



Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us . . . fix our eyes on Jesus, . . . who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. — Hebrews 12:1, 2, NIV.

Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel **Digest**

H. Wheeler Robinson, *Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981).¹

Editorial Note: For many years the Baptist pastor and scholar H. Wheeler Robinson (1872-1945) served as the Principal of Regent's Park College in Oxford, England. Robinson is best known for his classic introduction to the study of the place, role and relationships of family, tribe and nation in the Old Testament world. His treatise on "The Hebrew Conception of Corporate Personality" was first published in German in 1935, while his study of "The Group and the Individual in Israel" was first published in English in 1937. Both documents, including introductions by John Reumann and Cyril Rodd, have since appeared in *Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel*. While Robinson's concept of corporate personality in Israel has been vigorously debated over the last 65 years, it has gained surprising acceptance among biblical scholars. The following excerpts, taken from Catholic theologian Bernard J. Lee's reflections on the Jewish concept of corporate personality, represent an ecumenical tour-de-force actually derived from Robinson's original work.²

" . . . [THE ROMAN CHRISTIAN philosopher, Boethius (ca. 500 CE), who translated Aristotle, declared that a] human being . . . is an individual substance of a rational nature. 'Substance' is a key Aristotelian category: something is what it is but also has some 'accidental' configurations. . . . The human self is an autonomous self; it first exists and then enters into relationships. The relationships may change, but the individual, autonomous self remains fundamentally the same self. Accordingly, the philosophical category of 'relation' is a philosophical 'accidental' . . . Further, when

Boethius defines a human being as an individual substance of a *rational* nature, he reflects the judgment that rationality is . . . what it means to be human. Reason is the seat of [individual] human personhood.

“ . . . [On the other hand, t]he ancient Hebrew social sense of self contrasts so deeply with our more individualized sense of self that we have to work very hard indeed to sympathize into the experience of corporate personality . . . [But t]oday’s world surely needs a deepened . . . sense of our corporate existence in a world that is either ours together or perhaps not at all. . . . [I]n the Hebrew cultural . . . story, the

corporate or social aspect of reality has a primacy over the individual aspect . . . [T]he notion of individuality is set upon social and corporate moorings and thus . . . [contrasts] significantly with the Greek model. . . . [In Hebraic thinking] the relational web is the perpetual womb of our becoming. The umbilical connection between individual and community is never severed. But unlike the womb metaphor, individuals in their turn birth society. It is a reciprocal parent-child creation.

“ . . . [Thus,] the Hebrew ‘model of’ and ‘model for’ what it means to be human lays a heavy stress upon the primacy of social and relational considerations . . . [Hebrew anthropology also] locates the psychic center in human affect [rather than in rationality]. Because of the central role of affect . . . , ‘the heart’ is a recurring theme in the earlier scriptures (and in Paul as well as in the later scriptures). . . .

“[T]oday’s world surely needs a deepened . . . sense of our corporate existence in a world that is either ours together or perhaps not at all.”

Corporate Personality and Individuality

“The notion of corporate personality is clearest in Hebrew history before the axial period [800-200 BCE] of human civilization. [In this pre-exilic era] Yahweh makes a covenant with a body of persons, not with individuals. Even the king is a figure through whom Yahweh’s promises and guarantees are directed to his people. The king is called Yahweh’s son, but

Yahweh’s son is also what the nation is called in Hosea 11:1. *The relation of individuals to Yahweh is mediated through the corporate personality of the nation. The relation of Yahweh to individuals is mediated through the corporate personality of the nation.*

“ . . . [In later Jewish history] the Hebrew sense of individuality . . . [developed] as a product, in great part, of the experience of individuality that emerged in the prophets themselves, especially Jeremiah. As the pained and tearful prophet sees himself over and against the people to whom he proclaims Yahweh’s new covenant, his own awareness of self is strengthened. . . . The notion of corporate personality is modified but not surrendered. Individuals have their own moral centers and assume individual responsibilities, yet one people has a single heart, and even in death there are tribal gatherings in Sheol. . . .

“Individuals have their own moral centers and assume individual responsibilities, yet one people has a single heart.”

“ . . . [Today, however, it is exceedingly difficult to] relate to the notion of corporate personality. The nearest analogy . . . is with ecology. The root word is the Greek *oikos*, which means home or dwelling. Literally, ecology is the science of our common home . . . [W]e are so organically linked together that whatever happens to any part reverberates throughout the entire system to every single other part. And any slightest change in the system itself has effects upon every tiniest part. What you do to even the smallest, you do to me and to everyone else as well. There is no such thing as a purely private destiny, no purely private sin or purely private virtue, no purely private love or purely private hate; there is no purely private relationship with God, no purely personal spirituality. And my individual subjectivity is not any less real for it. Only it is not an autonomous self with accidental relationships. It is an individual reality whose actuality is an emergent from the relational web. We do not awake some morning and then decide to walk into the *oikos*. The *oikos*, our common home, is what we come out of. We have a communal home address before we ever wake up with consciousness.”³

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Endnotes

1. H. Wheeler Robinson, *Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel*, is available from Barnes & Noble at www.barnesandnoble.com/w/corporate-personality-in-ancient-israel-h-wheeler-robinson/1001011138.
2. Bernard J. Lee, *Jesus and the Metaphors of God: The Christs of the New Testament* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), pp. 57-66.
3. See note 2.

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