



Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel¹

A Book Review

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

Author

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*.¹

Synopsis

" . . . [The fundamental principle] in Robinson's understanding of corporate personality . . . [was] the idea that the whole group was considered as a 'person,' the isolated individual having no standing apart from the larger body. . . . This idea found favor in studies of the 'I' of the Psalms, where the first person singular sometimes seems to be

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an individual and at other times a whole community. . . .

“Scandinavian scholarship developed this further using the ‘royal psalms,’ thought to be in honor of the king, whom they saw as representative of the deity . . . and whose blessing was seen as a channel for the divine blessing.”²

Commentary

Corporate Personality as Covenant. Robinson was aware that the corporate personality was inseparable from the biblical concept of “covenant.” For example, he expressly stated:

. . . [T]he fundamental conception of the covenant (*berith*), which can be made the basis of a complete theology of the Old Testament, is inseparably linked to the conception of corporate personality.³

Since God himself constituted the Covenant, God himself was/is the ultimate Corporate Personality. To properly understand the significance of this fact, one must realize that “covenant” is the biblical term for “relationship” and/or “relationality” rather than for an individual or individuals. In his treatise on *Jesus and the Metaphors of God*, Bernard J. Lee articulates this fundamental concept:

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. . . [E]very individual is an emergent from relationships . . . [and,] as my colleague Michael Cowan has often observed, the relational web is the perpetual womb of our becoming. The umbilical connection between individual and community is never severed.⁴

Corporate Personality as Prophet. In ancient Israel the prophet spoke to the people for God and therefore connected the communal God with all Israel. Thus:

And when he was come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved, saying, Who is this? And the multitude said, This is Jesus the prophet of Nazareth of Galilee. — Matthew 21:10, 11.

On the road to Emmaus on the evening of Jesus’ resurrection,

Cleopas . . . said unto him, Art thou only a stranger in Jerusalem, and hast not known the things which are come to pass there in these days? And he [Jesus] said unto them, What things? And they said unto him, Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, which was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people . . . — Luke 24:18, 19.

This confirms the “fluidity of thought” that Robinson strove to articulate when he tried to define the corporate person “as a reflection of the indefinable unity between Yahweh and the prophet — the virtual identification of the human with the divine.”⁵

Corporate Personality as Priest. In ancient Israel it was the priest who spoke to God for the people and umbilically connected the Israelites with the communal God. The book of Hebrews emphatically assigns this priestly role to Jesus Christ:

. . . The Lord swears and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec . . . — Hebrews 7:21.

Thus, the corporate personality that involves the relationality of the human individual and the human community with God has been and always will remain the role of Jesus Christ as our High Priest.

Corporate Personality as King.

In ancient Israel the king spoke to the people for the people. The king was the representative of the community as a group. Thus, Bernard J. Lee declared, “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.”⁶ As Robinson himself stated, “To every other ancient monarch the subject was a slave; to the Israelite king he was a brother.”⁷ It is in this context that Jesus Christ was declared to be the King:

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? . . . — Matthew 2:1, 2.

Nathanael answered and saith unto him, Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art the King of Israel. — John 1:49.

I give thee charge in the sight of God . . . that thou keep this commandment without spot, unrebukeable, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ: which in his times he shall shew, who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords . . . — 1 Timothy 6:13-15.

Conclusion

“This, then, is our hope and our comfort — Jesus Christ is the final prophet, the great high priest, and the conquering king. There is a miraculous cure for the disease of ignorance, guilt, and pollution after all. . . . Believers have found to be true Paul’s saying that

‘all the promises of God find their yea and amen in Christ.’”⁸

Jesus Christ himself also constitutes both the Divine Corporate/Covenantal Personality and the Human Corporate/Covenantal Personality.

For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power . . . — Colossians 2:9,10.

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Endnotes

1. H. Wheeler Robinson, *Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1981).
2. Alec Gilmore, “Did Steinbeck Know Wheeler Robinson or His Theory of Corporate Personality?” at muse.jhu.edu/demo/steinbeck_studies/v015/15.1gilmore.html.
3. Robinson, *Corporate Personality*, p. 34.
4. Bernard J. Lee, *Jesus and the Metaphors of God: The Christs of the New Testament* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), p. 59.
5. Gilmore, “Did Steinbeck Know Wheeler Robinson . . . ?”
6. Lee, *Jesus and the Metaphors of God*, p. 62.
7. Robinson, *Corporate Personality*, p. 43.
8. Kim Riddlebarger, “The Triple Cure: Jesus Christ — Our Prophet, Priest and King,” at www.graceonlinelibrary.org/articles/full.asp?id=13|15|507.

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