

THE FLESH AND THE SPIRIT

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WE MAY BEGIN with a truism – excusable because it is only a starting point and one which we may modify before the end. Hebrew, biblical ways of thinking are different from greek. Biblical thought is more concrete, less analytic than greek; one way of describing it is to say that it is more ‘global’. What this means may be illustrated by the concept of ‘corporate personality’: the way in which, in the bible, the individual is regarded as part of the group to which he belongs, with no sharp distinction between him and his descendants or ancestors or other members of his people.

It is in this light that we must think of the biblical use of the term ‘flesh’ and especially of the antithesis ‘flesh-spirit’.

This does not mean that the bible is unaware of the simple observable fact that there is a material organism; the word ‘flesh’ is used of this just as it is in our language – ‘the flesh of men, the flesh of animals, of birds, of fish’.¹ When Paul talks of ‘circumcision of the flesh’ it is at least partly with reference to the physical operation. The word is used of the tangible, visible corporality: ‘A spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see me to have’, the risen Lord says to his disciples.²

It is then only a natural extension of the same meaning when the word is used to refer to the body as a whole; ‘the weakness of the flesh’ to which Paul was subject³ means some physical infirmity. But it is then only a natural development of this when the word is applied to the whole person; the biblical phrase ‘all flesh’ simply means ‘all mankind’, everyone, or, as in english, *everybody*. The word then has no reference to the material corporality; Paul can say ‘our flesh had no rest’⁴ or ‘I had no rest in my spirit’,⁵ and the meaning is obviously the same – it simply means himself.

We are not surprised then to find the word ‘flesh’ used to describe

¹ 1 Cor 15, 39.

² Lk 24, 39.

³ Gal 4, 14.

⁴ 2 Cor 7, 5.

⁵ 2 Cor 2, 13.

what is human, what is natural. Abraham is the ancestor of Israel 'according to the flesh';⁶ and Paul is acutely conscious of his membership of that race; they are his brethren 'according to the flesh'.⁷ Jesus too belongs to the same race; he is a descendant of David 'according to the flesh'.⁸ In all of these, 'flesh' means natural, physical descent; and so too, when Paul says that married people have trouble 'in the flesh',⁹ he is not referring to anything specifically material but to the 'natural' troubles – economic, social, psychological – which are part of married life.

This is probably the commonest use of the term 'flesh', and it is used in almost a neutral sense. There is nothing pejorative in it. Indeed it can be used in a slightly favourable sense, as when Paul speaks of the corinthian church being as it were his letter of commendation: a letter written 'not on stone tablets but in hearts of flesh'.¹⁰ Here these human, living witnesses are obviously regarded as something better, more noble than an ordinary letter. But we can also see here the beginnings of a use which is pejorative, where it is used of human nature not merely in a neutral sense or even with reference to the dignity of human nature, but with reference to human nature in its weakness.

'All flesh is grass';¹¹ and the New Testament makes the same sombre judgment of human nature. 'Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven'.¹² The knowledge of divine mysteries is not a product of human intelligence: 'Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you', Jesus says when Peter grasps something of the mystery of his being;¹³ and Paul similarly comments that when he had received his revelation he considered it irrelevant 'to consult with flesh and blood'.¹⁴ 'The flesh profiteth nothing';¹⁵ 'there is no good in me, in my flesh'.¹⁶ The human person is a battleground in which 'the flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh'.¹⁷

But in all these harsh judgments on 'the flesh' it is important to remember the idiomatic use of the term, the development of which we have traced. A similar idiomatic usage is found in the fourth gospel, in the use of the term 'world'. In the literal sense, of course, 'the world' is simply the universe, the visible environment in which we live, and, by extension, those who inhabit it: 'God has made us a

⁶ Rom 4, 1.

⁹ 1 Cor 7, 28.

¹² 1 Cor 15, 50.

¹⁵ Jn 6, 63.

⁷ Rom 9, 3.

¹⁰ 2 Cor 3, 3.

¹³ Mt 16, 17.

¹⁶ Rom 7, 18.

⁸ Rom 9, 5; cf 1, 3.

¹¹ Isai 40, 6.

¹⁴ Gal 1, 14.

¹⁷ Gal 5, 17.

laughing-stock to the world – to men and angels'.¹⁸ But in John's use of it, the same pessimistic judgment is implied as in Paul's use of the term 'flesh'. It is a world which was made by God, but which refused to acknowledge him;¹⁹ it is a place of darkness, cut off from the divine light and yet rejecting it when it comes.²⁰ Christ, coming 'from above', from outside this world, is an alien, disturbing element, causing unease, resentment and finally hatred. Christ has come 'for the judgment of the world, so that those who are blind may see and those who see may be blinded'.²¹ The world hates Christ, because its works are evil.²² It is under the sway of the devil, 'the prince of this world'.²³

But of course such dualism cannot be absolute. God is the only creator and ruler of the world, and he loves it – loves it so much that he sent his only Son, and this Son came not to condemn the world, but to save it.

