

# G L O S S A

## The Progressive Revelation of Man

**J**ust as the mystery of Christ was hidden in the Old Testament in types and shadows only to be revealed in New Testament times to the apostles and prophets in spirit (Eph. 3:5), so also a complete view of the tripartite human being, consisting of body, soul, and spirit, has been revealed progressively. In the Old Testament man is revealed more as a unity without much distinction between the three parts. Greek philosophers primarily thought of man as consisting of a material, physical part and an immaterial, psychological part. The revelation of the tripartite nature of man, however, is presented clearly in the New Testament. Many modern scholars continue to debate whether man is a unified whole, dichotomous, or tripartite in nature, failing to recognize the progressive biblical revelation of the parts of man. An understanding of this progressive revelation, through a careful analysis of the words which designate the various parts of man, provides a clear answer to the nature and purpose of man.

### A Brief Statement concerning the Parts of Man

Before we look at the progressive revelation of the parts of man, it is necessary to briefly present the parts of man according to their fullest revelation. According to the Bible man was created as a tripartite being with a spirit, soul, and body. These parts correspond to the three spheres of human experience. The human body with its five senses corresponds to the physical realm; the human soul (consisting of mind, emotion, and will) corresponds to the psychological realm; and the human spirit (consisting of conscience, fellowship, and intuition) corresponds to the spiritual realm and was created to contact God who is Spirit (John 4:24). Due to the fall of man, these three parts became damaged and corrupted yet retained certain functions in relation to God's economy through redemption and salvation. In the Bible these parts of man are sometimes referred to in a negative sense, reflecting the effects of the fall on them, and sometimes in a positive sense, reflecting their worth in the carrying out of God's economy through redemption and salvation.

### The Old Testament

The writers of the Old Testament present humanity as a unified whole. They frequently employ the literary device of synecdoche, where one part, usually a significant part, is

used for the whole. The parts of man are often interrelated, and similar predicates are used with different parts. The various parts are rarely contrasted when they are referred to in the same context. However, the fact that separate words are used to refer to the physical, psychological, and spiritual aspects of human nature implies a distinction between the parts of man. Whereas the Old Testament indicates that man is tripartite, it is not until the New Testament that the significance of this truth is made clear. The paucity of words in Hebrew for the parts of man suggests that the distinctions made among and within the parts are not so fine, particularly in the earlier books of the Old Testament. The number of words for the constituent parts of man increases in the later books of the Old Testament, suggesting that even in the Old Testament there was some development in the progressive revelation of the parts of man.

From the beginning of the creation of man in Genesis 2:7, man is presented as a unified whole (also implying a tripartite view of man). Through the uniting of God's breath (*neshamah*, the same used for the human *spirit* in Proverbs 20:27) with the dust of the ground, man became a living soul. This can be considered the first case of synecdoche where the *nephesh*, or soul, is considered equivalent to the self, or whole person (cf. Gen. 12:5). The use of *nephesh* is frequent in the Old Testament, and *nephesh* is probably the most frequent part used in synecdoche, perhaps being the most appropriate part to represent man in his entire being. However, the spirit, the flesh, and body parts such as the head, face, eyes, and feet are also employed in the same way.

**T**he fact that the parts of man are interrelated also demonstrates that the Old Testament writers presented man as a unified whole. These writers associate physical parts with some characteristics of the immaterial parts and immaterial parts with some characteristics of the material parts. For example, words for physical organs such as *bowels*, *liver*, *kidneys*, and particularly *heart* are used to refer to the inward parts of man. On the other hand, the immaterial parts are related to the physical realm; for example, the life (*nephesh*) of the flesh is in the blood (Lev. 17:11), and *ruach* and *neshamah* mean breath as well as spirit. There is also a certain interrelatedness between the parts; for example, a broken spirit dries up the bones (Prov. 17:22).

When two parts occur in the same context, they are rarely

contrasted; rather, they enlarge or expand the idea associated with the first part: "My soul longed and even yearned for the courts of the Lord; / My heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God" (Psa. 84:2; cf. Psa. 63:1). The writers of the Old Testament also do not focus on the effect of the fall of man on the constituent parts. Neither the flesh nor the soul (at least in their condition) carries negative connotations as they often do in the New Testament. In the Old Testament the effects of the fall are related primarily to the heart. Every intent of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil continually (Gen. 6:5; Jer. 7:24); the heart is deceitful and desperately sick (17:9), wicked (Prov. 26:23), rebellious (Jer. 5:23), perverse and crooked (Prov. 11:20; 17:20), hard (Psa. 95:8), stony (Ezek. 11:19), divided (Hosea 10:2, KJV), proud (Prov. 21:4), and in need of cleansing (Psa. 51:10) and washing (Jer. 4:14). Perhaps it is appropriate that the heart (representing the core of man) is used in the Old Testament in synecdoche to refer to the whole of fallen man being corrupt.

