

HUMAN NATURE AND DESTINY

A Seventh-day Adventist Reflection

The biblical message confronts contemporary minds with an intriguing concept of true human identity: a speck of dust carved into God's image, a blade of grass cherished as the apple of His eye (Deuteronomy 32:10). Defacement of that image, and withering of that blade matters to God. Consequently, human history becomes a story of redemption. This essay explores the Biblical doctrine of humanity. It is divided into three segments, Original Human Nature, The Fallen Human Nature, and Human Destiny. Our focus is to highlight the Seventh-day Adventist understanding of this doctrine.

ORIGINAL HUMAN NATURE

Introduction

The Biblical account of creation reports that at the end of the sixth day nature stood ready for Adam and Eve's arrival. There was ample air for lungs, light for sight, food for a stomach. In Genesis 1:26, God, Himself, engages in family planning, and family making: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."¹ Thus the mode of creation shifts from commanding creatures into existence to a direct forming, molding and breathing Adam and Eve into life. "Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7).

From these concise statements emerge several important characteristics of human nature. First, humans were not to be a result of random mutations, not an accident or a chance, nor even an impersonal response to a fiat command. If Adam and Eve came out of the Creator's hands it was because they were willed, planned and provided for. (The arrival of a human baby into the world today may be a surprise, even an accident, but should never be treated as a nuisance, or a failure.) When Adam and Eve came out of the Creator's hands they were completed, and whole, finishing God's dream for His creation. Seventh-day Adventists believe that God created man and woman on the sixth literal day of the creation week and that family planning is a duty before God.

The Biblical narrative insists on a definite pattern, the image of God, which defined humanness at creation. A concept of an indefinite creature, charged to define his own nature (Pico della Mirandola), or condemned to be free so as to create herself in the way she wanted

¹RSV, unless otherwise indicated.

(Sartre) is not to be found in the Bible. Seventh-day Adventists believe that this image of God was reflected in every dimension of human nature. However one defines that image, one cannot deny the existence of a definite structure of a human being without affecting the view of God's nature as well. Our treatment of God-likeness (humans) is indicative of the way we treat God. This is foundational for essential worth of every human being independent of race, gender, station in life, or position in society. Whatever we do to humans, including ourselves we do it unto Him (Matthew 25:40, 45).

The first man came to life as an adult, beautiful, good and lonely and God assumed the role of the first and the best matchmaker (Genesis 2:18). Animals were simply called to life, as males and females. Not so with humans. After a period of preparation during which Adam became conscious of his aloneness (Genesis 2:18, 19, 20) God administered anesthesia, performed a surgical extraction on Adam and reconstruction of Eve. With but a few hours of single existence, catching a glimpse of Eve, Adam exclaims: "This *at last* is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh . . ." (Genesis 2:23) [emphasis mine]. Marriage is not an afterthought, a concession to sinners, and hence God, and the Christian Church nurture and protect this holy pre-Fall institution (Exodus 20:14).

It seems evident that the unique nature, place, and function of human beings within the created order is Biblically sanctioned (Psalm 8:4, 5). Only humans are created in God's image, God speaks to humans only, and only to them does He give a task to have dominion over the rest. This special status however, implies an equally special responsibility. The earth is the Lord's. He expects humans to manage and protect His property. Having dominion over the earth includes protecting it against pollution of its water, air, food supplies, and other resources. The day of judgement is the time of reckoning for those who destroy the earth (Revelation 11:18). Seventh-day Adventists recognize that humanity is abusing its special status, but do not side with thinking akin to that of James Rachels, or Peter Singer who, in their different ways, claim no superiority of humans over the rest of creation. Such ideas ultimately undermine any basis for accountability, responsible management of earth, or respect and valuing of every man and woman.

Body, Breath, and Soul

It must be admitted at the outset that the Biblical text presents a rich and complex picture of human nature. A neat and detailed outline is not as readily available as one would wish. For example, the Biblical witness recognizes dichotomous (body-soul Matthew 10:28), trichotomous (spirit, soul and body, 1 Thessalonians 5:23), and a variety of other structures of a human being, (heart, soul, and might, Deuteronomy 6:5); (heart and soul, Deuteronomy 30:6); (heart soul and mind, Matthew 22:37); (heart, soul, strength, and mind, Luke 10:27). Several questions need our attention here. First, how are we to understand such terms as body, breath, and soul (Genesis 2:7), at the very moment of the initial making of Adam? What is the nature of this composite human being? Are the constituent elements independent “parts,” free standing elements, as are the pieces that make up a watch?