What is involved in both cases, in John's 'world' and in Paul's 'flesh' – is the use of a technical term; and, as with any other technical term, the attempt to interpret it in a non-technical sense is bound to lead to misunderstanding. If we take 'world' in the ordinary sense, or 'flesh' as meaning simply the material body, then it leads to the practical conclusion that everything in the world is evil; that only the spiritual universe, the purely divine, is good; that everything physical, material or natural is wrong, impure, inherently tainted and abhorrent. This is a view which has been condemned often enough, which most christians would reject if put to them explicitly; but it is one which still manages to colour many of our unconscious reactions.

John's use of the term 'world' is really just a development of its normal use. What appealed to the greeks in their view of the world was its order, its beauty, its harmony: the word 'cosmetic' is from the same root as the word 'cosmos', the greek term for 'world'. But what is most striking about it in the bible is that God made it: 'The earth is the Lord's and all that dwells therein';²⁴ 'The heavens are thine, the earth is thine, the world and all that is in it thou hast founded'.²⁵ The world is made by God, and it is *for* God. But it is possible to misuse the world, to use it as if it were not for God, as if it were an end in itself, as if it were all that there is – 'the wicked, whose portion is this world'.²⁶ This is to misuse the world, and also

¹⁸ 1 Cor 4, 9.

²¹ Jn 9, 39.

²⁴ Ps 24, 1.

¹⁹ Jn 1, 10.

²² Jn 7, 7.

²⁵ Ps 89, 11.

²⁰ Jn 3, 19.

²³ Jn 14, 30.

²⁶ Ps 17, 14.

to misunderstand it, to distort it; and then the world becomes a place of darkness indeed, with the darkness of falsehood; and the service of God, the Lord of heaven and earth, is replaced by slavery to the devil, the prince of darkness and the lord of 'this world'. The world is really the 'world-for-God'; if it is not for God, then it becomes – and this is John's use of the phrase – simply 'the world'.

The same is true of Paul's use of the term 'flesh'. We have seen how this word comes to denote what is human, what is natural. But 'the body is for the Lord'.²⁷ It is not only made by God but for God, and in particular for our Lord. This is its function; this is what defines its role. It is, then, not truly a body unless it is fulfilling this function. A man may have good health, good digestion, acute powers of reasoning, but unless these functions are 'for the Lord' he is not a proper man. It is like a beautifully bound and artistically printed book in which the letters are all jumbled up; if a book is 'for reading', then it is not fulfilling its purpose if it cannot be read. And the body is for the Lord. If it is not for the Lord it is a failure; this is 'sin' – not perhaps in the strictly moral sense in which the word is used today, but certainly in the biblical sense; a deviation, a lack, 'missing the mark'. It is in this sense that it is 'sinful flesh'.²⁸

And what makes the body 'for the Lord', gives it its orientation to God? The spirit. The spirit of God is the life-giving power of God which alone gives life and vital action to men. 'God breathed into the face of man and he became a living being'.²⁹ Only with this power is he of any value. 'Cursed be the man who trusts in man, and makes flesh his arm, whose heart turns away from the Lord';³⁰ the man who trusts in man, who relies on the power of mere man – 'flesh' – is one who has turned from the Lord. 'Woe to those who go to the egyptians for help . . . The egyptians are men and not God, and their horses are flesh and not spirit'.³¹ The antithesis between flesh and spirit is parallel to the antithesis between man and God; man is meant to be 'man-for-God' ('the body is for the Lord'); if he is not, he is merely man, merely 'flesh'; if he is, he is 'spirit'.

When flesh is contrasted with spirit, it is not a contrast between two parts of man, the visible and material contrasted with the invisible and immaterial. It is the whole person looked at from two different points of view; man with or without the power of God – man in himself is flesh, man for the Lord is spirit. When we speak of the world or the flesh, it is not its createdness to which we are

²⁷ 1 Cor 6, 13.

²⁸ Rom 8, 3.

²⁹ Gen 2, 7.

³⁰ Jer 17, 5.

³¹ Isai 31, 3.

referring, not its fallibility and deficiency, but a sphere of interest; and this sphere of interest is not the material as such, nor the visible nor the corporeal as such, but the exclusion of the divine. So too it is no accident that Paul contrasts not only the flesh and the spirit but also the letter of the law and the spirit;³² because in this attitude to the law human efforts are relied on, the means of justification is regarded as being in one's own power, instead of the work of God. So Paul can rebuke the corinthians for being 'men of the flesh', not spiritual, and he explains this by calling them 'babes in Christ'.³³ Moreover, he specifies the weakness that this implies as 'jealousy and strife' – not at all 'sins of the flesh' in the ordinary use of the term. Similarly, when listing the 'sins of the flesh', the 'works of the flesh',³⁴ though he does include such things as licentiousness and drunkenness, he also lists enmity, jealousy, anger and envy. Again, if the contrast were simply between the material and the immaterial, what an intolerable paradox it would be when Paul speaks of 'a fleshly mind',³⁵ or 'a spiritual body'.³⁶ Such language only makes sense if we recognize that the flesh is man without God, and the spirit is man with God.

