimacy in and of itself, ‘an intimacy grounded in the bodily joining of two embodied creatures’ (thus Carr, 2003, p. 32):

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed. (Gen. 2:24-25)

We are, of course, very familiar with this passage, and yet it seems important that we continually remind ourselves of the biblical text’s focus on an erotic, bodily connection. Once again, the implication is that the human body is not to be devalued but to be celebrated as an essential part of God’s good creation. Obviously, Genesis 2:23-25 talks about a very special relationship, but it has been rightly said that this particular ‘example of embodied connection is the first and most important expression of the broader passion that drives humanity, a superlative example of human interconnectedness’ that extends beyond this special relationship (Carr, 2003, p. 34).

In other words, while this is a special case, Genesis 2:7 says that the inbreathing of the divine breath into the creature formed from the earth turns that creature into a living needy human person that, as we saw earlier, desires, indeed needs, relationships with both the creator and fellow human beings more generally. And human relationships are always embodied and never a-sexual, even though that is sometimes seen as an ideal. As André Guindon (1977, p. 68) has pointed out:

There is no such thing as an a-sexual relationship between living human beings. All concrete relations are those of sexed men and women who have, it is to be hoped, real, sensuous bodies which are existentially implied, one way or another, in all transactions. The ideal presence of human persons to each other in any exchange is never that of two marble statues or that of two angels.
But, quite apart from the bodiliness of God’s creation and all that that implies, there is something else of fundamental importance in Genesis 2 that we must not overlook. Six times, the writers of Genesis 1 tell us that, when God surveys his creation, he comes up with the verdict that ‘it was good’ (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). This, as you know, is followed by the final judgement that the whole creation, everything that God had made, ‘was very good’ (Gen. 1:31). Yet when we get to Genesis 2:18, we find out that something is not good at all. The first human being, once created, had been placed in this magnificent garden, a place where God himself could be seen strolling among the trees in the evening breeze (now there’s an example of anthropomorphism). And yet something is not right! For ‘it is not good’, we are told, ‘that the man should be alone’ (Gen. 2:18).

As we are about to find out, the animals just will not do as his partners, but the implication is that communion with God is not sufficient either. Here is a vision of the importance of human interconnectedness that says that this is necessary even for a human being who lives in a temple (see Wenham, 1987, ad loc.), the place where God himself dwells. Or, to put it differently, this is the vision of a God who creates a world in which human beings desire each other so much that this cannot be compensated for by their relationship with God.

Both these aspects, human embodiedness and the need for interconnectedness, for relationships with our fellow human beings, are essential aspects of the vision of creation found in Genesis 2. The body of Christ, which is our main subject at this weekend, consists of human beings that are constituted in this way, and that is the reason why it is imperative that we learn to appreciate our bodies as an essential part of God’s good creation, and relationships with others as so important that the world envisaged by the writers of Genesis is severely flawed without them, even with God being present.

**Further Reading**