Body

“Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground . . .” (Genesis 2:7). The first act? The body. Adam formed from *adama*. No Biblical evidence exists to support the claim that dust used by God was some kind of “animated dust.”² It was the “dust of the ground.” Humans hail from here: this planet is the home, and God evidently saw fit to make the material expression an indispensable aspect for being in His image. The act of handling of the dust, of shaping Adam’s body sends a strong signal that the physical and physiological dimension of our being are worthy of personal and immediate attention. The human body was included in the “very good” of Genesis 1:31. It is David, in Psalm 139:13, who responds with awe and thanksgiving to God’s “weaving” (NASB), “knitting” (NEB) him. A distinctive characteristic of Christian theology is affirmation of the human body as given at creation affirmed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, nourished by Christian Church, and to be glorified in the resurrection.³ “If we must abstain from overestimating the body (1 Timothy 4:8) we must all the more refrain from denigrating it, as so many mystics and ascetics have done. It certainly ought to be disciplined, (1 Corinthians 9:27), but by no means neglected or despised.”⁴ [translation mine]

²Augustus Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge: Judson Press 1976), 465.

³See Margaret R. Miles, “Body Theology” in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, Allen Richardson and John Bowden, eds. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983).

⁴Alfred Vaucher, *Histoire de Salut* (Dammarie-les-Lys: Signes des Temps 1951), 81.

Breath

Genesis 2:7 describes the second event in creation of Adam with words “. . . [God] breathed into his [Adam’s] nostrils the breath of life.” The word *ruach* translated in KJV by “spirit” (232 times), “wind” (91 times), and “breath” (28 times), indicates a life principle. A man shape of dust, changes into human body as breath enters into it. Just as the forming of the dust of the ground is done by God himself, so is the life-giving breath God’s exclusive gift to humans. In the Hebrew context breath became a synonym for life itself. It served as an empirical evidence for life, and absence of it indicates death. In addition, breath came to denote other characteristics that accompany life, such as mind, intelligence, and the emotions, or disposition. In the latter sense it is simply translated “spirit” (Psalm 32:2; Isaiah 54:6; Daniel 2:1).⁵ Thus we notice divine intent of uniting the material element, dust of the earth which He created previously, with His life-giving breath. At that instant though, the inorganic mass became an organism.

Soul

But the next sentence reports a change infinitely more essential. Genesis 2:7 states it simply “and man became a living being (*nephesh*)”. This word in the Bible contains rich anthropological meaning. For example *nephesh* and *psyche* in Genesis 1:20, 24, 30, and Revelation 16:3 refer to animals, and in Genesis 2:7 and Matthew 2:20 to humans. Many times they mean simply “life” as in Job 33:18, 22 and Matthew 10:39, “persons” as in Genesis 46:26, and Acts 7:14, and “self” in Leviticus 11:43. Expressions “my soul” stands for “I,” “me,” “you,” and “he”. . . (Psalm 146:1; Luke 1:46). When speaking about humans it usually refers to life of the whole human being. So, as God breathed the breath of life inorganic dust yields an organic body, which “*became* a living being.” It defies all human genius to imagine what Adam felt when *he became soul*, when light touched the eye nerve, when nerves transmitted messages to the brain, when feelings responded with a heartbeat, when conscious of himself and his environment he experienced his identity, his self. This was no “ensoulment”: God injecting, permeating, infusing him with a substance called “soul” so that from that moment on he *had* soul in his *body*. While there is an undeniable relationship between soul and body, the soul is not some spiritual substance ‘in’ the body as a fetus is ‘in’ the womb, nor is that substance diffused through the body as blood ‘through’ the veins. Rather the soul is just the personal self, the ‘I’ animating the body.