It is 'in the likeness of sinful flesh' that Christ enters our human situation, and, by his resurrection, transforms it. That which 'lacked the glory of God',³⁷ becomes now 'a glorified body'. This is what we mean by Christ's resurrection; what is involved is not the mere resuscitation of a corpse, but on the other hand it is not merely a ghost: 'a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see me to have'.³⁸ What is involved is something to which the language of material or immaterial is simply inappropriate; it is a genuinely human being totally transformed by the life-giving power of the spirit of God – 'a spiritual body'.³⁹ It is something unique, and therefore not accessible to further discussion. Unique, but not alien to the human situation; on the contrary, it is unique because here for the first time the human body is as it should be – 'for the Lord': 'he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives for God'.⁴⁰ He is unique, but he is the first-born of many brethren;⁴¹ and when we too wait for 'the resurrection of the body', it is not the curious phenomenon of the ingathering of scattered dust and bones that we wait for, nor on the other hand a state of chilly de-materialization;

³² Rom 2, 29; 2 Cor 3, 6.

³⁵ Col 2, 18.

³⁶ Lk 24, 39.

⁴¹ Rom 8, 29; Col 1, 18.

³³ 1 Cor 3, 1–3.

³⁶ 1 Cor 15, 44.

³⁹ 1 Cor 15, 44.

³⁴ Gal 5, 19–21.

³⁷ Rom 3, 23.

⁴⁰ Rom 6, 10.

we wait for the Lord Jesus Christ 'who will transform our lowly body into likeness of his glorified body'.⁴²

But can this really be the full answer – that Paul sometimes uses the terms 'flesh' and 'spirit' in a technical sense, and that if we do not realize this we may seriously distort his meaning? It is not that I have any wish to qualify anything that has been said; but there is a point of principle here which should cause us some concern. 'The writings of the New Testament set forth the word of God for the salvation of all' (Vatican II, Constitution on Divine Revelation, 17). It would be surprising, then, if this gift of God were to be restricted by considerations of grammar and linguistics: if what is meant for the salvation of all were to be accessible only to the refined skill of scholars. It is true that the word of God expressed in human words is subject to all the limitations of human language – just as the Word made flesh shares all our human weaknesses except sin. But it is also true that Christ transcends human limitations; he is not just a first century Jewish man but the man for all men. And in the same way one might expect the written word of God somehow to escape the narrow bondage of scholarship. So I would like to examine Paul's terms and ideas a little further to see if, *underlying* the technical usage discerned above (but not contradicting it), there is another level of thought rather closer to our normal way of speaking.

Regardless of linguistic considerations, it is true that the human person is not simply and totally comprised in that which is visible and material. There is something in man which goes beyond material appearances. Paul is aware of this: 'Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day; we look not to the things that are seen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal'; and he goes on to say that we are impatient for the passing away of 'our earthly tent', and long for the coming of our heavenly state.⁴³ This sounds very like traditional asceticism, and could very well be labelled gnostic, puritan, jansenist – the very attitude we have been saying is *not* scriptural. And the difficulty cannot here be put down to a misunderstanding of a technical term; the terms 'flesh' and 'spirit' are not used here; he uses the terms 'inward man' and 'outward man', and makes it moreover quite clear that the outward is corruptive, visible and transient, and that the inward is invisible

⁴² Phil 3, 21.

⁴³ 2 Cor 4, 16 – 5, 4.

and not subject to the ravages of time.

This inner man can also be described as 'the heart' or 'the mind' – not in any biological or psychological sense, but in quite a normal popular sense, more or less as we might use them in english. For example, in that well-known passage where Paul so graphically describes the struggle that goes on in a man's own self, he says: 'I approve the law of God in my inner self; but there is another law at war with the law of my mind . . .'.⁴⁴ Or again, when he contrasts the inner reality with the outward show: 'those who take pride in appearances instead of in the heart';⁴⁵ and again when he exhorts slaves to give their service 'from the heart (*psyche*)', not merely keeping up appearances.⁴⁶