Although the Old Testament emphasizes the unified view of humanity and there are only a limited number of words to refer to the constituent parts of man (especially the immaterial parts), it does use three words to refer to the three parts of man: *basar* (flesh), which refers to the outer, physical aspect of humanity (mostly in a non-pejorative sense emphasizing mainly human weakness); *nep̄hesh*, which refers to the soul as well as the whole person or life; and *ruach* (having the meaning of "wind," "air," "breath," and "spirit"), which is used to refer to the human spirit.<sup>1</sup> The occurrence of these three words is sufficient to inform us of man's tripartite nature; however, the full significance of this fact was hidden and veiled from the Old Testament believers.

Only in late biblical Hebrew and in Rabbinic and modern Hebrew are separate words introduced in relation to the body, mind, emotion, will, and conscience. Also *ruach*, referring to the human spirit, occurs more frequently in the later books of the Old Testament. This indicates a progressive revelation of the parts of man within the corpus of Old Testament literature.

### The Inter-testamental Period

Two developments occurred in the inter-testamental period which prepared the way for the New Testament writers to reveal the parts of man in a finer way. First, Greek philosophers, in their consideration of the psychological makeup of man, used a greater variety of words than the Old Testament writers did. They also distinguished between and contrasted the different parts of man, particularly the immaterial and material parts. Second, the Septuagint translators, by using these Greek words to translate the Hebrew words for the parts of man, enlarged the semantic domain of the Greek and Hebrew words for the parts of man.

Although the classical Greek writers did not arrive at the same realization as the New Testament writers, their use of certain key words in Greek gave the New Testament writers a greater and more precise vocabulary to work with in describing the parts of man. After Plato and Aristotle, there was a richer array of words to describe the inward parts of man, particularly the mind (e.g., *nous*, *noēma*, *dianoia*, and *phronēma*). Plato and some of the later Greek philosophers even divided man into three parts, but their division was not the same as that made by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:23. Plato's divisions were a tripartite division of the soul. In *Timaeus* 30 he also divided man into *nous* (mind), *psychē* (soul), and *sōma* (body), with *nous* being the noblest part of the soul.

Many Greek writers considered man a dichotomy, and they contrasted the immaterial and material parts of man. This dualistic notion was developed later by the Gnostics, who considered the physical body and the material realm as evil and maintained that freedom from evil could be attained only when the immaterial soul/spirit was freed from every material/physical influence. They saw the soul as the middle ground between the evil, physical realm and the divine and spiritual realm, with everything depending on the soul's inclinations. Their view of man, particularly in the physical aspect, does not accord with the revelation of the New Testament.

When the Old Testament was translated into Greek, the Septuagint translators consistently used *sarx* (or *sōma*) for *basar*, *psychē* for *nep̄hesh*, and *pneuma* for *ruach*. The word *pneuma* took on two additional meanings through the Septuagint translators' rendering *ruach* as *pneuma*. They used *pneuma* to refer both to the Spirit of God and to the human spirit. As Stacey comments, "*Pneuma* has not figured so prominently [in Greek writings prior to the Septuagint] because it had no personal sense in classical usage" (77), and according to the Stoics, its greatest personal sense was as "a single, life-giving power which flowed into man through the breath" (78). While the Septuagint translators recognized that the Hebrew word *ruach* had a personal sense, some still considered it synonymous with the soul. As a result, *ruach* is translated *psychē* in Genesis 41:8 and Exodus 35:21, compounds of *psychē* in Exodus 6:9, Proverbs 14:29, 18:14, Isaiah 54:6, 57:15, *nous* (mind) in Isaiah 40:13, and *kardia* (heart) in Ezekiel 13:3.

### The New Testament

While the New Testament writers did not discard the Old Testament view of man as a unified whole, continuing the use of synecdoche and similar predicates with the different parts, they strengthened and elaborated on the idea that man is tripartite. They drew from the rich Greek vocabulary to bring out new and finer distinctions and contrasts within and among the parts of man, in particular related to

the effect of the fall and to the scope of God's complete salvation. This demonstrates a more sophisticated understanding of man's tripartite nature, especially as it relates to God's economy.