Adam “became a living soul.” Body + breath became more than the sum of the two, they became one: he, Adam. We know the *origin* of the body, and we know the *origin* of the breath of life, and when the two unite we know the *beginning* of the soul. The appearance of the soul identifies body, it is now Adam’s body, it identifies breath as Adam’s breath, until death do them part. But more than that, the soul also expresses individualized being: it affirms, and articulates

⁵Siegfried H. Horn, “Breathe” in *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary*, (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1979).

the “once-for-allness” of every person. When Mr. Hamish Carter won the gold in the 2004 Triathlon in Athens it was not Mr. Carter’s body that won! To be sure, the volume and tonicity of the muscles, the lightness of the bones, the volume of his lungs were all essential. Of course breath is crucial as well, because the organism needs oxygen, else it dies. It is the whole of him that clinched the victory. Not only body and breath needed each other, but Mr. Carter needed the will power, the resolve, the self-control while training, eating and drinking, which are the function of the inner core, the body + breath union, that is soul. Every cubic millimeter of his body, and every breath are his soul, and because they are so masterfully united, the things that happen in that unity transcend each. Otherwise he is no more.

The preceding makes it evident that Seventh-day Adventists have traditionally opted out of the belief in immortality of the soul, independent survival of the soul, or even in a soul as an immaterial substance. From the very beginning of our existence as a church we could not accept any form or hint of dualism which views human nature as composed of two separate elements. Dualism pre-dates the New Testament as one of the strands of Greek philosophy.⁶ Gnosticism of the first century insisted that body belongs to matter, and that soul temporarily inhabits the prison. Body is inherently evil because it is physical, and soul pure, because it is spiritual. In XVII.c Rene Descartes abandoned Aristotelian, and the later Thomistic tradition, and opted for Platonic dualism. Soul is now seen as a pure mental state independent of the body. The influence of Cartesian dualism upon view of human nature is pervasive, both in philosophical and theological anthropology. Philosophical anthropology splits the physical from the mental and creates body/ mind dualism. Theology, seeking to preserve spiritual value of persons, turned to the soul as a concept of personal being that constituted the true identity of the self, even surviving the death of the body.⁷

The concept of the soul as an integrated whole, as the core unity of a human being is very important to Seventh-day Adventists. From it proceeds our stand on stewardship of the totality of human life. Integral to the Christian lifestyle is the care for healthful nutrition, exercise, and family relationships, together with the traditional spiritual disciplines like communion with God, prayer, Bible study, and worship. . . . A healthy, and vigorous, holistic lifestyle enhances a healthier and deeper physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual experience.

This essay considers the basic structure of a human being, as articulated in Genesis 2:7: body + breath yields the soul, as foundational. But what then of the spirit? Here again we recognize the richness of the original Biblical languages, and notice that besides “breath of life” and “wind,” *ruah* is sometimes translated “spirit of wisdom” (Deuteronomy 34:9), “determination” (Haggai 1:4), “courage” (Joshua 5:1), “compassion” (Zechariah 12:10),

⁶In fact, Greek thought cannot be reduced to a single point of view on human nature, according to Joel B. Green. “Bodies-That is Human Lives” in *Whatever Happened to the Human Soul*, Warren S. Brown, Nancey Murphy and H. Newton Malony, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 159, 160.

⁷Ray S. Anderson, “On Being Human: The Spiritual Saga of a Creaturely Soul” in Warren S. Brown, et al, 185.

“faintness” (Psalm 77:3), “pride” (Psalm 76:12), and “jealousy”(Numbers 5:14). In the New Testament the function of the human spirit is focused more on relationship with God. So Paul speaks of “spirit of sonship” which overcomes the “spirit of fear.” “When we cry Abba! Father! It is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Romans 8:14-16).

For several reasons Seventh-day Adventists consider spirit (when it does not refer to breath, or wind) as a *function* of the human soul. (1) In several places soul and spirit are used interchangeably (Job 27:3; John 12:27; 13:21). (2) Soul as well as spirit are ascribed to animals (Ecclesiastes 3:21; Revelation 16:3). (3) To lose the soul means to lose all (Matthew 16:26; Mark 8:36, 37). Henry C. Thiessen, concurs with Augustus Strong that rather than considering spirit as a constitutive element, it should be viewed as a higher function of the soul. “To the soul would belong man’s imagination, memory, understanding; to the spirit, his powers of reason, conscience, and free will.” This variation explains “how some Christians are ‘carnal’ and others ‘spiritual.’ It also agrees with the teaching that the present body is a ‘soul body’ and that the resurrection body will be a ‘spiritual body (1 Corinthians 15:44).”⁸