There is more to man than the purely visible and material; there is the inner man, the heart, the mind – and this inner, invisible quality can also be called 'spirit'; not in any technical sense, but, again, in a quite normal sense as we would use the word in english. Paul exhorts the philippians to 'stand firm in one spirit, one mind'.⁴⁷ Titus and himself acted 'in the same spirit, took the same steps'.⁴⁸ And the word 'spirit' in this sense too can be contrasted with the flesh; but it cannot now be explained as a special use of the term. Rather, it corresponds to the contrast between the inner and the outer: 'With my mind I serve the law of God; with my flesh, the law of sin';⁴⁹ just as earlier he had said, in a text already quoted, 'I approve the law of God with my inner self, but there is another law in my body, my members, which is at war with this law of my mind'.⁵⁰ 'Real circumcision of the heart, in the spirit'.⁵¹ It reminds one of the passage in the fourth gospel, where people apply various tests to Jesus – his attitude to the law, his galilean origin, his very humble background – and by those criteria find him wanting; and his only reply is to urge them not to judge 'by appearances',⁵² 'according to the flesh',⁵³ but to judge 'just judgment'. A true judgment, in other words, is something that goes beyond human appearances to an inner reality.

In these texts, the word 'spirit' is used to describe 'the inner man' – mental or moral qualities, attitudes, mood, to take a selection from *The Oxford Dictionary*. It is the human spirit, not the spirit of God. But Paul does make a connection between the two, between

⁴⁴ Rom 7, 22–23.

⁴⁷ Phil 1, 17.

⁵⁰ Rom 7, 22–23.

⁵³ Jn 8, 15.

⁴⁶ 2 Cor 5, 12.

⁴⁸ 2 Cor 12, 18.

⁵¹ Rom 2, 28–29.

⁴⁶ Eph 6, 6.

⁴⁹ Rom 7, 25.

⁵² Jn 7, 24.

our spirit and the holy Spirit. 'No one knows the mind of a man except the spirit of a man which is in him; and no one knows the mind of God except the Spirit of God'.⁵⁴ There is an analogy between man's self-awareness and God's self-awareness. The holy Spirit in the blessed Trinity is rather like human consciousness. And the way we know God is rather like the way we know ourselves – 'we have received the spirit from God that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God'.⁵⁵ The same is true of prayer: 'We do not know what to pray for nor how to pray for it; but the Spirit prays for us with inexpressible groaning'.⁵⁶ The yearning of the human spirit which lies too deep for words, or which is even sometimes made explicit in a way which really betrays our true desire: this for a christian is not simply the work of our spirit, but is taken up by the holy Spirit. When we call on God our Father, 'it is the Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God'.⁵⁷ The holy Spirit – the power of God – is not synonymous with the human spirit, the inner man, the higher self; but the two are closely associated.

The Spirit of God gives life to all things: 'you send forth your spirit and they are created':⁵⁸ birds of the air, beasts of the field, fish in the sea, and man. All that lives, lives in virtue of the power of God, all have the spirit of God. But the peculiar quality of human life is that a man is both subject and object to himself: he is capable of willing, of knowing, of making a conscious choice. The life-giving Spirit of God in man involves this free orientation of himself – to himself, to the world, to God. This quality of human life, this capacity for free choice, is what Paul would call the inner man, the mind, the heart; and what Paul and ourselves would call his 'spirit'. And it is precisely there that the holy Spirit is at work. Not that the Spirit is not in the body, in flesh, in matter: 'the Spirit which raised up Jesus from the dead will also raise our mortal bodies'.⁵⁹ But the language of spatial relationship is inappropriate here; we should not speak of God as being 'in' either our bodies or our spirits. The holy Spirit is at work in man, and, as it is man's spiritual quality which is most characteristically human, it is through man's spirit that the Spirit works.

Paul was at home in two cultures, the semitic and hellenistic. With this background, and with the urgency of the immediate

⁵⁴ 1 Cor 2, 11.

⁵⁷ Rom 8, 16.

⁵⁵ 1 Cor 2, 12.

⁵⁸ Ps 104, 30.

⁵⁶ Rom 8, 26.

⁵⁹ Rom 8, 11.

apostolate that inspires all his letters, it is not to be expected that he should be as precise and logical in his use of language as this article may have made it appear. But for the sake of clarity one may simplify still further in offering this summary. The terms 'flesh' and 'spirit' in Paul have much the same range of connotations as in our own languages; but one particular sense may lend itself to confusion, his antithesis between the two terms, in which he implies that the flesh is evil and the spirit alone good. This is not, as it might appear, an antithesis between the material and the immaterial. It is an idiomatic usage which is perfectly legitimate; and indeed if we share Paul's conviction that God is at the beginning and end and centre of everything, it is one which we should accept – the body is for the Lord.

It is the holy Spirit who gives man this orientation towards God, makes him 'for the Lord', makes him 'spirit' rather than 'flesh' (in Paul's idiomatic use of these terms). But it is precisely man's spirit – his free orientation, his character, his bent – that is the point of contact with the holy Spirit of God.