**T**he New Testament writers followed the Septuagint and used *sarx* and *sōma* to refer to the physical aspect of humanity, *psychē* for *soul*, and *pneuma* to refer to the human spirit. The clearest reference to tripartite man is found in 1 Thessalonians 5:23: "And the God of peace Himself sanctify you wholly (*holotēlēs*), and may your spirit (*pneuma*) and soul (*psychē*) and body (*sōma*) be preserved complete (*holoklēros*), without blame, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." This verse combines the Old Testament view that man is a unified whole (using words *wholly* and *complete*) with the full New Testament significance that man is tripartite, specifying explicitly each part (*klēros*) of man in the same context. To bring out finer distinctions and contrasts within and among the parts of man, the New Testament writers used Greek words for body, mind, will, and conscience which were not available to the writers of the Old Testament. For example, in Romans 8 a fine distinction is made between the mind (*phronēma*), as it is related to the flesh and to the human spirit (mingled with God the Spirit).

The New Testament writers also made fine distinctions in relation to the effect of the fall of man and God's complete salvation on the parts of man. The New Testament reveals the extent to which the fall affected the constituent parts of man and gives certain negative connotations to the spirit, soul, and body which were not emphasized in the Old Testament. The spirit became dead (cf. Eph. 2:1, 5). The flesh became the dwelling place of the sinful nature (Rom. 7:23) in which nothing good dwells (v. 18) and which needs to be crucified with its passions and lusts (Gal. 5:24). The body became a body of sin (Rom. 6:6), and its practices need to be put to death (8:13). The soul was corrupted to become the self (Matt. 16:26; cf. Luke 9:25), which needs to be denied (9:23) and not loved (2 Tim. 3:2).

However, in God's economy of salvation, the three parts of man also have a very positive function as they are redeemed and delivered from the effects of the fall and uplifted in their function for the accomplishment of God's eternal purpose. Through regeneration man's dead spirit is enlivened (John 3:3, 6; Eph. 2:5). God now has a base within the being of man from which He can transform the soul of man by the renewing of the mind—*nous* (Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18; Eph. 4:23). Eventually the body will be transfigured from being a soulish body to a spiritual body (1 Cor. 15:44), conformed to the body of His glory (Phil. 3:21).

One particularly fine distinction that is brought out in the New Testament relating to the ongoing process of God's complete salvation concerns two distinctions in the meaning

of *psychē*. *Psychē* can refer both to the life of the soul (the soul-life) or to the function and faculties of the soul (mind, emotion, and will). The soul, or the self, needs to be denied or lost (Matt. 16:24-25; Mark 8:34-35; Luke 9:23-24), but the faculties and function of the soul need to be saved (Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24), preserved (17:23), and gained (Heb. 10:39). Luke 17:33 illustrates these two meanings of *psychē* according to the organic aspect of God's salvation: "Whoever seeks to preserve his soul-life will lose [or destroy] it [the functions of the soul], and whoever loses it [the soul-life] will preserve it [the functions and faculties of the soul] alive." *Psychē* in the first part of the two clauses of this verse is best understood as the soul-life, whereas in the second part of the verse it is better to understand it as referring to the functions or faculties of the soul. The word *lose* can also be translated *destroy* and *preserve alive* (*zōogomēō*) literally means "to beget or bring forth in life." It is through the denial of the *psychē* (soul-life), or the losing or destroying of the *psychē* (soul-life) through the subjective working of the cross, that the divine life can be imparted into the faculties of our soul. As a result, our soul is saturated with the divine life, and its faculties become life (cf. Rom. 8:6—a mind of life), and the divine life can even be imparted into our mortal bodies (v. 11). This process of the impartation of the divine life into the faculties of the soul is related to the salvation of the soul (James 1:21; 1 Pet. 1:9).

**T**he New Testament writers had at their disposal a greater inventory of terms, with finer distinctions in meaning, to present the highest view of tripartite man in the process of God's complete salvation and the fulfillment of God's eternal economy. Much of the debate among scholars as to whether human beings are a unity, of two parts, or composed of three parts can be clarified by a proper realization of the progressive revelation of the parts of man. Those who see man as tripartite recognize the New Testament revelation of man, and through this revelation they are enabled to experience the pneumatic Christ.

by Roger Good

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Some scholars, associating *nephesh* with the Akkadian word *napāshu*, which means "to breathe," try to make *nephesh* synonymous with *ruach*. However, it is better to understand *nephesh* as the breathing person rather than the breath itself (except perhaps in Job 41:21), especially in light of its origin in Genesis 2:7—the result of God breathing into man's nostrils.

## Works Cited

Stacey, Walter David. *The Pauline View of Man in Relation to Its Judaic and Hellenistic Background*. London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1956.