Whether we venture into details or not, it seems that the New Testament ascribes functional rather than constitutional roles to the human spirit. The apostle Paul contrasts between the natural (*psychicos*) and spiritual (*pneumatics*) person in 1 Corinthians 2:13-16. The first does not “receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. For who has known the mind of God to instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ.” Then in the very next verses of Chapter 3, Paul chides the Corinthians for not being spiritual but rather “fleshly”- soulful. However, if spirituality is the matter of constitution, of the makeup of human nature, then no reprimand, but rather sadness would be in order.⁹

It would be well to hear Anderson again who warns that when life of the spirit becomes detached from one’s embodied existence spirituality lacks ethical content with respect to how one views the body, with all of its needs, instincts, drives and potentialities. He further states that true religion must be grounded in the spiritual integrity of one’s relation to the other person as well as to God (James 1: 27).¹⁰

THE FALLEN HUMAN NATURE

⁸Henry C. Thiessen, *Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1975), 227.

⁹Unless one holds to a form of constitutional change effectuated by regeneration. As we shall see shortly, Seventh-day Adventists believe that such a change requires transfiguration at the time of resurrection.

¹⁰Anderson 181, 187.

The Fall and its Results

In Genesis 2:16, 17, God informs the pair that their initial immortality is conditional; it is contingent upon their obedience to God: “. . .but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.” “Tree of the knowledge itself was good, and its fruit was good; for it was not the tree, as some think, but the disobedience which had death in it.”¹¹ But man and woman sinned. The physical act of picking the fruit is but a result of reasoning (Genesis 3:1-5), autonomous and independent valuing of the fruit, esthetic appreciation of it, and a desire for it. “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate” (verse 6). It was, and is, therefore, a soul not a body alone that sins (Ezekiel 18:4). The soul, the integrated whole, and it is that integrated whole that is the victim of sin.

The Biblical notion of sin calls for re-examination of human nature after the fall. . . . Just the number of Hebrew and Greek words, each with multiple meanings is overwhelming. A dozen of words yields over thirty five denotations.¹² But sin, though real, is an enigma. In the words of Bercouwer, “We do not know from whence it is or what it is. It is here and has no right to be. . . . This force, this sin, is nothing and has nothing apart from the beings and powers which God has created. And yet it organizes all these for rebellion against Him.”¹³ The consequences are many.

Separation from God

The human spirit, the capacity to commune with God became the first strategic target of sin, and when spiritual energies become disconnected from their source of power, spiritual death ensued first (Genesis 3:8-10; Isaiah 59:1, 2).

Pervasive Depravity

Humans became sinners, and thoroughly so. No dimension, structural or functional remained sheltered from its power. Their behavior turned consistently and hopelessly suicidal. Yet the image of God, while suffering fatal and pervasive damages did not result in a total depravity. There are some faint resemblances, some feeble yearnings after God, and the Holy Spirit still provides every soul with opportunity to choose (Romans 1:18-20; 2:14-16).

Death

¹¹Henry C. Thiessen, 254.

¹²See Miroslav M. Kis, “Le Peche, une Realite Enigmatique” in Roberto Badenas, *Autours de la Croix* (Collonges-sous-Saleve: Faculte Adventiste de Theologie, 2003), 17- 28.

¹³G. C. Bercouwer, *Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 65.

Sin brings every human to their grave. The creature, which came to being as God breathed the breath of life into the body must die. (Romans 3: 23). The integrated whole must disintegrate. The dust must return where it came from (Genesis 3:19), and the breath which God holds in His hands all the lifelong (Daniel 5:23) must return back to Him (Ecclesiastes 12:7). This is every sinner's due, and this is also a just and fair due (Romans 6:23). And just as at creation the unity of body and breath caused human life, so the departure of the breath of life causes the dissolution of the human soul. "When his breath departs he returns to his earth; on that very day his plans ["thoughts" NASB] perish" (Psalm 146:4).

All of this leads us towards the question on the state of the dead. Seventh-day Adventists believe that the last breath is the last human act. Nothing survives. No structural, nor functional dimension has freelanced privileges. The cohesive unity of human nature is pregnable only at a price of annihilation. Humans are indivisible as Carsten Johnsen argues forcefully.¹⁴ Ecclesiastes teaches that "the living know that they will die, but dead know nothing, and they have no more reward; but the memory of them is lost. Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished, and they have no more for ever any share in all that is done under the sun." What a somber, even depressing, but a realistic message! So Solomon counsels: "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going" (Ecclesiastes 9:5, 6, 9). This recalls a powerful and sobering lesson in the parable of rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31).

Spread throughout the Bible is an intriguing, insightful and hopeful description of the state of the dead as sleep. (Deuteronomy 31:16; 1 Kings 2:10; Job 14:12; Daniel 12:2; Matthew 27:52; Luke 8:52-55; John 11:11-13; Acts 7:60; 13:36; 1 Corinthians 15:6, 18, 20, 51; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 5:10; 2 Peter 3:4). Intriguing, because it implies that this death is not yet complete eternal annihilation. It is a period of total unconsciousness, with the body decomposed (John 11:39), and mingled up with the soil of this earth, with the breath returned to God, and the soul vanished. It is insightful because it indicates that while the memory of those deceased may be lost to humans, their identity is not forgotten by God. It is hopeful because it points to a resurrection, where I can be confident that my eyes shall behold Him and not another (Job 19:25-27). "All aspects of the present life reach their end at death, but the memory of the life well lived linger on, not in material monuments for the dead, but in the living memory maintained for a time in the mind of the survivors, and preserved forever in the mind of God (Isaiah 49:15, 16; Nehemiah 14:22, 31). Therefore, the memory of the personality and character of the deceased who lived and died faithful to God is preserved in the hope that death, which struck them down, will itself be struck down at the last day by God, who then will return life to all those from whom it has been taken (1 Corinthians 15:54-57). The character of the deceased, as remembered by the survivors and preserved in the mind of God, provides the connection between this life and the resurrected life."¹⁵

¹⁴See Carsten Johnsen, *Man the Indivisible* (Oslo: Univeritets Vorlaget, 1971). passim.

¹⁵Niels-Erik A. Andreasen, "Death: Origin, Nature and Final Eradication" in *Handbook of*

HUMAN DESTINY

Human history, and with it the history of sin and death advance inexorably toward the promised return of Jesus. The purpose of His second visit is to claim the final victory over the forces of evil, to fully establish the Kingdom of Heaven on this rebellious planet, and with it to vindicate His Father's character of love before the whole universe. However, in His many discourses, Jesus, and other inspired writers, continually stress that the main goal of His second coming concerns human eternal destiny. . . . "I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also"(John 14:3). "I will not leave you desolate, I will come to you" (vs 18, 28). "Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another" (Matthew 25:31, 32); "For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body" (2 Corinthians 5:10; see also Matthew 24:31; John 17:24; Jude 14, 15; Revelation 1:7; 6:15, 16; 22:4, 7-12). Every human life advances towards eternity: either eternal death or eternal life. The destiny of every individual is not determined by God arbitrarily. We choose, every day, our eternity by the way we live our time.

The first act of the coming King will involve His creative powers. For long millennia sin has ravaged, destroyed and caused irreparable damages to human beings and relationships. No amount of mending will do, resurrection is an act of new creation. As to details, the Bible gives some hints, as John indicates, "It does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). This time, at resurrection, each individual human will assume his/ her identity. Moreover, this time the corruptible will give in to incorruptibility. Apostle Paul deals with the nature of the resurrected body by comparing it to a seed that is sown, but when harvest comes the original seed perishes and makes it so that many other seeds appear. So also, "What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown as physical body, it is raised as spiritual body" (1 Corinthians 5:35-44).

John chapter 20:19-29 may give us an additional clue as to the nature of the resurrected being. Verse 19 says that disciples were in the room, the door being shut for the fear of the Jews. The doors were really shut. Yet Jesus appears among them, and talks to them. Thomas, upon his return does not believe the disciples' report. Eight days later, when the doors were shut again, Jesus appears. Speaks to them and specifically to Thomas (who knew the doors were shut, and that He came anyway). "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing." Could it be that one characteristic of the spiritual bodies is to have access where physical bodies do not?

I wish to conclude with the words that describe the end of the great controversy between light and darkness, between good and evil: “The Lord your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love, he will exult over you with loud singing (Zephaniah 3:17). “The great controversy is ended. Sin and sinners are no more. The entire universe is clean. One pulse of harmony and gladness beats through the vast creation. From Him who created all, flows life and light and gladness, throughout the realms of illimitable space. From the minutest atom to the greatest world, all things, animate and inanimate, in their unshadowed beauty and perfect joy, declare that God is love.”¹⁶ The prodigals have returned and behold, everything is very good again.

¹⁶ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Association 1950), 678.